



# Assessing the Impact of **The Brilliance, Excellence, and Equity Project**

An evaluation of participating teachers' ability to identify giftedness in Black and Hispanic Students



**The Brilliance, Excellence,  
and Equity Project**



# Introduction

This past May, The Brilliance, Excellence, and Equity Project (The BEE Project) graduated its first cohort of teachers in Arizona. They received 180 hours of instruction in gifted education through a lens of cultural responsiveness and responsibility. The program, a nonprofit initiative of thinkLaw, aspires to equip Black and Hispanic teachers to equitably design and lead gifted and talented education programs through an asset-based framework that supports the unique needs of brilliant students of color and their families.

The three main goals of program are to highlight the brilliance of the overlooked and underestimated children and teachers who look like them; to identify the expertise of Black and Hispanic educators, and develop it further with the recognition of their unique ability to see, cultivate, and connect with the brilliance of students of color and their families; to shift the education equity conversations from the deficit-based notion of closing achievement gaps to a narrative based on shattering achievement ceilings.

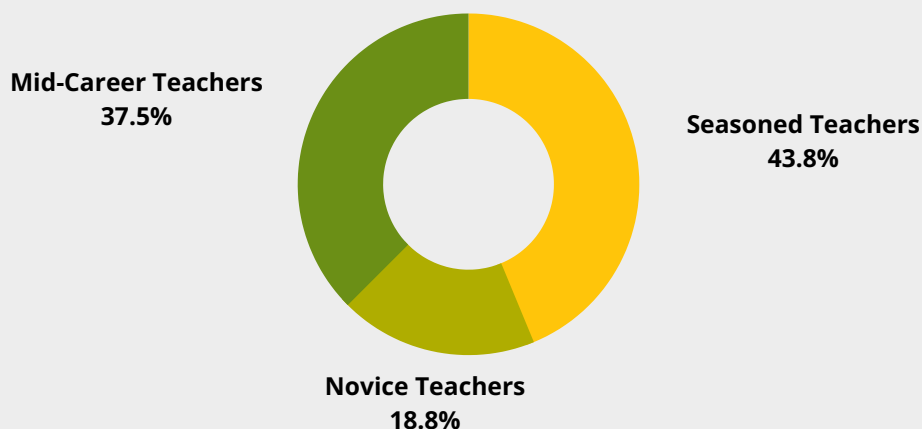
Researchers from Arizona State University conducted an independent audit of the program's effectiveness. The evaluation team sought to understand (a) how The BEE Project changed and transformed the attitudes and perceptions towards gifted and talented education programs of Black and Hispanic educators in Arizona; (b) how educators describe the influence of The BEE Project on their teaching practices; (c) how teachers' participation in the Bee Project impacted their likelihood of applying gifted strategies to underrepresented students; (d) how educators assessed the effectiveness of The BEE Project.



# About the Cohort

## Description of participants in the sample

Participation in The BEE Project was open to any Arizona teacher with at least three years of experience in the classroom. For the purposes of this evaluation, novice teachers are defined as those in their third to fifth years in the classroom; mid-career teachers are those with between five and 15 years; and seasoned teachers are those with more than 15 years of teaching experience.



Though the majority of BEE Project participants in the first cohort had over 15 years of classroom experience, most had no previous experience with gifted education. Of the 16 participants, 11 (or about 70%), were not previously involved in gifted or talented programs. Among those who had previously taught in gifted programs, one had 18 years with gifted programs, and the other four had 3-4 years of gifted education experience. Most were elementary school teachers (K-6), and many taught multiple grade levels.

