

Teacher perceptions of gifted cultural minorities: An Australian study

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative case study set within an Australian boarding school, which explored the perceptions of teachers in relation to gifted cultural minorities. The study aimed to shed light on the persistent underrepresentation of some cultural minority groups in the extension and enrichment programs offered at the study site. Ten teacher participants at Boarding College [Pseudonym] were recruited and interviewed in relation to their views on the topic. Thematic analysis revealed that the teachers held diverse views of cultural minorities, and lacked the cultural competence to respond to the gifted needs of these learners. The teachers also viewed giftedness and gifted programs as performance based, and this may act to preclude some cultural minorities from being identified. Furthermore, it was found that the teachers often viewed the underrepresentation of Indigenous students in gifted education as stemming from issues relating to the students and their culture, and from systemic school-based factors. Despite these somewhat negative findings, teachers at the study site viewed it to be an educator's responsibility to cater for the gifted cultural minority student, suggesting the participants would be willing to address the problems identified.

Key words: gifted cultural minority students, cultural competence, underrepresentation

Literature Review

Many cultural minorities experience persistent and widespread underrepresentation in gifted education programs (Thraves & Bannister-Tyrell, 2017; Ford, 2005; Borland, 2004). Deficit theorising is often posited as a reason for this underrepresentation. Within the United States, Ford (2005) has teamed with a variety of researchers to produce a considerable body of work on this topic. Consideration of Ford's contribution and that of her colleagues is useful in terms of providing insight into the conceptual framework used in this current study.

Deficit thinking has been isolated by Ford, Moore and Trotman Scott (2011) as the “major reason gifted underrepresentation exists, persists and is so extensive or pervasive” amongst certain cultural minorities (p. 240). Ford, Moore and Milner (2005) describe deficit thinking as occurring when educators “fail to acknowledge, understand and affirm cultural differences among students” (p. 97). According to these authors, individuals can respond to cultural difference in one of three ways: positive acknowledgment of difference; no acknowledgment of difference – “operating in a *culture blind* fashion” (p. 97); or acknowledgment of cultural difference, but in a negative way. Deficit thinking occurs when educators adopt the second and third of these responses, usually meaning that they hold stereotypic views of cultural minority groups (Ford, Moore & Trotman Scott, 2011). Further, deficit thinking ascribes poor performance to the student or to the student’s cultural background, and fails to acknowledge the role played by systemic factors (Ford, Moore & Trotman Scott, 2011).

Deficit theorising has negative implications for cultural minority students in gifted education. Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman (2002) outlined symptoms of deficit thinking for cultural inclusivity in these programs, such as low teacher referral and reliance on culturally biased tests. Ford, Moore and Milner (2005) added to this list a range of negative classroom-level interactions that stem from the cultural mismatch between teacher and student that can emerge when deficit thinking is in play. The result of negative cultural interactions is the development or reinforcement of the teacher’s deficit or negative views of the culturally diverse learner, and these attitudes were noted by Ford, Moore and Trotman Scott (2011) to have a behavioural component at the classroom level, reflected in low expectations and under-referral for “gifted screening, identification and placement” (p. 241).

Deficit thinking is bolstered by narrow understandings of giftedness that tend to be associated with characteristics and behaviours of the cultural majority (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Ford, Moore and Milner (2005) suggested an important component of the solution to achieving parity of representation is the creation of culturally inclusive learning contexts through the development of cultural competency amongst teachers. Milner and Ford (2007, p. 167) described the pursuit of cultural competence to involve:

an amalgamation of awareness, sensitivity, and consciousness that may assist teachers in uncovering hidden beliefs, biases, prejudices, and values that may cause them to (mis)understand their own and others’ cultural existence in education and, thus, the world.

