Increasing the Representation of African American Males in Gifted and Talented Programs

The educational and social status of African American males is well chronicled. As a result, compelling analyses of dropout statistics and academic achievement issues pertaining to African American males can be found throughout the scholarly literature (Farmer et al. 2004; Jackson and Moore 2006, 2008; Lee and Ransom 2011; Moore 2006; Noguera, 2003). With respect to other racial groups, significant comparative research has focused on the overrepresentation of African American males in special education as well as excessive disciplinary practices (Butler et al. 2012; Cartledge, Gibson, and Keyes 2012; Darensbourg, Perez, and Blake 2010; Geisler et al. 2009; Lewis et al. 2010; Moore, Henfield, and Owens 2008; Whiting 2009). For example, a recent report from the US Department of Education showed that African American male public school students had been suspended at a higher rate than males from other racial groups in 1999, 2003, and 2007 (Aud, KewalRamani, and Frohlich 2011). While many issues affecting the educational plight of African American males have been highlighted, the gifted education crisis affecting African American males is not as apparent in the media or in scholarly settings. As a result, it appears that lesser attention has concentrated on the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted and talented programs (Donovan and Cross 2002; Ford 1998, 2011; Whiting 2009).

National education data illustrate the low percentage of African Americans in gifted and talented programs (Hargrove and Seay 2011). For example, in 2002, 3.1 percent of African Americans participated in gifted programs in public elementary and secondary schools (US Department of Education 2006). Moreover, according to national data, 3.5 percent and 3.6 percent of African American students participated in gifted programs in 2004 and 2006, respectively (US Department of Education 2006).
of Education 2008). The statistical data also illustrate that African American females are more likely to be represented in gifted education programs (Ford, Grantham, and Bailey 1999; Jackson and Moore 2006; Lewis and Moore 2008a) and less likely to comprise special education classrooms when compared to their African American male peers (Cartledge, Gibbon, and Keys 2012; Lo and Cartledge 2007). Additionally, data from the Schott Foundation for Public Education (2008, 2010) suggest that African American males are more likely to be underrepresented in gifted and talented programs and less likely to be selected (or identified) for these types of accelerated learning opportunities.

Education trends associated with African American males tend to portray a bleak academic and occupational future for this population (Darensbourg, Perez, and Blake 2010; Lewis et al. 2010). Also, on many school indicators, African American males are less likely to perform as well as African American females and their White peers (Ford and Whiting 2010; Irving and Hudley 2005, 2008; Jackson and Moore 2006, 2008; Lewis, Chambers, and Butler 2012; Moore and Owens 2009). As a result, White male students tend to be represented in gifted education programs (Ford, Grantham, and Whiting 2008), while African American male students tend to be underrepresented (Ford 2003, 2011; Henfield, Owens, and Moore 2008). Given the compounded effects of educational issues, these disturbing trends in gifted education are likely to intensify rather than improve.

Across the United States, the underrepresentation problem for African American males is more visible in suburban school districts (Lacy 2007; Ogbu 2003). However, it appears, to some extent, that the gifted education underrepresentation crisis goes unnoticed in urban school districts, where African Americans commonly represent a considerable percentage of the student enrollment and where consistent examples of academic challenges are evident for African American males (Noguera 2008). It has been argued that the challenges facing urban school districts are widespread, to the point that negative educational outcomes for African American males are viewed with a degree of normalcy (Noguera 2008; Lewis and Moore 2008a, 2008b). This idea may explain why the low number of African American males in gifted education is seldom perceived as a topic of concern. Pedro Noguera (2008) suggests that too many public school personnel “have grown accustomed to the idea that a large percentage of the Black male students they serve will fail, get into trouble, and drop out of school” (p. xix).

