Gifting the Ungifted: Disproportionality of Minority Students in Gifted Education

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Abstract

This paper centers on the topic of gifted education. Namely, the focus of the discussion will be on the underrepresentation of students of color in gifted education, the underachievement of students of color in gifted education, and proportionate and equitable representation in gifted education. This paper examines research in the field over the past twenty years to shed light on the limited presence of high achieving minority students in gifted education. It is imperative that teachers understand this disproportionality in order to overcome the discrimination of the minority population.

Keywords: underrepresentation, disproportionality, equitable, culturally responsive practice (CPR)

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This literature review was conducted in response to the extant literature on the disproportionality of minority students of color in gifted education. After highlighting the underrepresentation of students of color in gifted education, the discussion focuses on the underachievement of students of color in gifted education. Finally, recommendations will be offered for more equitable and proportionate opportunities for students of color to be included and successful in gifted programs.

The Underrepresentation of Students of Color in Gifted Education

African Americans, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged and underachieving, are not provided with equal educational opportunities as described in The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). Henfield (2013) states, “On average, no other group in the U.S. is as entrapped by the vicious cycle leading to the abysmal life outcomes (achievement gap, expectation gap, opportunity gap, and so on) than males who are black” (p. 395). Olszewski and Thomson (2010) explain that much of the data on gifted programs suggests minority students, primarily economically disadvantaged African Americans students, are underrepresented in gifted education and overrepresented in special education programs. Furthermore, much of the research suggests current gifted programs are the most segregated programs in our education system in the United States. According to Burley et al. (2010), “…this trend of underrepresentation of African Americans and overrepresentation of Whites in gifted programs was evident in 1976 when data were first collected and has continued to date” (p. 52).

When compiling research for this review, it became evident that there was a scarce amount of current literature related to the disproportionality of gifted minority students (Henfield, 2013). Moreover, the problem is that although the research is interesting and
thought-provoking, most of the current research does not aim to shed light on the disproportionality in gifted education programs (Lee et al., 2010).

Olszewski and Thomson (2010) agree that the achievement gap between minority students and nonminority students of all ages continues to be the biggest problem in education today. A large portion of this stems from the fact that a majority of these students grow up in poor, minority communities. These communities lack the resources and support necessary to bridge the achievement gap. Students considered gifted in these communities are at the highest risk because they typically fall through the cracks (Olszewski and Thomson, 2010). It has been consistently argued that the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education is directly correlated to the achievement gap (Henfield, 2013). Furthermore, the research states that this underrepresentation in gifted and overrepresentation in special education of minority students completely and without question supports the achievement gap. According to Henfield (2013), researchers Ford and Moore support the notion that high achieving minority students should be included in the achievement gap discussion.

As a result of the persistent underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education, Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 was passed (Ford, 2010). That legislation provided financial support to state and local agencies to develop and maintain valued gifted programs; the highest priority was to be given to students who were economically disadvantaged, limited English proficient and/or had disabilities or a handicapping condition (Ford, 2010). Research continues to support the notion that students of color are underrepresented in gifted programs.

According to Olszewski and Thomson (2010), students of color are underrepresented by as much as 55% nationally in gifted programs. Although there are many causal theories, much of the research points to concerns around the identification process of gifted students. Very little data exists on this topic, however, most research blames assessment for the issue. Tests are created in a way that does not necessarily support the assessment of students from varying cultures (Ford, 2010). If cultural bias exists within the makeup of the test questions, an accurate portrayal of student abilities is not being collected.

According to Ford (2010), the underrepresentation of minority students in gifted education is due to three paradigms: (1) deficit thinking, (2) colorblind ideology, and (3) white privilege. Deficit thinking stems from the belief that students from varying cultures are inferior to white students. It is the belief that these cultures are substandard and therefore unacceptable. Educators who possess deficit thinking, whether aware or not, ignore the successes and achievements of students of color (Ford, 2010). Colorblindness occurs when educators do not support or promote cultures of diverse students. Ford also notes that whether it is done intentionally or unintentionally, this cultural blindness (as it can also be referred), denies students of colors from many educational opportunities.

Lastly, white privilege occurs when students of color are not provided the advantages that white students receive as a result of their skin color/culture. This is deeply embedded in our culture and can be seen as a form of racism in schools. Dating back to the time of
slavery in this country, white students have been treated far better just because of the color of their skin. White supremacy is a major issue in our educational system and there is a need for equal opportunities for all students.

Another perspective, shared by Henfield et al. (2010), argues that underrepresentation of African American gifted students in particular is due to choice. The research maintains that students of color often feel negative social pressures from peers or internal/psychological issues stemming from racial identity status. According to findings, African American gifted students may be viewed as traitors to their race and ostracized from their peers (Henfield et al., 2010). These gifted students may be accused of “Acting White” by peers, which can deter them from seeking further gifted education program placement.

