

Low-Income Gifted Students in the United States: Are their Peers in Other Countries Treated Better?

Hani Morgan; Tom O'Brien
University of Southern Mississippi, USA

Abstract

This article compares the way the United States deals with its low-income gifted students with the methods Finland, Japan, and Singapore implement for these pupils. Four components of gifted education were used to compare these nations: the methods for identifying gifted students, each country's gifted education policy, the educational opportunities for low-income gifted students, and the concerns each nation faces relating to the education of gifted pupils. The conclusion focuses on the practices Finland, Japan, and Singapore implement that would benefit low-income, high-ability students in the United States.

Keywords: Inequalities; Low-Income Students; Comparative Education.

Nations in different regions of the world can vary greatly in the methods they use for teaching low-income students. For example, Singapore's approach to teaching these students differs greatly from that of the United States. Singapore, like Finland and Japan, does a better job of supporting children equitably (Darling-Hammond, 2014-15; Morgan, 2018). To explore how a few top-performing nations in international testing differ from the United States in their approaches to teaching low-income gifted students, we analyzed the methods of three leading nations in international testing. We investigated the methods of Japan and Singapore because these two countries are known for their high scores on one of the most important international tests: the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). We analyzed Finland's approach because this nation has usually been considered the leading European country in international testing throughout the 21st century (Morgan, 2018).

We used four components of gifted education to compare the United States with these nations on how each of them deals with low-income gifted students: the methods for identifying high-ability students, each country's gifted education policy, the educational opportunities for low-income gifted students, and the concerns each nation faces relating to gifted education.

Before exploring how these nations differ in their methods to teaching low-income gifted students, we offer a brief background on international testing. We also include information on the characteristics of high-ability students.

The Program for International Student Assessment

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is offered every three years to 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science (OECD, 2018a). On the 2015 PISA, Singapore surpassed all nations in the three subjects this test covered. Japan scored second in science, fifth in math, and eighth in reading, and Finland performed very well when compared with how other European nations fared, coming in fifth in science, fourth in reading, and twelfth in math. In contrast, American students continued to achieve unimpressive results.

Low-income students in these three high-scoring nations tend to outperform their counterparts in the United States. One of the ways the PISA results were analyzed was by determining the percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students who achieve a certain level of proficiency in the three cognitive domains the PISA assesses. PISA refers to these students as core-skills resilient students. The top-performing nations, which include Singapore, Japan, and Finland, were found to have the largest shares of core-skills resilient students (OECD, 2018b).

Gifted students

Gifted students are generally considered to include those with above average ability in an academic field such as language arts, mathematics, and science. These students can also include those with exceptional intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership skills (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], n.d.-a). The number of gifted students in the world and in the United States is difficult to determine because it depends on the methods used to identify them (NAGC, n.d.-a).

Winner (1996) distinguished between profoundly and moderately gifted students. She explained that the former have an extraordinary passion to pursue the area in which they have exceptional talent. For example, they may read voraciously even before entering kindergarten. In contrast, moderately gifted children are usually described as bright, but they do not exhibit an obsessive desire to master an area. Although they may score highly on IQ tests, they are not years ahead of their peers like profoundly gifted children.

Callahan (2018) explained that there are no crucial developmental times when students exhibit gifted traits. Children are not necessarily born with talent and may develop it late in life. For example, Laura Ingalls Wilder did not publish her first book until the age of 65. In addition, not all traits of giftedness are positive. Someone with advanced verbal ability can be viewed as disruptive, and students with superior academic ability may act out if placed in classes below their grade level as a consequence of being bored. Further, not all gifted students exhibit the behaviors that characterize them as gifted all of the time (Callahan, 2018).

Since gifted students learn faster than their peers of the same age, their teachers need to differentiate instruction. Specifically, teachers need to adjust the level, depth, and pace of their teaching to match these students' abilities (Firmender, Reis, & Sweeny, 2013; NAGC, 2010). Educators also may need to include appropriate interventions, such as parent education, counseling, and placement in a program designed for older students. Many gifted students do not do well in school because they lack educational opportunities resulting from poverty, cultural barriers, or discrimination (Kautz, 2017; NAGC, 2010). Such students need to be provided with additional support and placed in challenging programs to have a chance to work at a level appropriate with their skills (NAGC, 2010).

Methods for identifying gifted students in the United States

American schools typically identify gifted students through nomination and screening (NAGC, n.d.-b). Examples of instruments used for identification include intelligence and achievement tests, student cumulative records, teacher observations, nomination forms, portfolios, and student educational profiles (NAGC, n.d.-b). Since a single test cannot measure all the talents gifted students may possess, one best practice for identification is the use of multiple assessments. Further, to promote equity, teachers need to recognize that students from cultural minority groups may exhibit giftedness in different ways than mainstream students (Johnsen, 2009). To nurture these students' gifts, educators need to provide an environment allowing them to focus on their talents rather than their weaknesses.

