Socio-Emotional and Psychological Issues and Needs of Gifted African-American Students: Culture Matters

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Most of the scholarship on gifted Black children focuses, legitimately, in a disproportionate way on underrepresentation, namely, identification and placement issues, barriers, and recommendations. Comparatively speaking, less attention has focused on socio-emotional (or affective) and psychological needs and development of these students. Furthermore, because the characteristics exhibited by African-American children are not the traditional characteristics understood, valued, and accepted in classrooms, their intellectual, academic and socio-emotional needs are rarely met. Considering the many culturally-based interests and needs that gifted children bring into the learning context, teachers of gifted African-American children must make changes in a proactive way. In this article, the author discusses the characteristics and needs of gifted African-American children and strategies that will develop, maintain, and/or enrich their educational experiences.

Keywords: socio-emotional needs, psychological needs, gifted Black or African-American students, multicultural education, underrepresentation

Most of the scholarship on gifted Black students focuses extensively on underrepresentation, namely testing, identification and placements issues, barriers, and recommendations. Comparatively speaking, less attention has focused on the socio-emotional (or affective) and psychological needs and development of these students. As described later, this neglect is particularly evident in at least four areas—definitions, theories, identification instruments and procedures, and services (i.e., models and programs).

Annemarie Roeper was one of the first scholars to focus on the specific and unique socio-emotional needs of gifted children. She found that gifted children feel as if they are alone and do not fit in or belong, and their voices are not heard, which leads to stress, frustration, sadness, and other negative feelings and beliefs because they do not have an outlet to express their emotions. However, when parents, caregivers, and teachers show a sense of understanding and empathy for gifted children, they emerge from the negativity and begin to enjoy life (Kane, 2003) and school.

Since Roeper's early work, more emphasis has been placed on the cognitive and academic needs of gifted students, and with Black students in mind. Nonetheless, it cannot be stated enough that these needs and issues have been neglected or relegated to second-class status when compared to cognitive and academic concerns and needs. For this author, developmentally and culturally,

these two are inseparable from socio-emotional and psychological issues and needs. In addition to the above, neglect regarding the development and experiences of gifted students is made more complex when the students are culturally different (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American). Here, racial identity must also be included in the discussion of socio-emotional and psychological issues, needs, and development. Because of their significant underrepresentation in gifted education (Ford, 2011b), African Americans are the focus of this paper.

Gifted African-American Students: Definitional Shortcomings

Historically, federal definitions have neglected the socio-emotional and psychological needs of gifted students. From 1970 - 1993, federal definitions of gifted education focused heavily on academic, intellectual, and creative abilities or gifts and talents. The Education Amendments of 1969 (U.S. Congress, 1969) focused on five areas of giftedness. Specifically, gifted children were those who had outstanding intelligence, academic achievement, creativity, visual and performing arts, leadership, and psychomotor abilities that required special activities or services that were not ordinarily provided by local education agencies. Although the federal definition was revised in 1978, no attention was given to socio-emotional or psychological aspects.

The definition appearing in the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 deleted any reference to the level of schooling, while the more recent U.S. Department of Education (1993) federal definition focuses on the same areas as the aforementioned definitions. However, unlike the prior definitions, the latter emphasizes that outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. The definition also states that these children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. While the wording in this definition is the most philosophical and inclusive and, thus, holds promise for African Americans, it still fails to address the affective and culturally-influenced areas of giftedness.

Gifted African-America Students: Identification Shortcomings

Identification instruments, procedures, and policies have been criticized extensively by proponents and opponents of gifted education. For the most part, traditional approaches used to identify and place gifted students neglect socio-emotional, psychological, and cultural needs. Regardless of their cultural experiences, most gifted students are identified and placed in gifted programs using traditional approaches, such as selecting those who score in the top 3 – 5% of intelligence and achievement scores and/or selecting those who are nominated by their classroom teachers (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Davis & Rimm, 2003; National Association for Gifted Children, 2009) -- despite under-referrals of African Americans for gifted education screening and placement by teachers (see extensive review by Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008).