Researchers have credited many causes as to this underrepresentation of minority students in gifted programs including the following factors: (a) Definitions of Giftedness, (b) Identification Practices, (c) Educational Issues and Considerations (i.e. Teacher Quality, Teacher Shortages, Financial Inadequacies, etc.), (d) Cultural Differences in Learning, and (e) Parental Influence. With each state creating their own standards as to what it means to be gifted, a student may be gifted in one state and when they move to a new location, may no longer be considered “gifted”. Having varying definitions of gifted makes it difficult for teachers to accurately recommend students for the program (Ford, 2010). Ford (2010) also points out that teachers possess biases of their own which may impede their ability to accurately identify a student of color who may show signs of giftedness.

The Underachievement of Students of Color in Gifted Education
According to Olszewski and Thomson (2010), more than half of students in gifted programs have been identified as underachievers. Many factors can be at fault in the identification of underachieving students. Many researchers agree that this depends on how “gifted” and “underachievement” are defined. According to Ford (2010), a gifted underachiever can be defined as a student who has a discrepancy between their achievement on standardized tests and their academic performance. As a result of the varying definitions of these terms, students of color may be impacted in a negative light. The following section discusses different reasons for the underachievement of gifted students of color.

Testing Bias. Students of color may not perform well on standardized or achievement tests, which may be interpreted as not showing effort or that students are incapable of performing well on tests. Minority students often do not perform well on tests because there may be certain cultural or testing biases included. This can cause many to feel anxious (Ford, 2010). In light of the biases that have been found to exist within standardized tests, it is not an accurate measure of the giftedness of students of color. These students are not provided an opportunity that is equal to their peers to perform their best. One test is not going to tell a principal or even a classroom teacher that the student is performing at his or her own best. Not to mention, many young students experience test anxiety on tests of heavy importance (Ford, 2010).
**Teacher Preparation.** There is a lack of experience for many teachers when it comes to meeting the needs of culturally diverse students. This lack of knowledge and training can impact the teacher’s ability to interpret the students understanding due to cultural biases. It has been found that the most popular method of identifying students who are gifted is through teacher recommendations. It is clearly evident that this approach is part of the issue of the underachievement of students of color. Moore et al. (2010) states that as a result in a lack of teacher preparation, general education teachers may not be the most effective sources for identifying gifted learners, particularly those who come from diverse cultures/families. It can be argued that until the cultural diversity knowledge of teachers is increased, gifted students of color will continue in their underachieving academic ways (Moore et al., 2010). When compared to their white peers, students of color often perform poorly on high-stakes tests, receive lower grades on their report cards, and eventually drop out of school. All of these issues, in turn, negatively impact the students’ futures and cause them to lag significantly behind their white peers.

**Identification Process.** Another issue impacting the number of minority students of color in gifted education is the identification procedures amongst the different states. Each state has its own process with different criterion. This can be cause for a child to be considered gifted in one state and upon moving to a new state, fall short of the requirements necessary in that particular state (Henfield, 2013). For example, a student with an IQ score of 116 in one state may be identified as gifted and/or talented; however, a score of 130 or higher is required in another state. Other states identify a gifted and/or talented student without an IQ Score being considered as a factor.

Harradine et al. (2014) conducted a study exploring the impact of a teacher’s ability to systematically observe and record the academic strengths of 5-to 9-year olds across multiple domains as they used a tool known as The Teacher’s Observation Potential in Students (TOPS). According to the research, without the TOPS tool, teachers would have overlooked the academic potential of 22% of their children of color (approx. 1,750 students) of which 53% were African American boys. This data shows that teachers must be supported and trained to effectively identify gifted students of color. One of the research questions included in this study was, what barriers do teachers perceive as being obstacles to recognizing potential in children of color? The barriers that were accounted for when recognizing strengths in this study included behavior, demographics, no parent advocacy, low expectations of teachers, oral language, and prior achievement. Of these studied, behavior and lack of parent advocacy were the two leading obstacles. This suggests biases, whether intentional or unintentional, exist among teachers. “Three fourths of teachers stated that using the TOPS helped them notice strengths in children of color, poverty, and of linguistic diversity. One fifth reported that it completely changed their observation and recognition approaches to their students” (Harradine et al., 2014, p. 32).

**Proportionate and Equitable Representation in Gifted Education**
According to Burley et al. (2010), recommendations for recruiting and retaining minority students in gifted education programs are essential to solving this problem of disproportionality. Some of these suggestions include the use of valid and reliable
instruments, the collection of multiple types and sources of information, an increase in family involvement, and an increase and refocus of research and literature.

Furthermore, Burley et al. (2010) recommend integrating a multicultural and gifted education curricular framework. Gifted minority students would benefit from programs that infuse multiculturalism throughout the curriculum taught. According to Lee et al. (2010), one way to increase the number of minority students in gifted education would be through the use of accelerated programs. The gifted minority students in his study viewed taking accelerated courses as a positive experience.

*Prior research* concluded that: (a) the gifted Black students sampled were not being educated to live in a racially and culturally diverse society (and neither were their White classmates); (b) the curricula did not enhance their racial and cultural identities; and (c) for some gifted African American students, school courses lacked relevance and meaning, thus, they were disinterested and unengaged (Ford, 2005, p.126).