## How Gifted Education is Administered in Participants' Districts

Participants were asked how gifted services are administered in their districts. Four said they were unsure. Of the remaining 12:

- 58.3% said students receive pull-out services
- 31.3% said students receive gifted services in their regular classrooms
- 25.0% said their schools used cluster classrooms
- 18.8% said students are taught in self-contained gifted classrooms
- 18.8% said students are served through honors/advanced coursework
- 12.5% said students are served through dual enrollment programs

# Executive Summary

Dr. Mirka Koro, a professor of qualitative research, Dr. Margarita Pivovarova, associate professor of economics, and Ketevan Chachkhiani, a doctoral student in the college of education, evaluated the program from February 2022 - May 2022 and found the following:

- Program activities and materials raised awareness among educators about the ways existing identification strategies for gifted students do not adequately address the unique abilities and strengths of students of color.
- Participation in the cohort significantly increased teachers' awareness of the existing inequities in gifted education and helped them understand the role of teachers of color in advocating for more equitable and diverse gifted education.
- Participation in the cohort has broadened teachers' understanding of giftedness and the ways it manifests differently across different cultures.
- After participating in the cohort, teachers report being encouraged to adopt a multidimensional concept of giftedness, and motivated to reconsider their thinking about the relationship between students' behavior and giftedness.
- The program helped teachers to shift their beliefs from deficit-based pedagogy toward asset-based pedagogy. It also has helped them understand the importance of gifted instruction for all students.
- The program helped participating educators shift their teaching and instruction towards differentiated instruction, student autonomy, student collaboration, and critical and creative thinking skills.



# Identifying Giftedness in Black and Hispanic Students

Two of the teachers come from districts that do not require the use of specific criteria to identify gifted students. Five teachers said that such criteria were determined by the state and eight teachers said these were determined at the local level. The vast majority of teachers (62.5%) said their districts currently rely on nominations/referrals to identify giftedness in students, and half said assessments also play a role in identifying students. But because of known biases in assessments and documented educator biases against Black and Hispanic students, a multi-criteria model is an important component of ensuring equity in gifted education.



81.3%

Only 12.5% of participants said their schools/districts currently use a multiple criteria model to evaluate giftedness, but by the end of the cohort, 81.3% said they recognize the need for such a model.

Participants reported that, particularly for students of color, other factors like parent referrals should be considered. They also believed IQ scores and test scores were less valid predictors of giftedness in Black and Hispanic students, compared to white students.

Participants also reported a lack of identification and services for double exceptional students, or those who are both highly knowledgeable and academically talented *and* have a learning disability. Research shows a high correlation between giftedness and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, for instance; what presents as an overexcitability to one evaluator may be labeled hyperactivity by another. Overexcitabilities tend to exist in people with IQs over 110, or those with high IQs, but Black and Hispanic students are less likely to be viewed through a lens of genius.

In addition to overt racial disparities, cohort participants noted that English Language Learners are also often overlooked in the conversation about giftedness; only 6.3% of participants said their districts currently address the presence of giftedness in English Language Learners, though 75% of participants in the final survey agreed there should be a mechanism for addressing those who are learning in a second language.



# Shifting Attitudes Among Participants

Researchers found that prior to the start of the program, teachers had a narrow understanding of giftedness, and they associated it primarily with the possession of strong math and language/reading skills and “being straight A students.” Teachers’ predispositions toward the traditional concept of giftedness are echoed in one of the interview responses: “Before, if the kids scored well on tests and quizzes and you're like, it was kind of the red flag - why isn't this kid in honors classes. You just assumed that they were doing well.” Similarly, one of the participants expressed concerns about teachers only looking at the grades of students when making a referral decision and not understanding that a “student may be strong in one area (verbal) and weak in another (reading). Gifted is a very individual process”.

Along with expanding the conception of giftedness, teachers also started questioning methods for identifying gifted students. The participating educators became more critical of testing, such as CogAT, as the best or only tool to capture the manifestation of talent.

**97.8%**

**Percent agreement of teachers who believed it is essential to change identification procedures to ensure greater equity at the end of the cohort, compared to 80.88% at the start of the program**



Participation in the BEE Project has significantly increased teacher awareness of the existing disparities in gifted education programs. This new learning has been particularly eye-opening in relation to racial inequities. As participants pointed out, although they always subconsciously noticed the disproportioned representation of Brown and Hispanic students in the gifted program, they overlooked the magnitude of the problem and did not pay attention to the real reasons behind this.

