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A Challenge for Culturally Diverse Families of Gifted Children: Forced Choices Between Achievement or Affiliation

I have enjoyed having my son and daughter in the inner-city elementary schools, and they were quite successful, but I chose different options for middle/high schools. I know there are stereotypes about all schools, but what I don't seem to be able to answer is "What are my options?" These are my perceptions. On one hand, if I say, okay, we'll stay in the inner city, then we have the issue of "acting White" when a student (my son/daughter) is a minority and does well academically because of stereotypes about minority students, especially African American students. On the other hand, we have the issue of isolation when a minority student is in a predominantly White gifted program. . . . I apologize for this lengthy e-mail, but I just feel so lost . . .

—e-mail from a concerned African American mother, April 17, 2004

I frequently receive e-mails and calls from African American and Hispanic American parents, often mothers, who are torn between the need to meet the academic needs of their children and their social/emotional needs. While these parents want their children to be challenged academically, they also want them to be happy, to fit in socially, and to have friends. Many culturally diverse parents are frustrated because they cannot find gifted education programs that are culturally diverse.

Until gifted programs become more racially and culturally diverse, this issue and related concerns will continue. My heart goes out to diverse children and their families. As an African American parent, I share this concern. And, having been identified as gifted as a child, I share the concerns of other gifted diverse children, specifically the desire to have friends without sacrificing achievement.

My mother recently recalled how unhappy I was as a 10th-grade student at a private high school for girls, only five of whom were culturally diverse. I was depressed, frustrated, and confused. While I can vividly recall being miserable in the private school, I was also "losing my identity," according to my mother. That was a tough pill to swallow. I did not seem to belong at the school because I was "different." Teenagers in my neighborhood often teased me, charging me with "acting White." I was "different" from them, too. That was 1976. The above e-mail is from 2004, some 28 years later. Yet, the mother's concerns echo those of my mother; the students' concerns are similar to my concerns.

Although 60 years have passed since *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) legally ended segregation

in school settings, schools are now more segregated than ever before, including their gifted programs. Until gifted programs become more racially and culturally diverse, what can diverse parents do to meet both the academic and affective needs of their children?

In the Meantime

Parents and educators must recognize that culturally diverse students are gifted *and* culturally diverse. Like gifted students, they need to have their abilities recognized and they need to be challenged. Like diverse students, they need to have their culture (e.g., values, traditions, customs, etc.) acknowledged, respected, and otherwise affirmed. Abraham Maslow taught us that, in order to reach our full potential, we must have our basic needs met. This includes the need for safety, belonging, identity, and esteem. For diverse gifted children to develop optimally, they must be challenged *and* appreciated.

Although gifted programs are not as diverse as I would like and as culturally diverse students and parents would wish, my initial preference is for diverse parents to keep their children enrolled in challenging programs, even if there are few diverse students. In the long run, students will benefit academically and professionally from taking such classes. However, diverse parents will have to compensate for this lack of diversity. Here are a few suggestions:

- Be involved as much as possible in your child's school and classroom; volunteer as often as possible.
- Be an advocate for your child; share your concerns with school personnel.
- Work with school teachers, counselors and administrators to provide a safe and culturally responsive learning environment. Share ideas and suggestions with school personnel about making the school and classrooms nurturing for diverse students.
- Work with teachers to develop multicultural activities, programs, and curricula.
- Join the parent-teacher organization as a way to advocate further for your child. Help to develop social activities for all students to work together and to get to know each other (The less we know about each other, the more we make up.). This organization can also support meetings and workshops that focus on all school members becoming culturally sensitive, aware, and competent.
- Start a parent/family organization for gifted students and encourage diverse parents to participate as members and leaders.
- Involve your child in activities and organizations where members are diverse. Students have a life outside of school where their cultural needs can also be met.
- Encourage school administrators to hire a diverse staff, including teachers and counselors.
- Work with schools and organizations to find your child a mentor (e.g., former student, college student, businessperson). Ideally, the mentor should share your child's interests and background; this often increases their bonding.
- Be open and honest with your child about the existence and persistence of prejudice and discrimination. With this knowledge, your child is less likely to internalize negative information from others about him- or herself and diverse groups.

