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What's in a Zip Code? Underrepresentation Due to Unopened and Rejected Black Gifts

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ABSTRACT

Black students are extensively underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (GATE) and Advanced Placement (AP) classes but disproportionately overrepresented in special education and referrals for disciplinary infractions. The aforementioned issues, tantamount to contemporary miseducation (Woodson, 1933), causes psychological harm and emotional trauma for many Black students given the negative experiences that come with being under-referred, over-referred, and over-policed with harsh and inequitable educational experiences. In this piece, authors interrogate school-based racialized injustices, using the "mail rejected on delivery" and "returned to sender" metaphors. They include recommendations for school to actively engage in anti-racist and equitable practices that demonstrate cultural competence. The aim is that school personnel will shift from the reactive and punitive identification and placement of Black students to advocacy, allyship, and a proactive process of developing and supporting their promise, potential, and possibility.

Keywords: gifted and talented; underrepresentation; Black students; anti-racist education; culturally responsive education

There is a long history of Black students being denied access to education in the United States, as evidenced by the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education (1954). Moreover, this history includes systemic racism that has contributed to the trauma Black people experience (and still continue to experience) that impacts their lives

daily. We can look no further than the killing of George Floyd, redlining in the 20th century, and unequal access to employment and education. Unquestionably, racialized trauma created and perpetuated in schools have haunted Black students. The history of racial segregation and ongoing battles to racially desegregate and integrate schools and programs such as GATE, dual enrollment, and AP classes continue as we write this article. Accelerated college credit initiatives are consist of AP, international baccalaureate (IB), dual credit (i.e., high school students earn college credit), and dual enrollment (i.e., students earn both college and high school credit from a course taken at a college) coursework (Pierson et al., 2017). In various publications spanning 30 and 20 years respectively, the second and last authors (Ford and Moore), recognized as leading scholars in GATE on Black students, have interrogated and exposed the inequitable underrepresentation of Black students in these two programs. Drawing on data from the Office for Civil Rights' /Civil Rights Data Collection (OCR CRDC) (www.ocrdata.ed.gov), we report that each year for which data are provided, Black students are underrepresented by 50% to 70%. These percentages translate to over 400,000 Black students annually having their Black gifts and talents unopened and denied upon delivery. For the 2017-18 school year, Black students were 15.1% of school enrollment. However, they were 7.4% of gifted education. This represents a discrepancy of almost 55%. Their Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment is 10.2%, resulting in almost 35% underrepresentation. To reiterate this disturbing trend, Black students are always the most under-referred and underrepresented in GATE and AP, according to every year reviewed from the OCR CRDC. These data reveal an inequitable pattern that denies the cultivating of the potential, and gifts and talents of these racially different student groups. Thus, their gifts and talents are rejected, and are neither recognized nor opened. To note, the National Association for Gifted Children define giftedness as, "students with gifts and talents perform - or have the capability to perform - at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains" (NAGC, n.d., para 2).

A discussion of GATE and AP racial inequities is incomplete without attention to dual enrollment (DE) and STEM (Fletcher & Hernandez-Gantes, 2021). DE has increasingly become popular due the view it is an initiative enabling student access to postsecondary education, increasing the rigor of the high school curriculum, and strengthening the links between high school and college (Bailey & Karp, 2003; Thomas et al., 2013). Dual enrollment opportunities allow students in high school to earn college credit by taking postsecondary coursework toward high school completion, industry certification, or an associate or baccalaureate degree. The location where the student takes the course varies from a college campus, high school (taught by a high school teacher who also serves as a college adjunct), or online. Funding and requirements for DE varies across the 50 states. For example, Florida (with over 60,000 dual enrollment participants) requires students to achieve a minimum score on a common placement test and have a 3.0 GPA to enroll, and dual enrollment students benefit from free tuition, books, and fees. Karp et al. (2007) found that student participation in dual enrollment in Florida was positively related to graduating from high school, enrolling and persisting in college.

Disturbingly, gaps in postsecondary degree attainment are the widest between high socioeconomic (SES) status students and their low SES counterparts – where high SES students are more likely to attain a degree (Doyle, 2010), as well as among Black and White students. This gap is likely to expand even more as the costs to attend college increases and need-based funding decreases. Thus, dual enrollment opportunities are a critical strategy to raise the postsecondary aspirations and realization for Black students. The benefits of dual enrollment are that it can: (a) help students make the psychological transition from high school to college; (b) demystify the college experience and assist in their understanding of the expectations; (c) increase their confidence in completing college courses; (d) be an inexpensive (in many states, free) way to earn a college degree; and (e) shorten the duration of time needed to earn a degree. In fact, DE initiatives are present in all 50 states (Allen & Dadgar, 2012). Yet, few studies have examined access and equity issues, students' experiences, and outcomes of dual enrollment students from low-income Black students (An, 2013).