Adhering to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has increasingly become the primary focus of urban school districts (Gallant and Moore 2008; Michael-Chadwell 2011; Moore and Owens 2009). However, a common criticism of the legislation is that school districts have little, if any, incentive to improve students’ test scores beyond the minimum scores set by the state. Another critique of NCLB, according to researchers such as Sharon Michael-Chadwell (2011), is that it neglects to include educational programming and special funding specifically for gifted and talented students. As Michael-Chadwell states, “With the focus of US public education systems on improving the academic competency of their low-performing students, questions regarding the feasibility of maintaining enrichment programs for gifted students persist” (p. 101). By focusing intently on students who are apt to underperform on standardized tests, urban school districts may be likely to underidentify African American males who possess the ability for gifted education. Furthermore, because substantial resources are utilized to close the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students, it is also possible that the concerns of gifted and talented African American male students may be overlooked.

It has also been noted in the scholarly literature, but not proven conclusively, that some urban school districts are considered ineffective in educating African American males (Lewis and Moore 2008a, 2008b; Moore and Lewis 2012; Noguera 2008). Research regarding this issue suggests that, despite the fact that thousands of African American males attend urban school districts, only a small and disproportionate number of them are enrolled in gifted and talented programs (Ford 2003, 2011; Whiting 2009). Thus, many African American males may never have the opportunity to be in gifted and talented classrooms. Stated differently, many African American males may never experience intellectually-stimulating gifted and talented programs that can help them realize their full academic potential (Bonner and Murry 2012; Ford 2011).

**Identification and Assessment Issues**

Because of the negative categorizations commonly assigned to African American males, their schooling experiences are often compromised (Jackson and Moore 2006). Regrettably, many urban school districts concentrate on the academic shortcomings as opposed to the strengths of African American males. These tendencies are quite prevalent in school settings and tend to negatively impact African American males (Bonner and Murry 2012; Whiting, 2009). Accordingly, in numerous urban school districts, the academic needs of gifted students of color are not being met (Ford 2011).

Because some school districts rely heavily on standardized assessments to identify gifted students, gifted education scholars (e.g., Ford 2003, 2011; Ford et al. 2002) assert that these practices may contribute to the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted and talented programs. For example, test scores are usually the main variables used to identify gifted students (Briggs, Reis, and Sullivan 2008). Moreover, it is widely believed that, due to the conceptions of giftedness (Stemberg and Davidson 2005) in public schools, which are usually restricted and limited to cognitive measures, many African American male students may not be selected to participate in gifted and talented programs (Ford 2003, 2011; Ford et al. 1999). Regrettably, test scores do not always support the identification of the unique academic abilities of African American males (Ford 2003; Ford et al. 1999). Also, in some urban school settings, there is a tendency to assess the academic aptitude of these students in relation to White students. In such cases, the academic potential of African American males may go unrecognized (Bonner and Jennings 2007; Ford 1995).
In the research literature, numerous education scholars (e.g., Bonner and Murry 2012; Ford et al. 1999; Michael-Chadwell 2011; Moore, Ford, and Milner 2005) have indicated that structural factors, which are embedded in the philosophies and practices of school districts, contribute to the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted and talented programs. Aligned with these perspectives, Mara Sapon-Shevin (2003) asserted, “Gifted programs are implemented for students for whom educational failure will not be tolerated (generally the children of White, privileged parents) and are enacted in ways that leave the general educational system untouched and immune to analysis and critique” (p. 129).

One strategy for expanding the educational opportunities of African American males in urban school districts is to focus the attention of educators and school leaders on selecting African American males to participate in gifted and talented programs. Consistent with this idea, Alexzina Baldwin (2011) wrote, “Variables such as socioeconomic deprivation, cultural diversity, social and geographic isolation, and a relative perception of powerlessness, require assessment or identification techniques which cut across these variables to locate the hidden talents of the black child” (p. 14). Therefore, urban school leaders need to understand how these variables may affect test scores in order to effectively translate the test results (Ford et al. 2002). It is also important that urban educators (e.g., teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists) are adequately trained to assess African American male students’ academic potential for gifted education. However, Ford (2003) suggests that educators sometimes develop extensive processes that decrease minority students’ chances of being admitted to gifted education programs. For example, in one urban school system, students had to meet the following eight requirements, before being admitted to gifted education (Ford 2003, pp. 147–148):

