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Underrepresentation of Culturally Different Students in Gifted Education: Reflections About Current Problems and Recommendations for the Future

At the dawn of each year, I feel compelled to take some time to reflect upon my professional goals and scholarly focus, as well as what, if any impact, I might have had on resolving problems and moving the field forward in addressing underrepresentation. For some reason, entering the year and decade 2010 seems to be "one of those times" where self-reflection weighs heavily on my mind. For almost two decades, I have devoted my professional life to the field of gifted education, as have others. More than any time in my career, I find myself reflecting even more so on the persistent or stubborn problem of underrepresentation among Black and Hispanic students in gifted education (and Advanced Placement courses). Is this more frequent self-reflection because I am getting "old," with the age of 50 knocking at my door? Is it because, in rereading some of my work of almost two decades, I see the same problems and issues of underrepresentation being discussed ad nauseam with too little progress being evident? Is this more frequent self-reflection because I am impatient for change and so desperately want excellence, equality, and equity to guide all decisions made about students? Is it because my justice meter is higher than others, that my focus on underrepresentation is not just professional, but also personal? Is it because I know that we can do better at decreasing underrepresentation but am fearful that the moral will seems to be missing in action?

In the following pages, I share my two cents worth on some of the key problems or barriers to increasing the representation of African American and Hispanic students in gifted education, and offer suggestions for moving forward to meaningful change and progress. I ground this article in the fundamental belief that underrepresentation negatively affects the lives and future of Black and Hispanic students, as well as the school district, the community, the state, and the nation. This is both a national and international problem that hinders our ability to compete and thrive globally. Simply put, underrepresentation is not *their* problem; it is *everyone's* problem. We all (e.g., educators, families, communities, and businesses/organizations) suffer when students don't do well; we all benefit when students do well. Thus, when underrepresentation is viewed as having personal, social, fiscal, and long-range implications, perhaps changes will be more forthcoming.

Underrepresentation: A Brief Overview of the Past

I believe that most professionals in gifted education would agree that this field is the stepchild or an afterthought of special education. One obvious indication is the lack of a federal mandate for gifted education. Thus, it seems that many school districts do not feel as pressed or even accountable to rectify underrepresentation.

The underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in gifted education is meaningful and statistically significant. For example, as of 2006, the most
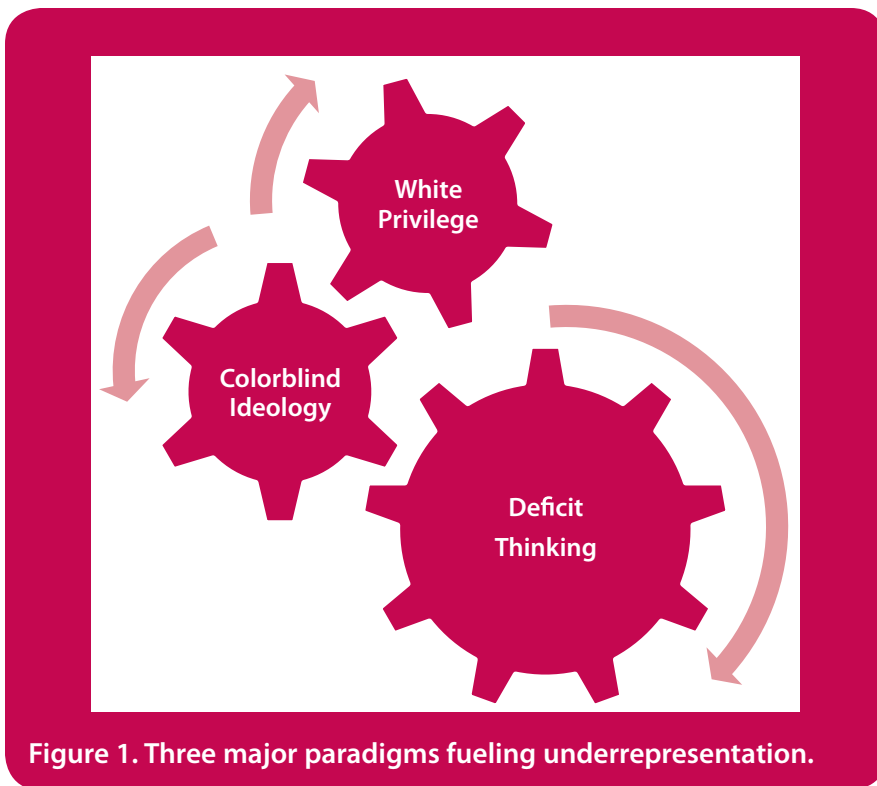
Figure 1. Three major paradigms fueling underrepresentation.