Unfortunately, many states fail to recognize some students as gifted because they focus on academic ability and overlook the other talents high-ability students may possess. A recent study, for example, found that over half of states emphasize intellectual and academic abilities in their

definitions of giftedness (Hodges, Tay, Maeda, & Gentry, 2018). Additionally, some gifted programs have been found to overlook gifted children who do not show the cooperative, high-achieving behaviors some educators believe students need to display to attend these programs (Hamilton et al., 2018; Kautz, 2017).

American policy on gifted education

The Jacob Javits Act is the only federal program devoted especially for gifted students in the United States (NAGC, n.d.-c). The Javits Act was passed in 1988 and reauthorized under the Every Student Succeeds Act to encourage the development of talent in U.S. schools. Its purpose is to arrange programs of research, demonstration projects, and strategies that help elementary and secondary schools meet the needs of gifted and talented students. The Javits Act funds demonstration grants and a National Research and Development Center that conducts research designed to inform practice. Like other federal programs, Congress funds the Javits program (NAGC, n.d.-c).

Although the Javits Act is designed to serve underrepresented students, especially minority and economically disadvantaged youth, gifted low-income students achieve at lower levels than their more privileged peers both in high school and beyond it. Some of the reasons they underperform involve the harsh living conditions children from low-income families endure and the inferior schools they usually attend (Morgan, 2019). Other concerns related to gifted education policy in the United States include the great diversity in programs within and among states (VanTassel-Baska, 2018).

Equity for U.S. students

The high-poverty schools that many low-income gifted students attend often lack the resources to accurately identify high-ability students. This condition contributes to the low percentage of these children in gifted programs. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute indicated that students in high-poverty schools, where high proportions of students of color attend, participated in gifted programs at about half the rate than that of pupils who attended low-poverty schools (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018).

In addition to having inadequate textbooks and fewer computers, schools serving large numbers of students of color are typically overcrowded. Many of these schools fail to offer the courses needed for students to be eligible for college and operate with a shortened school day and school year (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Such an environment makes it difficult to perceive these students as gifted because they do not experience the conditions needed to show their talents. Consequently, many talented low-income students of color do not get recognized as gifted students (Gollnick & Chinn, 2013; Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2018).

In addition, teachers who teach in low-income schools generally have fewer qualifications than their counterparts who work for wealthier districts (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). Such schools are more likely to hire teachers with emergency credentials than low-poverty, low-minority schools. Teachers on these credentials are the least qualified teachers (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). This trend should concern American policymakers interested in improving the schools gifted low-income students attend because qualified teachers can make a significant difference in children's academic success (Morgan, 2018). With lower numbers of qualified personnel, underserved schools are less likely to identify their high-ability students accurately and to offer them the stimulating environment they deserve.

In some cases, students from wealthier families may get placed in a gifted program simply because their parents can afford to pay for an IQ test that helps in determining if their children are eligible. For example, Card and Giuliano (2015) investigated one district allowing parents the option to hire a private psychologist to test their children in order to present IQ scores directly to the district. Psychologists who could provide the tests were easy to find because there was an active market for IQ testing where the district was located.

Concerns about gifted education in the United States

One obvious concern about U.S. gifted education programs is the low percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students enrolled in these programs and the consequences of this problem. Recent statistics indicated that only 6.1% of students in high-poverty schools participated in gifted programs but that 12.4% of those in low-poverty schools participated in gifted education (Yaluma & Tyner, 2018). The evidence suggests that the academic gap between these students and their more privileged counterparts would narrow if the percentage of low-income students of color in gifted programs increased.

When South Carolina implemented a new policy that increased the percentage of low-income and minority children in these programs, students benefitted in several ways. This approach boosted the students' self-confidence and developed their communication skills more than if they would have remained in regular classrooms (VanTassel-Baska, 2018). Card and Giuliano (2016) concluded that participation in gifted classrooms helped Black and Hispanic students make achievement gains at a large urban school district. They indicated that gifted programs had the potential to serve large numbers of high-achieving disadvantaged students at little or no cost to other students.

Other concerns about gifted education involve programs that can vary greatly within and between states and the lack of legislation designed to address the needs of gifted students regardless of their socioeconomic background. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act did not address gifted students. This problem leads many gifted pupils to sit in classes without instruction that meets their needs (VanTassel-Baska, 2018).

