

Children of Promise: Dr. James Gallagher's Thoughts on Underrepresentation Within Gifted Education

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You can see them, you can hear them, and sometimes you can “feel” them—these young gifted children. The ways they differ from their chronological peers are observable to those who know how to look. Yet, one or two years later they become invisible. What is it that happens between the time they enter kindergarten and leave first grade? What is it that turns enthusiasm to apathy, and apathy to hostility by the fifth and sixth grades?

—J. J. Gallagher and Kinney (1974, p. 16)

In 1973, Jim Gallagher convened an interdisciplinary group of eminent scholars and practitioners to address the critical issue of underrepresentation of minority children within gifted education. *Talent Delayed–Talent Denied: The Culturally Different Gifted Child* (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974), the report from this conference, set the foundation for much of the ensuing work on culturally appropriate practices. “This issue—the continuing waste of human potential as found in the unused and unstimulated potentials of talented children from culturally different backgrounds—is why this publication [i.e., the report] came to be” (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974, p. vii).

Four areas of concern were identified: (a) the nature of the school program; (b) the educational system that plans, organizes, and implements school programs; (c) the social environment of children; and (d) public decision makers with the power to allocate resources and set policy (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974). Strategies recommended to address these concerns included the following: developing new criteria for “gifted,” using measures beyond IQ for identification, teaching with flexible instructional practices and culturally responsive curriculum, nurturing potential in early childhood, supporting students’ self-concepts, focusing on reducing cultural bias,

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using technology to provide equitable access, enhancing teacher preparation, creating pilot demonstration programs, holding school boards accountable for minority gifted students' achievement, organizing parents and the community to advocate for student needs, and addressing state and national policies (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974). Looking back across the past 40 years and his initial work in this area, we can begin to understand Dr. Gallagher's pragmatic vision.

The Wisdom of Dr. James Gallagher

Underrepresentation of culturally different children stems from a complex combination of societal, economic and political, and personal factors (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995; J. J. Gallagher, 2006). It is a pervasive and pernicious problem. Underrepresentation is a "tragic waste of human potential: the concerto never written, the scientific discovery never made, the political solution never found" (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974, p. vii). It is an individual heartbreak—but it is also a societal tragedy.

J. J. Gallagher (2001) believed that the foundation of giftedness was in innate advanced ability, but he understood equally well that whether or not potential would come to fruition was a function of the child's environment and opportunities.

There are many students with high native abilities that remain uncrystallized because of a lack of opportunity, practice, and motivation. It is the responsibility of families, schools, and society to create a more favorable atmosphere for the full development of all students—including those with outstanding talents. (J. J. Gallagher, 1995, p. 408)

He understood that IQ measures were the single most effective predictor of success in school; however, he pointed out that "they [IQ scores] cannot measure 'native ability,' [and cannot be used alone] without regard to motivational or social factors" (J. J. Gallagher, 1995, p. 409). Dr. Gallagher made this point as he discussed the famous studies of giftedness completed by Lewis Terman:

We have come to realize that Terman did not balance his sample of individuals with SGT [special gifts and talents]. Through his identification process . . . using IQ tests . . . he eliminated many potentially bright youngsters of low economic and immigrant status . . . For example, he failed to find two future Nobel Prize winners who were in school at the time of his study. We still do not have a record of what happens in adulthood to low-income or culturally diverse children who are gifted. (Kirk, Gallagher, & Coleman, 2014, p. 328)

J. J. Gallagher (1995) continually stressed the importance of nurturing potential in early childhood and sustaining support as the child's abilities developed. He believed early childhood gifted education could not be left to chance and that we should

organize and institutionalize equal opportunities and experiences for talented students . . . from all racial and ethnic groups . . . by creating early programs . . . designed to find

and encourage those students with special abilities—regardless of race, gender, or ethnic origin—while they are still in preschool or primary school. (J. J. Gallagher, 1995, p. 410)

He recommended a full continuum of supports and services to address the range of abilities, including those of the highest levels, and the specific areas of strengths (i.e., mathematical reasoning, musical talents, and written expression; J. J. Gallagher, 1995; Kirk et al., 2014). He felt that educational environments must include a variety of experiences that directly pertain to the student's interest and challenge his or her abilities. Educational experiences should include diverse instructional practices and multicultural curricula that emphasize relevant and engaging pedagogy such as problem-based learning and inquiry approaches (S. A. Gallagher & Gallagher, 2013; Kirk et al., 2014).

Even 40 years ago, J. J. Gallagher and Kinney (1974) argued that teacher preparation must focus on developing racial and cultural awareness, and teachers should work with parents to build a positive self-concept in culturally different children. They pointed out that the teacher was critical to meeting the needs of underrepresented gifted students, and the “traits that a teacher should manifest or cultivate are flexibility, creativity, self-assurance, and sensitivity to needs of culturally different gifted children” (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974, p. 19). But, according to J. J. Gallagher (1994), personnel preparation was only part of the infrastructure needed to support practice—policy must also be considered.

Local, state, and national policies provide a starting place for establishing equitable programming in gifted education—but even Gallagher believed that policies alone will not do the job (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995). In addition to policies that support the appropriate identification and services for culturally different gifted students, there must be the following: (a) clear communication of the policies' intent, (b) allocation of adequate resources to support nurturing potential, and (c) initiatives to strengthen trusting relationships with schools and families establishing a sense of “right to access” for culturally different gifted children (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995). J. J. Gallagher (1995) called for a strong commitment to “equal opportunity and justice for all and the actions taken against those barriers that stand in the way of such equality” (p. 408).

What Is the Current State of Gifted Education: Underrepresentation?