recent data for which federal statistics are available, Black students are underrepresented by 48%; more specifically, 253,000 more Black students should be identified as gifted (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Likewise, Hispanic students are underrepresented by 38%, resulting in another large number of students who are not accessing gifted education curriculum, programs, and services. Combined, this means that at least 500,000 Hispanic and Black students are not being challenged to reach their potential in schools nationally. Further analyses indicate that Black and Hispanic males are more underrepresented than all other groups; they comprise the bulk of those underrepresented.

Underrepresented students suffer, as do their families, schools, communities, state, and nation. The barriers to increasing the participation of Black and Hispanic students in gifted education, as noted earlier, have remained pretty much similar to those that I

discussed 20 years ago, 15 years ago, 10 years ago, and 5 years ago. More specifically, the top (but not only) four categorical roadblocks to representation are: (a) lack of teacher referral, (b) students' differential performance on traditional intelligence and/or achievement tests, (c) stagnant and outdated policies and procedures for labeling and placement, and (d) social-emotional concerns and eventual decisions of Black and Hispanic students and their primary caregivers about gifted education participation. But these four issues are symptoms of three larger problems—deficit thinking (Ford, 2003; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002), colorblindness (Milner & Ford, 2007), and White privilege (McIntosh, 1989; see Figure 1).

First, deficit thinking is grounded in the belief that culturally different students are genetically and culturally inferior to White students. It is a belief that their culture—beliefs, values, lan-

guage, practices, customs, traditions, and more—are substandard, abnormal, and unacceptable. When deficit thinking exists, educators are unable to focus on the strengths and potential of Hispanic and African American students; they are blinded, instead, by low expectations and stereotypes. Hence, the low referral rates of Black and Hispanic students for gifted education screening and placement (Ford et al., 2008). As I have proposed and/or argued throughout my career, deficit thinking is a systemic problem that influences all aspects of gifted education—definitions and theories, instruments selected, criteria, policies and procedures (low teacher referral), curriculum and instruction, relationships, and placement (or lack thereof).

Colorblindness (also referred to as culture-blindness) is another systemic barrier to redressing underrepresentation (Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Milner & Ford, 2007). The philosophy and practice exist when educators/individuals intentionally or unintentionally suppress the importance of and role of culture in learning, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and expectations. Colorblindness is often equated with being fair by not seeing differences, and treating everyone the same. I believe that treating everyone the same, even in the context of culture is not only unrealistic, but also impossible and contradictory to the goals of gifted education. Stated another way, if we believe that gifted students are the same as all other students, there would be no need for gifted education programs and services. This is not the case; gifted students are like other students, but they are also different. This, too, is the case with culturally different students; as learned from cultural anthropologists and cultural psychologists, for example, they are like White students, but also different.

White privilege is equally problematic and contributes to the poor presence of Black and Hispanic students in gifted education. As described by McIntosh (1989), White privilege is unearned benefits that advantage Whites while disadvantaging others. White privilege is deeply embedded in the structural fabric and cultural workings. It is a form of entitlement and affirmative action in which the social and cultural capital (e.g., language, values, customs, traditions) of White Americans is valued and held as normal, normative, or the standard. According to Sue (2008), White privilege operates in an invisible veil of unspokenness and secrecy, confers dominance to one group and owes its existence to White supremacy, and is based on the mistaken notion of individual meritocracy and individualism.

Recommendations for Change

Demographic Changes: Living in the Past Rather Than the Future

I often hear people, mainly White Americans, refer to wanting to return to the "good ole days." I immediately contemplate the date or era to which they might be referring. During slavery? During the Jim Crow era? Prior to legally sanctioned desegregation and equal educational opportunity under *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954)? Back to the days when blatant racism and discrimination were the norm, acceptable, and legal? Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964? To those years when "minorities" were truly the numerical minority? Prior to having a Black President in 2009? For me, those days are dreary and a welcomed past. I can think of few Blacks and Hispanics who want to regress and live in or relive those times. As we enter and live

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in the current decade and beyond, it is time to be proactive—to acknowledge, accept, and even welcome or appreciate changes in the U.S. and the world. The world is, indeed, despite resistance and protest, shrinking. For a myriad of reasons, change is inevitable, and we (i.e., educators) are left with little to no choice about embracing them.

