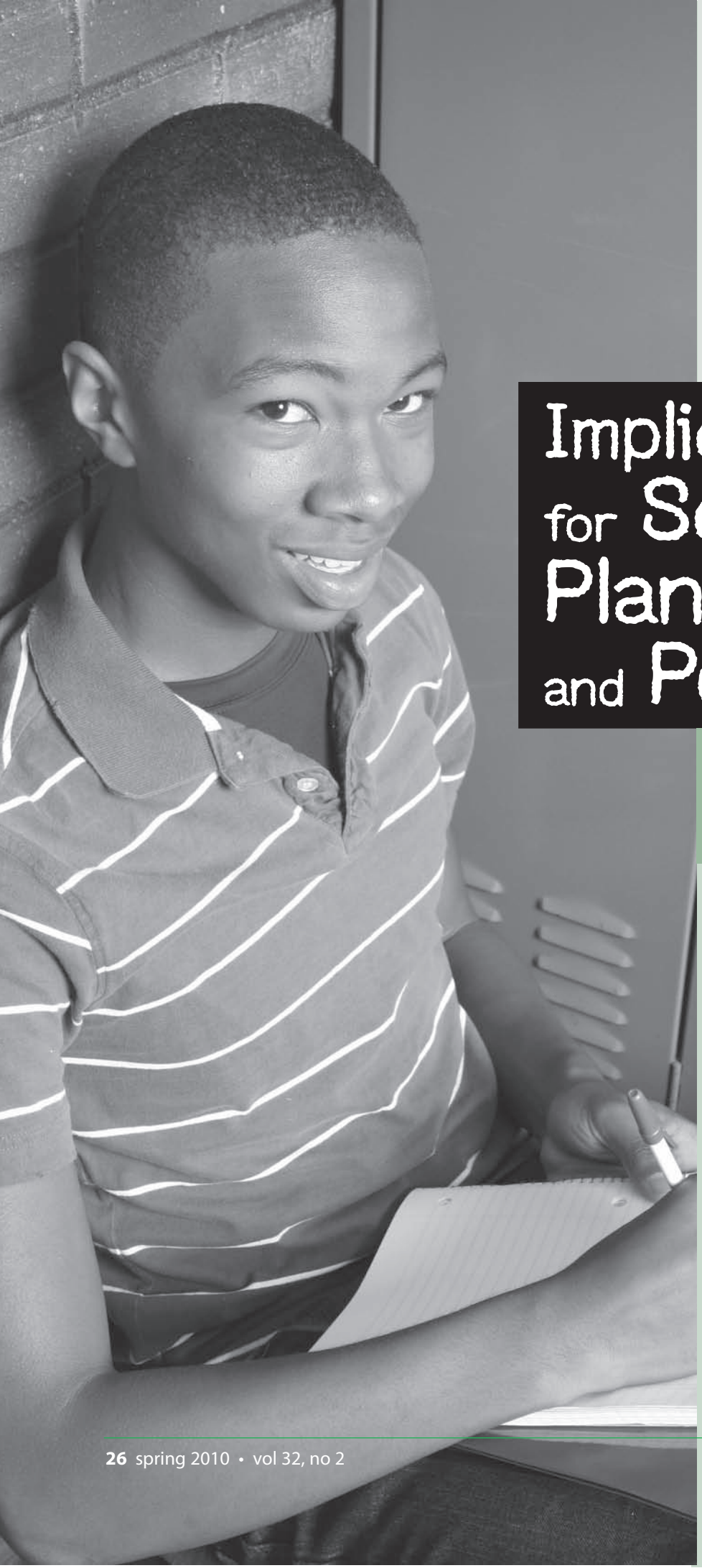

An Often-Neglected Issue in Consideration of Gifted African American Millennial Students:

Implications for School Planning and Policy

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Millennials, which includes persons born between 1982 and 2002, often have been characterized as a mixed bag with two overarching variables used in describing this population: the diverse nature of the group and the closeness that exists between them and their parents. In the case of the latter, millennials have a closeness to their parents who tend to belong to the groups euphemistically referred to as "Baby Boomers" and "Generation Xers" and who have very high expectations for their children. In their endeavor to realize these expectations for their children, parents pursue educational objectives for their children alone rather than in cooperation with other parents who may be like-minded. In the case of diversity, few articles discuss the special needs of students who are not regarded as mainstream students in American schooling—those who are culturally and linguistically different (CLD).