***“It [the program] definitely opened my eyes with how unfair it is for those students and it kind of shocked and surprised me that, why has it taken this long for me to notice that and how sad it is.”***

***- Cohort 1 Participant***

# Impact of The BEE Project on Teaching Methods

Nearly all participants agreed that broader cultural experiences brought by students of color will benefit all students already in the gifted/talented programs and that gifted students of color have strengths that are not adequately addressed by current identification procedures for gifted programs. Teachers in The BEE Project's first cohort frequently and consistently credited improvements in their teaching practice to their participation in the training sessions.

## Allowing for more student autonomy

Many participants praised the BEE Project for refreshing their knowledge and understanding of the importance of teacher support for students' personal autonomy. Teachers stated that increased perception of control brought many benefits to students, including high-self-esteem and "valuing themselves as contributors to their own learning." With the encouragement and support of the BEE Project trainers, they felt confident to move away from teacher-directed instruction and allow for student-led learning.

*"We have to come to understand that noise doesn't mean a waste of time, it means something is happening, kids are thinking, there's a lot going on, that we just need to learn how to appreciate."*

*- Cohort 1 Participant*

## Strengthening efforts in differentiated instruction

The findings of the study suggest that participation in the BEE Project has motivated and empowered teachers to raise the bar and expectations for all students and support their high achievement with differentiated instruction. Teachers also felt more confident in challenging low-performing students with high-level tasks, because they were able to continuously observe their performance, assess their needs, and provide strong scaffolding support.

Researchers also found that participating in The BEE Project has helped teachers to realize that although exceptionally advanced students make a small percentage of their classes, they need to do their best to challenge them further with sufficiently sophisticated tasks and problems.



*“Within the curriculum that we have in our district, I don't think it's appropriate for any of our kids, specifically Black and Hispanic students. The text and everything that we're reading doesn't really pertain to what they experience in their lives.”*

*- Cohort 1 Participant*

## **Emphasizing Culturally Responsive Instruction**

Findings of the study also indicate that teachers increased their awareness of the importance of culturally relevant curriculum and teaching. Teachers were also able to assess existing teaching resources and programs critically.

Participation in the BEE Project also enabled critical examination of teachers' own practices of teaching minority students in the past and at present. Teachers realized they did not always consider and build on students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

For example, as one teacher shared, in her classroom, she would always blindly use stories that were given to her. The same teacher pointed out how she also worked with other teachers in the BEE Project to select and use more appropriate books and stories for different cultures and backgrounds. In addition, other teachers became aware of the characteristics of culturally responsive instruction that they did not pay attention to before and tailored their teaching to reach culturally diverse students.

## **Improving Classroom Practices Around Creative and Critical Thinking**

All the teachers unanimously praised The BEE Project for giving them the opportunity to learn many new strategies and activities for developing high-order skills, such as creative and critical thinking. In the area of standardized tests, they found such a strong emphasis on these skills very valuable and life-changing for their students. All educators enthusiastically implemented newly learned skills-oriented activities in their general education (regular) classrooms.

They learned about multiple activities and strategies for developing critical and creative thinking skills among their students. Quite a few teachers mentioned that although they understood the importance of such skills, until the BEE Project, they had minimal knowledge and experience in training students in this area. Some teachers critically re-evaluated their practices and substantially changed the ways they were implementing some of the skills-oriented activities. For example, one teacher shared how he reformulated all close-ended questions into open-ended ones with plenty of answer time, allowing “children time to really process what we're doing instead of just trying to go through it quickly.”

## About The Brilliance, Excellence, and Equity Project

The BEE Project is the nonprofit arm of thinkLaw. We work to get more teachers trained to recognize the brilliance of Black and Hispanic students across the U.S. We do this by inspiring, training, and certifying educators to teach, lead, or equitably design and launch gifted programs for overlooked and underestimated Black and Hispanic children.

In fulfillment of our mission to support the brilliance of students of color and their families, we work to increase the number of Black and Hispanic educators certified to lead gifted and talented programs across the country while also making sure educators of non-color are equipped to recognize the brilliance of their Black and Hispanic students.