In this article, we assert that being under-referred to GATE, DE, and AP, academically under-challenged, rejected and teased by classmates, and falsely accused of cheating by educators (re)traumatizes Black students, many of whom begin to question their brilliance, resulting in underachievement, anger, grappling with racial identity, and developing a dislike of their White teachers and counselors. This frequently ignored trauma created and perpetuated in schools experienced by Black students manifest in their individual and collective isolation, feeling or being positioned as an impostor, racial stereotypes and other forms of racialized bias that are pervasive in White-dominated GATE programs and institutions (e.g., P-12 schools, universities). These experiences create a climate in which the gifts and talents of Black students are rejected upon delivery and are met with a "return to sender" attitude from educators, as discussed next.

Rejected on Delivery - Returned Mail

Furthermore and also troubling, the gifts and talents of Black students (regardless of their zip code) are denied and considered damaged and must be returned to sender (i.e., the parents/ caregivers, communities). In other words, regardless of income and socio-economic status, Blacks are unjustly under-referred by educators (e.g., teachers and school counselors). Corroborating this fact is the research of Grissom and Redding (2016) who matched Black and White students by family characteristics (income, educational credentials) and academic profile, such as grades and test scores. They found, despite this matching, that Black students continue to be under-referred by White teachers; their zip code did not matter in educators' judgments and perceptions. When excuses for under-referrals are removed, deficit thinking by White educators persists.

Aligned with our research, Grissom and Redding's (2016) findings also highlight the dire need for more Black educators. Grissom and Redding also reinforce the finding that Black students were more likely to be referred to GATE when teachers were Black and, thereby, underscoring and reinforcing the need for *more* teachers of color, Black teachers in particular, in courses and programs for

advanced learners. #RepresentationMatters. Data on the demographics of educators in GATE and AP are not available. However, it is safe to report herein that given the shortage of Black teachers and counselors overall at 7% (Condition of Education, 2021, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/sld)), the authors predict that they would be significantly underrepresented as AP and GATE educators. Ford (1999) surveyed teachers of color about why they were *not* assigned to GATE classes. They reported that administrators did not assign them to these classes due to fear of backlash from White educators and families, and their belief that Blacks were not capable of teaching their GATE White children. This assumption is grounded in racism, anti-Blackness, eugenics, and White supremacy, along with cultural incompetence.

While the P-12 student population in urban schools is increasingly diversifying, the teaching and school counseling workforce remains largely White (80%); only 7% are Black (see Figure 1, Condition of Education 2021. The same is true for the lack of representation of Black males within the school counseling ranks (Farinde et al., 2016). Consequently, most Black students are not afforded educational experiences where they can have meaningful student-teacher and student-school counselor relationships with Black professionals in the school (Easton-Brooks, 2019; Goings & Bianco, 2016). According to Brown (2009):

> … African American male teachers…work through uncertainties and employ a variety of beliefs, practices and pedagogies to address the needs of African American male students. And of course, embedded within these practices, beliefs and pedagogies was in-depth understanding of what it means to be 'Black' and 'male.' And yet, even here, both how the teachers approached Black male students and envisioned the model for what these students should and could become was quite different (p. 433).

Brown (2012) further reminds us that the successes of Black male educators in teaching Black male students are not merely because of their gender and ethnic/racial identities. Rather, the successes are related to the pedagogies they employ by using a culturally centered framing.

Increasing the representation of Black professionals in the school counseling ranks is a worthy endeavor and goal. In the majority of U.S. school systems, there is a dearth of Black professionals as role models, which is not to reify the stereotype that Black students do not have Black role models in their homes and communities as evident in the authors' statements of positionality presented above. Our stories are not exceptions to the rule, but a representation of many Black homes and communities. Notwithstanding Black familial support, too often, Black students resign to "operate under a shield of distrust toward whites" (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 40) and are reluctant to engage or open up to non-Blacks or even non-Black school personnel for fear that their gifts and talents will be rendered as invaluable.

Trauma and Social-Emotional Needs and Issues Among Black Students

There are various factors in schools in general and GATE and AP specifically that undermine the social and emotional needs as well as the development of Black students. In other words, these factors (re)traumatize Black students based on a series of recurring events and sets of racialized circumstances that are physically and emotionally harmful resulting in lasting effects on the psyches of this population. First we define trauma according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (2014) definition:

> Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (p. 7).