In most districts, no information or limited information is collected on students' affective and psychological needs and development. The process tends to be colorblind (Ford et al., 2008). Specifically, it is unlikely that self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity instruments are

considered and/or used. Unfortunately, these are practices that will likely overlook low income and/or underachieving Black students who historically perform poorly on intelligence tests due to factors such as environmental disadvantages (e.g., prejudice, discrimination, low expectations, negative stereotypes, peer pressures, poverty), psychological factors (e.g., test anxiety, perfectionism, low academic self-concept in a subject area or areas), and instrumentation issues (e.g., test bias, test unfairness) (Ford, 2011a).

Finally, theories about gifts and talents generally fail to include socio-emotional, psychological, and cultural components. Exceptions are: Renzulli's (1986) Three-Ring Conception of Gifted, which is comprised of task commitment, above-average ability, and creativity; Sternberg's (1985) Triarchic Theory, which includes componential (analytical), experiential (creative), and contextual (practical) intelligences; and Gardner's (1999) Theory of Multiple Intelligences, which includes interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences that address socio-emotional aspects of gifted. These theorists and theories proactively consider Black students and endeavor to open doors to African Americans.

Neglect of the Issues and Needs of Gifted African-American Students

Formalized attention was finally given to the affective needs of gifted children in a position paper developed by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) in 1995. Even greater attention was gained through the development of the advocacy organization Social Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG). Again, prior to this, the affective and psychological aspects of giftedness had been neglected in general and was not viewed through a cultural lens. In some ways, this can be traced back to the traditional Western view of emotion and cognition as two separate and contradictory phenomena (Goleman, 1995). The value of emotional intelligence and development was minimal and was not enough to create environments such that socio-emotional needs could be developed and nurtured. However, the link between emotion and cognition and the effect that they have on individuals of high intelligence is being realized.

While the field of gifted education has tangentially focused on the socio-emotional and psychological issue and needs of gifted students, there has been even less of a focus on the needs and issues of African-American students with culture in mind. This void can be and has been detrimental to many gifted African-American students, possibly contributing to both their underrepresentation in gifted programs and under-achievement, even if placed in such programs. For example, when focusing on affect, variables to consider are self-esteem, self-concept, and negative peer relations and pressures. Added to this would be racial identity when the students are African American (Cross, 1995; Cross & Vandiver, 2001).

A number of factors contribute to the challenges that African-American children face which prevent them from fully demonstrating their intellect, including: (1) school factors (e.g., fear and lack of feeling safe in school, low curricular rigor, less teacher preparation, low teacher experience, high teacher absence and turnover, large class sizes, and low instructional technology); (2) health factors (e.g., low birth weight, high hunger and poor nutrition, environment damage); and (3) home factors (e.g., less parent participation, high parent-pupil

ratio, less talking and reading in the home, excessive TV watching, frequent school changing, and high summer achievement loss) (Barton & Coley, 2009). In turn, these factors could cause these students to develop low self-concepts and/or develop an expectation that would be in direct conflict with the effort to succeed - the expectation of failure.

Characteristics and Needs of Gifted African Americans

Gifted individuals differ from each other in meaningful and countless ways. Lovecky (1993) identified five traits (i.e., divergent thinking, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness, and entelechy) that may lead to both inter-and intra-personal conflicts in gifted children. Children who are divergent thinkers often prefer unusual, original, and creative responses; those who are excitable are described as having a high energy level with emotional intensity and reactivity (Lovecky, 1993). Some gifted students are sensitive, very passionate, and committed to people, issues, and ideas, while those who are perceptive have a keen sense of justice and empathy.. These students may have few supportive adults in their lives due to conflicts they encounter with adults, including teachers who do not understand them. Gifted students who have the entelechy trait are identified as being reliable, which may cause them to become burned out. They may also begin to alternate between feeling extremely positive and/or special (valued) or extremely negative and/or alienated (devalued) (Lovecky, 1993).