Methods for identifying gifted students in Finland

In contrast to the United States, Finland does not identify gifted students. This may lead educators in other countries to assume that a large number of high-ability children in Finland do not receive the education they deserve. However, gifted students in Finland are more likely to receive stimulating instruction than those in other countries because the newest Basic Education Act emphasizes individualism and diverse education. As a result, Finnish educators accept learners as unique and respect their rights. Further, Finland's approach to education is in harmony with an important aspect of gifted education: acceleration (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2013). Acceleration occurs when students skip an entire grade, take an Advanced Placement class, or enroll in a class with students in a higher grade (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Finland's policy on gifted education

Finland does not have a gifted education policy, and gifted students are not discussed in any important educational documents. Gifted education has been a controversial topic in Finland, with some interest groups perceiving it as necessary while others view it as elitist (Laine & Tirri, 2016). Discussing giftedness in Finland can even create feelings of discomfort as a result of traditional cultural beliefs. In contrast to the individualistic values that prevail in the United States, Finnish people tend to have egalitarian attitudes (Morgan, 2014). Therefore, they shy away from regarding one person as being more talented than others (Laine & Tirri, 2016).

Despite the absence of a gifted education policy, Finland's approach to education serves high-ability students rather well because students are placed in classes that match their skills. This occurs as a result of the strong emphasis on identifying and providing support for all students with needs in reading, writing, and math. Consequently, schools in Finland have a higher rate of students with special needs at the primary level when compared with the percentage of students who receive special education in many other countries (Morgan, 2014). These students may be children with learning disabilities or those below grade level in a particular subject. At the upper secondary school level, schools use modular curriculum units, allowing students to take courses at their own pace. Thus, students with strong academic abilities can complete their studies at a faster rate than other pupils (Sahlberg, 2012).

Additionally, as a result of the strong emphasis on differentiated instruction, many students in Finland receive instruction that matches their skill levels. In fact, the national core curriculum considers differentiation as the foundation of teaching, and this instructional approach starts in kindergarten (Laine & Tirri, 2016). Because differentiation focuses on children's needs, teachers in Finland are expected to provide support for both gifted students and those with learning problems.

Although Finland does not have a gifted education policy, special schools exist. These are schools with higher than average percentages of students who get admitted to a university. Such schools are similar to those for the gifted. Finland has over 50 special high schools, and many families send their children to these schools so that they have better chances for university admission. These schools admit students based on their applicants' GPA, and some require admission examinations, interviews, or other methods of evaluation (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Equity for students in Finland

Finland's egalitarian school system creates opportunities for low-income gifted students to receive stimulating instruction that matches their talents. Whereas in the United States socioeconomically disadvantaged children usually attend underserved schools (Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016), in Finland, the schools are more similar in quality, regardless of how many low-income students attend (Morgan, 2014; Sahlberg, 2012).

Since the Finns value egalitarian principles, they tend to resist separating students. Consequently, they implement education for high-ability students in mixed-ability settings (Laine & Tirri, 2016). However, some students with special needs are placed in a separate class in their school or in a separate institution when necessary (Sahlberg, 2012). One reason low-income gifted students are likely to experience a stimulating education in Finland is that all their teachers are rigorously prepared to teach. In addition, teacher attrition is not a problem. Teachers usually stay in the same school for life, and very few primary teachers leave their profession after the first 5 years. Only about 10% to 15% of teachers leave the profession (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015). In the United States, however, teacher attrition rates are high, especially in low-income schools (Morgan, 2018).

In contrast to the United States, Finland requires all teachers to complete a more rigorous and selective teacher education program than most of those American teachers attend. They also need to hold a five-year master's degree to teach. And the admission process in Finland is fierce. In 2010, over 6,600 students applied for the 660 slots available for the primary school preparation programs (Economic Opportunity Institute, 2012; Hancock, 2011).

Concerns about gifted education in Finland

Although Finland does a fine job in providing its low-income children opportunities to succeed academically, the country receives its share of criticism for the way high-ability students are treated. Teacher training programs devote sufficient time to prepare future teachers for teaching students with disabilities but almost no time to prepare them to teach gifted students. Although they are expected to provide a fast pace for high-ability students, they receive inadequate training on teaching these students. It is not uncommon for future teachers to listen, at most, to a single lecture on the characteristics of gifted students. This lack of training leads to a lack of consistency in teaching high-ability students at the primary and middle schools levels (Finn & Wright, 2015).

The lack of emphasis on gifted education is, in part, the result of how special education is perceived in Finland. Educators in Finland tend to view special education as an approach to support students with learning disabilities rather than gifted students. As a consequence, less emphasis is placed on research on gifted education than on research for students with learning disabilities (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2013).