The scarcity of discussions of CLD millennial students is especially evident when attention is paid

to the preparation of teachers with distinctive and appropriate methodologies such as culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching that address the special needs of such students. Gay (2000) summed up rather clearly what is entailed in the application of such methodologies: " [It is] . . . the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of [CLD] students to make learning more relevant to and effective [for students]. . . . It teaches *to and through* strengths of these students. It is *culturally validating and affirming* [emphasis in original]" (p. 29). What is of utmost importance in the application of culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching is the focus on greater success among *all* students but particularly among CLD students for whom the absence of such an approach increases the probability of school failure (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Moore et al., 2006; VanTassel-Baska, Feng, & Evans, 2007; Williams, 2007). Although this situation may be noticed across the spectrum for CLD students, it is much more prevalent among African American students. Ford et al. (2008) suggested: "deficit thinking and the use of traditional tests (especially IQ tests) and lack of teacher referral of CLD students for gifted education screening and placement are the primary contributing factors to underrepresentation" (p. 290).

This article addresses factors that may account for that underrepresentation—the impact of teacher perception with respect to both identification and participation of CLD students and, in particular, African American students in gifted and talented programs. Additionally, we will discuss some of the implications for parents of CLD millennials for policy and practice in schooling and will provide some recommendations for addressing the issue of underrepresentation.

Cultural Synchronization

One of the implications of this demographic difference between the racial and ethnic characteristics of teachers and students is the increased probability of a lack of cultural synchronization. The lack of cultural synchronization, whereby the teacher is familiar with many of the cultural characteristics that affect the way a student learns, is not explained simply by the racial and ethnic backgrounds of teachers and students but by inadequate exposure of teachers in their everyday experiences and in their professional preparation. Indeed, this limited exposure often results in the lack of teacher referral of CLD students for gifted education screening and placement, which may be attributed to teachers' perceptions. CLD students "do not fall into the nice, neat stereotype of good test takers and lesson learners—ethnic minorities, underachievers, children who live in poverty and young people show their potential in nontraditional ways" (Renzulli, 2005, p. 80).

Teacher Beliefs and Expectations

Teacher perceptions and their lack of cultural synchronization also may lead to erroneous expectations, which are sometimes referred to as self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Researchers have found that not only is there a strong relationship between teachers' expectations of students and their academic performance but these expectations often are hidden and not usually examined when considering students' successes or failures (Rist, 2000; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Willis & Brophy, 1974).

More recent studies also show a strong relationship between teacher perceptions of CLD students and their effects on achievement and participation in gifted and talented programs. For example, Ferguson (2003) reported that not only were the beliefs of teachers largely influenced by race, ethnicity, and social class but "teachers' perceptions, expectations, and behaviors probably do help to sustain, and perhaps even to expand, the Black-White test score gap" (p. 495). Moreover, using data derived from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), Konstantopoulos, Modi, and Hedges (2001) found that White and Asian students were more likely than CLD students to be identified for participation in gifted and talented programs. Williams (2007), in a cross-cultural, qualitative study of teacher perception of CLD students in the identification process in gifted and talented programs, also reported similar findings as Konstantopoulos et al. and Ferguson.