Beyond the School Walls

Clearly, parents want their children to be happy while in school. Although students spend a considerable amount of time in school, they also have a life outside its walls. Therefore, parents can structure out-of-school experiences that help to nurture their children's cultural identities and social/emotional well-being. In their own right, the following suggestions have the ultimate goal of promoting racial pride in children. My personal and professional experiences have convinced me that diverse children who have strong, positive racial identities are more likely to achieve and be resilient in the face of adversity (e.g., discrimination, peer pressure) than children who are lost, confused, and ambivalent. Perhaps Eleanor Roosevelt captured this notion best with her statement, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." Some suggestions:

- Involve your children in organizations that are both diverse and achievement-oriented.
- Let your child attend and participate in cultural events.
- Visit historically Black colleges and universities so that your child can see successful diverse students in an academic setting; this image also shows that there is life after K–12 schooling.
- If possible, live in a diverse community.
- Read books with your child about culturally diverse students who are gifted (e.g., *Maizon at Blue Hill; Fast Talk on a Slow Track; Yolanda's Genius; Don't Say Ain't; A Hope in the Unseen*). This helps children to not feel alone and to find ways to cope with their concerns. Similarly, watch movies that contain positive images of diverse gifted students (e.g., *Finding Forrester*).
- Read books with your children about characters who faced negative pressures, but succeeded (e.g., *I Wish I Were a Butterfly; 213 Valentines;*

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Au Contraire

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antigifted policymakers who are always looking for ways of minimizing or eliminating services to students with special needs" (Renzulli, 2004, p. 67).

"Research" can lead us anywhere, and one's interpretation of specific findings seems as legitimate as another person's view. It's time to recognize this and return to the basics: educating gifted children in ways that would make Leta Hollingworth applaud in praise, rather than shake her head in disappointment.

Q: Any last thoughts?

Just one: When you find the emperor is naked, say so. GCT

References

Renzulli, J. (2004). Expanding the umbrella: An interview with Joseph Renzulli. *Roeper Review, 26*, 65–67.

Silverman, L. S. (2001). This issue honors Annemarie Roeper—a gifted teacher and teacher of the gifted. *Roeper Review, 23*, 188.

Multicultural

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Amazing Grace; White Socks Only; Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear; Another Way to Dance).

- Share personal experiences with your child about how you overcame social injustices. Your objective is to instill hope in your child.
- Talk to your child about the true meaning of friendship. Many students are so eager to have companionship that they affiliate with classmates without regard to their character, integrity, and goals.
- Be forthright in acknowledging that diverse students may exert negative peer pressures on your child (e.g. accuse your child of "acting White"). This is another form of discrimination that cannot be ignored.
- Talk with your child about being assertive at initiating discussions with classmates.
- Above all else, don't lose hope or faith. Be conscious, deliberate, consistent, and systematic in advocating for your child.

Not much has been written about "parenting culturally diverse gifted students." However, some scholars have written books on parenting diverse children that might be a helpful resource. Books on helping children cope with peer pressures may also offer insights and suggestions. Several of the above suggestions were borrowed from strategies my mother adopted as she faced the forced choice of placing me in schools where I did not have to sacrifice achievement or social relationships.

All of us—parents, educators, and others—must take a vested interest in and be proactive in nurturing culturally diverse gifted students. We must work together as if our collective future depends on it—because it does. GCT

Advocacy

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democratic classroom environment is one where all students are provided with the right to learn. Such a classroom must consider the unique and differential needs, interests, and abilities of all students, and this includes the needs, interests, and abilities of gifted students.

They are talking about "accountability." We can use their term to advocate on behalf of gifted students. While the major emphasis of the discussion related to accountability focuses on the outcomes of teaching and learning, we need to redefine the term so it includes moral accountability or the need to make educators and policymakers accountable for their decisions and the outcomes commensurate to these decisions. Provocative questions that ask why and how decisions are made concerning the education of the gifted is a form of moral accountability that we, as advocates for the gifted, must bring to the attention of others.

They are talking about "academic rigor." We can use their term to advocate on behalf of gifted students. Historically, the drive to identify the dimensions of academic rigor and implement academically rigorous curricula have been associated with educators of the gifted and gifted education. We need to provide the background and the direction for academic rigor as the topic is addressed among educators and policymakers. Others need to understand how gifted education can and does contribute to general education.

There always has been discussion about the negatives and positives of educationalese, the language coined by educators to describe and promote intentions and directions in education. Advocates of gifted education need to use the current educational jargon to draft their advocacy efforts. Redefining the common language for the common good of gifted students is the challenge and demand of today's educational political climate. GCT