Such an approach reflects the importance placed on the role of the teacher. Wright and Ford (2017) pointed out that in the United States black students are less likely to be referred by their teachers for gifted education support, even when they achieve the same standardised test scores as their white peers. The centrality of the teacher's role, more generally, was supported by Australian researcher Hattie's (2009; 2012) highly regarded (and ongoing) meta-analysis that identified the teacher as having a significant effect on student progress. In earlier work, Hattie (2003) contended that, other than factors intrinsic to the student (such as ability), it is the teacher who has the greatest impact on student learning, accounting "for about 30 percent of the variance (of achievement). It is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation" (p. 2). It follows that if teachers hold deficit views of gifted cultural minority students, the progress of these students will likely be inhibited.

Deficit theorising can also play a role beyond the classroom and may feature in system-based processes that act as a barrier to cultural inclusivity in gifted education. Historical views of racially based theories of intelligence have been directly linked to deficit thinking (Ford, Harris, Tyson & Trotman, 2002). These views have manifested in ideas around racial background that has impacted definitions, policies and practices, and have served, over time, to support disadvantage for cultural minorities in education programs for the gifted. Such deficit ideas, whilst not presently as systemically enshrined as they once were, continue today, and Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman (2002, pp. 54–55) outlined "how deficit orientations influence, directly and indirectly, a myriad of gifted education practices." This position has more recently been supported by Valencia (2010), who characterised deficit thinking as "a contemporary bases of ... oppression" that leads to inequities in policies across a range of educational institutions. Further, Wright, Ford and Young (2017) claimed that attempts to desegregate gifted education are "hobbled by *Genesis Amnesia*" (p. 46). The authors argued that, at least in the United States, there is a "stubborn ignorance" (p. 46) regarding the impact of histories of marginalisation and their ongoing impact on educational achievement.

As noted by Fforde et al. (2013), race relations in Australia between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians are shaped by a deficit discourse that permeates nearly all aspects of public life. They situated deficit thinking in Australian Aboriginal education in the wider context of a deficit discourse that "is intricately entwined within and across different sites of representation, policy and expression" (p. 163). Fforde et al. noted that much of the deficit discourse surrounding Aboriginality is subtle, and often stems from the use of language that serves to undermine efforts to create more equitable outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.

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One substantial difference between the analysis of the United States context provided by the scholars above, and the analysis proffered by Fforde et al. (2013), is the acknowledgement of the behavioural component of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in response to deficit discourse. On the one hand, Ford, Moore and Trotman Scott (2011) focused on the reactive behaviour of the dominant group in regards to deficit theorising; on the other hand, Fforde et al. (2013) considered the reactive behaviours of both the dominant and the minority, and noted the tendency for such thinking and discourse to lead to racist behaviour and “lateral violence”, while also fostering “notions of helplessness and lack of agency” (p. 163).

“Funds of Knowledge” approaches have been advocated as an effective counter to deficit thinking (Hogg, 2011). “Funds of Knowledge” is an anthropological term that has been applied to the knowledge and information contained within a community that enables it to survive. Hogg (2011) has highlighted the potential of a “Funds of Knowledge” approach for “achieving a culturally responsive pedagogy” (p. 675). She suggested that the “Funds of Knowledge” approach requires teachers to move beyond multicultural professional development (learning an objectively presented set of understandings about a culture), and to get to know their students, their students’ community, cultural experiences, and values. Hogg (2011) also noted that this is a post-modernist approach, as it advocates a pluralistic attitude to communities and culture. In the Australian setting, Klenowski (2009) has argued that a “Funds of Knowledge” approach could be used to counter the inherent bias that exists against Indigenous learners in school and national assessment programs. This argument could readily be extended to gifted identification protocols.

Method

The current qualitative case study aimed to investigate the underrepresentation of cultural minorities in gifted education at Boarding College [Pseudonym]. It was guided by the following research question: How do teachers at this school view gifted students from cultural minority backgrounds?

