



# SEEING & SERVING UNDERSERVED GIFTED STUDENTS

50 Strategies for Equity and Excellence 

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# Introduction

Late one afternoon several years ago, a teacher from a Title I school contacted our university office where we housed a summer program for more than two hundred gifted children in preK through grade 12. Earlier in the year, she had helped one of her students apply for the program, and we had awarded that student a full scholarship to attend. She was excited that her student would be able to participate, and she wanted to let us know how excited he was too. As she continued talking, she shared that she would be the one driving him to and from the program, about an hour each way. She said, “His mother doesn’t drive, so he’s actually never been outside the town he lives in.” She asked what she should tell her student to pack for the dance on the program’s final night: “Will the kids be dressed up? Should he bring his church clothes?” She concluded the conversation by telling us she had collected money for her student from the teachers at her school, since she didn’t want him to feel left out if the other kids brought spending money for lunch and snacks.

This student was not the first or the last gifted student from an underresourced community we have worked with, but his story illustrates how educators so often go above and beyond to support their students. Most teachers lack the capacity to drive students to and from additional classes or to collect money for them, but this is one example of a teacher’s steadfast commitment. There are countless other examples. The importance of caring and committed teachers who see the potential in their underserved gifted learners and who support them in fulfilling that potential cannot be overstated. Yet many of the teachers we’ve worked with over the years have had no training, either preservice or professional development, designed to help them recognize and develop the intellectual and creative strengths that exist in their diverse student populations. So even with the best intentions—which we believe all teachers have—the teachers had limited strategies for meeting gifted students’ needs.

We wrote this book for you, the educators who wake up every day with your hearts and minds set on making a positive difference in your students’ lives. And we wrote it for your students, who are counting on you never to stop seeing and believing in their potential.



## A Call to Serve Underserved Gifted Learners

The term *underserved* is traditionally used in educational research to describe individuals from certain groups whose needs are not consistently met in K–12 schools. From our experience, underserved gifted students reflect the diversity of public school students: they are students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds, students who are English language learners (ELL), students from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and twice-exceptional (2e) students. This

book's chapters are organized according to the four pillars of the Giftedness Knows No Boundaries campaign of the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC): "See Me," "Understand Me," "Teach Me," and "Challenge Me," followed by a fifth chapter titled "Advocate for Me." One of the primary goals of the NAGC campaign is to bring awareness to the unique learning needs of gifted students.

Using the pillars of this campaign as a framework, the intent of this book is to promote equity and excellence in schools by giving you a variety of teaching tools. You can use these tools to recognize the potential and foster the academic, social, and emotional growth of the underserved gifted learners you care so deeply about. Although the primary focus of this book is gifted learners, the teaching and learning activities can be adapted easily for other learners in your classrooms and for any age group, ranging from kindergarten through high school.

As you read this book, we hope that you will begin or continue to:

- ▶ recognize the strengths of underserved gifted learners in your schools and classrooms
- ▶ become aware of your implicit bias and how it affects your teaching
- ▶ understand the academic, social, and emotional needs of your underserved gifted learners
- ▶ create a culturally responsive learning environment
- ▶ provide high-quality instruction that shows how much you care about your students' learning
- ▶ carry out challenging instruction to help your underserved gifted learners soar
- ▶ advocate for your underserved gifted learners on a micro and macro scale

We hope this book inspires you to become a change agent for your underserved gifted learners. Meanwhile, we also hope this book fills your teaching toolkit with many new strategies that you can use right away to better meet the unique needs of all your students.

## About This Book

**Chapter 1: See Me** focuses on the need to identify and cultivate *potential* (as opposed to developing talents). It provides proactive strategies to help you spot evidence of high potential in your students. It also confronts issues that hinder identification of underserved gifted learners and their access to gifted programming.

**Chapter 2: Understand Me** includes strategies to help you create a culturally responsive learning environment in which your underserved gifted learners can thrive. Creating such an environment begins with knowing and appreciating who your underserved gifted learners are and what they need to feel engaged and excited to learn. We also provide tips for involving both students and their families in the learning process.

