

## Afterthought

### *Gifted Education: The Civil Rights Issue of Our Generation?*

By Satasha Green



All students deserve a high-quality education; however, some students are denied such an education due to their ethnicity, class, gender, language, and/or disability status. That is why United States Education Secretary Arne Duncan has declared education the civil rights issue of our generation. Gifted and talented education programs can no longer be reserved for a set few. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is essential that those who have historically been denied access to these programs, e.g., students who are economically disenfranchised and students of color, have the opportunity to participate in gifted and talented classes/programs. More than two-thirds of students who are economically disenfranchised and students of color are in schools with low graduation rates, high attrition rates, and minimal access to preparatory curricula, enrichment courses, and gifted and talented programs.<sup>1</sup>

In this issue of the *Black History Bulletin*, authors have addressed the importance of providing African American students in K-12 settings with the opportunity to participate in gifted and talented programs/classes. They also addressed the importance of providing young, gifted, and Black teacher candidates in teacher education programs with knowledge of the historical legacy they inherit and

the educational philosophy that Black educators embraced in the past. Along with their articles, they have provided culturally responsive lesson plans for both K-12 and higher education settings.

The sentiment across all these articles is clear: young, gifted, and Black students are overlooked and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. In the article “Separate and Unequal: The Underrepresentation of African American Students in Gifted and Talented Programs,” the author expresses concern with the limited number of African American students in gifted and talented programs; however, this same population of students is overrepresented in special education. Perhaps the issue of underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs for African American students can be viewed as providing credibility to the argument that gifted education legislation has created a vehicle for separate and unequal educational circumstances for students of color.

The underrepresentation, and in some cases decreasing enrollment, of African American students in gifted and talented programs/classes has become a national epidemic that contributes to the achievement gap between African American students and their White counterparts. In the article “The Causes of Underrepresentation of African American Children in Gifted Programs and the Need to Address this Problem through More Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices in Teacher Education Programs,” the authors contend that most of the resources and energy have been dedicated to addressing African American children who are not meeting academic standards, and African American children who excel in school have been underserved and neglected because of an effort to close the achievement gap between European American and African American students. Although it is important to address and work toward closing the achievement gap, it is also important to address and work toward supporting, engaging, and providing programs and activities to develop our young, gifted, and Black students.

Though the other articles in the issue do not specifically and explicitly address the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted and talented programs/classes, they do express the need for providing young, gifted, and Black students in both K-12 and teacher education programs with nurturing leadership opportunities. In the article “Developing African American Leaders in Today’s Schools: Gifted Leadership, the Unfamiliar Dimension in Gifted Education,” the author reiterates the 1972 federal definition of “gifted and talented,” which was amended to incorporate leadership ability. The definition explains that if gifted students are to be the future leaders, then leadership

training should be a major aim of gifted programs. Unfortunately, in today's gifted and talented programs, leadership training is not a major focus. However, students should be provided with many opportunities to improve their leadership skills. Programs should be centered on engaging students through hands-on activities, allowing student leaders practical experience early in their academic careers. Additionally, leadership skills are important for young, gifted, and Black teacher candidates as they transition into teacher educators. They must understand that Black educators of the past needed leadership skills for the many roles that they played: e.g., community leaders, moral exemplars, public health reformers, and civil rights activists. The author of the article "Embracing the Historical Legacy of Young, Gifted, and Black Educators" illustrates how important it is for young, gifted, and Black teacher candidates not only to be leaders in the classroom, but to understand the legacy of Black educators of the past by examining the historical legacy that affords them an opportunity to identify, develop, and nurture a sense of pride and be a part of a larger movement. The author acknowledges that the struggle for educational justice is critical, not just for Black students, but for students from all racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and class backgrounds.

It is clear across all the articles that the cultural competence of teachers, administrators, counselors, and pre-service teachers and the use of culturally responsive teaching is imperative to educate young, gifted, and Black students in both K-12 and higher education. Being young, gifted, and Black must be celebrated. For far too long in our public school system, young, gifted, and Black students have been sentenced to attending low-performing schools with the least qualified teachers and a lack of quality instruction. These students have not been challenged or provided with enrichment and college preparatory courses that help to develop their existing gifts and talents. Culturally responsive teaching may help to resolve the issues that many young, gifted, and Black students face, including a lack of leadership training, a curriculum that does not cover the historical journey of previous Black educators, and the underrepresentation of these students in gifted and talented programs.<sup>2</sup>

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) is designed to acknowledge the presences of cultural diversity and to find ways for students to connect with the content material.<sup>3</sup> When students are provided with CRT, they are more motivated to learn and to perform better academically.<sup>4</sup> CRT is a pedagogy of opposition similar to critical pedagogy, except that it focuses on collective and individual empowerment.<sup>5</sup> The goal of CRT is to allow African American children and children from diverse backgrounds

in the development of a "cultural personality" to not only choose, but to prefer academic excellence, and to identify that academic excellence with their own cultures.<sup>5</sup> Although CRT is essential for *all* learners, it has been categorized as a method just for students who have been traditionally and systematically marginalized and students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Providing students with instruction that is responsive encourages them to be actively involved in the process of learning.<sup>6</sup>

As noted by several of the authors, the field of gifted education is lacking in assessments and referral practices designed for students of color who are gifted. This is reflected by the disproportionate number of students of color referred and placed into gifted programs.<sup>7</sup> We must recognize that gifted education needs a structural change. As a result, in order to successfully and effectively meet these changes and the needs of students of color, we must begin to align our curriculum and instruction to be culturally responsive to address not only students' learning needs, but their sociocultural needs.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in this volume of the *Black History Bulletin*, social studies lesson plans utilizing differentiated methods are presented. These activities include active and engaging instruction and are designed to encourage students to discover, to explore, and to participate orally and physically in the learning process.

Educators have an obligation to critically evaluate their roles in educating students who are young, gifted, and Black and promoting culturally responsive pedagogy. Whether out of ignorance, indifference, or blatant disregard for students who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse, many educators have not considered that they must address the needs of these students, particularly if they are gifted and talented. No longer can we as educators ignore the changing demographics of the United States. We must move toward a curriculum that is culturally responsive, because all of our students deserve to be educated equitably. Therefore, we as educators and administrators must continue to transform the educational system, and when deciding who will be in gifted and talented programs/classes, we must consider the entire community of students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, races and ethnicities, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and abilities. This volume of the *Black History Bulletin* and its contributing authors help to bring this issue to the forefront of educational discourse.

**Notes**

1. The Schott Foundation for Public Education, *The Schott 50 State Report on the Opportunity to Learn in America*, May 2009.
2. Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and As G. Hilliard, *Young Black and Gifted: Promoting High Achievement among African American Students* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003).
3. W. Montgomery, "Creating Culturally Responsive, Inclusive Classrooms," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 33, no. 4 (2001): 4-9.
4. A. McIntyre, *Making Meaning of Whiteness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).
5. L. S. B. Lane, "Black in the Red Zone: A Study of Disproportionate Suspension of African American Males," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 68, no. 1A (2006): 55.
6. Dorothy M. Singleton, Jonathan Livingston, Dorothy Hines, and Helen Jones, "Under-representation of African American Students in Education Programs: Implications for Sustainability in Gifted Classes," *Perspectives*, Spring 2008, 11-21.
7. Michael R. Olneck, "Immigrants and Education," in *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, ed. James A. Banks and Cheny A. McGee Banks, 310-327 (New York: MacMillan, 1995).
8. G. Ladson-Billings, *Crossing Over to Canaan* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).



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