Black Father Involvement in Gifted Education

Thoughts From Black Fathers on Increasing/Improving Black Father–Gifted Teacher Partnerships

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Abstract: Black fathers are important advocates in addressing the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs, as well as the achievement gaps between Black and White students. Black fathers increasingly understand the important role that Black mothers have traditionally played in supporting their gifted children's school experiences. As a result, many are learning to value and embrace their fatherly role in nurturing their child's academic potential by establishing and cultivating relationships with gifted education teachers. Improving Black father and gifted education teacher partnerships requires examining assumptions about Black father involvement and acknowledging the shift in Black family images inspired by President Obama and the First [Black] Family. What are stereotypical views of Black men that undermine their motivation to become involved with schools or that hinder teachers' desire to work with Black men? What resources and support exist for gifted education teachers to engage Black fathers in the education of their children? In this article, the authors address these questions and related issues. Furthermore, they also share personal and professional insights to encourage teachers to understand and initiate Black father involvement through the lens of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility.

Keywords: Black fathers, parent involvement, parent-teacher relationships, Black parents, fatherhood, gifted Black students, Black men, underrepresentation, Black students

While mothers have traditionally been the primary family representative handling school matters, increasingly more fathers are stepping up and wanting to be involved with the educational side of children's lives at home and school (Castillo & Fenzl-Grossman, 2010; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005). Father involvement in schooling decreases a child's likelihood of academic failure, behavior and psychological problems, and economic despair in adulthood (Barton & Coley, 2009). Because of the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted programs and the achievement gaps between Black and Whites males and females (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008), it is critical that teachers also focus on Black fathers and how they can be involved as advocates for their gifted children.

At the 2009 National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) conference, we had the opportunity to reflect on Black fatherhood and Black father involvement in the lives of gifted Black students in the age of Obama. We are fathers of gifted Black children, and we discussed the challenges and triumphs of fathering and how having a Black president and an African American First Family may be impacting Black families and Black men, in particular. While we do not believe that Barack Obama's presidency suddenly makes Black fathers want to become more involved in their children's schooling, as fathers with young children, we identify with Obama on an important level because he wants to be involved with his young children's educational lives. While we believe that Black fathers have always wanted to be involved in schooling their children (Coles & Green, 2010; Mcdoo, 2007), President Obama's national advocacy for father involvement has influenced our personal views and self-expectations as Black fathers and families. The NAGC session was therapeutic, inspiring, and transformative. From the discussions with our audience members, we realize that President Obama as a husband and a father also inspires many teachers. They want insights into the parenting lives of Black fathers and recommendations to promote improved relationships with teachers and, accordingly, greater involvement. Thus, this article's purpose is to raise awareness of the importance of Black father involvement and to encourage gifted teachers to...
be proactive in their efforts to build partnerships with Black fathers.

**Perspectives From Two Black Fathers**

We have gifted sons who experience similar challenges in school, yet our fathering experiences and issues are quite unique. We briefly share some of the thinking that accompanied the NAGC session and the preparation of this article to hopefully affirm your belief that Black fathers are involved, want to be involved, and view educators as important persons in the lives of our gifted children. We have high expectations for our gifted children and want educators to conscientiously include us and other Black fathers in their children's educational experiences.

**Tarek’s Personal Story**

I parent my gifted son, Wade, with my wife, and together, we are consistently involved with his schooling experiences. However, as I reflect on our individual parent involvement, I acknowledge that Wade’s mom is the primary parent involved in our son's educational experiences at school and at home. Even though I am an educator and faculty member in the field of gifted education, when it comes to my own children, my level of leadership and involvement in their education follows a similar pattern in most families, where dads have or take a backseat to moms. Now with 7 years parenting under my belt, I challenge myself to understand the dynamics surrounding father involvement in schooling of children, specifically examining my own involvement in my son's education and to conscientiously become more involved. Because my father was very rarely involved in my schooling as a not-in-the-home parent, I have a deep-seated desire and need to be involved in my gifted son's schooling. I want to know and work with his teachers and peers, as well as after-school personnel, extracurricular sponsors, and the like. Because I address equity issues in my professional work, I feel compelled to consider equity in parent involvement with gifted students, and specifically father involvement, due to the important role parents play in helping gifted children reach their full potential. Starting in my own household, I ask myself, “How are Wade’s mom and dad involved in his educational experiences?” There may be natural maternal connections that my wife, as a first-time mom, has with Wade, her first-born, that contribute to unequal attention that he receives. Now after our third child, mastering educational parenting tasks at home and school trumps those early ties, requiring both of us to be as fully engaged as we can, with my striving to make our parent involvement more equitable. I recognize that while I have enjoyed the privileges that Wade’s strong mother involvement affords him and me, I cannot take a backseat or take for granted the roles she assumes to be involved in our children's education at home and school. My wife has a job just like I do. She has to manage a schedule with personal and professional commitments, just like I do. She has 24 hours in a day, just like I do. As a father, I am taking steps to become more involved in my gifted son’s education as vigorously as I would advocate in my professional work for you to support the needs of gifted Black children or other underrepresented groups of gifted children. Teachers of the gifted cannot afford to let me or other dads off the involvement hook. There is too much time-consuming work to be done, including a serious amount of rigorous homework to challenge gifted children, a myriad of in-school and after-school enrichment activities to cultivate their interests, and many wonderful opportunities to celebrate their accomplishments. I and other Black dads, and dads in general, need to be more involved, and teachers are key in helping to make that happen.