In **Chapter 3: Teach Me**, you will find an abundance of strategies to support not only the learning of your underserved gifted students, but also the learning of *all* the

students in your classroom. We use the acronym CARE to represent the strategies in this chapter. To recognize and develop our students' strengths, we must:

- Connect learning to their lives
- Ability group them in flexible ways
- Respectfully differentiate their learning
- Engage them in higher-level thinking activities

In **Chapter 4: Challenge Me**, we share toolkit strategies that focus on advanced learning options for underserved gifted learners. You will want to embed challenge thoughtfully into your students' learning experiences and provide supports to help them accomplish difficult tasks. We chose the acronym ASPIRE to sum up the strategies in this chapter, because we want underserved gifted learners to aspire to reach their fullest potential, and we want you to aspire to provide your students with learning experiences that help them shine their brightest. You can accomplish this goal when you:

- Add challenge thoughtfully
- Supply the support necessary for success
- Provide opportunities for mentorships
- Identify possibilities for independent investigations
- Recognize when acceleration is vital
- Embed curriculum compacting into learning units

In the final chapter, **Chapter 5: Advocate for Me**, we help you prepare to become a change agent for your underserved gifted learners. We provide toolkit strategies for advocacy at the micro and macro levels, including finding your advocacy focus, setting SMART goals (goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timebound), designing professional learning activities, and creating an action plan that incorporates the strategies from chapters 1 through 4 that you are most excited to try.

Throughout the book, you will find the following recurring elements:

**Toolkit Strategies.** You will find fifty strategies for promoting equity and excellence for underserved gifted learners throughout the five chapters of this book. Many of these strategies are best practice for working with gifted learners. However, we have adapted some strategies and created new strategies to address the unique learning needs of underserved gifted learners.

**Real-World Examples.** In each chapter, we present real stories from our classroom experiences and from those of educators we have worked with through the years. The purpose of these snapshots is to give you practical, authentic ideas for applying many of the strategies you will find in each chapter.

**Spotlights.** Throughout this book, you will find several Spotlights written by educators who care deeply about underserved gifted learners. In these in-depth features, educators share insights from their personal experiences in supporting and advocating for underserved gifted learners.

**What I Want You to Know About Me.** Over the years, author Amy Graefe has asked her gifted students to write down what they want their teachers to know about them—beyond what their test scores and other data reveal. Amy has used these notes to get to know her students better and to personalize learning opportunities and supports for them. She has also shared these notes with the students' other teachers, so they, too, could understand and serve the students better. We've included quotes from Amy's students throughout this book, so you can hear from actual underserved gifted learners what they wish their teachers knew about them.

## How to Use This Book

We created many of the strategies in this book from our own experiences as educators and researchers, with underserved gifted learners specifically in mind. We chose not to align specific strategies with specific groups of underserved learners, because that would be a nearly impossible task given the unique and diverse individual needs that exist within special populations of learners. Additionally, many strategies may benefit multiple populations of underserved gifted learners, so we don't want to limit your use of them. Although we wrote this book with underserved gifted learners in mind, we believe that *all* students need culturally responsive teaching and *all* students can benefit from gifted-education strategies. We also believe that at different points in time, *all* students require targeted supports to develop their potential. We believe that one-size-fits-all teaching is inappropriate for any student—and especially for underserved gifted learners, who come to school with diverse skill sets, ability levels, supports outside the classroom, and lived experiences that need to be honored in the classroom and school communities. Therefore, we've adapted many strategies that represent good teaching for all learners to make them even more beneficial for underserved gifted learners, in addition to creating new strategies with underserved gifted students specifically in mind.

We'd like you to begin reading this book with the goal of transforming learning experiences for *each and every* student in your classroom, focusing on how you can improve the education your underserved gifted students are currently receiving and will receive in the future. This focus will require you to pause and reflect constantly on current practices in your classroom and school. We do not want you to feel discouraged by what's not happening in your classroom and school, but rather to feel empowered by all the strategies in this book that you can use right away to improve the educational experiences of your underserved gifted learners.

We strongly recommend that you complete the reproducible checklist provided at the end of every chapter to help you identify your areas of strength in supporting underserved gifted learners and your areas for improvement. These checklists are based on the strategies presented in each chapter. They point you toward topics you might want to revisit in this book. Consider these checklists as progress checkups that tell you where you are in terms of applying the strategies in this book: beginning, developing, or leading.

You may choose to read this book from cover to cover, comprehensively learning ways to see, understand, teach, challenge, and advocate for underserved gifted learners. Or, you may choose to go straight to strategies that you feel could benefit

your students right now. This book is designed to be read either way, and its strategies can be adapted easily for any grade level and subject area.

If you decide to pick and choose specific strategies, please be sure to visit chapter 5; we share concrete steps for turning the knowledge you've acquired from this book into an action plan you can carry out to make a positive impact on the lives of your underserved gifted learners. We believe that the pursuit of equity and excellence for underserved gifted learners requires a commitment not only to learning who these students are and how educators can best support them, but also to advocating on their behalf.