Situational and Dispositional Attitudes

With the population of CLD students increasing due to large-scale immigration and other factors, teacher beliefs and expectations assume even greater importance and raise questions for preparing professional teachers at both preservice and in-service levels. The challenges are not new but are really long overdue and succinctly and forcefully addressed by Ford et al. (2008):

> We believe that the problem is complex, but not insoluble. Educators, particularly those in positions of authority, must explore this complex and pervasive problem, and then become proactive in eliminating all barriers that prevent CLD students from being recruited and retained in gifted education. Atti-

> tudinal changes are essential, as are changes in instruments, and policies and practices. (p. 302)

In addressing the problems of underrepresentation of CLD students in gifted programs, the reference specifically to attitudinal changes among teachers is perhaps the most pressing one. Gilbert (1995), a noted social psychologist, contended that such attitudes may be explained by the way people respond to the universal question: How do we think of the other? In answering that question, Gilbert noted, we are likely to select one of two major ways of responding: "situational" and "dispositional." In the case of situational responses, we conclude that one is likely to see another person's behavior depending upon the circumstances dictated by that situation. In the case of dispositional responses, we are likely to make certain judgments based upon our perceptions or beliefs about that person regardless of the situation. Indeed, Gilbert is very much convinced, given his research findings, that more often than not there is a tendency for us to resort to the use of the dispositional explanation largely because it requires less thinking and seems to best explain how we think of the other person. As a result, one runs the risk of engaging in stereotyping the other.

Along with teacher perceptions and expectations, this stereotyping, we feel, amplifies perhaps one of the most formidable barriers to increasing the identification and participation of CLD students in gifted and talented programs. However, while this issue may appear to concern teachers only, we are convinced that addressing such an issue involves parents, teachers, and school planning and policy. In light of that position, we would like to make a number of suggestions to school planners and policy makers.

Suggestions

Professional Teacher Development

Professional teacher development programs at both the preservice and inservice levels should provide candidates with an extensive theoretical and practical exposure to the nature of dispositions and their effect on how one thinks of the other person.

Everyone is a product of his or her socialized experiences or those experiences that come out of our everyday interactions with others. Those experiences influence how one thinks of the other. This is of great importance. More often than not, despite the increased effort of professional accrediting and certifying agencies to ensure that this component is included in the professional preparation of teachers and other school personnel, the research is rife with the inadequacy that teachers display in addressing the issues involved in teaching CLD students in general and in particular with the identification and participation of CLD students in gifted and talented programs. One of the more promising practices for candidates involved in professional development programs is to engage them in reflective experiences (e.g., log entries, journals) aimed at ferreting out biases that they may be unaware of given their socialized experiences. It is important that every precaution should be taken to ensure that such experiences are nonjudgmental by all parties involved so that efforts at addressing potential and actual biases are improved favorably. This suggestion, which is supported in the literature (Baldwin, 2002; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000; McBee, 2006; Morris, 2002; Renzulli & Reis, 1997), concludes that negating a cultural deficit approach and embracing a cultural difference model is beneficial particularly for CLD populations. According to Briggs, Reis, and Sullivan (2008), such an approach tends to avoid "value judgments about cultural beliefs and behaviors; and presents various cultures, including the dominant culture, as parallel or cocultures . . . [as well as] recognize differences and modifying the learning environment to support student learning preferences" (p. 132). In effect, the combination of teachers having the ability to apply cultural difference models in their teaching and being aware of their socialized experiences of the other will most likely favorably change their views of CLD students.

Professional teacher development programs should include an equally intensive exposure of candidates to diverse communities. The focus should be on candidates developing a familiarity with diverse cultural practices so that they develop an appreciation and respect for the role(s) of such cultural realities in teaching and learning.