Today, 40 years after *Talent Delayed—Talent Denied: The Culturally Different Gifted Child* (J. J. Gallagher & Kinney, 1974) was released, we find ourselves facing many of the same issues. The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights “Dear Colleague” letter (October 1, 2014) stated that although positive steps have been taken, there remains much to be done. The letter (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) noted the following:

- Chronic and widespread racial disparities in access to rigorous courses, academic programs, and extracurricular activities. (p. 2)

- Schools serving more students of color are less likely to offer advanced courses and gifted and talented programs than schools serving mostly white populations, and students of color are less likely than their white peers to be enrolled in those courses and programs within schools that have those offerings. (p. 3)
- Challenging and creative courses, programs, and extracurricular activities; effective and qualified teachers, leaders, and support staff; adequate facilities; up-to-date technology; quality education materials; and sufficient funding—are critical to the success of students. Yet, disparities in the level of access to these resources often reflect the racial demographics of schools. (p. 5)

We have made some progress through federal support for the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program (J. J. Gallagher, 2006). The emphasis of this program is on serving students traditionally underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. The Javits program funds a National Research Center and supports state and local initiatives focused on addressing underrepresented populations of gifted students. The Javits program has heightened awareness of the importance of raising achievement through a focus on greater access to high-end learning opportunities for culturally different children.

We have established a body of knowledge showing how to nurture, recognize, and support the development of potential in children (Coleman & Shah-Coltrane, 2010; Olszewski-Kubilius, Limburg-Weber, & Pfeiffer, 2003). We have examples of best practices showing how to appropriately address the needs of culturally different children (Coleman, Winn, & Harradine, 2013; S. A. Gallagher & Gallagher, 2013; Grantham et al., 2011; VanTassel-Baska, 2009). And, Gallagher himself remained engaged in the task of finding and serving underrepresented gifted students; his final research focused on problem-based learning as one approach to nurturing academic potential (S. A. Gallagher & Gallagher, 2013). Our remaining challenge is to bring best practices to scale.

Where Would Dr. Gallagher Have Us Go?

Dr. Gallagher would have us renew our commitment to both equity and excellence, recognizing that they are not mutually exclusive and in fact are often the same. When we juxtapose groups of children in a battle for resources, we undermine *all* children. Stating his frustration, Dr. Gallagher said,

Generations of public policy persons have “talked the talk” on education and how precious it is to the prospering of the American society. They need to “walk the walk”—pay the bill for quality education or else stop making speeches about how important it is to educate the next generation of Americans. (J. J. Gallagher, 2006, p. 286)

We must continue to advocate for adequate resources to appropriately educate all of our nation’s children. Excellence is no longer a luxury for a few: “There should be *excellence for all*” (J. J. Gallagher, 2005, p. 32, emphasis added).

He would have us continue to explore educational approaches that more strategically allocate resources according to specific strengths and needs. “The model [RtI] has been one of the latest attempts to provide a framework for organizing assistance for students who need a different approach to meet their academic needs . . . including those who are gifted” (J. J. Gallagher, 2013, p. ix). However, Dr. Gallagher cautioned that without the allocation of appropriate human and financial resources, RtI (Response to Intervention) could not be successful, and as always, he would advocate for continued research and evaluation to document its effectiveness (J. J. Gallagher, 2013, p. xi).

Gallagher believed that to do the job well, it takes a team. He believed that collaboration among educators, partnerships with families, alliances with business and community members, and cooperation with policy makers were essential (Kirk et al., 2014). Because meeting the needs of students with gifts and talents is a complex task with broad ranging responsibilities, he called for “a *team approach* by professionals, in partnership with families, each of whom brings to the table some unique skills to apply to this impressive collection of responsibilities” (Kirk et al., 2014, p. xxxv).

Perhaps Dr. Gallagher’s most pressing advice for us would be to *stay the course*. He would often say in meetings, “If you get off the merry-go-round you will never get the brass ring.” He would remind us that our efforts to establish a body of knowledge, identify best practice, and extend our reach on behalf of underrepresented gifted students ultimately benefit us all:

Advocacy for such programs arise partially out of a sense of justice but is also rooted in enlightened self-interest: the understanding that the full development of all our nation’s talents will surely bring reward for all of us. Our tall poppies of multiple hues should cause us to rejoice in our rich and profitable diversity. (Gallagher, 1995, p. 419)

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Mary Ruth Coleman, PhD, is a senior scientist emeritus at the FPG Child Development Institute, at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She directs Project U-STARS~PLUS (Using Science, Talents and Abilities to Recognize Students~Promoting Learning in Underrepresented Students). She has numerous publications including the 14th edition of the textbook, *Educating Exceptional Children* by Samuel A. Kirk, James J. Gallagher, and Mary Ruth Coleman (2014). She has served three terms (9 years) on the Board of Directors for The Association for the Gifted (TAG), one of which she was president; three terms (9 years) on the Board of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC); and two terms (6 years) on the Board of Directors for the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). She was president of CEC in 2007.

Sneha Shah-Coltrane is currently the director of Gifted Education and Advanced Programs at the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). She works with public school districts, teachers, policy makers, families, colleges/universities, and other advocates of gifted education to ensure that the needs of gifted learners are most effectively met in the state of North Carolina. Before joining NCDPI in January 2009, she was an elementary school teacher, gifted education specialist, professional developer, author, and researcher. As co-director of Project U-STARS~PLUS at The University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, she worked with school-teachers and district personnel across the country to better recognize and respond to outstanding

potential in young students. In all of her work, she strives to meet and better understand the needs of advanced students, including those from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds, through various lenses including policy and teacher development. She also serves the gifted community in multiple roles, including having been co-chair of the Early Childhood Division of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and Board of Directors of The Association for the Gifted, a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), and currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Council of State Directors for Gifted Programs (CSDPG).

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