Although you can pick strategies to use depending on your classroom and school needs, please keep in mind that even if you were to implement all fifty strategies in this book, achieving equity and excellence for your underserved gifted students will be an ongoing journey. This book is a starting point for many of you and a midpoint for others, intended to provide you with information to consider and ideas to help your underserved gifted students realize and achieve their full potential.

We trust that you'll gain valuable insights from reading this book, and we hope you'll feel inspired to advocate for your underserved gifted learners like never before. Let's get started!

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# 1 SEE ME

Every day in a hundred small ways our children ask,  
“Do you see me? Do you hear me? Do I matter?”  
Their behavior often reflects our response.

—L. R. Knost



At some point in your career, you may have overheard statements similar to this one: “I’ve been teaching for many years. I know what I’m doing, and I treat all students equally. I don’t know why we need to focus on diversity so much. I just don’t get it.” On the surface, the teacher who says this may seem to be doing the right thing by striving to teach all her students equally. However, the phrase *treat all students equally* implies that the teacher is giving all her students the exact same learning opportunities and supports. This approach runs counter to best practice in education.

*Equity*, not equality, needs to be the teacher’s goal. Treating students equitably means providing all students with learning opportunities and supports according to their unique needs. Treating students equitably is the best way to ensure students have opportunities to demonstrate and cultivate their potential. Educating students in an equitable manner means that teachers must recognize and honor the diversity of their students. Teachers must make meaningful efforts to see who students are and what they are capable of contributing and achieving.

It takes courage to examine honestly what you believe about educating gifted students from underserved populations and to reflect on how your thinking and actions support or contradict these beliefs. Throughout this chapter, as you consider your beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors, you may feel uncomfortable at times, and *that is okay*. When it happens, stop and ask yourself this question: “What’s best for my students?”

Let’s begin our journey toward seeing underserved gifted learners more clearly.

## Who Are Underserved Gifted Students?

What does it mean to be underserved, or underrepresented, in gifted education? Underserved gifted students are those whose needs are not being met in general education settings. Underrepresentation can be evaluated by examining the data on who is identified—and being served—as gifted in a given setting. For example, if most of the students at a school identify as Latinx, but most of the students receiving gifted or advanced academic programming are *not* Latinx, then Latinx students are underserved in that particular gifted-education program.

In this chapter, we talk specifically about four groups of students who often fall into the category of underserved gifted learners:

- ▶ students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds
- ▶ English language learners (ELL students)
- ▶ learners who are economically disadvantaged
- ▶ twice-exceptional (2e) learners (students who are both gifted and have one or more other special needs)

### **A Note About Gifted Students in Underresourced Rural and Urban Areas**

Gifted students living in rural and urban areas do not fit into the underserved category by virtue of geographical location alone. It would be inaccurate to say that *all* gifted students attending schools in rural and urban areas are *underserved* by existing gifted programs and services in the same way that students from historically underserved populations are. The term underresourced is an important distinction to use when referring to these geographical areas, because many—but certainly not all—inner-city schools and rural schools are located in low-income areas lacking educational infrastructure, such as libraries, community centers, youth programs, and gifted services.

Although we must be careful not to assume that all gifted students living in urban and rural areas are from CLD backgrounds, are ELL students, are economically disadvantaged, or are twice-exceptional, these underserved groups of students certainly do attend schools in these geographical regions. Further, due to limited resources and lack of teacher training in many of these districts, other students attending these underresourced schools also might not have the opportunity to be identified for gifted programming. Because of these overlapping challenges, the strategies in this book will prove useful to teachers in underresourced rural and urban schools too.

## **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Learners**

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners are students growing up in households that differ in some way from the system-normed, white, middle-to-upper-class North American household. This group includes, but is not limited to, students whose cultural heritage is African, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Middle Eastern, Russian, or Alaska Native. It also includes students who are proficient in English but whose home language is not English.

According to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), roughly 80 percent of public school teachers and administrators in the United States are white, while fewer than half of public school students are white (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). In 2018, NCES projections for the 2018–2019 school year indicated that the 50.7 million public school students entering preK through grade 12 would include 26.6 million students of color: 14.0 million Hispanic students, 7.8 million black students, 2.6 million Asian students, 0.2 million Pacific Islander students, 0.5 million American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 1.6 million students of two or more races. Meanwhile, the percentage of white students enrolled in public schools was projected to continue declining through at least fall 2027 (National Center for Education Statistics 2018).