Another concern involves the trend to offer better educational opportunities for gifted children from wealthier families. Although differences in school quality in Finland are generally smaller than those in many countries, they exist. Some parents with high-ability children even move to a new neighborhood to send their kids to the best schools. They can tell which schools perform poorly and which ones contain more children from low-income families because struggling schools receive extra resources. Despite Finland's reputation as an egalitarian country, this controversial practice is increasing and contributing to segregated neighborhoods (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Methods for identifying gifted students in Japan

Like Finland, Japan has no official methods for identifying gifted students and no formal definition of giftedness. Nonetheless, students have the opportunity to be educated in a similar way to those placed in a traditional gifted program. Since there are no official gifted programs, education that plays this role is sometimes referred to as virtual gifted education or de facto gifted education. This form of education is available inside and outside of school settings (Matsumura, 2016).

The de facto gifted education system sorts the highest-performing students based on their school entrance examinations, but this process generally does not occur until the middle and high school levels (Ibata-Arens, 2012). During the primary grades, parents can enroll their children in a few selective schools affiliated with teacher training programs. These schools offer accelerated instruction, especially for children from wealthier families. In addition, regular primary schools may implement ability grouping, but they need to get government approval to do this (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Although public primary schools are generally not ranked, when students move up to the middle and high school grades, they enter schools that are ranked according to how well these institutions prepare students to enter the best universities. The students who perform highest on the entrance examinations are those who attend the highest-ranked schools (Ibata-Arens, 2012). Since tests determine which students will receive de facto gifted education, it is primarily their scores on entrance exams that determine their giftedness (Matsumura, 2016).

Japan's policy on gifted education

The limited chances for students to receive gifted education throughout their nine years of compulsory education resulted to a great extent from the opposition to this form of education. This resistance reflects the egalitarian values that prevail in Japan. As a consequence of these values, Japan has no official policy on gifted education (Matsumura, 2016).

Japanese values emphasize the group over the individual. Such beliefs are inconsistent with the idea of offering special learning opportunities for certain students (Heuser, Wang, & Shahid, 2017; Sumida, 2013). The Japanese believe in contributing to the group because the group will respond by helping individuals. But if someone shuns the group, it will not help this person in return (Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011). As a result, the Japanese educational system has encouraged a high average achievement rate for all students instead of focusing on excellence for a few (Morgan, 2018; Cooper, 1999).

The idea of contributing to the group over the individual is in harmony with the idea of teaching high-ability students to help struggling pupils. As a consequence, instead of skipping grades or attending separate classes for accelerated instruction, Japanese educators usually have high-ability students help pupils who struggle throughout the compulsory years of schooling. They believe this approach helps all students because children who tutor others often learn as much as those who are tutored (Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011). In addition, this practice reduces the inequalities associated with tracking (Bugaj, 2009), a practice that occurs when high-ability students are separated from other children so that they are taught in different classrooms (Brookings Institution, 2013). Classes at the primary level in Japan, therefore, frequently consist of students with varied skill levels (OECD, 2011; Tucker & Ruzzi, 2011).

Although the Japanese generally believe that devoting special attention to a certain group is discriminatory (Bugal, 2009), in 2005, Japan implemented the third Science and Technology Basic Plan, which focuses on the special abilities of gifted students. This plan involves developing the abilities of gifted children through several programs including “Super Science High Schools,” “Next Generation Scientists Programs,” “Science Camps,” and “Japan Science Tournaments.”

In addition, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) formed a task force in 2011 to explore the possibilities of reforming the national education system to better support science education. This task force concluded that a national system of gifted education should be created (Basister & Kawai, 2018). In 2012, the Japan Society for Science Education published various articles about gifted programs. This was regarded as a significant step since gifted education was previously viewed as taboo (Sumida, 2013).

Equity in the school system in Japan

Although Japan’s high-ability students have few opportunities to enroll in gifted programs in the primary grades, some aspects of the Japanese approach to education would likely benefit American gifted students from low-income families. These aspects relate to the practices that allow low-income students to have an adequate level of learning opportunities. One reason Japan repeatedly outperforms the United States on the PISA involves the opportunities available for its low-income students. In contrast to the United States, Japan provides better than average learning options for its students, regardless of their socioeconomic status (OCED, n.d.). Low-income gifted students in Japan are therefore likely to receive instruction that matches their ability. However, it frequently involves an inferior form of learning because the memorization needed for them to do well on exams promotes rote methods of study rather than analytical thinking and creativity (OECD, 2012).

Further, many high-ability students in Japan receive instruction appropriate for their skills in cram schools, which can help both gifted students and struggling students. However, cram schools frequently use an approach to instruction based on preparing students for tests, reducing their opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. When students prepare for their high school entrance exams, for example, cram schools usually teach to the test, offering sample tests similar to the ones pupils need to pass to be admitted to their preferred school (Morgan, 2018).