**Malik’s Personal Story**

My issues as a father are unique in that I do not live in the same home as my son, Mason. This circumstance is, unfortunately, quite common in the African American community. In fact, I do not live in the same city as Mason, which further complicates my ability to build a relationship with his teachers. As a father to a 7-year-old son with an advanced reading level, it is quite a challenge to understand his needs as a gifted student and try to meet them from hundreds of miles away. I am determined to be involved in his education no matter how far we live from one another; the distance between Mason and I does, however, shape how I can reasonably define involvement. For instance, it is a fairly common expectation for parents to be present at Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. Although this is not an unusual expectation, in my circumstance, attending these meetings can be quite difficult and, in most instances, impossible. The impact of not attending these meetings, while seemingly mundane on the surface, may be quite detrimental to my son's education.

As an African American male, I am keenly aware of the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of African American males in the media. Moreover, I am also cognizant of the fact that these images are consumed by many individuals, including educators, who may not have alternative images to offset such negativity. Missing a PTA meeting may very well serve to support negative images of African American males' lack of involvement in their child’s education and may be reflected in how my son's teachers interact with him inside and outside the classroom. In other words, if my son’s teachers do not believe he is fully supported by his parents, they may be unwilling to challenge him academically and suggest rigorous programs and courses beyond those offered in his school. Fortunately, the aforementioned negative experiences have not been the case for me, as I have been involved with his school whenever I come into town to visit my son and through e-mail on a regular basis. For those African American fathers who are unaware of the power of perceptions, both negative and positive, their child may suffer from low teacher expectations, which can lead to underachievement and unrealized academic potential.
**Understanding Assumptions About Black Father Involvement**

We realize from our own school experiences when we were young and our own experiences as former public school educators and now parents of gifted Black children in schools that Black fathers and teachers of the gifted have different views about fathers’ roles in schooling children and different desires and needs for Black father involvement. Many views stem from trends in the 1980s and research that called attention to realities of more working mothers, more single-parent households, and the consequences of absent fathers. Traditionally, while mothers still carry a heavy load with childrearing, everyone would agree that it is important for Black fathers to be involved with their children’s Pre-K–16 educational experiences. Gifted education teachers may focus too heavily on negative portrayals of Black fathers that may cause them to internalize stereotypical negative expectations of Black fathers.

A study by Gary, Beatty, and Weaver (1987) evaluated a Head Start program in Washington, D.C., that focused on improving Black fathers’ involvement in their children’s education. As part of this evaluation, educators were surveyed to determine their perceptions of the reasons for low or lower Black father participation in Head Start activities. The top three responses expressed by educators were these: Fathers feel no need to be involved, father is absent in the home, and fathers believe their children are primarily the mother’s responsibility. In the same evaluation, fathers’ perceptions of Black fathers’ low involvement were also surveyed. Their top three responses were these: Head Start is mostly female, activities are mostly female related, and activities are at inconvenient times for fathers. As discussed in the following, these findings help us to understand the thorny, two-pronged issue of Black father involvement in gifted education from the perspective of gifted education teachers and Black fathers.