The research setting

Boarding College is a K-12 school, located in Darwin, Northern Territory, that runs both day and boarding programs designed around the needs of its diverse clientele. Approximately 30% of the student population are from one of 35 remote Aboriginal communities and are largely enrolled in parallel educational programs based on English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) status. The remainder of the school population comes from a range of diverse

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backgrounds. This is reflective of multicultural Darwin, with 50% of its citizens reporting a parent born overseas, with high immigration from the Philippines and India (ABS, 2011).

Boarding College provides Middle School extension and enrichment programs for its gifted mainstream learners. It must be noted that, to date, no Indigenous student has been included in any of these programs. While some students from East Asia, South East Asia, and Africa, have participated in the program, their participation has not been reflective of their prevalence in the broader school community. The exception to this are Indian and Sri Lankan background students, with both these cultural minorities being well represented in these programs.

The study sample

Purposive convenience sampling was used to identify ten participants from Boarding College academic staff. Inclusion criteria comprised current employment in an academic role at the college, and teaching experience in the college's extension and enrichment programs. The ten participants exhibited varying degrees of teaching experience and engagement with the relevant programs, as shown in Table 1 (see Appendix).

Semi-Structured qualitative interview

The questions included in the semi-structured interview were designed to elicit responses that reveal the participants' perspectives on gifted cultural minorities. The questions directly related to the participants' views on their teaching experience within the study site.

Thematic Analysis

The analysis of this study reflected Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis process.

1. Familiarisation with the data. This phase involved reading and re-reading the data. This ensued the researcher was intimately familiar with the participant responses.
2. Coding. This phase involved generating succinct labels that identify important features of the data that might be relevant to answering the research question. Each of the ten participant transcripts, the entire data set, was coded. The coded data were collated for later stages of analysis.
3. Searching for themes. This phase involved examining the codes and collated data to identify themes. It then involved assigning data to each candidate theme. This allowed the viability of emerging candidate themes to be interrogated.

4. Reviewing themes. This phase involved checking the themes against the data set. It is at this stage that themes were discarded and refined.

5. Defining and naming themes. This phase involved the creation of the scope and focus of each theme. Themes were named in this stage of data analysis.

6. Writing up. This final phase involved synthesising the themes into a narrative structure, and contextualisation of the data within the existing literature.

Phase Two of Braun and Clarke's (2014) data analysis process necessitates the generation of succinct codes or labels be applied across the data set. The codes that emerged in this study refer to teacher responsibilities, professional learning needs, and definition of giftedness, teacher attitude toward enrichment programs, cultural minority groups, and Indigenous students, and are summarised in Table 2 (see Appendix).

Phase three and four of Braun and Clarke's (2014) model of thematic analysis requires the coded data to be collated. Table 3 (see Appendix) shows a sample of the collated data for the 'definition of giftedness' code taken from Participant One's responses, and identifies one of the themes that emerged during this process.

Results and Discussion

The final two phases of Braun and Clarke's (2014) thematic analysis (defining and naming themes, and writing up) led to the articulation of the following six themes:

- Theme one: Teachers at Boarding College largely believe it is a teacher's responsibility to cater for needs arising from a student's gifted cultural minority status, and demonstrate a willingness to provide for these needs; however, they have difficulty articulating specific strategies to support them beyond their EAL/D requirements.
- Theme two: While there is a mix of understandings of giftedness, teachers at Boarding College largely hold a performance-based understanding of the concept in the academic context.
- Theme three: Teachers view suitability for the extension and enrichment programs at Boarding College to be based on a student's motivation and ability to work independently, and/or to have already attained a certain level of performance/achievement.
- Theme four: Participants hold varying conceptions of what constitutes cultural minority status. Additionally, participants are hesitant in their knowledge of cultural minority

students they have taught, with the notable exception of students from an Indian or Sri Lankan background.

- Theme five: Teachers view Indigenous students as the most likely not to be identified for the extension and enrichment programs at Boarding College.
- Theme six: Teachers at Boarding College view the lack of Australian Indigenous students in extension and enrichment programs as stemming from issues related to the students and their culture, as well as school-based practices and processes.