A recent study by Harradine et al. (2014) found that teachers have certain preconceived biases, whether they know it or not, about the students in their classroom, and these biases can influence how they perceive students’ abilities and potentials. This supports the notion of developing and providing professional development and teacher training on culturally responsive teaching strategies. Professional development in this area would provide all students with an opportunity to demonstrate and strengthen their abilities. As Olszewski and Thomson (2010) point out, students who are considered gifted in urban areas typically reside in districts, which lack support and are underfunded. This can lead to students being overlooked or in some cases, the absence of a gifted program altogether. Burley et al. (2010) recommend a multicultural gifted curriculum for minority students in gifted programs that both challenge and encourage African American students’ needs and goals. Culturally competent teachers invite social awareness and foster diversity within their classrooms. These teachers model best practices in accepting others and fostering a community of learners who respect cultures that differ from their own. These practices, also termed Culturally Responsive Practice (CPR) aid teachers in developing meaningful relationships with their students from all cultures, especially students of color. A decrease in the negativity toward minorities is expected and respect for all is required (Ford, 2005).

Ford (2010) adds that exemplary teachers or African-American students hold their students to high expectations, develop interpersonal relationships, advocate for students’ best interests, and take responsibility for their students’ success. Culturally competent teachers are also socially responsive and responsible. Burley et al. (2010) asserts the idea of reaching out to varying communities of diverse populations regardless of its prevalence in their classroom setting. Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Classrooms according to Ford (2010) include: (a) Culturally Responsive Teaching (b) Culturally Responsive Learning Environment (c) Culturally Responsive Curriculum (d) Culturally Responsive Instruction and (e) Culturally Responsive Assessment.
Recommendations from Ford (2010) suggest that curriculum and instruction must move from colorblindness, as mentioned earlier, to culturally responsiveness. Additionally, Ford (2010) believes the achievement gap needs closing, data needs to be examined under multiple lenses (including race, gender and race, income, etc.), early identification, and redefining what it means to be gifted, can support the shift from underrepresentation of minority students to equal opportunity education for all students.

Equally important, according to Moore et al. (2010) and Hughes (2010), is the notion of multicultural mentoring. Mentors bridge the gap for these students and support their ability to handle negative peer pressure and racial identity issues. Through the mentoring process, barriers are broken down allowing students to achieve their fullest potential as students. Mentoring establishes a foundation between mentor and mentee providing mutual benefits as the two work collaboratively to overcome barriers. Hughes (2010) explains that mentors should establish a relationship with their mentee that communicates the whole “we are a team” mentality. Helping students of color understand that they are not in the process alone, but have support from someone from a similar background may be the push needed to help them succeed.

Typically, there are three types of mentoring programs to support the needs of gifted male students of color. These include: (1) educational mentoring, (2) career mentoring, and (3) personal development mentoring. The first has a focus on supporting students in their academic abilities. The second provides students with the skills needed to choose to continue on a career path. Finally, the third promotes youth in times of personal struggle that can be in the form of psychological support, social/emotional support, and/or personal support if students are going through a difficult time inside or outside of school (Moore et al., 2010).

In order for these students to believe they can successfully participate in gifted programs, mentors provide culturally relevant experiences that teach students to face racial barriers and promote positive attitudes and confidence during difficult times. Key attributes of the mentoring relationship include love, commitment and responsibility. In order for this relationship to be effective, mentors must possess all three qualities.

Mentoring opportunities must also occur on a regular basis. Consistency is key. The consistency of support for the students of color promotes the student’s expectations, values, and self-identity. Some of the suggestions made by Hughes (2010) to enhance the mentoring relationship include: (a) Social injustice conversations, (b) Shadowing and internships, and (c) Reading books on Blacks who have overcome adversity. “As the mentors focused on how students could be academically successful, the students seemed to take on a new worldview” (Hughes, 2010, p. 59).
In order to gain a complete understanding of the true effect of culturally responsive practices on minority students in gifted education programs, it is necessary to conduct a study that examines all aspects of CRP and how it impacts African American student achievement. The recommendations shared here for desegregating gifted programs are not comprehensive; instead, they offer a starting point as to how to ensure the success of all students. Providing teachers with professional development to support culturally responsive practice, offering a means of mentoring for students of color in gifted education programs, and rethinking the definition of giftedness will begin to ensure the learning and academic success of all students, regardless of race, gender, culture, etc. If these steps are not researched further and implemented, African American students will continue to be underrepresented in gifted education programs throughout the United States. It would be wrong of us to think that this drastic of an issue will mend itself. In order to level the playing field and provide more ethnic and cultural diversity in gifted programs, the aforementioned recommendations must be considered. Burley et al. (2010) said it best, “Perhaps the core problem is not the students, but how theorists, government, and educational agencies define giftedness” (p. 52).

References

About the Author

Nicholas Catania is a current graduate student in the University of South Florida’s special education doctoral program. His research interests include the teacher-learner relationship as well as pedagogical practices for meeting the needs of all students. His research has been presented at The Office of Special Education Programs Conference (OSEP), American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Annual Meeting (AACTE), and Council for Exceptional Children Convention & Expo (CEC).