1. an admission fee ranging from $160 to $600, depending on the school building (no financial support given to families unable to pay the fee);
2. a history of perfect attendance or only excused medical absences;
3. no negative behavioral marks on report cards;
4. no grade below a C in any previous course;
5. official transcripts submitted by parents with an application (even if the student was already enrolled within the district);
6. application to be submitted to the school only on two specified dates and only during certain hours;
7. a contract signed by parent or guardian agreeing to participate in certain activities on predetermined dates and at predetermined times; and
8. all applications delivered in person.

Because teacher recommendations frequently comprise a major part of the identification process for gifted education (Baldwin 2011; Ford 2011), some researchers have argued that negative or vague teacher recommendations prevent African American males from being selected for gifted and talented programs (Bonner and Jennings 2007; Ford 2011; Ford et al. 2002; Ford and Whiting 2010; Whiting 2005). In support of this assertion, in the mid-1950s, M. D. Jenkins (1954) conducted a landmark study on African American students and gifted education. Although Jenkins found no differences between the test scores of African American males and females, the females were twice as likely to be referred for gifted education. As a possible explanation for this finding, “one can attribute part of this imbalance to teacher perceptions; namely, teachers may be more willing to accept Black females as gifted” (Ford et al. 1999, p. 52). In this regard, research suggests that teachers may hold negative biases about African American males, and some teachers may not possess the needed training in multicultural education (Flowers, Milner, and Moore 2003; Ford et al. 2002) or understand the importance of culture and its effects on African American male students (Ford 2011). Thus, teachers who are unwilling to learn and utilize multicultural knowledge in their classrooms may be less likely to positively interact with African American male students and assess their academic potential (Ford 2011).

When African American students perceive that teachers do not believe in their academic ability, their educational aspirations are often negatively affected (Flowers, Milner, and Moore 2003; Deborah Harmon 2002), utilizing a qualitative research design, found that urban African American students believed that some of their teachers lacked understanding and appreciation of African American culture and that their teachers behaved in manners that communicated low expectations of them. In 2008, Moon and Brighton discovered that only 65 percent of the teachers in their study agreed with the assertion that “the potential for academic giftedness is present in all socioeconomic groups in our society” (pp. 460–461). Having these perspectives is often referred to as deficit thinking (Ford et al. 2002; Ford and Whiting 2010). Given that urban school districts are usually situated in dense communities of poverty (Lewis and Moore 2008a, 2008b), the aforementioned research findings have major implications pertaining to the identification of African American males for gifted and talented programs.

In light of the structural dysfunction associated with many school environments, sometimes, even when identified and placed in gifted education, urban school systems may still struggle to retain African American males in these programs. Additionally, because gifted programs tend to mostly consist of
students who are White, female, and middle-class, African American males in gifted and talented programs may experience some degree of discomfort because they are not well-represented as a group (Ford et al. 1999). Also, some African American males may not fare well in certain gifted and talented programs because they may feel or believe that they need to make substantial academic, personal, and social adjustments that are not required of them in non-gifted classroom settings—where they tend to be more populated (Ford 2011). Regardless of a particular school’s approach to gifted and talented education (e.g., enrichment, pullout, compacting, cluster grouping, self-pacing, and acceleration), several education researchers (Baldwin 2011; Bonner and Murry 2012; Ford 2003, 2011) have highlighted the importance of diversifying gifted education. One study (Ford, Grantham, and Bailey 1999) asserted that having a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse gifted student population increases the likelihood that African American males are motivated and interested in participating in a gifted and talented program.