It is important to acknowledge that much of the discussion that now follows focuses on Indigenous cultural minorities. This has occurred because participant responses isolated this group as the main outlier in terms of gifted education at the College.

Theme One reveals that teachers at Boarding College believe it to be a teacher's responsibility to cater for needs arising from a student's gifted cultural minority status, and are willing to make adjustments; however, they have difficulty articulating strategies to cater for these needs. Language was viewed by the participants as the greatest need for these learners, but few other needs or strategies could be articulated. This could be exacerbated by Theme Four, which demonstrated that participants were hesitant in identifying the cultural minorities that they had taught in the program. This hesitancy could stem from the varying conceptions participants held of what constitutes cultural minority status. Participant Three suggests minority status in the school context is determined by the make-up of the class ("when you are of an ethnic group and the numbers are quite low compared to the rest of the class"), and this view was supported by Participant Four who believed it was comprised of "the non-dominant cultural group in the classroom". Such views are likely to mean that these teachers are not factoring in broader issues associated with cultural minority status beyond the classroom context, and are thus having difficulty identifying the needs of many of these students. This is problematic, as cultural competence is presented in the literature as an important tool for achieving parity of representation in gifted education (Ford, Moore & Milner, 2005).

It is important to note that this view of cultural minority status was not universally held by participants, with Participant Five offering a broader understanding of the concept, describing a cultural minority as being: "not the major cultural group in a community". Many of the other participants provided responses that indicated their understanding of the meaning of cultural minority fell somewhere between the above two positions.

It should be noted that the widespread willingness of participants to acknowledge the role of the teacher in addressing the learning needs of gifted cultural minorities suggests they would be receptive to undertaking multicultural professional development, which is posited as a “must” by Ford and Milner (2007). It further suggests teachers could be willing, with professional guidance and leadership, to engage in a “Funds of Knowledge” approach, a solution that may have more validity for teachers working with remote Indigenous Australians as this model could account for the diversity of Aboriginal cultures (Thraves & Bannister-Tyrell, 2017; Hogg, 2011). Further investigation is needed into what teachers would and would not be willing to do to improve their cultural competence.

Teachers at Boarding College also held narrow views of giftedness, as demonstrated in Theme Two. By and large, they view giftedness to be high performance, as opposed to high potential. Such limited views of giftedness have been linked to deficit thinking by reducing teacher willingness and capacity for identifying and referring culturally diverse gifted underachievers (Ford & Grantham 2003).

This is relevant when teamed with the manner the teachers at Boarding College view giftedness in relation to students from a remote Indigenous cultural background: Theme Six demonstrates there is a tendency amongst some participants to associate Indigenous giftedness with physical prowess. Participant Five directly links giftedness for Indigenous students with their ability to hunt, stating: “I think that the fact that some of my kids can hunt really well means that they’re very very gifted.” By linking giftedness with performance, teachers are identifying areas where they know Indigenous students are already experiencing success, as opposed to areas of possible potential.

This view can explain the inclination of participants to consider remote Indigenous students as unsuited for the extension and enrichment opportunities on offer at Boarding College, as revealed by Participant Four when she suggests the extension programs would need to be “a little bit more hands on” if they were to be suited to Indigenous learners. Ford, Moore & Milson’s (2005) model of potential teacher responses to cultural difference can be applied here. In this case, the participants that link Indigenous giftedness with physical prowess may be responding to difference negatively by oversimplifying the culture of their Indigenous cohort, leading to stereotypical views. Such notions tend to lead directly to deficit thinking that focuses on what the cultural group cannot do in school, potentially transpiring in behaviours such as low referral.

Alternatively, the focus on physical giftedness in Indigenous students held by some of the participants could be considered a misguided attempt to value “Funds of Knowledge”. The problem here is that to be effective, a genuine “Funds of Knowledge” approach must involve the teacher actively researching the culture of their students, and synthesising their findings within existing research to develop an informed view of their students’ existing “Funds of Knowledge”, and a developed understanding of what they need to value in their particular school context (Hogg, 2011). Unfortunately, to assume giftedness will present physically due to a perceived affinity with hunting, tends to reduce the gifted remote Indigenous student to a stereotype, reinforcing a tendency not to think of the remote Indigenous student as having the potential of presenting as academically gifted.

