

Project EXCITE: Implications for Educators of Gifted Minority Students

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Editor's note: *In order to connect current research with quality classroom practice, each issue of THP contains an article complementary to one found in the pages of Gifted Child Quarterly (GCQ).*

In the following article, Michelle Reed and her co-authors describe a comprehensive intervention mathematics and science program for gifted minority students at Northwestern University. The article is based on Dr. Seon-Young Lee and other's Spring 2009 Gifted Child Quarterly article, A Follow-Up With Students After Six Years of Participation in Project EXCITE. Their discussion and insight provide a wealth of ideas for educators faced with identification and programming issues.

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Much of the current research and practice that addresses the achievement gap between whites or Asians on one side and African Americans or Hispanics on the other focuses on “treatment” rather than “prevention.” The problem typically is diagnosed as low-achievement and the usual solution is some form of remediation. The Center for Talent Development (CTD) at Northwestern University, a university-based center that has specialized in the talent development of gifted students since 1982, created Project EXCITE in 2001 as an intervention program for talented minority students that is primarily preventative. CTD’s model is a “wrap around” approach that supplements the school curriculum and instruction.

Project EXCITE

Project EXCITE is a collaboration involving CTD and the elementary and high school districts serving students in Evanston, Illinois. Evanston has a racially and socio-economically diverse population (45% white, 40% African American, 13% Hispanic). One of the aspects of the achievement gap in Evanston that has long been a concern is the regression or “dumbing down” of bright African American and Hispanic students as they advance through the elementary and middle school grades. The result has been a significant under-representation of minority students in the honors or AP courses at Evanston Township High School.

Project EXCITE specifically focuses on student achievement in mathematics

and science. Collaborating with elementary, middle, and high school teachers and administrators, the CTD Director utilizes her extensive experience in gifted education as well as the expertise of the participating educators from the Evanston schools to develop a unique and innovative program. Project EXCITE provides supplementary educational experiences for a select group of bright African American and Hispanic students that expose the students to a variety of high-achieving peer groups, that enhance and develop the “scholar identity” of these students, and that do so over an extended period of time beginning at a relatively early grade. The program is now in its ninth year.

Project EXCITE classes and support sessions are held after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer. The classes and sessions are designed to enrich and support the mathematics and science learning of these students in their schools. Some of the classes and sessions include only Project EXCITE students, others include high achieving students from Chicago-area schools, and there are classes that include students from other states and foreign countries.

The Project EXCITE model is a subject of continuous research and evaluation. After the students in the first Project EXCITE cohort completed the eighth grade, exit interviews were conducted with them and their parents. Not only did these interviews confirm that the Project EXCITE model holds promise as a uniquely preventative solution to the achievement gap, but the

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interviews also provide valuable insights to educators working with gifted minority students.

Reflections About Being an Under-Represented Minority in Gifted Education

Minority students are drastically under-represented in gifted education, and so it is not uncommon to find gifted classes where there is only one African American or Hispanic child in attendance. To counteract this isolation, Project EXCITE creates cohorts of 20-25 minority students at each grade level. These students take classes together where they build the confidence that enables them to be successful in the gifted classes where they are under-represented. Many minority gifted learners have specific needs, including the opportunity to observe and bond with other minority gifted learners as a way of building self-esteem and to develop the necessary academic skills to maintain their high performance in order to excel in the regular classroom and in the gifted education programs.

When students from Project EXCITE were asked about the most difficult challenge of the program, getting up early on Saturday mornings was the most popularly reported response. This account casts doubts on research that finds that many minority students shun academic excellence due to the fear of being rejected by peers and struggle with the issue of isolation or “fewness” when placed in gifted education classes.

When students and their parents were asked about “belonging” in the gifted program, this is what they had to say:

“I felt I belonged there. Although sometimes I felt that other kids wanted me to fail.”

“The one thing that impacted him the most was staying on campus for three weeks. He was just thrilled to meet kids from all over the world. You know, just interacting with kids from different nationalities.”

Academic Supports

One of the main goals of Project EXCITE is for the students in the program to complete Algebra I before entering high school, a placement that puts them on a track to complete Calculus by the end of high school. Some of the students had been placed in accelerated mathematics classes as sixth, seventh or eighth graders and were not immediately successful, raising the question of whether or not they were still “gifted.” In turn, some teachers and even some parents questioned the abilities of the students who experienced difficulties and requested that they be removed from the accelerated courses. The assumption that a gifted student will not have any difficult moments in his/her accelerated mathematics classes is erroneous, but nonetheless one that is hard to extinguish.

We also found that parents whose children have struggled with an accelerated mathematics course but who want their children to continue with that course are sometimes embarrassed by their child’s performance and consequently don’t ask for help. On the other hand, we found that when regular tutoring was provided to our students in accelerated classes, success in these courses dramatically increased. In fact, one parent suggested that one way to make Project EXCITE more effective would be to add more study groups and study sessions.

Another parent reported, “Tutoring. I think we would like to tutor him as long as possible. The help was very good. It also gave an opportunity to [work] with people from other cultural backgrounds.”