According to the existing research on this topic, the negative feelings that African American males may experience in gifted programs requires that educators closely monitor students’ progress, academically and socially, as well as the pedagogical approaches used in classroom settings (Ford 2003, 2011). In light of the research describing the experiences of African American males in gifted programs, it is well established that the pursuit of excellence for those students, who attend urban schools, is often challenged (Lacy 2007; Ogbu 2003). However, there is little data, if any, that closely examines the extent to which African American males are represented in gifted education programs among the nation’s largest school districts. To provide initial data, the next section of this article summarizes the research design and socially, as well as the pedagogical approaches used in classroom settings (Ford 2003, 2011).

Descriptive Statistical Analysis of African American Male Enrollment in Gifted and Talented Programs

Data Source

Data from the US Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) were accessed for this study. The CRDC, a federally mandated reporting system, was designed to obtain school-level data highlighting specific dimensions of school and student characteristics (US Department of Education 2010, 2012). The CRDC information was deemed useful for the present study because it contained student enrollment data partitioned by race and included data highlighting student participation in school-based activities (e.g., gifted and talented programs). Regarding the primary variable of interest for this study, schools were asked to report if they had “students enrolled in gifted/talented programs” (US Department of Education 2010, p. 4). Then, schools were asked to report their student enrollment in gifted and talented programs “on a single day between September 27 and December 31” by race, gender, disability status, and English proficiency status (US Department of Education 2010, p. 4).

Variables

For this study, we reviewed gifted and talented program student enrollment data from the twenty largest school districts that were also examined in a recent report, utilizing CRDC data, produced by the US Department of Education (2012). According to the CRDC variable definitions (US Department of Education 2010), gifted and talented programs are defined as “Programs during regular school hours offered to students because of unusually high academic ability or aptitude or a specialized talent or aptitude” (p. 34). Descriptive statistical data of the racial composition of each school district’s student enrollment and their gifted and talented program enrollment were obtained to examine the representation of African American males in gifted education. As shown in Table 1, for the twenty largest school districts, we examined the African American male enrollment in the school district, the percentage of African American males enrolled in the school district, the number of African American males enrolled in gifted and talented programs, the percentage of African American males in gifted and talented programs among the total population of African American males in the school district, and the percentage of African American males enrolled in gifted and talented programs (which shows the percentage of African American males in gifted and talented programs compared to the total number of students in gifted and talented programs).

Results

Among the twenty school districts analyzed for this study, the average total enrollment in each school district was 257,065 students. The average enrollment in gifted and talented programs in each school district was 21,682 students. Comparatively, the average enrollment of African American males in each school district was 57,392 students. The average enrollment of African American males in gifted and talented programs was 1,622 students. To explore the extent to which African American males were represented in gifted and talented programs, the number of African American males enrolled in gifted and talented programs was compared to the number of African American males enrolled in the school district. As shown in Table 1, of the twenty school districts, only two of the school districts had percentages higher than 10 percent, indicating that, among many of the school districts, a small percentage of the African American males participated in gifted and talented programs. Based on these data, as well as additional data shown in Table 1, African American males are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs among these school districts. Additionally, we reported the percentage of African American males in gifted and talented programs among the number of students enrolled in gifted and talented programs. Of the twenty school districts, African American males comprised 10 percent or more of the
gifted and talented program enrollment in only four school districts. In contrast, in sixteen of the twenty school districts, African American males comprised less than 10 percent of the gifted and talented enrollment. In these twenty school districts, there is ample evidence suggesting that African American males are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs. However, the level of underrepresentation is more extreme in some school districts than others.

Conclusion
The study presented above can be used to initiate important conversations, within and among urban school districts, pertaining to the problem of underrepresentation among African American males as well as signal the need for more research on this topic (Ford et al. 2008; Ford and Whiting 2010; Hargrove and Seay 2011; Whiting 2009). In light of the study’s findings, research and policy questions remain as to the reasons why the gifted education underrepresentation crisis is more pronounced in some school districts than in others. Moreover, future research should investigate why some school districts are more successful than others in identifying and retaining African American males in gifted education programs. This type of research and scholarly analysis will, it is hoped, encourage education practitioners and policymakers to examine issues associated with the recruitment and retention of African American males in gifted education programs in a way that enables more African American males to explore the opportunity to achieve their highest potential.

