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Closing the Achievement Gap: How Gifted Education Can Help

The field of education faces many challenges in its effort to ensure excellence and equity for all students. The subfields of special education and gifted education are being challenged in particular because of persistent accusations of inequities relative to culturally diverse students. For example, a litany of studies, reports, and works from popular press detail the pervasive overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in special education (Artiles, 2003; Donovan, 2002; Eitle, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006) and their underrepresentation in gifted education (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Frasier et al., 1995). The most recent data from the Office for Civil Rights ("Elementary and Secondary," 2002) reveal that efforts to rectify the two representation issues have not been effective (see Table 1).

A number of studies, as well as conceptual and theoretical pieces, have been conducted in response to this stubborn and pervasive problem of Black and Latino students achieving lower than White students (Barton, 2003; Ferguson, 1998; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). That is, theologians, policymakers, administrators, and educators have offered their views on this issue, but the "Black-White" achievement gap has been resistant to change. Despite federal legislation (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Javits Act of 1988) demanding educational reform, and numerous intervention and prevention efforts (such as Head Start, preschool, and talent development programs), the gap persists.

The research and literature base is replete with concerns and frustrations regarding not only the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in gifted education, but also their low performance

when compared to White students. Specifically, data indicate that Black and Latino 17-year-olds often have the math and reading skills of White students who are 13 years old (e.g., Barton, 2003). There are other gaps as well, for example, in grade point averages, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment and completion rates (Ferguson, 2002).

What factors contribute significantly and consistently to the achievement gap? And, what role can gifted education play in helping to close the gap? In this column, I offer three propositions. First, the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students in gifted education is one of the many issues that should be discussed in efforts to both understand and close the achievement gap. Second, I assert that too little attention has been given to the achievement gap problem in gifted education; we have not, as a field, considered how underrepresentation might contribute to the gap. Finally, I propose that although dozens of variables have been reported as contributing substantively to the achievement gap, we have not considered how increasing access to gifted education (and decreasing representation in special education) for Black and Latino students can make a difference in narrowing the gap (Ford & Moore, 2004).

The Achievement Gap: Significant Factors

Based on an extensive review of the literature, Barton (2003) identified 14 factors that are strongly associated with the achievement gap. The factors were

Table 1

Elementary and Secondary School Civil Rights Survey (2002)						
Race/Ethnicity	Enrollment		GT Enrollment		Total	
	% Female	% Male	% Female	% Male	% School District	% Gifted & Talented
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	.59	.62	.49	.44	1.21	.93
Black	8.46	8.7	4.78	3.65	17.16	8.43
Hispanic/Latino	8.67	9.13	5.36	5.05	17.80	10.41
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.14	2.28	3.65	3.43	4.42	7.64
White	28.81	30.61	36.71	35.88	59.42	72.59
Total	48.67	51.33	51.27	48.73	100.00	100.00

Note. Taken from <http://www.demo.beyond2020.com/ocrpublic/eng>.

categorized as “before school” and “during school and after” influences. Before school factors include variables associated with families, such as less family participation and involvement and fewer resources in homes. The during and after school factors (primarily the school and social environments) include lack of rigor in curricula in schools serving Black and Latino students and fewer resources, as well as less qualified teachers and less experienced teachers. Although the 14 factors do not exhaust the list of explanations for the achievement gap, they have been commonly studied and discussed.

Rigor of Curriculum

The rigor of the curriculum is the strongest predictor of the achievement gap (Barton, 2003). As already noted, Black and Latino students have the least amount of access to challenging courses, AP classes, and gifted education classes. The field of gifted education prides itself on excellence and rigor, seeking to provide students with the highest quality curriculum and instruction. We endeavor to chal-

lenge students who need more than what is offered in general education (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 1993). This lack of access to rigorous content for Black and Latino students means that these students may fail to reach their potential, thus contributing to the achievement gap.

Teacher Quality and Preparation

Students who are the most in need of well-trained teachers tend not to get them. Specifically, teachers with the fewest credentials often teach in the lowest performing classrooms, too many of which are comprised of Black and Latino students (Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2004). It is clear that when credentials and preparation are inadequate, it is difficult to challenge students and raise their achievement. The chances of gifted education referrals for diverse students decrease.

Teacher Experience and Attendance

Just as student attendance influences school performance, so does

teacher attendance. Data indicate that teachers working with urban students often have higher rates of school absence and turnover (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). This lack of consistency with teachers (and curriculum and instruction) negatively affects the quality of students' education. Low achievement is likely, and low-performing students are not likely to be referred for gifted education screening.

Class Size

Students in urban schools are most likely to have larger class sizes than students in suburban and high-performing schools (Barton, 2003). The impact of large and crowded classrooms on student achievement is clear. Classroom management, time on task, and opportunities for individualized attention are compromised.

Technology-Assisted Instruction

The digital divide is real. Today, technology plays a role in almost all

educational, employment, and recreational activities. Computer access has the potential to help students complete coursework independently, participate in class discussions, communicate with peers, access distance learning courses, and participate in high technology. Like others, gifted students benefit from Internet exploration and database access. Despite the power and potential of technology, teachers in urban settings seldom have adequate numbers of computers and they often work with the least updated technology (e.g., Kozol, 2005). When computers are available, teachers working in urban settings do not appear to use them for instruction-related purposes (Barton, 2003). The lack of access and opportunity, like others just described, hinder diverse students from being adequately educated and prepared for gifted education classes.