**Gifted Teachers’ Assumptions About Black Father Involvement**

Among many gifted education teachers, like the teachers in Gary et al.’s 1987 study, a prevailing negative assumption may exist that Black fathers do not care about their children’s education (Foster, 1995). If so, then these beliefs may be based on these observations: Black fathers have less of a presence in school than Black mothers (Glenn & Whitehead, 2009), a majority of Black children are reared in single-mother households (Horn, 2007), and the media perpetuates negative images of Black males and Black fathers as negligent, incompetent, unembracable, uneducated, or criminal (Harris, 1992; Rome, 2004). While these observations may be realities for some Black men, gifted education teachers need to understand that this reality is not true for all Black men and must not shortchange themselves or gifted Black students. As President Obama models for all Americans, a new day is here in that whether married or single, professional, working class, or unemployed, Black fathers are demonstrating their love for children by attending more to education. Stated another way, the Obama presidency calls for and presents a new national image of Black fatherhood (Bosman & Falcone, 2008). Many Black men and boys want new father-son images and embrace the possibility of Cosby-like families (Berry, 1992). Many Black fathers are accepting responsibility and desiring to be involved in their gifted children’s lives and do not want to be labeled as dead-beat dads. We are striving to be up-beat dads and to live our lives as two positive examples of Black fathering.

**Another Viewpoint: Black Fathers’ Assumptions About Black Father Involvement**

Gifted teachers must understand that stereotypical assumptions of gender norms and pragmatic views of parent involvement held by Black fathers can be a deterrent to their involvement. The teaching force in gifted education is predominantly White and female (Howard, 2006), particularly at the early childhood and elementary levels. Roughly 25% of teachers are males and only 1% of them are Black (Planty et al., 2009). Because of the overwhelmingly White and female teacher presence in gifted education classrooms, Black fathers may believe mothers are better at relating to female gifted education teachers given their shared gender status. Furthermore, Black fathers may assume that White female gifted teachers are more comfortable talking to a female as opposed to a Black male (Gary et al., 1987). If Black fathers hold these assumptions and misunderstandings, then it follows that they are less inclined than Black mothers to be as involved with the gifted program activities or experiences.

It is essential that gifted education teachers realize that the 1980s view of Black fatherhood is changing. In our experience with and observations of Black fathers, more are involved in school activities than in recent decades and in ways that may not be evident to others. While Black fathers may not regularly engage in traditional forms of gifted parental involvement (e.g., volunteering to compile summer reading lists for gifted students, organizing fundraisers for science competitions, coordinating field trips to museums, sponsoring mini-enrichment courses), many manage to make time to attend their children’s sporting events, parent-teacher conferences, and school assemblies. More specifically, traditional forms of parent involvement (e.g., field trips to the museum, bakery sales, auctions, Monday morning story time, candy sales, or Valentine’s Day card exchanges) may be viewed as designed by women for women. Since the number of female gifted education teachers is so high and the level of mothers’ involvement is relatively high in comparison to fathers’ in every racial group, Black fathers may feel out of sorts and/or emasculated by attending female-dominated gifted program activities or school events.
In addition to assumptions based on stereotypical female roles, Black fathers may have also internalized a traditional provider role. Historically, Black fathers have been socialized to believe they must provide for their families, which according to Lamb (2000), “breadwinning became the most important and defining characteristic of fatherhood—the criterion by which ‘good fathers’ were appraised” (p. 27). Black fathers may assume that their sole role is that of provider for their families, thus prioritizing work-related activities. Involvement with gifted program activities, then, creates challenges to fulfilling the provider role. With these issues and considerations in mind, we offer the following recommendations for gifted education teachers to work with Black fathers and become co-advocates for gifted students.

Recommendations for Changing Assumptions for a Change in Times

Gifted education teachers must not be bound by the past nor by old assumptions they hold about Black fathers. They must understand that now, more than any other time in our history of schooling gifted Black students, they have an opportunity to enhance the Black father–gifted teacher partnership. They must be proactive and initiate efforts to clearly convey that they do believe that Black fathers care about their gifted children and want to be involved. It is also important that they accept the reality that Black fathers may perceive that their involvement may be out of place in a predominantly White and female setting.

Lamb (2000) offered an important way to think about parent involvement in terms of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. We offer a few concrete recommendations on how gifted teachers can facilitate Black father–gifted education teacher partnership.

Engagement. In this type of parent involvement, Black fathers spend protracted one-on-one interactive time with their children. Gifted education teachers can assist in cultivating networks of Black fathers who can work together to build interactions among an extended family of gifted Black children. For example, teachers can set aside designated times (daily, weekly, or monthly) for Black fathers to read stories with their children or help with learning activities during school hours or at home. Many gifted education teachers can schedule time for Black fathers to come in and facilitate mini-courses, serve as guest presenters on a specific topic or career, or host a site visit at their place of employment. Whether working in a pullout-, cluster-, or resource teacher–type model, teachers can strategically plan for and invite Black fathers to be directly involved with their gifted children.