Next, we discuss examples of such trauma that includes, but is not limited to isolation and alienation, microaggressions, and how these contribute to Black students' unfriendly and hostile learning environments that (re)traumatize them. GATE and AP educators continue to do a disservice to Black students, along with the broken and corrupt educational system and pipeline to higher education. Saleem and colleagues (2022) have noted that many youth of color experience racial stress and trauma in schools that turn into negative school experiences.

Isolation, Alienation, and Trauma

Black students frequently experience isolation and alienation in classes for advanced learners, leading to situations that impact their mental health and ability to perform optimally in class. Moreover, the root causes of isolation and alienation – gifts and talents rebuffed – stem from low and negative teacher expectations, rejection from White peers, and negative pressures from Black peers in their school and neighborhood. We have found that far too many of these students suffer in silence. Collectively, this hinders the recruitment *and* retention of Black students, such as not wanting to participate in GATE and AP because they are exhausted, as depicted next.

Microaggressions, Racial Battle Fatigue, and Trauma

As Ford (2013) and Ford et al. (2013) wrote, microaggressions are prevalent in GATE and AP settings. They impede the retention of Black students in these classes and programs. Sue et al. 's (2017) conceptual framework delineates various types of microaggressions. Borrowing from their model, we describe how microaggressions affect minoritized students, GATE students in particular. Three are particularly germane herein: the ascription of intelligence; position as a second-class citizen; and the ascription of criminology.

Black GATE students experience subtle forms of microaggression, such as being told they are articulate. This 'compliment' is an insult. Marshall (2020) corroborates our point that Black people are frequently ranked and sorted using

manufactured arguments about intelligence based on their ability to perform whiteness in their style of communication and/or 'talking White.' Insulting Black students based on the way they communicate is not just an indicator of low expectations expressed by culturally incompetent teachers but a denial of and devaluing of the connection between language, race, and identity. To complicate matters, school-induced trauma is intensified by being over-policed.

Over-Policing of Black Bodies and Trauma

GATE Black students are not exempt from facing racial microaggressions, such as assumption of criminality (Sue et al., 2007). Like Black students in general, when GATE Black students are unidentified, disengaged, and unmotivated, they tend to act out, and have a high probability of being referred for disciplinary action – suspension or expulsion as early as preschool. They, too, are over-policed very early in their schooling experience (Upchurch, 1997; Wright, 2020).

Schools with resource officers tend to be in schools where the student population is majority Black (National Prevention Science Coalition, 2021). Further, Black students are more often than not arrested, charged, and enter the court system (NCPS, 2021). According to the NCPS, Black students make up 15% of the nationwide P-12 student population, but constitute 31% of all referrals to law enforcement and 36% of all school-based arrests (Fulks et al., 2020). Conversely, White students constitute 49% of the nationwide P-12 population, but only account for 37% of referrals to law enforcement and 33% of all school-based arrests (Fulks et al., p.1).

Strikingly, fourteen million students attend schools where there is not a counselor and where school resource officers are considered a necessity and priority (ACLU, n.d.). This trend is notwithstanding, schools with mental health staff tend to have positive school outcomes for students (ACLU; Hines et al., 2021). Given this reality, state education agencies and local school districts must prioritize supporting the academic and social-emotional development of Black students rather than criminalizing them. Social and emotional support and encouragement from teachers do influence the academic achievement of Black students (Brooms, 2016; Hines et al.; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Moreover, training in cultural competency and cultural responsiveness is needed to encourage allyship toward healthy interactions of police with Black students in which their humanity is central to how these resource officers engage with them in and outside of school. Next, we give more attention to motivational issues whereby gifts and talents in black packages are unraveled.

Motivational Issues and Underachievement, and Trauma

The seminal research of Ford (1991, 1996) serves as a vanguard in the field of gifted and talented Black students who underachieve. According to Ford (2010), underachievement results when Black students are disengaged due to curriculum irrelevance and under-challenged, and when dealing with negative socio-emotional issues, as described in the previous sections. When students exert little or no effort on assignments, a discrepancy between their potential and performance results

(Ford & Moore, 2013). Noteworthy is that very young Black student (grades P-3), especially boys, also disengage and become unmotivated if they do not see themselves reflected in curriculum and books (Wright et al., 2020, 2022) and if the curriculum is whitewashed, 'culture blind, ' and culturally assaultive.

