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Closing the Opportunity Gap: A Story of English Learners and Their True Ability

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Introduction

Schools nationwide are struggling to service English Learners (ELs) and provide them with meaningful access to high-quality, rigorous grade level instruction. In their best attempts to provide ELs with comprehensible grade level instruction, schools have become entrenched in a vicious cycle of bridging the gap between the learner and the task —the task forever remaining a moving target. Over the past few decades, the impact on the EL achievement and their academic outcomes has been minimal. Schools seem to be stuck on the bridge that leads to yet another task, never reaching the learning target.

Enrichment and acceleration are as elusive as they have ever been for ELs. In this huge national crisis, educators must wonder if what is being provided is enough and examine their own perceptions: what can make a difference, and are we stuck in our own latent deficit perspective of ELs' abilities and talents? In the current remedial experiences, are removing all sense of EL self-efficacy? ELs need exposure, opportunities, and cultural and learning experiences that provide access to enrichment, advanced and accelerated programs that help them recognize and develop their gifts and talents. The current design of the varied EL service delivery models was not developed with this perspective.

English Learners and Opportunity

A simple look at the disparities in gifted identification adds to this argument. In 2018, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), ELs represented 10.2 percent of the K-12 student population nationwide. In 2016, they only represented 2.6 percent of over 3 million students identified as gifted learners, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. According to the same source, at that time, Florida had 0.5% of its EL population identified as gifted. An unintended consequence of a deeply flawed

system that under-identifies EL gifts and talents possess is that it deprives everyone of a powerful opportunity for economic advancement. As experts continue to work toward improving the system of identification that will provide access for all, “schools around the country are beginning to abandon costly non-verbal gifted assessments for English language learners because they yield the same results as traditional verbal tests,” stated Jonathan Plucker, president of the National Association for Gifted Children in *‘We Don’t Have Any Talented Students’: Confronting English Language Learners’ Drastic Under-Representation in Elementary Gifted & Talented* (Napolitano, 2021, p. 2).

Meanwhile, in the theoretical conceptualization of giftedness, the two most prominent researchers described talented and gifted learners as representing a range of diverse distinct abilities. Gagné (1995) distinguished two interpretations of the concept of talent development. One refers to talent as the raw material or simply a starting point, “present with varying intensity in most boys and girls” (p. 350). This concept of natural abilities makes it possible to extend, adapt and apply the raw material “to a particular field or human activity” (Gagné, 1995, p. 350). Furthermore, Renzulli (2011) described giftedness as a behavior rather than a characteristic which leaves room for students to be identified without solely relying on formal academic testing. Gifted learners, generally speaking, just like ELs do not prosper without appropriate accommodations.

According to Renzulli (2011), gifted and talented children possess the following three traits: above-average abilities (general or specific), high motivation, and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are capable of developing these traits and applying them, according to Renzulli (2011). Similarly, Gagné (1999) suggested that while talents stem from natural abilities, they also develop through learning. According to him, the talent development is

influenced by inner and outer catalysts. Without the formal and informal learning processes and practice, gifts do not develop into talents and that presence of developmental processes and catalysts can enhance giftedness and talent (Gagné, 1999).

All things considered, what if the perspective of the EL service delivery shifted to encompass the talent development theory? Would this *gestalt shift*, this different way of viewing the EL universe, affect their representation in our talented and gifted programs and most importantly, have a significant impact on their academic careers? If talents come through learning, if they can be developed by outer catalysis (Gagné, 1999), if these traits can be developed (Renzulli, 2011), then what happens if we provide the opportunity to learn, develop, and achieve to our underrepresented and overlooked students through our EL service delivery models?

In their 2018 study *Who Becomes an Inventor in America? The Importance of Exposure to Innovation*, Bell et al. identified the key factors that determine who becomes an inventor in America. Their investigation that involved more than a million inventors in the United States uncovered large gaps in innovation rates within different socio-economic groups, races, and genders. The study also provided insight into how exposure to innovation affects the gaps within different demographic groups. The findings suggested that providing consistent exposure to innovation opportunities for students from under-represented groups are likely to maximize the likelihood of them becoming an inventor.

