

EMPOWERING UNDERREPRESENTED GIFTED STUDENTS

Perspectives
from the Field

Edited by
Joy Lawson Davis, Ed.D.,
and Deb Douglas, M.S.

PRAISE FOR EMPOWERING UNDERREPRESENTED GIFTED STUDENTS

“As a child, I was told and understood that there was something different about me. I was a little Black girl growing up in a military town in North Carolina with a vocal presence who asked tons of questions about almost everything. Once I was identified as gifted at a young age with a number of my Black friends, I gained more confidence in expressing my academic talents. Little did I know that I was much more fortunate than most Black and Brown children who demonstrate their advanced academic abilities, but never receive the support they need to flourish. Now, as the parent to a beautiful, Black, gifted daughter, thirty years since my time participating in gifted programs, we are still fighting the same social justice battles in gifted education. Not much has changed and we have to do better! *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* was written to change the tide and help educators support children who are historically underidentified for gifted programs reach their full academic potential.”

—Shawna L. Young, former executive director of Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP) and executive director of Scratch Foundation

“The diversity of our gifted population cannot and must not continue to be ignored. Our gifted students come from a variety of backgrounds and social identities that make who they are, and as such they have unique needs. Advocating for these students and helping them grow into their own powers of self-advocacy is the goal of *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students*. This book is a must-have for families, educators, and counselors who fight daily to ensure that these students are recognized for who they are and for the value of the stories that they bring to our classrooms. We can no longer sit on the sidelines as these students go unrecognized for their academic and social-emotional needs. We must do better; we can do better. This book is an important step on that journey.”

—C. Matthew Fugate, Ph. D., assistant chair, urban education, and assistant professor, educational psychology at University of Houston Downtown, and coeditor of *Culturally Responsive Teaching in Gifted Education*

“Editors Dr. Joy Lawson Davis and Deb Douglas have brought together some of the greatest minds in the field of gifted education to help us empower underrepresented gifted students to advocate for educational justice. Each chapter is rich with the voices of students in their quest toward self-advocacy for equity, access, and excellence. The authors present the most current research and share strategies and techniques educators can use to make their gifted programs more inclusive and diverse. This text is a must-read for every educator!”

—Richard M. Cash, Ed.D., educator, author, and consultant, nRich Educational Consulting, Inc.

“In *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students*, Davis and Douglas have assembled an impressive array of diverse voices to discuss the urgent issue of representation and equity in gifted education. These expert contributors explore the change still needed, consider the challenges and opportunities ahead, and share their own stories of bright students whose talents went unrecognized for too long—and ultimately offer educators the tools and inspiration for empowering historically marginalized students to speak up for themselves and attain the visibility, respect, and education they deserve. I love their emphasis on the importance of self-advocacy. This is a truly timely and important book.”

—Scott Barry Kaufman, Ph.D., cognitive scientist, author, podcaster, editor of *Twice Exceptional*

“This book highlights the importance of empowering minoritized students to use the skills of self-advocacy while also pointing out the systemic and structuralized racism that oppresses students into needing these skills in the first place, just to obtain their very basic rights to an education. The layout of the chapters is ideal for professional learning, whether self-directed or in group settings. Of note, the vignettes help the reader to learn from multiple perspectives, and each chapter has questions that can serve as personal reflection questions or guided group discussion. Teachers, counselors, and administrators seeking to be change agents will find this text illuminating.”

—Angela M. Novak, Ph.D., Diversity and Equity Committee co-chair and Rural SIG founding coordinator, NAGC; Board of Directors, membership coordinator, CEC-TAG; and co-editor, Best Practices in Professional Learning Series

“Every so often, a book comes along that presents fresh perspectives and understandings, reveals hard truths and facts, and offers clear and direct guidance for a wide audience seeking to enact change. *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* is that book, taking the reader on a journey of the lived experiences of underrepresented and underserved gifted and talented students while simultaneously recommending tools, strategies, and ideas for educators. An absolute must for any personal or professional library!”

—Jeff Danielian, teacher resource specialist, NAGC, and editor-in-chief, *Teaching for High Potential*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the countless numbers of gifted students from communities across America who go unnoticed and underestimated each day. Our hope is that this book will give them an opportunity to have a voice in their education and the resources needed so that their dreams are no longer deferred.

—Joy & Deb

Acknowledgments

As co-editors, we acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Tarek Grantham, whose foreword aptly captures the themes in this important book; all expert contributors; and our Free Spirit editors—Meg, Cassie, and Alison. We will forever be grateful for your dedication to our vision.

—Joy & Deb



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Foreword

Tarek C. Grantham, Ph.D.

