

REMOVING THE MASK: GIFTEDNESS IN POVERTY

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*I*ntroduction

Dear Reader,

When I first read Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, I knew I had found some labels and explanations for things that I had personally and professionally experienced in my life. Having worked in the field of gifted education for many years, I also knew that many school districts have struggled to identify gifted and potentially gifted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Over the years I have read the literature and listened to a variety of consultants on meeting the needs of gifted students from diverse backgrounds. For every proposed answer, there seemed to be "Yes, but..." followed by five more questions.

As Dr. Payne has conducted workshops across the United States on the subject of poverty, she has been questioned repeatedly about gifted students from poverty. She shared this information with me and suggested that we pursue it. Having worked in a school district with a diverse population, I knew the difficulties in identifying gifted students from diverse backgrounds. I too had struggled with the identification process, as well as keeping the students in the program once they were identified.

Having the opportunity to be a curriculum auditor, doing evaluations of gifted programs in a variety of school districts, and having done a dissertation on achieving and non-achieving kindergarten students by doing home visits, I also knew that equity was a key issue. School districts, under the guise of fairness, were omitting their students from poverty in the gifted program while increasing their numbers of students

from poverty in other special programs. Opportunities in the home environment were not there, and yet students were being assessed as though they were all from middle-class America. In working with Dr. Payne, I found the pieces of the puzzle coming together. This work is a first step in looking at students' gifts and talents in a context of opportunities afforded within the home environment. Their giftedness is shaped differently and, therefore, must be examined differently. The gifted from poverty do not come to school with middle-class experiences and values; programs thus must be adjusted to accommodate the experiences and values that are fostered in the culture of poverty. This work addresses two major questions:

1. How do I identify gifted students from low socioeconomic environments?
2. Once the district has identified them, how do school officials design and implement programs that will meet these students' needs and keep them in the program?

Removing the Mask: Giftedness in Poverty is for the practicing professional who is committed to finding and serving the best and the brightest from the culture of poverty.

Paul D. Slocumb, Ed.D.



Chapter One: The Paradigm

Rick
Age: 10

Rick lives with his grandmother and his twin brother Mick in a suburb of a major city. The two boys have been living with their grandmother since they were 11 months old. Their father is her son. According to Grandma, "He sees the boys when he feels like it—usually once or twice a month." The father gives no financial support. Rick's mother lives in the city. She sees Rick and his brother once or twice a year. The boys usually spend a night or two with her when she comes to get them.

Rick's grandmother works at a local hospital in the housekeeping department. She completed the 9th grade in school. She makes approximately \$14,500 a year. She has worked at the hospital for 11 years. She receives food stamps and Medicaid. Both of these benefits are to end this year. She says there are too many forms to be completed (to keep the food stamps and Medicaid) that she couldn't fill out. Rick and his brother participate in the free-lunch program at school.

Rick has been in the same school for more than two years. He attends an extended-day class to help him improve his grades and performance on the state competency test. The program is funded with Title I money. He started kindergarten when he was 5. He was retained in 3rd grade.

No adult men live in the household. Rick's grandmother is the only adult female in the household. Rick has regular chores at home. He does the dishes each night. His bedtime is 9 p.m. on school nights. On weekends he is allowed to stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. watching television. It is his "payback" for the 9 p.m. bedtime during the school week. Rick has never spent the night more than 50 miles away from home.

The small house in which the three live is decorated in neutral tones. Rick and his brother have some books, but they are books for younger children. No newspapers or magazines are received in the home. His grandmother does speak in formal register. Rick is a member of the dominant ethnic and economic group on his school campus.