The deficit thinking that may exist in relation to Indigenous learners at Boarding College could be exacerbated by the fact, as demonstrated in Theme Three, teachers tend to view the traits necessary for extension and enrichment as independence in the learning process, combined with proven academic achievement. Participant Two summed up the near consensus of the group by describing the ideal student for the program as “being self-motivated and taking ownership of one’s own learning”, with students coming to the learning with ‘a shared set of codified language’ in keeping with school based cultural practices. Many of the participants expressed the view remote Indigenous learners are unlikely to come to school equipped with independent learning skills, nor with the consistent schooling pattern that will have allowed them to reach the level of attainment or achievement deemed necessary by the teachers for them to be successful in these programs.

In keeping with this, Theme Five revealed that teachers view Indigenous students as the most likely not to be identified for the extension and enrichment programs at Boarding College. In fact, despite the composition of the school reflecting Darwin’s multicultural mix, no other cultural minority group was identified by the teachers to be under-represented in these programs. It is interesting to note, as revealed in Theme Six, that a number of participants observed that Aboriginal Indigenous learners were likely not to feel comfortable in the mainstream, and in the extension and enrichment programs offered at the College. This is best illustrated by Participant Four who suggested that often these students “don’t want to be in the mainstream.”

Deficit discourse in the Australian context is a theory that could be used to explain the reported reticence of the remote Indigenous student to join the mainstream. Fforde et al. (2013) assert that deficit discourse has a behavioural component for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous

Australians, and refusal to participate in integrated learning environments could potentially be explained as an impact of this framework. Further empirical research is needed in this area.

In Theme Six, the perceived inability of the remote Indigenous student to access the extension and enrichment program was partially explained, as indicated above, by factors relating to the student themselves, including their culture. Participant Five focused her attention on “what they’re missing” and what students “don’t come with” (sic). Her response was mirrored by the views of her colleagues with Participant Three indicating “attendance, communication with family” as preventers of success. This is in keeping with deficit thinking which ascribes poor performance to the student themselves and their background; however, it must be noted that this is a small study and there may be other factors influencing participant responses that fall outside its scope. It can be said though, that these attitudes, and the conceptions of the program itself, fail to respond to cultural difference in a manner conducive to cultural inclusivity, and as a result likely act as a barrier (due to the potential behavioural component of deficit thinking) to students being identified, referred, and provided for, in the enrichment and extension programs at Boarding College (Ford & Milner, 2007).

Participants also pointed to issues and factors within the school context that they perceived as acting as barriers to equitable access. Class size, leadership, curriculum, and inconsistencies in program delivery in the Indigenous Education framework at the College were all presented as inhibiting success for this cultural minority. This fits with Ford, Harris, Tyson and Trotman’s (2002), Valencia’s (2010), and Wright, Ford and Young’s (2017) view that deficit thinking can have an impact on system based processes; however, whilst moving attention away from the student themselves, such views do fail to account for the importance of the attitudes of the classroom teacher (Ford & Milner, 2007). As Hattie’s (2003;2009; 2012) work has demonstrated, what teachers value and believe is fundamental to student success. This is reinforced by Ford, Moore & Milner (2005) who argue that teachers who move beyond deficit thinking, and are culturally competent, are more likely to refer, identify and create culturally inclusive classrooms.

Limitations

This study contained three key limitations related to its design. First, the qualitative case study structure of this study prevents the findings from being generalisable. Second, the study’s scope is restricted to the perspectives of teachers, and this means it is not possible to draw conclusions

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in relation to some of the broader issues canvassed in the literature and the discussion of results. Third, the data were coded and analysed by a single researcher.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study investigated the perceptions of teachers in relation to gifted minorities to provide insight into the current composition of the extension and enrichment programs at Boarding College. Underachievement of cultural minority groups has been consistently observed across a range of educational settings (Thraves & Bannister-Tyrell, 2017). This study found six main themes that have implications for practice.