Summary of Solutions
African American males represent a considerable percentage of the student enrollment in urban school districts; however, they reflect a small percentage of the enrollment in gifted and talented programs. To address and rectify this issue, below are recommendations that urban school districts may consider to increase the representation of African American males in gifted and talented programs.

1. Collect and disaggregate gifted and talented program participation data by race, gender, socio-economic status, grade level, and description of the gifted and talented program.
2. Ensure that selection committees for gifted and talented programs are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse.
3. Develop and utilize a variety of strategies (e.g., portfolio assessments, student transcripts, observational and performance-based assessments, nominations by parents, teachers, and peers) to identify and select African American males for gifted and talented programs.
4. Eliminate any policies and practices that might prevent African American males from participating in gifted and talented programs (e.g., admissions fees, attendance requirements, and parent contracts/agreements).
5. Provide multicultural training to all urban school teachers to ensure that they possess the appropriate multicultural awareness, skills, and knowledge to work with gifted African American males.
6. Ensure that African American males have the opportunity to participate in gifted education by providing financial resources to support gifted and talented programs.
7. Provide multicultural professional development for school counselors so that they are able to positively support and interact with gifted African American male students and their parents.
8. Ensure that gifted and talented programs are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse.
9. Provide professional development opportunities for principals to ensure that they are aware of the issues associated with the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted programs.
10. Encourage university-level collaborative partnerships with faculty and students in principal preparation programs to ensure that future principals are able to support the recruitment and retention of African American males in gifted and talented programs.
11. Encourage university-level collaborative partnerships with faculty and students in teacher preparation programs to ensure that future teachers are being prepared to identify, teach, and nurture gifted and talented characteristics in African American males.
12. Implement parent-training programs in urban schools to help families or legal guardians better understand the benefits of gifted and talented programs.
13. Pursue funding opportunities from the US Department of Education and National Science Foundation to examine issues impacting the recruitment, retention, and educational excellence of African American males in gifted education.
14. Conduct research studies to answer important questions, such as:
   a. How do urban school districts define gifted education?
b. What identification and selection processes do urban school districts utilize with regard to gifted education?

c. What gifted education policies and practices are implemented in urban school districts?

d. What types of resources are allocated to gifted education in urban school districts?

e. What type of gifted education training is provided to teachers, school counselors, principals, and other school personnel?

References


Table 1. Representation of African American Males in Gifted and Talented Programs in the Twenty Largest School Districts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>African American Male Enrollment in the School District</th>
<th>Percentage of African American Male Enrollment in Gifted and Talented Programs</th>
<th>African American Male Enrollment in Gifted and Talented Programs (as a percentage of the total enrollment of African American male students in the school district)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York City Public Schools</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>160,150</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Unified School District</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>39,995</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Public Schools</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>10,310</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dane County Public Schools</td>
<td>WI</td>
<td>36,980</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>2,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark County School District</td>
<td>NV</td>
<td>23,980</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broward County Public Schools</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>51,115</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houston Independent School District</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>27,220</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1,549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillsborough County Public Schools</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>22,710</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehama County Public Schools</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>9,815</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia City School District</td>
<td>PA</td>
<td>13,980</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palm Beach County Public Schools</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>20,665</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange County Public Schools</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>24,705</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davidson County Public Schools</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>22,375</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Independent School District</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>20,500</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery County Public Schools</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>16,064</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wake County Public Schools</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>18,610</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1,025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego Unified School District</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>8,170</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>30,665</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>7,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince George's County Public Schools</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>41,030</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>3,255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davie County Public Schools</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>28,245</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