For at least 20 years, Ford has identified and shared characteristics, needs, issues and problems of gifted Black students. She also classified some characteristics (e.g., perfectionism, fear of success, asynchronous and dysynchronous development, underachievement, introversion, non-conformity, heightened self-awareness and feeling different, idealism; justice, concern over world problems, empathy) that were more specific to Black students than White students.

Many gifted students struggle with their gifts and talents. This is largely due to their need to belong and feel connected with others. Their gifts may make them feel awkward in social situations if they fail to bond with others. This is very likely when they do not have 'true peers' who share similar abilities, interests, hobbies, and extra-curricular activities. Moreover, some have the need to be perfect. They may experience self-doubt, anger, and frustration and may also become depressed because of the expectations that they have placed on themselves. In an effort to produce the 'perfect' assignment, perfectionists may procrastinate, which may then lead to underachievement because the assignment may be completed hastily in an effort to meet deadlines. The student may even go as far as to not turn the assignment in because of its poor quality (Ford, 2011a).

On the flip side, some gifted Black students may fear success, especially if it means sacrificing social relationships. Such students have a need for affiliation and would much rather be accepted by their peers than deal with rejection, alienation, or isolation. As a result, these students, especially gifted African-American students, may choose to underachieve as a ploy to feel similar to and not different than their peers (Ford, 2011a). Due to perfectionism, fear of success and the need of affiliation, some gifted Black students may underachieve as a way to gain attention or to rebel against those who know that they can do better. Very little effort is put forth and, as a result, they may develop poor study skills. Some may also have tests and/or evaluation anxiety, feel that

they can't do any better (hopelessness), have negative self-images, and/or feel unmotivated to achieve (Ford, 2011a).

Like gifted students who fear success, the asynchronous and dysynchronous development of some gifted Black students may make them feel frustrated and depressed. This frustration can be credited to dysynchrony -- the uneven development gifted students experience socially, or asynchrony -- when he/she is out of sync with his/her age group on an emotional and intellectual level. Although these students are physically similar to their classmates, they differ cognitively and emotionally and these dissimilarities often cause stress in many gifted students. This stressor is problematic to Black students because many are communal in their orientation and the need for affiliation may be especially strong (Ford, 2011a).

Gifted students who are non-conformist 'go against the grain'. Although they are creatively expressive, they enjoy freedom and dislike staying within the organizational schemata that are in place. Due to their questioning of and resistance to rules and authority, these students are often considered stubborn and usually isolate themselves from others. On the other hand, some introverts are self-isolated and feel rejected. They look at their differences as a negative attribute, which may affect their self-perception.

Many gifted students are negatively affected by how they and others are treated. They seek equity, justness, and truth, and attempt to put these into place via unrealistic reforms and goals. The inability to make a difference may cause them to feel frustrated, angry and depressed, and may also cause them to feel guilty because they have survived and/or are receiving adequate accommodation (Ford, 2011a). As mentioned above, characteristics of gifted children vary. However, many of the traits harbored by these children may lead to inter- and intra personal conflict which, in turn, often require their affective and psychological needs to be met.

Affective and Psychological Issues and Needs of Gifted African-American Students

There are several myths and stereotypes pertaining to gifted children, ranging from the notion that these children are innately well adjusted to the belief that gifted individuals do not have special needs (e.g., Lovecky, 1993). Literature supports these myths by suggesting that, as a group, gifted students show healthy emotional adjustment in general but especially compared to students not identified as gifted (Franks & Dolan, 1982; Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985; Tidwell, 1980) and positive peer relations (Austin & Draper, 1981; Janos, Marwood, & Robinson, 1985). However, others suggest that, as the giftedness of a person increases, so do the behavioral and socio-emotional issues associated with being gifted (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Roedell, 1984).

