ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: Expanding Access to Gifted Education Programs for Underrepresented Students: An Examination of Teacher Referral Decision-Making

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Despite recent focus and concern regarding disproportionality in gifted education, minority students (Ford, 2014; McBee, 2006), as well as students with disabilities (Bianco, 2005; Bianco & Leech, 2010; Bratter, 2009), continue to be underrepresented within gifted programs. Previous research indicates that teacher characteristics significantly affect referral rates to gifted education programs, with special education teachers being less likely to refer students compared to general education teachers (Bianco, 2005), and gifted education teachers more likely to refer to gifted programs compared to special education and general education teachers (Bianco & Leech, 2010). Additionally, students with disabilities, are less likely to be referred (Bianco, 2005; Bianco & Leech, 2010). Furthermore, male students are shown to be more likely to be referred (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leech, 2011).

The present study consists of a sample of 688 teachers, including 375 general education teachers, 119 gifted education teachers, and 194 special education teachers. While results are consistent with prior research, some important differences emerge when previously studied variables are allowed to interact more fully. Specifically, congruent to previous research, gifted education teachers are observed to be more likely to refer students for gifted education

programming. Furthermore, unique to the current study, gifted education teachers also perceive students as being more intelligent compared to teachers of other types. Student gender, disability status (emotional disability), or ethnicity are not observed to be significant predictors of teacher referral decisions. Finally, teacher perception of their own level of competency related to identifying gifted children, and their education level related to gifted education are included in analyses.

Analysis related to these variables indicate that self-reported teacher competency is significantly related to both referral rates and teacher perceptions of student intelligence. Moreover, when perceived teacher competency is introduced to the model examining teacher referral rates, teacher type becomes non-significant, indicating that higher perceived teacher competency may significantly increase teacher willingness to refer to gifted programming. Furthermore, when perceived competency is introduced to the model examining teacher perceptions of intelligence, gifted education teachers continue to rate student intelligence significantly higher when compared to special education and general education teachers, but teachers of all types who indicate that they are competent in identifying gifted children also rate student intelligence higher. That is, when teachers feel competent, confident, and perceive themselves as having the background knowledge they need to make decisions, they are more likely to consider that a student may have advanced academic potential or aptitude. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.