Developing culturally relevant pedagogy or culturally responsive teaching goes beyond a theoretical understanding of the extent to which "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of [CLD students] . . . make learning more relevant to and effective [for such students]" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). To be effective in the classroom, candidates need a theoretical background in meeting the learning needs of CLD students and more exposure to CLD students during their clinical experiences. One of the most glaring shortcomings of professional teacher preparation and, indeed continuing professional development, is the minimal exposure if not total absence of formal, supervised exposure to diverse communities where "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of [CLD stu-

dents]" (Gay, 2000, p. 29) could best be understood. This is of tremendous importance especially considering that schooling is heavily influenced by mainstream societal factors, which are not always similar to those factors in CLD communities. Harry, Arnaiz, Klinger, and Sturges (2008) summed up the important distinctions between those communities:

> The knowledge and skills gained by children [in mainstream society are from] homes and neighborhoods [that] have prepared them in the language, discourse patterns, cognitive approaches, and social behaviors of the mainstream of the society. In other words, schooling is not culturally neutral. Rather, it is culturally responsive to the children of mainstream families. (p. 24)

Professional teacher preparation programs may do well to borrow practices from several areas regarded as the helping professions (e.g., social work, medicine, criminal justice) where candidates are expected to spend a considerable time in supervised practical assignments in the community at-large that are interwoven with seminars on campus.

Professional teacher development programs should include a sequence in gifted and talented issues beyond mere familiarity with the subject because identification of potential students for such programs will require some in-depth understanding of the potential barriers regarding the selection of CLD students.

Many teachers are unfamiliar with the variety of ways in which giftedness and talent are manifested in students. VanTassel-Baska et al. (2008) observed:

> In the United States, training in gifted education is more optional at the secondary level, especially as it is carried out through professional development services that a local district provides, state gifted education endorsement, and/or graduate courses in gifted education. (p. 347)

Additionally, programs for the gifted and talented are usually addressed under the broad heading of special education at the undergraduate level and more often than not are either minimally addressed or totally absent. It is not unusual for the curriculum on special education in most professional teacher preparation programs to be confined to issues of disability. At a minimum, candidates should become familiar with the issues surrounding the identification of students for gifted and talented programs and the controversial nature of some of the criteria used, especially those regarding IQ testing and teacher recommendations. Additionally, candidates should be knowledgeable of the implications for how gifted and talented is defined by the leaders in the field such as Feldhusen (1992), Gagné (1995), and Renzulli (2005).

School Planning and Policy

Schools that have established gifted and talented programs should ensure that all *teachers and administrators have at least a basic understanding of the parameters of talents and gifts and that teachers who are actively engaged with those programs have either professional preparation or have consented to obligatory professional development in those areas*.

It is not advisable that only those teachers and administrators who are directly involved with gifted and talented programs should be knowledgeable of the area. As with any other program, an environment that promotes equitable recognition, identification, and participation of *all* students in gifted and talented programs should be embraced by everyone and particularly those whose primary responsibility is directed toward school planning and policy matters. Consequently, it is important that everyone who has a functional responsibility in ensuring that teaching and learning is effective in the process of schooling should be expected to at least understand and be familiar with the major aspects of gifted and talented programs.

Schools should ensure that all parents and students are made aware of established gifted and talented programs and should provide information sessions that present the nature of these programs and the expectations for students, parents, and teachers in order for students to be successful.

Parental participation in their children's schooling is rather uneven when issues of race/ethnicity, language barriers, and social class are taken into consideration. There is greater probability that parents of students drawn from among lower socioeconomic and CLD backgrounds are less likely to maintain a strong relationship with teachers and school administrators (Harry, 2008; Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman, 2007; Lazar & Slostad, 1999). Consequently, parents are less likely to be knowledgeable of programs and opportunities that are not considered to be mainstream; gifted and talented programs are among these. To further complicate this situation, teachers are less likely to have the necessary skills and knowledge base on how to effectively engage parents in their children's schooling and special activities geared to improve their academic success. From their study focused on the critical elements of parent involvement aimed at achieving their children's academic achievement, Ingram et al. (2007) concluded: "A lack of teacher training on how to involve parents may

be another barrier. . . . Professional development is needed to train teachers and schools to provide resources or point parents in the right direction" (p. 493).