If “opportunity to learn” and, specifically, the opportunity to learn cultural knowledge could be measured, the EL population would receive another grim score report. EL students come from and grow up in cultural environments that reflect their native communities and cultures. For some of them, their first encounter and introduction to the new culture start with the

first day of school. Their knowledge of and level of comfort with the new culture may have a significant impact on their learning and processing of information. The cultural distance between their native and the host culture may cause a disconnect, a clash, or confusion in the processing and learning new information. Knowing this, providing meaningful opportunities for ELs to engage in activities that will help actualize their potential is essential. Everyone benefits from diversity and shared experiences. ELs come to our schools with intelligence, creativity, and passion. It is on us to create opportunity and exposure. It is in us to provide access.

Equity is on Us

Pinellas Summer Camp Invention

Instead of waiting for the definition of a gifted learner to magically become more inclusive, while conducting the “universal screenings,” while operating under a plan with an alternative set of criteria for identification of gifted ELs (known as Florida’s Plan B), and while providing professional development for our teachers and administrators on recognizing the characteristics of diverse gifted learners, Pinellas County Schools has come up with a creative way to provide the much needed exposure to innovation for their ELs through a nationally acclaimed summer camp. The idea of a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)-based camp that provides problem-based learning of science concepts through a standards-based, rigorous curriculum to build confidence, persistence, and problem-solving skills started in the summer of 2017. The goal was to break the cycle of remediation and provide access to enrichment opportunities for the district’s ELs. The camp sets ELs on a path to acceleration and appropriate representation in gifted and talented programs by increasing and extending their access and opportunity to learn and actualize their potential to positively impact our community in the future.

In 2017, the project started with pairing a gifted and an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher to teach a week-long summer STEM camp to ELs. The idea was to integrate embedded, hands-on professional development through the EL teachers' exposure to powerful gifted teaching methods that maintain the engaging and rigorous expectations for ELs. Further, it provided opportunities for gifted teachers to learn high-yield ESOL strategies from their ESOL teacher peers. In addition, this gave the gifted teachers much needed exposure to ELs and learning how to recognize the gifted characteristics in diverse learners. Our hope was that all would benefit from the experience: the ESOL teachers from exposure to and the use of gifted teaching methods and high-order thinking (HOT) questioning techniques, the gifted teachers from working with ELs and learning how to recognize gifted characteristics in them, and, most importantly, the ELs from a structured access to innovation and enrichment.

By the summer of 2020 during the pandemic, the camp had evolved to have the ELs joined by the same number of gifted learners who are not ELs, thus diversifying, extending, and elevating the cognitive exchange among peers. The camp increased diversity in the district's enrichment programs. It was the first enrichment program designed with ELs in mind, and then the first enrichment initiative that had a goal to pair ELs with gifted learners for extended exposure to innovative thinking and exchange of cultural and expert opinions. School and district administrators who oversee and visit the camp report seeing no visible difference in the performance of ELs and gifted learners in this highly engaging environment. Everyone is authentically engaged and learning at high levels of complexity. The camp helps students find an area of interest in which they excel and provides exposure to the necessary stimuli that inspire and grow their gifts. It is this simple recipe that makes all the difference. From here on, students take off and own their learning in their unique ways. In camp, each student's product looks

different, each student finds their own voice by choosing their own path to the end goal, each presentation of the final product carries the experiences of that child, and, most importantly, each of the products is valued equally and the students feel comfort in knowing and owning their success. A nice boost of self-confidence for students who typically hide and avoid attention, the camp provides what they do not get during the school year.