Narrow views of giftedness are indicative of possible deficit thinking, which may act to preclude gifted cultural minorities from access to gifted education. At Boarding College, this is potentially exacerbated by the tendency of teachers to view the available extension and enrichment programs as best suited to students with proven performance in the classroom, and those exhibiting learning attributes such as independence. Further, the tendency to view gifted Indigenous Australians as unsuited to the programs due to issues beyond the schooling context is likely to act as a barrier for this cultural minority. These perceptions need to be challenged, and cultural competence amongst teachers improved in this context, to assist Indigenous learners and other minorities to gain equitable and effective access to gifted provision. Additionally, participants perceive there to be a range of school-based processes that need to be addressed and refined if the problem under study is to be redressed.

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Appendix

Table 1: Participants’ teaching experience and context

Participants		Years Teaching	Years teaching at Boarding College	Roles held in the College	Subject areas and Year levels taught	Experience in HAA/OSB
1.	Male	25	20	Classroom teacher; Head of Physical Education; Head of Sports	7-10 Science; Psychology; Physical Education	3 years OSB
2.	Male	9	4	Classroom teacher	9-12 English; Society & Culture	2 years OSB
3.	Female	13	7	Classroom teacher; Classroom assistant	7-10 Core subjects	OSB
4.	Female	12	3	Classroom teacher; Year level Coordinator	7-12 English Integrated Learning	1 term OSB
5.	Female	1.5	1.5	Classroom teacher	7-11 EAL/D; English; History; Personal Learning Plan	OSB/HAA
6.	Male	3	3	Classroom teacher	Middle Years Science/ EAL/D Science/ Senior Science	2 years HAA
7.	Male	7	7	Classroom teacher; House Master; Year level coordinator	6-12 EAL/D; Mathematics; SOSE	OSB
8.	Male	3	3	Classroom teacher	10-12 Mathematics	3 years HAA
9.	Female	20	7.5	Classroom teacher	8-11 Science	OSB
10.	Female	9	5	Classroom teacher; Assistant Head of House	7-12 Science	OSB

Table 2: Coding overview

Code (Acronym)	Expansion	Explanation
TR/LN	Teacher’s responsibilities / Professional learning needs	Used to identify areas where participants describe teacher’s responsibilities and/or learning needs in relation to gifted cultural minority students.
D	Definition of giftedness	Used to identify areas where participants describe their view of giftedness.
EP	Enrichment programs	Used to identify areas where participants describe their view of the enrichment and extension programs at Boarding College.
CM	Cultural Minorities	Used to identify areas where participants describe their understanding of cultural minorities.
Indig.	Indigenous learners	Used to identify areas where participants discuss Indigenous learners.

Table 3: Collated data and emergent themes – a sample from Definition of giftedness

<u>Participant 1</u>	<u>Notes</u>	<u>Themes</u>
<p>Researcher: What do you understand by the word gifted?</p> <p>Participant 1: Gifted is in some cases defined as an extremely low percentage of the population, probably about 0.05 percent, they’re extremely able to work at an abstract higher order level ...</p> <p>Researcher: Just elaborating on that, would you mind listing all the ways you think someone might be gifted?</p> <p>Participant 1: If you’re presenting them with high level Bloom’s abstract concepts within their area of giftedness, they will meet the challenge and understand what you are presenting, and they should be able to work at a much more accelerated level. For example somebody who is gifted in year 8, given the support, should be able to do a lot of the year 11 work.</p>	<p>Definition focuses on the word ‘able’.</p> <p>Definition focuses on the word ‘able’.</p>	<p>While there is a mix of understandings of giftedness, teachers at Boarding College largely hold a <u>performance-based understanding of the concept</u> in the academic context.</p>

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