Too often, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and other education professionals have limited authentic and useful tools to understand and support the needs of gifted and advanced students from underrepresented and underserved populations who are trying to identify and access resources and opportunities to achieve their dreams. I appreciate the opportunity to share this foreword with you because I know your reading this book will be time well spent. I applaud and celebrate the editors and authors of *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* for answering the call to increase the body of literature on and advocacy for special populations of underrepresented and underserved students. My hope is that your engagement with the content and recommendations in this book will decrease inequities and barriers in gifted and talented education (GATE) and inspire greater levels of advocacy, self-advocacy, and success for all students with gifts and talents, regardless of their cultures, languages, backgrounds, or experiences that may differ from those of the majority of students enrolled in gifted and advanced programs.

Two important perspectives guided my reading and thinking about this book and its contribution. First, as a professor at the University of Georgia in the Department of Educational Psychology, Gifted and Creative Education Program, I reflected on educator preparation programming and professional development in schools. Second, as a father of children identified for gifted education services, I considered ways in which parents and caregivers may connect with self-advocacy and the book's content. Through these perspectives, I aim to offer a view of how the book is organized and to identify some of the highlights you can expect from it. The organization of this book offers an essential framework and guide for you to:

- › empathize with the lived experiences of students with gifts and talents whose accomplishments and goals are often thwarted by institutional and systemic barriers that keep them trapped in patterns of underachievement and in debilitating feelings of inferiority, disengagement, and hopelessness
- › understand self-advocacy and why it is important for underrepresented and underserved students to develop self-advocacy knowledge and skills
- › navigate a GATE system not historically designed for culturally, linguistically, or economically disadvantaged students to fully know about or benefit from their rights to an appropriate, challenging, and meaningful education that empowers them to reach their full potential (Ford et al. 2018)
- › evaluate and apply gifted education models, culturally responsive strategies, and equity-oriented tools to empower students to be proactive in their advocacy efforts with their caregivers or allies and to pursue pathways in the direction of their dreams

As a university professor with over twenty years of experience in higher education, teaching courses in educational psychology focused on preparing researchers, teachers, counselors, administrators, and other professionals in gifted and creative education, I am always searching for high-quality resources to support my instruction and work on equity and excellence in gifted education. It is important to identify resources that are grounded by equity-oriented scholars and professionals who have authentic experiences and success with the groups they advocate for or represent. Often, research reports, books, and literature professing to support the needs of underrepresented populations and groups are produced by well-intentioned but noncredible individuals. This is not the case with the chapters in this volume. *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* is an important resource that can be used in the instruction of

undergraduate and graduate students and in professional development associated with GATE programs. In addition, it can be a useful supplemental text in teacher/educator preparation programs and in professional learning communities, where case studies of and strategies for gifted and talented learners from underrepresented groups can be examined and applied to school- and community-based field experiences and training.

All university and college professionals in educator preparation programs and all professional development specialists in state and local agencies are governed by national standards and professional principles. For example, the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) are leading associations that provide guidance for gifted and talented education. A recent standard-bearer for the design of gifted education services is NAGC's *Pre-K to Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards* (NAGC 2019). The self-advocacy focus of *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* directly aligns with many of the NAGC standards for student outcomes shown in **figure 0.1**. Instructors and professional development specialists for GATE preparation programs build their instruction using the NAGC standards and can use this book as part of the foundation of their programs.

FIGURE 0.1 Sample of Student Outcomes from NAGC Standards Embedded in *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students*

NAGC STUDENT OUTCOMES	DESCRIPTION
Personal competence	Students with gifts and talents demonstrate growth in personal competence and dispositions for exceptional academic and creative productivity. These include self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, resilience, independence, curiosity, and risk-taking.
Responsibility and leadership	Students with gifts and talents demonstrate personal and social responsibility.
Self-understanding	Students with gifts and talents recognize their interests, strengths, and needs in cognitive, creative, social, emotional, and psychological areas. Students with gifts and talents demonstrate understanding of how they learn and recognize the influences of their identities, cultures, beliefs, traditions, and values on their learning and behavior.
Awareness of needs	Students identify and access supplemental, out-of-school resources that support the development of their gifts and talents (families, mentors, experts, or programs).
Cognitive growth and career development	Students with gifts and talents identify future career goals that match their interests and strengths. Students determine resources needed to meet those goals (supplemental educational opportunities, mentors, financial support).
Equity and inclusion	All students with gifts and talents are able to develop their abilities as a result of educators who are committed to removing barriers to access and creating inclusive gifted education communities.
Ethics	All students with gifts and talents, including those who may be twice-exceptional, who are English language learners, or who come from underrepresented populations, receive equal opportunities to be identified and served in high-quality gifted programming as a result of educators who are guided by ethical practices.