To go a step further, because the needs and characteristics exhibited by African-American students are not the traditional needs and characteristics studied, understood and accepted, their intellectual, academic, socio-emotional, psychological and cultural differences are rarely considered and met. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) found that African-American students who do well in school often face negative peer pressures. They asserted that these students "experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success" (p. 177). This was partially due to the refusal of some White Americans to acknowledge the fact that

Black students were capable of intellectual achievement. Other research corroborates their work and is reviewed by Ford (2010). Essentially, when African Americans perform well academically, they are likely to encounter negative pressures that significantly affect their experiences, feelings, and eventual behaviors regarding academic effort and success. Cyclically, the students then began doubting their own intellectual ability and potential, and defined academic success as the prerogative of Whites. This belief led Black students to discourage their peers and considered those who were striving academically as 'acting White'. Hence, gifted Black students and/or those who valued school put very little effort into achieving academically (Ford et al., 2008). The socio-emotional price was costly in their minds.

In essence, too many very capable and motivated Black students are living a life of deception. Although brilliant, they choose to perform at average or below average levels in an effort to be accepted among their peers. This double life is rather self-destructive and conflicting. These students know that they are just as smart as their White counterparts. However, they are not willing (or, in some cases, are not able) to show it because they do not want to feel different from or unaccepted by peers and others. Sadly these students may be dying emotionally, psychologically, and socially.

As stated before, for African-American students to be identified as gifted, there are many obstacles that they must overcome. Moreover, once they become identified, the education delivered may not be responsive to their needs and/or they may experience difficulties grasping the reason(s) behind their struggles. For instance, some students may experience difficulty in the area of racial identity development that may lead to conflicts between academic and social self-concepts and cause these students to experience an array of emotions that may influence them to develop a stronger sense of identity, academically.

Recommendations for Teachers of Gifted African-American Students

As we consider the many issues and needs that gifted students bring into the learning context, teachers of gifted African-American students have to make changes. On this note, they must be made aware of the characteristics and needs of the students they serve. This can be achieved by using research, theories, and strategies that develop, maintain, and/or enrich the education of students. In order for the socio-emotional, psychological, and cultural needs of gifted African-American students to be met, educators must make concerted efforts to provide these students with: (a) a meaningful and fulfilling education and (b) the support that they need to be successful in schools and gifted programs. A few recommendations follow.

Recommendation 1: Integrate multicultural content into the curriculum using the Bloom-Banks (AKA Ford-Harris) Matrix (Ford, 2011b).

Ford (2011a) combined the works of Banks and Bloom to develop a matrix that addresses rigor and multicultural education. For example, Banks' multicultural curriculum addresses four levels of integration to help students increase their motivation, learning, and knowledge about cultural and racial diversity, as well as acquire a sense of social justice (Gay, 1993, 2010). This model can be very useful to teachers as they develop a framework for multicultural lessons. It offers

different levels of integration, ranging from the very simplistic contributions approach, an approach in which the teacher is not required to change the curriculum, to the more complex social action approach, which allows students to identify and solve problems within their curriculum and environment. This model/matrix also allows both the teacher and the student to gain additional knowledge on multicultural issues and meaningfully apply it.

The first level, the contributions approach, provides a quick and easy way to integrate ethnic content into the curriculum. It focuses on heroes, holidays and other discrete elements within a culture. The understanding of racially and culturally diverse groups acquired by students is, at best, superficial because the ethnic elements of diverse groups are added into the curriculum during special days, occasions and celebrations. This approach is most commonly used within classrooms because it requires minimal planning to implement. Unfortunately, teachers using this approach rarely expand the knowledge base of their students with regards to diverse groups because the delivered information is very common and students may have received the same information or a variation of the information in prior settings.

The second level, the additive approach, is implemented by using the existing curriculum without changing its structure. Ethnic content is added to the curriculum. The background knowledge needed to understand the added content is minimal because this approach does not re-- conceptualize the content, concepts, themes, and perspectives of the curricular change. Although the information presented in this level is more substantial, a curriculum change is still not required. Instead, the educator may add an assignment to the existing curriculum that requires each student to answer set questions about a culturally diverse group. Because minimal knowledge is obtained, students may have difficulty completely understanding the content. Teachers should take the lesson a step further by elaborating on the information provided, presenting them with information that goes beyond themes and concepts, and encouraging students to ask questions and seek further knowledge as a means for them to become more aware of diverse groups.