According to a number of reports from the U.S. Census and other sources, almost half of newborns in 2009 were "minority"—Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian—and this percentage is increasing. When it comes to public school enrollment, in 1972, White students comprised about 75% of students; however, by 2006, this dropped to less than 60%. Hence, some 2 in 5 students in our public schools are *currently* culturally different. This national average may fail to communicate that some cities and school districts are primarily or solely Black and/or Hispanic.

Conversely, the demographics of teachers remain primarily White, accounting for some 85% of the teaching force. This inverse relationship between teacher and student demographics is not trivial. How prepared are current and future teachers to work effectively, responsively, and proactively with students who come from backgrounds that differ from their own relative to race, culture, and language?

No one variable or factor is responsible for underrepresentation; instead, a confluence of factors is at work. Families, educators, decision makers, and peers contribute to underrepresentation. As described below, relative to education specifically, definitions, theories, policies, and procedures (all grounded in beliefs or subjectivity in many ways), along with social-emotional concerns, are duplicitous in gifted education underrepresentation. To effect meaningful change, I suggest the following: (a) educators place underrepresentation in the broader umbrella of the achievement gap; (b) educators not buy into deficit thinking about culturally different students; (c) educators not adhere to a colorblind philosophy and practices, and not ignore or discount social injustices and White privilege; (d) educators share the blame or responsibility for underrepresentation; (e) educators not acquiesce to the status quo and be complacent with a business as usual attitude; and (f) educators have substantive and ongoing preparation to work with both gifted and culturally different students. Rather than belabor all of the aforementioned problems, readers are referred to my work as well as scholarship in gifted education by Alexinia Baldwin, Mary Frasier, Ernesto Bernal, Margie Kitano, Tarek Grantham, and

Deborah Harmon. In the future, we must hold ourselves more accountable for underrepresentation. A few suggestions follow.

Equitable Representation: Toward the Future

Join the Fight to Close the Achievement Gap. A national problem that extends beyond, yet includes, gifted underrepresentation is the achievement gap. I have argued for a number of years that we cannot close the achievement gap without decreasing underrepresentation. We cannot completely reconcile underrepresentation if we do not address the achievement gap in gifted education (e.g., Ford, 2006).

Examine Data by Race. Most work on underrepresentation focuses, rightly so, on Black students, as they are the group most underrepresented in gifted education (Ford et al., 2008). Although Hispanic students, as noted earlier, are sorely underrepresented, their underrepresentation has improved over the years. This is not the case for Black students. Relatedly, Black students are underreferred more than any other group. Thus, it behooves all educators to disaggregate data by racial groups so that each group's underrepresentation is recognized and strategies can be tailored to their specific barriers, issues, and needs.

Examine Data by Gender and Race. Due to the significant percentage of Black and Hispanic male underrepresentation, there must be a greater focus on gender and race. Also, although females (i.e., White females) have received more attention in the literature of gender-based underrepresentation, the issues and needs of Black and Hispanic females must not be presumed to be the same as White females. Relatedly, the issues and needs of Black and Hispanic females are not the same as Black and Hispanic males.

There is a dire need to disaggregate data by the combination of race *and* gender (e.g., Hispanic males, Hispanic females, White males, White females, Black males, Black females).

Examine Data by Income and Decrease Using Income as Proxy for Race. One of the most pervasive, offensive, and stereotypical beliefs is that race and income are synonymous and/or that the majority of Blacks and Hispanics are poor. Nationally, it is the case that, percentage wise, *more* Hispanics and Blacks come from low-income backgrounds. However, it is not the case that most or all Black and Hispanic students/families are low income. When educators prejudge and stereotype in this way, when they make decisions on opinions rather than data, they deny the economic diversity that exists within such groups (frankly, all groups), and use poverty as an excuse to justify underrepresentation. Stated another way, using poverty as a proxy for race (and vice versa) is counterproductive and fails to serve students, families, and schools and communities well.