Psychological Needs and Challenges, and Trauma

Earlier, we addressed GATE Black students relative to teaching, learning, and schooling and the external influences such as systemic and structural inequalities and their impact on this population. In this section, we return to the socio-emotional needs and academic development of Black students in GATE followed by recommendations for school personnel. We begin with a discussion of racial identity development (RID), a fundamental aspect of development among minoritized people. We contend that attention to socio-emotionality without a focus on self, racial and cultural identities is insufficient for Black students.

Self-identity – racial identity and cultural identity – answers the question "Who am I?," "What am I?," "What is my purpose?" Who we are, distinguishes us from everyone else in the world? Children learn about themselves and construct their own self-identity in the context of their families and communities, and schools (Wright et al., 2022). Awareness that their culture comes from their family, Black and other minoritized children begin to see themselves as members of a group that distinguishes them from others. As children experience *enculturation* (also referred to as socialization), which refers to learning cultural norms and behaviors for the first time, and *acculturation*, which refers to the learning that occurs when people from different cultures come in contact with one another, they begin "to understand that they are a member of a family, an ethnic culture, a classroom, and a religion, and a citizen of a town, state, and country" (York, 2016, p. 33).

This process of self-identity, cultural and racial identity development is influenced by numerous familial, social, and cultural factors. Racial identity in particular among Black children is conceptualized, and generally assessed, as racial awareness, attitudes, preferences, and socialization (Swanson, Cunningham, Youngblood II, & Spencer, 2008). Black families have an extra burden of helping their children to survive and thrive physically, emotionally, and psychologically in an environment that is anti-Black; and otherwise culturally insensitive and assaultive. As we experience (directly and/or indirectly) a resurgence of heightened racialized violence in schools and society, finding ways to care for the mind, body, and souls of Black children through radical care and love is vital when consideration is given to schools/classrooms where there is a concerted effort to murder the spirits of Black children (Love, 2020). This is particularly the case for Black students who often get the message that school is a place where they are watched, not welcomed (Wright, 2019). This makes them less likely to be actively involved in acquiring academic knowledge, skills, socializing with other children, and interacting with teachers and counselors. As a result, far too many GATE Black students are denied genuine opportunities to achieve at high levels because of an unwelcoming and culturally assaultive classroom climate that contributes to

inequity and negative assumptions based on race and gender. This can, indeed, traumatize them.

We have emphasized the critical need for all educators to receive training to understand and support positive racial identity development - racial pride – among Black students (e.g., Ford, 2007; Wright, 2019). Teachers do not have to be counselors to support Black students. It is incumbent upon counselors and psychologists to be *formally* prepared in theories of racial identity development, such as Cross and Vandiver (2001) for Black people.

The Need for a Culturally Relevant Curriculum

The second author has created the only model for infusing authentic and rigorous multicultural content into the GATE curriculum (Ford, 2011; Ford & Harris, 1999). Seldom does the GATE curriculum have multicultural content, especially at Banks' (2018) highest two levels - transformation and social action. The transformation approach/level is characterized by: (a) multicultural content infusion in all subject areas throughout the school year; (b) multiple perspectives discussed; and (c) opposing perspectives discussed. Undergirding these three components is the *intentional* focus on promoting and supporting critical thinking about *all* topics and issues taught. Students are taught and given opportunities to understand the experiences of and empathize with marginalized individuals and groups. Relatedly, myths and stereotypes about Blacks and other minoritized populations are debunked. In our work (Wright, Ford & Moore, 2022), we use the transformational and social action approaches to instill positive racial and cultural identity/ pride, foster agency and feelings of empowerment through multicultural children's literature that features Black boys as the protagonist.

The highest level is the social action (social justice) approach. Black students engage in problem solving related to their school, classroom, neighborhood, and community, which includes opposing racial injustices. Recognizing the need for and power of an education that is rigorous and relevant, Ford created the Bloom-Banks Matrix which combines the four levels of Banks model with the six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). It consists of 24 cells that fit into four quadrants. The fourth quadrant is high on the transformation and social action levels, and high on analysis, evaluation, and creativity. We believe that critical thinking, along with empowerment and meaningful cultural and social problem solving (quadrant 4) can help decrease trauma, in its myriad forms, among Black students in GATE, AP, and other advanced and accelerated courses and programs (e.g., dual enrollment, college and career academies). The aforementioned barriers are prohibited when educators are prepared to work with students who are GATE *and* Black.

