

# **Under-representation of African American Students in Gifted Education Programs: Implications for Sustainability in Gifted Classes**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this article is to examine factors that may impede sustainability of African American children in gifted education programs. The lack of representation of minority students in gifted education programs has been of great concern for decades. For many scholars, the process of identifying black students for gifted education programs has been a cumbersome task. The use of referrals, IQ tests, and other so-called objective measures has not furthered efforts to identify academically gifted African American children. Moreover, once these children are identified, what factors are in place to sustain black children in gifted classes? The following paper proposes that teacher, familial, and community support are key in the placement and sustainability of African American students in gifted education classes.*

## **Introduction**

Closing the achievement gap between African American and European American children has become of increasing concern for educators in the U.S. Currently, African American children score significantly lower on standardized tests than their white counterparts,

and although there have been gains in many urban centers, the graduation rate for African American males continues to lag behind that of white males (McWhorter, 2000). Although there have been a number of new programs and curricula to address low performance among African American children, only minimal gains have been achieved. Thus, much of the resources and intellectual energy used to address the academic needs of African American children have focused on those who under-perform. According to a number of school performance researchers, African American children who excel in school have been grossly underserved and neglected (Boykin, 1983; Ford, Harris, & Shuerfer, 2002; Harmon, 2002). Due to the focus of “closing the achievement gap” and probable systemic and cultural biases due to negative stereotypes about African American children’s academic and intellectual functioning, many children are neither placed into gifted programs nor provided the contextual support to sustain them (Ford, et al., 2002). The following paper seeks to explore factors that may impede the likelihood of identifying African American children for academically gifted programs as well as provide recommendations to aid educators and parents in sustaining children in these programs.

### **Definition of Gifted and Talented**

Identifying gifted children has been an issue of considerable debate. Educators and intelligence testers have largely been unable to develop consensus on a definition of intelligence or what is considered to be high intelligence, which makes developing criteria for gifted children in the U.S. a difficult task. To identify the most promising students in U.S. schools, the following definition was developed by Congress in 1988 (Title IV-H.R.5):

The term gifted and talented youth means children who give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific fields, and who require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop such

capabilities.

Consistent with that definition, Kirk and colleagues (2006) noted that gifted children possess a surplus of ability or talent in certain areas. The outstanding abilities of the gifted and talented have attracted attention to their needs and individual differences. Much of our understanding and increased concern about identifying gifted and talented children in the U.S. was motivated by Cold War tensions in the 1950’s, particularly the launching of Sputnik. This era played an important role in identifying talented students in the areas of science and technology, placing great emphasis on educating the most able minds to meet the needs of a progressive society.

### **Gifted Education and African American Children**

In the 1990’s, there was a resurgence of gifted education programs across the nation for public school children. Currently, although African American children comprise 16% of the children in public school systems in the U.S., they only make up 8.4% of the children in gifted programs (Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Tavegia, 2005). Educators, psychologists, and academic researchers have cited a number of reasons why African American children are not appropriately represented in gifted education classes. Negative stereotypes about academic performance, teacher attitudes, lack of referrals of African American students to gifted education programs, and culturally biased tests (Baldwin, 1987; Gould, 1995; Menchaca, 1997; Ford, et al., 2002) have all been reported as possible reasons. According to Ford and colleagues (1998, 2002), the inclusion of African American students in gifted programs has not kept pace with rates for other groups. As reported by the U.S. Department of Education (2005), between 1978 and 1997 Hispanic students identified as gifted increased from 5.2% to 8.6% nationally. During that same period, black students identified as gifted dropped from 10.3% to 7.3%, even as the overall black student population increased from 15.7% to 17.0% (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). If this gap continues to widen, the effects will be enormous, especially since by 2020 children of color are expected to represent

46% of the students in U.S. public school systems (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

According to Harvard's Civil Rights Project (2004), African American students are half as likely as whites to be placed in Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) English or math classes and 2.4 times more likely than whites to be placed in remedial classes. Even when African American students demonstrate equal ability with their white counterparts, they are less likely to be placed in accelerated classes. Students who take AP courses in high school are eligible to take the corresponding AP examination and may earn college credit for scores above a minimum threshold. Given the importance of being academically prepared for college coursework, many African American students have not been exposed to the curriculum necessary for them to be successful in college.

Although there may be a number of structural barriers (e.g., biased testing, lack of referrals, etc.) that prevent children from being identified as gifted, it may be necessary to address multiple factors to sustain children in gifted programs.

#### *Sustainability and the Role of the Teacher*

According to Frasier, García, and Passow (1995), the success of gifted African American students depends on the attitudes and behaviors of teachers, counselors, and school administrators. Of key importance in sustaining any child in a gifted program is the interaction between the child and the teacher. Gifted children, like any other child, require attention, support, and a nurturing environment. Professionals and laymen alike have often reacted ambivalently to these children, while appreciating their special qualities, some still doubt their right to special educational enrichment on the grounds that it enhances "elitism" (Perry & Hilliard, 2003). School district administrators and educators must provide a nurturing environment that is inclusive for all children, but especially African American children who have been identified as gifted. Many African American students enter gifted programs and do not see children who look

like them. Immediately, they try to "hide themselves" from other students. They feel inferior and tend to withdraw from classroom activities (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford et al., 2002). Ford-Harris and colleagues (1991) also suggest that gifted African American children bring a unique set of challenges to the academically-gifted context. Many of these children experience problems in terms of identity development and often experience more emotional and psychological problems than non-gifted African American students. Pressure from peers and inconsistencies in values and expectations between school and communal contexts may cause many academically-gifted students dissonance (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kunjufu, 1986). Thus, there may be pressures on them to underperform due to the stigma or threat of being perceived as acting white when they excel in school.