The third level, the transformations approach, changes the basic goals, structure and nature of the curricula by describing the significance of events, issues, problems and themes. Because of the deeper knowledge base obtained by the students, they are able to view the content from the perspectives of groups different from them. This approach may be considered time consuming to teachers because it requires them to make curriculum changes. However, the information provided to the students is more than superficial in that it elaborates on events, facts and characteristics of diverse groups, enabling students to become more aware of and gain additional and meaningful knowledge about different groups.

The fourth level, the social action approach, allows students to identify analyze and clarify important social problems and issues, make decisions, and take reflective actions to help resolve the issues or problems. This level helps the student develop and/or improve their problem solving skills, as well as their skills in working with culturally and racially diverse groups. If teachers use this approach, their students are provided with pertinent information needed to identify and analyze the similarities, differences and inequities within different groups and cultures. Although it requires the teacher to create a new curriculum, students are equipped with the knowledge

needed to deal with personal and societal issues as well as implementing programs that would aid in the development and understanding of diverse groups.

The Ford-Harris/Bloom-Banks Matrix combines Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, 1956) and the works of the aforementioned Banks' Model (2009) to provide educators with a multicultural gifted education model that reflects the goals, objects, and perspectives of gifted and multicultural education. This model can be used to guide teachers as they examine the level of both complexity and multiculturalism in their curricular choices and their mode of instruction. It also allows teachers to implement lessons using the higher levels of the Bloom and Banks approaches. Lessons using higher levels will keep the interest of the students, especially lessons that are meaningful to them. This model is also useful in mixed-ability classrooms because teachers can present the same content on differing levels, thereby enabling all students to experience meaning and success on a level that meets their individual needs. Finally, using such an approach may enable African-American students who feel alienated to connect with the content because it may be familiar and relevant.

Recommendation 2: Understand and capitalize upon the Cross Model (Cross, 2001) when teaching, counseling, and providing socio-emotional guidance to gifted African-American students.

Understanding the needs of African-American gifted students will help educators address their differential success and failure in terms of their social adjustment and academic performance in school. It will also better equip teachers with the knowledge, dispositions, and skills needed to educate African-American gifted students, as well as help teachers to understand why some of these students may resist traditional routes to academic achievement. Nigrescence Theory helps to explain the psychology of becoming Black in terms of racial identity (Cross, 1995; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). This theory reflects the process that African Americans go through during their lifetime to resolve racial identity questions and dilemmas. When educators understand these transitions, they will have a frame of reference from which to develop lesson plans and counseling sessions that are culturally responsive.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to discuss the lack of emphasis placed on the socio-emotional and cultural issues and needs of gifted students in general, and African-American gifted students in particular. Currently, the federal definition of giftedness (1993) does not address the affective needs of gifted students and seldom do theories and models, and identification strategies and instruments. The National Association for Gifted Children has now addressed it, along with the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG). If the affective/socio-emotional needs of gifted students in general are barely being addressed, then the affective needs of African-American students are being virtually ignored or discounted.

Although we are now in the second decade of the 21st century, race is still an ongoing and unresolved issue. Inequities are still prevalent within school systems, school buildings, and school classrooms, and Black students, even if gifted, often face and experience the bulk of these inequities.

While the NAGC has formalized its position about the affective needs of gifted students, we can almost be certain that the needs of many African-American students are still not being met because most of the existing curricula do not meet their needs. Furthermore, many of the teaching styles do not address their varying and diverse needs – intellectual, academic, gifts/talents, socio-emotional – which make it extremely difficult for African-American students to achieve educational, psychological, and socio-emotional success.

A knowledge base of African-American and other minority groups will aid educators in the development and enrichment of the many needs of these gifted students. This will also give educators opportunities to help Black students reach their maximum potential and emerge in areas that teachers may otherwise not be aware. Providing an educationally safe haven for gifted African-American students is a primary means to meeting both their cognitive and affective needs. It is the duty of the student to take advantage of the education that is being given to him/her, and it is the responsibility or obligation of teachers to provide an education that allows students to be intellectually affectively, culturally stimulated, integrated, and whole.

AUTHOR NOTES

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