RECCOMENDATIONS

Despite efforts to make curriculum *anti-biased* (Derman-Sparks, 1989, 2008; York, 2016), *anti-racist* (Kendi, 2019), *culturally relevant* (Gay, 2010), *culturally responsive* (Ladson-Billings, 2009), *culturally sustaining* (Paris & Alim, 2017), and *multicultural* (Banks, 2018; Ramsey, 2015) whiteness and white ideologies continue

to pervade the ways schools plan curriculum, deliver instruction, and manage (or mismanage) the multicultural and multiethnic classroom climate (Wright, 2021). Allyship is often missing. We endorse Banks' philosophy that multicultural education is characterized by content integration, knowledge construction, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. We emphasize that education cannot be anti-racist, equity-based, and culturally competent unless professionals working with students characterize the aforementioned values and beliefs.

We argue herein that educators' lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to infuse the curriculum with readings, activities, and assignments that challenge students of color - Black GATE students in particular - in positive and affirming ways. Therefore, they can (re)traumatize these students. Because of this reality, a large and growing body of research has demonstrated the need for teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be culturally responsive, anti-racist (Allport, 1954; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010), and practice inclusivity among *all* students (Banks et al., 2005). Banks et al. explain:

> Teachers' attitudes and expectations, as well as their knowledge of how to incorporate the cultures, experiences, and needs of their students into their teaching, significantly influences what students learn and the quality of their learning opportunities (p. 243).

Therefore, it is essential that education professionals have a vast array of culturally responsive, relevant and sustaining teaching and counseling strategies to meet the needs of P-12 students' individual and varying experiences and learning needs.

Ladson-Billings (1995, 2009) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally relevant pedagogy has three elements: (a) the need for all students to experience academic success; (b) the need for teachers to be culturally competent; and (c) the need for teachers to build their own cultural consciousness by confronting the status quo in society. First, to capitalize on the strengths of their students, educators must assess the knowledge and beliefs students bring to classrooms, understand how they learn, and (re)construct new learning experiences to support their achievement and their cultural and personal identities. Further, teachers and counselors must harness a socio-cultural and allyship consciousness that includes, but is not limited to: (a) respect for their learners and their ways of knowing and being; (b) adapting instructional practices based on student's needs; and (c) a dedication to promoting the academic achievement, promise, potential, and possibilities of their students. Teachers with an equitable, anti-racist, sociocultural consciousness understand their lived experiences are not universal, but are shaped by their unique experiences and demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, economic class, gender, sexual orientation, geographic region).

Educators need to be reflective, culturally competent, and anti-racist practitioners who critically examine their cultural assumptions, philosophies, and ideologies and how these beliefs influence the learning expectations of and

relationships with Black students. Equally important is how these factors guide and inform assessment, curriculum and instruction. Culturally relevant educators ''form and maintain connections with their students within their social contexts'' (Banks et al., 2005, p. 245). The outcomes of culturally relevant, responsive and sustaining teaching are classrooms that foster academically challenging environments and curricula, which are responsive to minoritized learners.

We argue here and elsewhere that the recruitment of Black school personnel to work in schools will improve the academic outcomes of students in general, Black students who are in GATE in particular. Research (e.g., Foster, 1998) on Black educators documents that these educators are able to develop deep, caring relationships with Black students as they understand the challenges as well as share cultural practices and artifacts to make the educational process responsive and relevant.

CONCLUSION

Related to cultural matching, Black school stakeholders serve as positive role models for their students, motivate their learners to attain higher academic achievement, broaden Black students' postsecondary aspirations, and affirm their students' cultural identities and practices. School counselors are the frontlines to address the traumatic experience Black students encounter in school. It is imperative that school counselors use their counseling skills, knowledge, and awareness of the issues to address the needs of Black students and to speak out against traumatic experiences such as racism, low teacher expectations, and intentional exclusion of Black students from GATE, AP, Honors, and other courses and offerings for advanced learners. They are trained in addressing mental health issues and cultural competency to accept the mail on delivery rather than reject it.

Notwithstanding the dire and non-negotiable need for *all* of education to be equitable, anti-racist, and culturally responsive, it cannot be understated that White educators in *every* capacity (e.g., counselors, teachers, administrators) alone cannot provide all that Black students require, want, and *deserve* during their 13 years of formal education. With projections that educator diversity is not likely to change soon, schools must identify, recruit, and hire more Black school personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers, school counselors, specialists, school psychologists, etc.) to inspire and center Black students' possibilities in general education, special education, GATE, AP, and DE. School administrators will need to critically examine the design, creation, and implementation of innovative and robust recruitment and retention programs practices as well as strategies to address trauma (e.g., race) grounded in race, diversity, equity, and inclusion. School districts must incorporate strategies to address mental and health and wellness as well as adopt or create their own recruitment and retention programs to improve the outcomes of Black students in GATE.

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