Concerns about gifted education in Japan

Japan has lacked gifted programs to serve talented students well, especially during their compulsory years of schooling. At this level, other than a handful of schools that offer accelerated education, few programs for gifted students exist. Although in Tokyo schools may offer afterschool and summer programs for high-ability students, the demand for these programs exceeds the supply. Since wealthy parents can afford private schools that may offer accelerated instruction, low-income parents generally have fewer opportunities to enroll their children in gifted programs (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Although Japan may have fewer educational inequalities than those in America, low-income students still face them. The idea of admitting students to selective high schools through exam scores may seem fair. However, pupils from wealthy families have an advantage because their families can afford the cram schools that offer tutoring to help pupils achieve the scores needed for admission.

This nation also implements a system of education that promotes memorization, especially during the high school years. Such an approach reduces the opportunities for creative and gifted students to receive the kind of teaching that matches their talents. Although Japan has attempted to improve the education of its high-ability students by creating various programs, there is doubt as to whether enough students are attending these programs. The Super Science High Schools, for example, impact only a small fraction of all students (Ibata-Arens, 2012).

Methods for identifying gifted students in Singapore

Gifted students in Singapore are regarded as those with exceptional intellectual and leadership ability. Pupils with strong psychomotor ability or talent in art and music are considered gifted as well (Ministry of Education, 2015). Unlike Finland and Japan, Singapore recognizes that gifted children's needs might not be met in the primary mainstream classroom. Singaporean educators believe that if their needs are not met, learners could become indifferent or disruptive in class. As a consequence, the country implements a gifted education program (GEP) designed to develop intellectual rigor, values, and creativity (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Tests are used to identify gifted students. However, the Ministry of Education (2018) recommends against preparing children for these tests and warns that this practice could inflate test results. When parents neglect this advice, it leads to the misidentification of gifted pupils. Students not ready for the demands of the GEP, which they can enroll in starting at grade 4, may struggle rather than benefit, possibly even losing confidence and self-esteem.

The tests that determine if students are eligible for the GEP are offered during the third grade. After taking the first of these tests, those scoring in the top 8% take a second test about two months later. About 550 of these students are offered the chance to enroll in the gifted program, and about 450 pursue this opportunity. This number constitutes about 1% of the age cohort (Finn & Wright, 2015).

Singapore's policy on gifted education

Singapore has stronger policies on gifted education than those of Finland and Japan, offering more learning opportunities for high-ability students. In addition, many graduate students conduct research on gifted education and receive doctoral degrees that cover gifted education. Members of the Ministry of Education and academics do research on gifted education as well, although it is not shared with the public (Neihart & Tan, 2016).

Gifted children in Singapore can pursue a range of types of projects that constitute the Individualized Study Options (ISOs). Each option focuses on different skills, including information technology skills, research skills, problem solving skills, and inventive thinking skills. All pupils in grade 4 are taught to acquire the skills needed for the ISOs in grade 5. When the ISOs are implemented, a teacher mentors a small number of students, helping them to complete their projects. And parents can participate to provide support and encouragement. Although students do not receive grades, they can share their projects at their schools. If they produce stellar work, it is displayed at an annual exhibition (Ministry of Education, 2017a).

Nine schools offer essentially the same GEP at the primary level. Teachers and other personnel meet to make sure that all the schools use similar standards. Although differences exist among schools, all students have the chance to interact with their peers as they participate in activities (Ministry of Education, 2017b). In addition to the students in the GEP, other pupils receive advanced education, which consists of supplementation composed of content determined by individual schools. Since each school typically has a small number of high-ability students, schools often collaborate with one another to offer specialized classes (Finn & Wright, 2015).

At the secondary level, individual schools provide a curriculum designed for high-ability students. These pupils receive instruction that focuses more on learning and less on test preparation. The Integrated Program (IP) schools, which are designed for the top 6 to 10% of Singapore's students, select some high-ability students not formerly identified as GEP pupils as well as those previously enrolled in this program. Students at these schools can take the university qualifying exams without taking the O-level exams. Most students need to do well on O-level exams at the end of grade 10 to attend junior colleges and pre-university programs (Finn & Wright, 2015; Neihart & Tan, 2016).

Equity in the school system in Singapore

One reason Singapore has a strong school system involves its commendable methods of preparing, retaining, hiring, assessing, and mentoring its teachers (Sclafani, 2015). More importantly, well-regarded teachers are assigned to teach in struggling areas to minimize inequalities in education. As a result of such practices, low-income gifted students in Singapore experience fewer inequalities than those their counterparts in the United States endure. The Ministry of Education also funds all schools on an equitable basis, providing each school extra funds to spend on low-income students. These funds enable schools to offer enrichment activities and to buy resources for these students (National Center on Education and the Economy, n.d.).