Accessibility. These types of parental interactions with a child are less intense than those associated with engagement. Rather than direct interaction with the child, Black fathers are merely in proximity or available to the child. For example, gifted education teachers can encourage Black fathers to volunteer during regular or special program activities (e.g., enrichment center materials coordinator, accelerated reader rewards organizer, or website reviewer)—even in areas outside the classroom and in the school building. School building involvement could take the form of helping with minor repairs (e.g., labeling cubbies or lockers, painting props for a special occasion, hanging posters, fixing furniture, etc.) or assisting in less traditional male roles that are more academically or school oriented (e.g., library helper, main office assistant, tutor, PTA leader, or before-school car-rider car-door-opener to assist children getting in and out of cars safely and efficiently). Traditional and nontraditional male roles inside and outside of the gifted classroom should be considered and introduced to Black fathers. Black fathers who are accessible to their gifted children are better than Black fathers who are not involved at all. The main point is that teachers work with Black fathers to encourage them to break out of the parental gender role separation that exists in gifted programs and school.

Responsibility. This type of parent involvement is associated with the degree to which parents take responsibility for their child’s basic needs. Much of the time spent on these tasks does not involve direct interaction with the gifted child. By sharing information with Black fathers on resources (e.g., books, articles, websites, organizations, mentors), programs (e.g., weekend and summer accelerated experiences for gifted students), and enrichment activities (e.g., engineering camps, publication outlets for youth, performing arts auditions) in the community that can benefit their children, gifted education teachers encourage them to take more responsibility.

Professional Organizational Affiliations to Support Black Father–Gifted Teacher Partnerships

Teachers in gifted programs can promote engagement, accessibility, and responsibility in their quest to build Black father–gifted education teacher partnerships by tapping resources from these father advocacy agencies:

1. The National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI; visit http://www.fatherhood.org) provides a plethora of father resources intended to appeal to the specific needs of males. School assessment materials are available that can assist gifted education teachers in examining the level of father friendliness with their classroom. Curricular materials are available that can be shared with Black fathers and school or community leaders to assist them in convening a Black father support group. The NFI Fatherhood e-mail listserver can be joined to offer tips for Black fathers to address their children’s educational needs.

2. The National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL; http://www.npclstrongfamilies.com/) sponsors an Annual International Fatherhood Conference. Gifted education teachers could work with the school administration to sponsor Black father attendance at the NPCL conference in
return for leadership in promoting Black father involvement with children in the gifted program.

3. The National Association for Gifted Children Parent and Community Network (http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1445) can provide Black fathers with the critical information and tools to convey the importance of gifted education to other Black fathers, families, and organizations within the Black community. Grantham, Frasier, Roberts, and Bridges (2005) suggested that at a minimum, training of Black fathers as advocate for gifted children should include: awareness of underrepresentation among gifted Black students, recognizing patterns of underachievement among gifted Black students, and understanding core attributes of giftedness and their manifestation in gifted Black students. Gifted education teachers can encourage involvement at NAGC to enable Black fathers to be better equipped to support the gifted programming efforts back at school.

4. The National Center for Fathering (NCF; http://www.fathers.com/) offers fathers a wealth of research related to fathers and fathering. In addition, they provide trainings through seminars, small groups, and train-the-trainer programs that can be implemented in local communities. Furthermore, the website provides a number of different resources for different familial configurations. For instance, there is useful information for married fathers, as well as divorced, step-, adoptive, and grandfathers.

5. The Real Dads Network (RDN; http://www.realdadsnetwork.com/) offers Black fathers the opportunity to participate in a number of events aimed at supporting Black children such as a Daddy Daughter Dances and Scholarship Award Fundraisers. In addition, RDN sponsors events aimed at building a community of Black fathers who are interested in supporting their children and are concerned with their children’s overall well-being.

Final Thoughts

While there is a substantive amount of information focused on increasing parental involvement in and advocacy for gifted programs (see e.g., Delisle, 2006; Walker, 2002), there is very limited literature devoted to increasing Black fathers’ participation to address the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education. Part of this is due to the fact that besides President Obama, very rarely do we see gifted Black males, in general, and Black fathers, specifically, portrayed in a positive light in American society. Gifted education teachers must understand how internalized stereotypes may influence Black father involvement and how focusing on engagement, accessibility, and responsibility can make a positive difference. In this article, we encourage gifted education teachers to challenge negative assumptions they may hold toward Black fathers and take concrete steps to initiate strong Black father–gifted education teacher partnerships. By doing so, gifted Black students, our sons included, stand to benefit from the many advantages associated with having positive Black fathers who can be an integral part of gifted education programs and be valued by everyone for the substantial contributions they bring to the school as a whole.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

References


Bios

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