English Learner Opportunities and Acceleration

In a learning environment that focuses on creative problem solving, design thinking, persistence, and real-life experiences, our ELs are exceeding expectations. Through research, teamwork, and experimentation, ELs are expanding their academic vocabulary toolbox and using academic language with peers who serve as perfect models of academic and standard English, while also modeling for them the cognitive processes that lead to higher performance. There is no struggle to meet the demand of the task—it comes naturally through experimentation, exploration, hands-on activities, creativity, and advancing the spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. It is a fun experience for all students. New friendships are formed, perhaps unlikely ones, had it not been for the camp. ELs leave the camp with a new-found confidence and agility through both collaboration and competition.

Connecting back to the Bell et al. (2018) study findings: children who are exposed to innovation have a substantially higher likelihood of becoming inventors. With increased and repeated exposure to innovative learning opportunities, the likelihood increases, according to the study. On the other hand, a great majority of ELs across the country are less likely to have exposure to innovation or innovators through their neighborhoods or families if they struggle to make ends meet (Bell et al., 2018). However, what is really concerning is that this exposure, unfortunately, is also low in schools and it is most definitely not existent in every current EL

service delivery models. The enrichment camp in our district is currently offered to elementary students, and they are strongly encouraged to attend the camp each summer—repeatedly. A variety of exposure to innovation is a significant factor as well, according to the study. Each day of camp is kicked off by a video with a real-life inventor who shares with the students their own story and journey through innovation and then poses a challenge for the day ahead in the camp. The students then learn scientific principles, conduct cutting-edge research, collect data, create an invention related to the challenge, learn about trademarks, and how to market their invention. The inventors are different each day as they come from various backgrounds and walks of innovation.

Bell et al. (2018) coined a term the *Lost Einsteins*. Lost Einsteins were defined as “people who would have had high-impact inventions had they become inventors [and not been part of] the underrepresented groups” (Bell et al., 2018, p. 648). Providing greater exposure to innovation through targeted opportunities for ELs, students who lack opportunity will help actualize their potential. Providing access to these opportunities is on educators. An opportunity to create this portal, this access, is presented any time we are in contact with students. What we make of that contact is within our control. Knowing this, how do we re-design our EL service delivery models to ensure opportunity is present and the kind that makes a true impact? Opportunities for language learning are everywhere around us—just like the air we breathe, it will find its way into anything, just like the water. Intention is all it takes for meaningful opportunities to actualize. Developing and cultivating talents is a part of any culture, so we need make it a priority in our ESOL service delivery models.

Enrichment for Speakers of Other Languages

In our district, approximately 2.73% of the K-8 students enrolled in gifted studies are ELs, and the enrollment continues to increase. This is a 2-percentage point increase since 2016-2017, the year when the camp was first implemented. In the current year, an additional twenty-seven ELs were identified as gifted by March of 2022. This is remarkable progress and is a direct result of the district's efforts to ensure ELs have the opportunity to attend camp and are included in the talented groups in our schools. We focus on EL access to universal screening and strong communicate with their families in a meaningful way in their native languages.

The district's focus and commitment to providing access and opportunities for students who lack them is unwavering. Thinking of and implementing innovative ways of providing opportunities for enrichment and acceleration to underrepresented populations have become a way of work. This idea of re-imagining the EL service delivery model to one that builds from an enrichment and a talent-building perspective is taking a strong hold and gaining traction in our school and district. The focus is on developing an authentically engaging environment, where ELs thrive and develop into young people with a positive self-image, high level of confidence, and a belief they can be successful and significantly add to the economic development of the country.

From an individual perspective, life is what the individual makes of it given the opportunities they were afforded. In education, there is the power to create and provide opportunities to lead students in their growth and knowledge of how to convert opportunities into life accomplishments. The mission for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to convert to Enrichment for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and for this new model to

take a strong hold. Remediation is not doing the job. Let's intervene with an injection of enthusiasm, enrichment, and opportunity for acceleration. Let's stop contributing to the EL subgroup underperformance that we so passionately contest.

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