Although other countries claim they have a commitment to nurture and recognize the potential of their students, this outcome may not occur unless their parents make it happen. Singapore aims to avoid this trend. For many years, Singapore has improved the programs for its high-ability pupils. Although tracking and ability grouping can cause inequalities, Singapore implements these methods while maintaining a strong commitment to equal educational opportunity. For example, one strategy used for equitably placing students in the GEP program is a universal screening process (Finn & Wright, 2015). Universal screening promotes equity because all students are tested to determine if they are eligible to be placed in a gifted program (Plucker & Peters, 2018).

In contrast, most schools in the United States select students through parent and teacher referrals, a practice that can lead to bias if teachers fail to recognize the talents of gifted low-income student (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Elhoweris, 2008). A recent study, for example, showed that even when American low-income students performed well in reading and math, they got placed in gifted education less often (Hamilton et al., 2018).

Concerns about gifted education in Singapore

Although high-ability students in Singapore are generally served well, like Japan and Finland, this nation can improve its programs for these students in a few ways. One area of concern is the low number of primary students (less than 1.5%) who enroll in the GEP. Further, while these students receive the methods previously discussed, much less is known about the opportunities for gifted students not placed in the GEP (Neihart & Tan, 2016).

Another concern relates to the emphasis on standardized tests. Although students in the GEP receive instruction that focuses on problem solving and critical thinking, gifted students not placed in this program are more likely to receive instruction that promotes high exam scores. This type of teaching hinders the development of critical thinking skills. In addition, gifted students are identified through tests based on their intellectual potential (Ministry of Education, 2018), but such an approach does not serve students gifted in nonacademic areas well.

Additionally, the meritocratic exam system in Singapore rewards students who do well on exams with more educational and career opportunities. However, those with low scores do not receive these benefits. Because high scores are crucial for educational and career success in Asian nations, critics of Singapore's school system say that teachers are more inclined to teach to examinations rather than experiment with innovative approaches to teaching (Morgan, 2018).

Conclusion

Many educational practices for low-income gifted children in Finland, Japan, and Singapore differ from those of the United States. One reason for these disparities involves different cultural attitudes. Another reason involves the different type of educational systems these nations have. The United States has a decentralized school system, but Finland, Japan, and Singapore each has a ministry of education that controls more of the educational policies that are implemented throughout these countries. These nations are also less culturally diverse than the United States.

Policymakers therefore need to realize that differences in cultural attitudes may lead a practice that works overseas to backfire in the United States. They also need to be aware that the differences in the structures of the educational systems of Japan, Singapore, and Finland can make it difficult to successfully implement a practice that works well in one of these nations in the United States.

Despite these differences, some of these nations' educational practices would benefit low-income gifted students in the United States. For example, schools in Singapore use a universal screening process to determine which students are placed in gifted education. In contrast, most schools in the United States rely on parent and teacher referrals to select these pupils. American schools that have experimented with using universal screening have experienced impressive results. One large diverse district in the United States found that implementing this approach led higher percentages of low-income students to be placed in gifted programs (Card & Giuliano, 2015).

Another approach these nations implement involves providing better-prepared teachers and more resources for their low-income students than the United States offers. Supplying disadvantaged gifted students with the same educational resources as those privileged pupils receive would improve the education of these students in the United States.

While Finland, Japan, and Singapore implement some commendable practices for their gifted students, there are concerns about the ways high-ability students are treated in these countries. Teacher-training programs in Finland devote very little time for preparing candidates to teach gifted pupils, and high-ability students in Japan have few chances to attend a gifted education program during their nine years of compulsory education. In Singapore, a very low percentage of primary students (less than 1.5%) get placed in the GEP program.

Reflecting on how top-performing nations in international testing treat their low-income gifted students can help American policymakers develop ideas on providing a better approach to teaching gifted students in the United States. Such an approach can lead to practices that would enhance the American public school system.