Focus on Early Identification and Talent Development. Tied to the notion of poverty is early identification and talent development. Waiting until students are in grades 2–4 (or later) to identify and serve them as gifted seems to be counterproductive, especially when students live in poverty. As with any exceptionality, giftedness must be identified and addressed early. I am always mindful that a "mind is a terrible thing to waste" (United Negro College Fund motto). Talent development programs are critical and they help to decrease underrepresentation.

Underrepresentation: Be Reasonable About What Is Unreasonable and Inequitable. In the future, educators must be more concrete about underrepresentation and what is unacceptable, indefensible, and inequitable. Setting and adhering to a common

percentage or threshold gives all educators a concrete base or guideline from which to know that underrepresentation at and above a certain level must be addressed in a proactive way. Here are a few examples. Females are roughly 50% of the U.S. population. If they represent 20% of students in gifted education, is this acceptable, defensible, and equitable? Low-income students represent about 50% of students in schools nationally. Is 10% representation in gifted education acceptable, defensible, and equitable? Hispanic students represent 20% of a particular school district but 10% of gifted students in that district. Is this acceptable, defensible, and equitable? Black students represent 10% of a school district but 3% of gifted education. Is this acceptable, defensible, and equitable? Readers will vary in their views—subjectivity has contributed to problems. We need guidelines that carry legal implications such that accountability can be better guaranteed—so that we can stop aiming/shooting at a moving target and, instead, find common ground. I support the Office for Civil Rights' 20% discrepancy rule and am even more supportive of this dropping to 10%.

Definitions and Theories: They Must Be Culturally Responsive. The first federal definition of gifted was issued in 1970, with several revisions up to 2001 with No Child Left Behind legislation. The field has also been influenced by definitions and theories by Joe Renzulli, Robert Sternberg, and Howard Gardner. Thankfully, all of these theorists address and honor culture in their theories. Having said this, I am baffled that educators in school settings (e.g., practitioners, teachers, counselors, administrators) seem to be wedded to outdated, colorblind works. As the nation and schools change, so too must definitions and theories.

Policies and Procedures: Some Rules May Need to Be Broken. As noted by myself and other scholars, policies and procedures contribute in substantive ways to underrepresentation. For example, instruments (e.g., tests, checklists, forms, matrices), procedures (e.g., teacher referral and/or nomination; caregiver referral and/or nomination), when tests/instruments are administered, which tests/instruments are used, what accommodations are made, cutoff scores, and more, all contribute to and fuel underrepresentation. Schools must examine policies and procedures that, intentionally and unintentionally, contribute to underrepresentation. To the point, if it is found that teachers do not refer Black and Hispanic students for gifted education screening, identification, and placement, then this policy and practice is not defensible. Similarly, if Hispanic and Black students do not score well on a certain test, then educators must question and change the test to avoid unfairness, bias, and underrepresentation.

Testing and Assessment: Stop Hiding Behind "Objectivity." Standardized tests specifically are touted, applauded in many cases, for their objectivity. Philosophically, I somewhat understand this position. The gray area rests in the reality that a human (or group of humans) made the test, devised the items and format, determined examples and wording, and determined how points for responses would be scored. Thus, subjectivity saturates the instruments. Hence, I have always wrestled with the notion that tests are objective or as objective as some espouse. And should a test be objective, educators often misinterpret and then misuse the results (e.g., Ford, 2004).

Curriculum and Instruction: Move From Colorblindness to Cultural Responsiveness. If and once Black and Hispanic students are referred, identi-fied, and placed in gifted education, it is necessary that curriculum and instruction be responsive to their interests, readiness, and skills (Ford & Harris, 1999; Ford & Milner, 2005). I support and applaud the model of differentiation presented by Tomlinson (2001), culturally responsive instruction by Boykin and colleagues (2005), along with multicultural education (Banks, 2008) and culturally responsive education (Gay, 2002). Individually and collectively, these models provide much guidance for how to make curriculum and instruction rigorous and culturally responsive (see Ford & Harris, 1999). When curriculum is rigorous *and* multicultural—culturally responsive—then more Black and Hispanic students will be engaged and motivated. With engagement and motivation comes performance; with higher performance or achievement comes greater representation in gifted education. All of this weighs heavily on educators working to decrease, eliminate, and/or reduce the effects of deficit thinking, colorblindness, and White privilege. **GCT**

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