“And the wonderful thing about Project EXCITE is that it offers the support outside of the program itself, which was very helpful in that if they see a child with a weakness they strengthen it. So that...it’s an unbroken chain.”

Providing regular support to gifted minority students as they matriculate through the school system is essential to maintaining high achievement and ensures their success in gifted education programs. Project EXCITE offers regular support to students on an individual basis and in supervised group study sessions. Minority students from the school district who are not a part of Project EXCITE are also invited to participate in these sessions. In addition to receiving help in areas where students are experiencing difficulties, students are encouraged to look ahead in their lessons. The instructors who supervise these sessions often pre-teach difficult topics that the students will encounter in future lessons.

Study groups are an important component of the tutoring sessions. The minority students who are in the accelerated math courses are especially encouraged to form study groups. They are urged to work together to solve difficult problems and study for exams. These students are taught organization skills and note-taking and test-taking strategies. In addition, the teachers and parents are contacted to monitor student progress in the accelerated classes on a regular basis.

Expectations

The students who make up Project EXCITE come from diverse backgrounds that include varying socioeco-

omic status and language competencies. Thus our approach to meeting the needs of our diverse learners must be flexible and open to the idea of change. However, the one thing that must remain constant is what we expect from these students. High expectations result in high performance of the students. They have been identified as gifted and “hitting a wall” does not invalidate their status. Parents and teachers must take an ongoing interest in what the stu-



dents are doing in school and in our program and expect the best from these students at all times. The interviews confirmed that teacher interest in their student’s participation in Project EXCITE meant a great deal to our students and their parents.

“I think for middle school, the expectation was greater. The principal, Mr. Hood, at the school, definitely expected these students in the Project EXCITE program, to do well. And if they fell short of the expectations, he would call the par-

ents in and let us know that he didn't think they were living up to their true potential. So that was very helpful, not only to have the support of the Project EXCITE teachers, but also in the middle schools."

Researchers report that many white and Asian parents have their children tested for gifted programs before the children are old enough to enter kindergarten. In addition, once they



reach school age, many of these children participate in advanced courses during the summers and on Saturdays. In contrast, many minority parents have limited access to these programs and their children do not participate in gifted programs for various reasons. We have found that participation in Project EXCITE has raised the expectation levels that our parents have for their children and positively impacted the parent-child relationships.

"The biggest influence was that the program keeps them more attentive and focused on school subjects. She was spending more time

studying. The more she learned the more interested she was in her school subjects. I think that Project EXCITE gave her a clear and better perspective about school."

"It has changed our relationship in a positive sense, in that I expect Richard to do well, because I know that he has the ability to do well. It's not just an emerging ability at this point; it's an ability that has been fostered by the Project EXCITE program."

The Importance of Supplemental Learning Experiences

Project EXCITE students are provided with a six-year series of mathematics and science enrichment opportunities that total over 400 hours of supplemental educational experiences. This program provides students with early exposure to challenging topics in math and science. In grades three through six, all lessons are designed to be both hands on and stimulating to gain student interest and to encourage high achievement. In grades 6–8 students receive an introduction to AP and Honors coursework. The Project EXCITE students are successful in these classes and report feeling more prepared for the advanced classes where there would be

fewer minority students.

"The fact that we take classes that we are going to be doing next year, we are kind of ahead of everybody else is really helpful. We have a better understanding of the subject areas than others."

"Summer classes will tie into what you are going to do for the next whole year. You are seeing a full, whole year in three weeks, and that is giving you a chance to see what it [subject area] will be like in school. After the Saturday classes, you're probably like five or

six chapters ahead of the regular science group in school."

Exposure to Experiences that Elevate Student Aspirations

Because our families spend so many hours on the Northwestern University campus, Project EXCITE families tend to think about college more frequently and a lot earlier than the average parent. These families experienced early exposure and preparation for the college admissions process. Most students spent at least one summer as a resident on campus. All students completed admissions essays and solicited letters of recommendation from teachers. They developed an understanding of the need to develop positive relationships with teachers and some learned all too well how negative classroom experiences from the past can have lingering consequences in future endeavors.

Success in Project EXCITE boosts the self-esteem of our students and has given both the parents and the students a very bright outlook for the future. Parents reported that: "I think, just the thought of being in a gifted program and its association with Northwestern was a great boost to his self-esteem. It pulls from within him, that he has the ability. And this project certainly nurtured that ability to do best."

"As he enters high school, I think the expectation that he has for *himself*, goes beyond just the norm. The goal that he has set for himself is higher. The bar has been raised, through the Project EXCITE program. So it's maintaining and achieving that goal, and even going beyond."

Conclusion

Project EXCITE positively impacts both the academic and social development of gifted minority students, and connects them to a world of high expectations and enhanced possibilities. The interviews were not only a useful research tool, but also revealed themes that are important not only for supplemental programs like Project EXCITE, but also for daily instruction in school classrooms. ■

Reference

<http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/excite/>