References

- Basister, M. P., & Kawai, N. (2018). Japan's educational practices for mathematically gifted students. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(11), 1213-1241.
- Brookings Institution. (2013). The resurgence of ability grouping and persistence of tracking. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-resurgence-of-ability-grouping-and-persistence-of-tracking/>
- Bugaj, S. J. (2009). Governmental reform and education for the gifted in Japan: A current analysis. *Gifted and Talented International*, 24(2), 131-138.
- Callahan, C. M. (2018). The characteristics of gifted and talented students. In C. M. Callahan & H. L. Hertberg - Davis. (Eds.), *Fundamentals of gifted education: Considering multiple perspectives*. (pp. 153-165). New York: Routledge.
- Card, D., & Giuliano, L. (2015). *Can universal screening increase the representation of low income and minority students in gifted education?* Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21519.pdf>
- Cooper, E. (1999). A reflection: The Japanese approach to gifted and talented students. *Gifted Child Today*, 22(2), 18-21.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). What can PISA tell us about U.S. education policy? *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 26(1), 1-14.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2014-15). Want to close the achievement gap? Close the teaching gap. *American Educator*, 38(4), 14-18.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Rothman, R. (2015). *Teaching in the flat world: Learning from high-performing systems*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Economic Opportunity Institute. (2012). What Washington can learn from Finland's success in K-12 education. Retrieved from <http://www.opportunityinstitute.org/blog/post/what-washington-can-learn-from-finlands-success-in-k-12-education/>
- Elhoweris, H. (2008). Teacher judgment in identifying gifted/talented students. *Multicultural Education*, 15(3), 35-38.
- Finn, C. E., & Wright, B. L. (2015). *Failing our brightest kids: The global challenge of educating high-ability students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Firmender, J. M., Reis, S. M., & Sweeny, S. M. (2013). Reading comprehension and fluency levels ranges across diverse classrooms: The need for differentiated reading instruction and content. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 57(1), 3-14.
- Gollnick, D. M., & Chinn, P. C. (2013). *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Grissom, J. A., & Redding, C. (2016). Discretion and disproportionality: Explaining the underrepresentation of high-achieving students of color in gifted Programs. *AERA Open*, 2(1), 1-25.
- Hamilton, R., McCoach, B. D., Tutwiler, S. M., Siegle, D., Gubbins, E. J., Callahan, C. M., Brodersen, A. V., & Mun, R. U. (2018). Disentangling the roles of institutional and individual poverty in the identification of gifted students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(1), 6-24.
- Hancock, L. (2011). *Why are Finland's schools successful?* Retrieved from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/why-are-finlands-schools-successful-49859555/>
- Heuser, B. L., Wang, K., & Shahid, S. (2017). Global dimensions of gifted and talented education: The influence of national perceptions on policies and practices. *Global Education Review*, 4(1), 4-21.
- Hodges, J., Tay, J., Maeda, Y., & Gentry, M. (2018). A meta-analysis of gifted and talented identification practices. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(2), 147-174.
- Ibata-Arens, K. C. (2012). Race to the future: Innovations in gifted and enrichment education in Asia, and implications for the United States. *Administrative Sciences*, 2, 1-25.
- Johnsen, S. K. (2009). Best practices for identifying gifted students. *Principal*, 88(5), 8-14.
- Kautz, J. M. (2017). No "gift" giving here: The inadequate gifted education programs in New York state and the need for gifted education reform. *Journal of Law & Policy*, 25(2), 687-721.
- Laine, S., & Tirri, K. (2016). How Finnish elementary school teachers meet the needs of their gifted students. *High Ability Studies*, 27(2), 149-164.
- Matsumura, N. (2016). Virtual gifted education in Japan. In D. Y. Dai & C. C. Kuo (Eds.), *Gifted education in Asia: Problems and prospects* (pp. 121-145). Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2015). *Gifted education programme: Rationale and goals*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/rationale-and-goals>
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2017a). *Gifted education programme: Individualised study options*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/individualised-study-options>

- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2017b). *Gifted education programme: Schools offering the Gifted Education Programme*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/schools-offering-the-gifted-education-programme>
- Ministry of Education, Singapore. (2018). *Gifted education programme: GEP identification*. Retrieved from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/education/programmes/gifted-education-programme/gep-identification>
- Morgan, H. (2014). The education system in Finland: A success story other countries can emulate. *Childhood Education, 90*(6), 453-457.
- Morgan, H. (2018). *The world's highest-scoring students: How their nations led them to excellence*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Morgan, H. (2019). The lack of minority students in gifted education: Hiring more exemplary teachers of color can alleviate the problem. *The Clearing House, 92*(4-5), 156-162.
- National Association for Gifted Children. (n.d.-a). *What is giftedness?* Retrieved from <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/what-giftedness>
- National Association for Gifted Children. (n.d.-b). *Identification*. Retrieved from <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-education-practices/identification>
- National Association for Gifted Children. (n.d.-c). *Jacob Javits Gifted & Talented Students Education Act*. Retrieved from <https://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources-university-professionals/jacob-javits-gifted-talented-students>
- National Association for Gifted Children. (2010). *Redefining giftedness for a new century: Shifting the paradigm*. Washington, DC: National Association for Gifted Children.
- National Center on Education and the Economy. (n.d.). *Singapore: Supporting equity*. Retrieved from <http://ncee.org/what-we-do/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/singapore-overview-2/singapore-equity/>
- National Center for Education Statistics (2016). Performance of U.S. 15-year-old students in science, reading, and mathematics literacy in an international context: First look at PISA 2015. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017048.pdf>
- Neihart, M., & Tan, L. S. (2016). Gifted education in Singapore. In D. Y. Dai and C. C. Kuo (Eds.), *Gifted education in Asia: Problems and prospects* (pp. 77-96). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Olszewski-Kubilius, P., & Corwith, S. (2018). Poverty, academic achievement, and giftedness: A literature review. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 62*(1), 37-55.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (n.d.). *Japan: Country note: Results from PISA 2012*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA-2012-results-japan.pdf>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2011). *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. Paris: Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2012). *Strong performers and successful reformers in education: Lessons from PISA for Japan*. Paris: Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2018a). What is PISA? Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2018b). *Equity in education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility*. Paris: Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Owens, A., Reardon, S. F., & Jencks, C. (2016). Income segregation between schools and school districts. *American Educational Research Journal, 53*(4), 1159-1197.
- Plucker, J. A., & Peters, S. J. (2018). Closing poverty-based excellence gaps: Conceptual, measurement, and educational issues. *Gifted Child Quarterly, 62*(1), 56-67.
- Sahlberg, P. (2012). A model lesson: Finland shows us what equal opportunity looks like. *American Educator, 36*(1), 20-27.
- Sclafani, S. K. (2015). Singapore chooses teachers carefully. *Phi Delta Kappan, 97*(3), 8-13.
- Sumida, M. (2013). Emerging trends in Japan in education of the gifted: A focus on science education. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 36*(3), 277-289.
- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2016). *A coming crisis in teaching? Teacher supply, demand, and shortages in the U.S.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Tirri, K., & Kuusisto, E. (2013). How Finland serves gifted and talented pupils. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 36*(1), 84-96.
- Tucker, M. S., & Ruzzi, B. B. (2011). Japan: Perennial league leader. In M. Tucker (Ed.), *Surpassing Shanghai: An agenda for American education built on the world's leading systems* (pp. 79-109). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- VanTassel-Baska, J. (2018). American policy in gifted education. *Gifted Child Today, 41*(2), 98-103.

- Winner, E. (1996, October 16). The miseducation of our gifted children. *Education Week*. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1996/10/16/07winner.h16.html>
- Yaluma, C. B., & Tyner, A. (2018, January). *Is there a gifted gap? Gifted education in high-poverty schools*. Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
-

About the Authors

Hani Morgan is Professor of Education in the School of Education at the University of Southern Mississippi. He completed two postgraduate degrees from Columbia University. His first master's degree from Columbia's Teachers College was in Curriculum and Teaching, and his second master's degree was in International Education. Shortly after finishing his studies at Columbia, Morgan worked for ETS as an assistant examiner for the Principles of Learning and Teaching Praxis Test. He then started his doctoral studies at Rutgers University and specialized in Foundations of Education. During his years at Rutgers, he taught two courses for the English Department at the College of New Jersey. After completing a doctoral degree from Rutgers, Morgan returned to ETS to work as a reader for the School Leaders Licensure Assessment Exam. Morgan is the author of *The World's Highest-Scoring Students: How Their Nations Led Them to Excellence* and the co-editor of *The World Leaders in Education: Lessons from the Successes and Drawbacks of Their Methods*. He also authored and co-authored over 50 academic articles in journals such as *Childhood Education*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *American Educational History Journal*.

Thomas V. O'Brien is Professor of Educational Studies in the School of Education and a faculty affiliate at the Center for Black Studies at the University of Southern Mississippi. O'Brien studies the history of race, class, and schooling in the U.S. He is author of the book *The Politics of Race and Schooling: Public Education in Georgia, 1900-1961* and has published in journals such as *American Education Research Journal*, *Teachers College Record*, *Educational Forum*, *History of Education Quarterly*, and *American Educational History Journal*. O'Brien also studies topics related to pedagogy, multiculturalism, and teacher education. He is the co-editor (with Mordechai Gordon) of *Bridging Theory and Practice in Teacher Education*. In 2016 O'Brien expanded his conception of "the South" when he won a Fulbright visiting scholars award to study and teach in the Republic of Chile. O'Brien earned his B.A. (in Human Biology) at Brown University and Ph.D. (in Educational Studies) at Emory University. In the 1980s he taught middle-school and high-school science and math in Massachusetts. Prior to Southern Miss, he held tenured positions at Millersville University and The Ohio State University.

Address

Dr. Hani Morgan
School of Education
University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #5057
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, USA.

e-Mail: Hani.Morgan@usm.edu