It is, therefore, imperative that teachers and administrators should make every effort to familiarize themselves with the necessary skills and knowledge base on how to effectively engage parents in their children's schooling with regard to elevating their academic success. Hopefully, this preparation will permit them to provide innovative ways in which they may influence parents to become familiar with and interested in making it possible for their children to be considered for and eventually participate in programs for the gifted and talented. Civic and religious organizations provide a great outlet for disseminating information and posting flyers in neighborhood health clinics, grocery stores, barber shops, and beauty salons, and may be considered in the provision of innovative ways.

Schools should seek to work collaboratively with professional teacher development programs (e.g., local colleges' Schools of Education) in their areas to ensure that policies and personnel involved in executing programs for the gifted and talented maintain a high level of integrity regarding, but not limited to, the identification and participation of CLD students in these programs.

Schools and school districts often are hesitant in approaching professional teacher preparation programs about the development and execution of programs in general. More often than not, these relationships are limited to clinical experiences that candidates within teacher preparation programs are expected to acquire. Schools frequently enter into consulting relationships with personnel who are not necessarily connected with but are providing expertise independently of those professional teacher development programs. Such relationships often are very limited in scope for many reasons including the prohibitive financial costs for extensive contracts, the likelihood of interfering with previously negotiated labor/management contractual relationships, and the time required beyond the normal school hours. The proposed relationship is one that could provide mutual benefits to both schools/school districts and professional teacher preparation programs and, especially in cases where programs for the gifted and talented are nonexistent, excellent opportunities for both parties to develop programs. Further, this collaborative relationship will ostensibly yield greater benefits as the cultural, financial, and intellectual resources of both parties are used in developing programs with high levels of integrity.

Teachers

Teachers who are specifically committed to these programs should have had professional preparation in gifted and talented education and been formally exposed to preparation in addressing culturally diverse issues.

Despite the growing presence of gifted and talented programs in P–12 schooling, no similar growth pattern regarding professional development in teacher preparation programs or in addressing the issues surrounding CLD students exists. Equally problematic is that programs fail to address the relationships between teacher beliefs and student academic performance in the classroom. Professional teacher preparation programs may be better able to develop functional programs if they do so in collaboration with P–12 personnel and parents.

Teachers should make every effort to participate in continuing professional development focused on gifted and talented issues and maintain close contact with parents of children in the programs.

Because of the relatively low level of importance given to the issues of gifted and talented education in many teacher preparation programs, there are limited opportunities for continuing professional development in this area. Teachers may be able to participate in various activities at professional organizational meetings; however, they require financial support and time off from school. A way for teachers to engage in professional development is to maintain membership in national organizations that address gifted and talented education and subscribe to regular professional publications. With respect to maintaining close contact with parents, particularly CLD parents, teachers may want to consider scheduling regular phone calls with parents, developing a newsletter in multiple languages, and sponsoring social events that include group discussions on issues surrounding CLD gifted and talented students.

Parents

Parents should endeavor to maintain frequent contacts with both teachers and other parents of students in gifted and talented programs to increase their knowledge of these programs and to ensure that the students' needs are adequately met.

Although millennial students parents are very much involved in their educational experiences, they are less likely to be in contact with other parents. This pattern of behavior can be significantly changed if teachers and school administrators facilitate opportunities that increase the number of collaborative meetings between parents and teachers.

Whenever possible, parents should make every opportunity to subscribe to various sources of information and attend professional meetings where

issues in gifted education are the focus of discussions.

Given that the majority of schools provide gifted education as add-on programs rather than self-sufficient operations, less information is available for parents. Teachers and school administrators can be most instrumental in exploring creative ways in which they may be able to facilitate the participation of parents in professional meetings, particularly if they are held locally or regionally. They also may be very successful in holding regular information sessions, arranging for group subscription rates for parents in professional publications, and providing Internet resources.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, there has been much advancement in the areas of increasing CLD students in both their identification for and participation in gifted and talented programs but much more needs to be done. The suggestions made in this article, along with other recommendations in this special issue, will serve as a continuing catalyst to achieve the goals of increasing CLD students in both their identification and participation in gifted and talented programs. GCT

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