School Safety

According to recent studies by Sylvia Rimm and Jean Peterson, many gifted students are "tormented" by other students. Similarly, a recent study by Education Insights (2006) found that Black and Latino students feel less safe in schools than White students. Ford (1996) also found that gifted Black students often face negative peer pressures when they do well in school. It appears that concerns about school safety are on the rise for gifted students, diverse students, and gifted diverse students. As educators and parents, we know that learning is more optimal when students feel safe; students who feel unsafe or threatened in any way are not likely to perform at optimal levels.

Correlates of Achievement and Gaps: Before School and Beyond School

Whereas the previous variables address the school context, the next set of correlates relate primarily to the home and community context. They address the circumstances and lives of students before they enter school and from that point on.

Birth Weight

The percentage of Blacks born with low birth weight is disproportionately high, as Barton (2003) noted. These infants are more likely to: (a) sustain long-term disability, (b) have impaired motor and social development, (c) repeat a grade, (d) fail in school, and (e) require special education (Barton, 2003; Reichman, 2005). By implication, these students are not likely to be identified as gifted.

Lead Poisoning

Compared to White students (6%), 22% of Black students lived in older, lead-filled homes from 1991–1994. Lead poisoning has at least three results: (a) reductions in IQ and attention span, (b) reading and learning disabilities, and (c) behavior problems (CDC, 2003, as cited in Barton, 2003).

Hunger and Nutrition

Many Black students come to school hungry, specifically those who live in poverty. Children who are hungry and/or malnourished cannot learn at optimal levels. Adequate nutrition is clearly important for the development of mind and body; hungry

children cannot concentrate (Barton, 2003).

Parent Availability

Barton (2003) defines parent availability in terms of family structure—living in single versus two-parent families. More than White students, Black students live in single-parent homes, most often headed by mothers. Single-parent families tend to have much lower incomes than two-parent families. The income differentials account for half of negative effects of parent absence: health, educational attainment and achievement, behavioral problems, and psychological well-being. All of these are risk factors that hinder gifted education referral and placement.

Parent Participation

Family involvement differs across racial and cultural groups (Barton, 2003; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Black families tend to be less involved in school settings than White families, especially if they are single-parent and low-income families. This lower involvement can include attending fewer meetings, reading less to children, checking homework less often, not volunteering at school, and more. Regardless of the reason, when family participation is low, students experience more behavioral problems, lower academic performance, and lower school completion (Barton, 2003).

Reading to Young Children

Unfortunately, Black and Latino students are read to less often by their parents than White students (Barton, 2003). Language acquisition, literacy development, reading comprehension, and general success in school

Table 2

**Differences in Reading, TV Watching, and Other Variables Among Students
in Grades 1–6 by Race**

	% Black	% Hispanic	% White	% Asian
Read at home almost every night	44	51	58	65
TV in bedroom	82	70	41	37
Computer in bedroom	25	27	23	43
On many days, I am sleepy in school	34	29	26	12
Teachers say I don't pay attention in school	42	38	26	23

Note. From Ferguson (2006).

are affected when students are not read to (Barton, 2003). It is clear that students who have poor reading skills are at high risk for special education referral and placement, including such categories as learning disabilities, mental retardation, and developmental delays (Raymond, 2004).

TV Watching

Few recent studies have argued that TV watching has positive academic benefits for students. Unlike reading, TV watching is high among Black and Latino students, and this can detract from their learning and school progress (Ferguson, 2006; see Table 2).

Student Mobility

More than White students, Black and Latino students are likely to transfer schools more often. This lack of consistency negatively affects their achievement. Students are consistently trying to catch up and keep up. The probability of their school records, including gifted education

documentation, following them in a timely manner is low. Thus, even if identified as gifted, diverse students may not get the individualized services they require to succeed in school.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The field of education is under ongoing scrutiny as educators, policymakers, families, and community leaders endeavor to eliminate factors that contribute to the achievement gap. Gifted education is not exempt from this scrutiny. We, too, must study the achievement gap with gifted students, particularly Black and Latino students. How does our field contribute to the gap? What can we do to help narrow or close the gap?

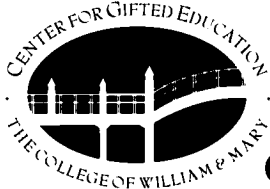
As I have written on many occasions, along with other scholars (e.g., Alexinia Baldwin, Mary Frasier, Sally Reis, Joe Renzulli, Tarek Grantham, Ernesto Bernal, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius), we must adopt a philosophy of inclusion rather than exclusion in gifted education. This means eliminating barriers to access for diverse

students (Frasier et al., 1995) and recognizing how environment and opportunity affect the development of gifts and talents (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Current barriers include definitions, instruments, and policies and procedures, as well as our expectations for diverse students. That is, we must also improve and increase gifted educators' preparation to become culturally competent (Ford & Harris, 1999) so that they hold high (or higher) expectations for Black and Latino students. Higher expectations are likely to result in increased referrals of diverse students for gifted education screening and placement. Finally, our field must enter into discussions about and research on the achievement gap. We have much to offer to the discourse, and we can make a difference. **GCT**


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