Given the complexities and challenges facing African American children, educators must develop positive attitudes toward gifted students and focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. Students who feel they are part of the class tend to interact better with both teachers and students. In order to sustain African American students in gifted education programs, educators should encourage and support African American students to be academically successful in and outside the classroom (Ford, et al., 2002). Moreover, African American students learn best when teachers develop differentiated curricula to meet their needs (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ford, 1996). Academic success is a salient part of the African American culture; school administrators and educators must realize that family members are very influential in the academic lives of African American children (Borland, Schnur, & Wright, 2000; McAdoo & McAdoo, 2002). Therefore, strategies must be implemented to engage parents and garner community support for students.

#### *Parental and Community Support*

Parents of gifted African American children can play a significant role in assuring that their children remain in gifted programs

(Tavegia, Houskamp, Huff, Watkins, & Stanton, 2005). Given the economic and structural impingements that disproportionately impact black people, African American parents have a more difficult time dealing with issues facing all families (e.g., work, family, childcare, etc.). This can limit the involvement of many African American parents in the early stages of the identification process. African American students who live in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have additional pressures that can deter them from participating in gifted education programs. To address these concerns, educators must encourage parents to become knowledgeable about the procedural process of Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) programs in an effort to become advocates for their children. Ford (1996) suggests that black parents need to use effective strategies in order to help their children cope with peer pressures while maintaining high academic achievement.

Students who experience parental absence and poverty can present a considerable challenge for many educators; nevertheless, one should not assume that poverty, disorganized families, or a lack of resources equal poor performance or intellectual deficiencies. Children from low-income communities, especially African Americans, can be very resilient. They may have support from extended families and/or faith-based communities to aid them in overcoming obstacles and excelling in school. To assist these children and establish congruency among home, school, and community, educators and school administrators need to adequately assess the resources that are available in the respective communities. Moreover, they will have to establish partnerships and collaborative efforts among parents and community stakeholders that will nurture and positively reinforce a standard of excellence for academically and intellectually gifted students.

Identifying gifted children of color is a challenging task. Whether it is teacher perceptions, systemic bias, or negative stereotypes which impede placement, fewer children of color are entering gifted programs. Given their low numbers in these programs, many students may experience isolation as they attempt

to negotiate this foreign context. In an effort to adequately identify gifted and talented children in the African American community, PreK-12 educators, administrators, and researchers have to begin to shift their thinking in terms of research, practice, and policy.

### *Research*

Although studies exist on underperformance among African American children and those barriers or factors that influence underperformance, very little research has focused on high achieving African American children (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Flowers, Zhang, Moore, & Flowers, 2004). Ford and colleagues (2002) suggest that the focus of research should be on recruiting and retaining African American children in gifted programs. Factors found to limit access to and remove African American children from such programs have been negative stereotypes about African American children's academic performance, as well as testing and assessment issues that may act as gatekeepers (Ford, et al., 2002). Thus, they propose that school systems need to begin to focus their research on high achieving African American students and investigate both those factors that may be barriers to and those that are conducive to academic success for gifted African American children. Moreover, there may be school system policy and practice that deters teachers' abilities to correctly identify African American children for gifted programs (i.e., lack of referrals, overemphasis on standardized tests, and subtle forms of classism and racism) (Ford, 2007). Addressing the aforementioned challenges will require bridging the gap between research, policy, and practice by conducting evaluations of the AIG identification process and enhancing those factors that increase the likelihood that African American children will remain in gifted programs.

### *Policy and Practice*

Although more funding will be needed to implement research-based policy that can aid in identifying gifted African American children throughout the U.S. school districts, Ford and

Moore (2004) suggest that school teachers and counselors play a major role in identifying students for academically-gifted programs and assisting these students in succeeding in such programs. Ford and Moore recommend continued professional development in terms of cultural competence for teachers and counselors who work with children of color or in socially or economically challenged communities (Ford & Moore, 2004). Moreover, they suggest that educators develop research to ascertain the specific needs and interests of the students and limit their focus on outcomes such as so-called objective tests. Educators need to employ an ecological approach to assure that gifted children of color have the necessary support and contextual reinforcement to stay in gifted classes (Livingston & Livingston, 2006), particularly low-income, inner-city African American children. Counseling interventions that include aiding African American children in establishing trusting relationships with other gifted African American children as well as offering family counseling may be apropos (Ford, Harris, & Shuerfer, 1993).

All criteria for gifted and talented education programs should be carefully examined and defined to meet the needs of children in all school districts. Moreover, given that “giftedness” is defined to include areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership capacity and/or specific academic areas, contemporary gifted programs should reflect current policy and be more inclusive of diverse children with the capacity to accomplish great things if given a chance. Employing these practices among African American children will greatly improve educators’ ability to nurture and support the best and brightest children and assure that they are adequately utilizing the intellectual resources needed to maintain and sustain the African American community.

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