continued >

FIGURE 0.1 Sample of Student Outcomes from NAGC Standards Embedded in *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* (continued)

NAGC STUDENT OUTCOMES	DESCRIPTION
Cultural competence	Students with gifts and talents value their own and others' languages, heritages, and circumstances. They possess skills in communicating, teaming, and collaborating with diverse individuals and across diverse groups. They use positive strategies to address social issues including discrimination and stereotyping.
Communication competence	Students with gifts and talents develop competence in interpersonal and technical communication skills. They demonstrate advanced oral and written skills and creative expression. They display fluency with technologies that support effective communication and are competent consumers of media and technology.

Used with permission. National Association for Gifted Children. 2019. *Pre-K to Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards*. nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/national-standards-gifted-and-talented-education/pre-k-grade-12.

As a father of children who are identified for gifted education services and as a member of several formal and informal parent and family networks for gifted and advanced students from underrepresented groups, I find *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* to be a great tool for network or advocacy group leaders to engage parents and families of culturally diverse students. Davis and Douglas's well-selected contributors speak to issues faced by parents and families in some of the most adversely impacted special populations of students in GATE. The student stories in each chapter are engaging and poignantly unpacked by leading scholars and professionals who have consistently done the work for equity in gifted and advanced programs. I applaud the authors for their careful and intentional analysis of the experiences of some remarkable students and of the barriers these young people have had to confront.

Parents and caregivers of gifted children or GATE advocates who represent young people with gifts and talents will find the stories of Black, Hispanic, American Indians and Alaska Natives, LGBTQ+, low-income, and other special populations of students and their parents compelling. They will also ponder important questions and recommendations posed by chapter authors and be invited to empathize and take action. Regardless of their own background or connection to the special populations featured, parents, caregivers, and GATE advocates who strive for equity will have an opportunity to connect with the contexts and experiences of students within and outside their own group. For example, as an underachieving creatively gifted Black male, I identified with the disciplinary concerns raised by Lucas's teachers and parents that are presented by the authors

in chapter 6. I also recalled how my experiences and some of my friends' backgrounds were connected to Sam, his single mom, and their grandparenting challenges in chapter 7. Written with credibility and passion, *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* will guide and ground you and other educators in your individual and collective efforts to empower gifted and advanced students to self-advocate.

Written with credibility and passion, *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* will guide and ground you and other educators in your individual and collective efforts to empower gifted and advanced students to self-advocate.

I commend the editors and authors of *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students*, and I would like readers to know how grateful I am for the invitation to contribute a foreword to this important book. It is an honor to offer a preview and perspective to help guide you on your journey into a work that has been crafted to support the personal and professional trek toward equity for advanced students in gifted and talented education. This unique volume will surely become an important resource to help prepare advanced learners from underrepresented and underserved groups and their families to effectively self-advocate with confidence and intentionality.

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Ford, Donna Y., Kenneth T. Dickson, Joy Lawson Davis, Michelle Trotman Scott, and Tarek C. Grantham. 2018. "A Culturally Responsive Equity-Based Bill of Rights for Gifted Students of Color." *Gifted Child Today* 41 (3): 125–129.

National Association for Gifted Children. 2019. *Pre-K to Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards*. nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/national-standards-gifted-and-talented-education/pre-k-grade-12.



Introduction

Joy Lawson Davis, Ed.D.

Harlem

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes, one of America's greatest bards, shared his poem "Harlem" at a time when the United States was recovering from its participation in World War II, a battle in which it was seen as one of the victors. But although the war was over, the nation was in turmoil regarding the equal rights of all its citizens. "Harlem" was Hughes's examination of the conditions of his life as an African American in a racially unjust society, with the American dream out of reach for so many. It was 1951, and for most African Americans, the dream of prosperity, fair housing, access to healthcare, and equal education was unfulfilled. "Harlem" was considered one of the most influential poems of its time. It was a call for a better understanding of the barriers, inequities, and challenges faced by so many Americans who deserved conditions that would allow them to accomplish their dreams. It shares what potential outcomes may result when others don't believe in those dreams or fail to help in accomplishing them.

Here we are so many decades later, and conditions are much the same. This poem was selected as a foundation for *Empowering Underrepresented Gifted Students* to help readers understand the critical importance of the role of all stakeholders providing support for gifted learners from underserved groups to help them in the fulfillment of their dreams. It is our belief that with the consistent and steady support of parents and educators, and through the self-advocacy of students themselves, more of them will be able to accomplish the goals they set to achieve their dreams.

Current research and practice have demonstrated that gifted learners come from a variety of racial, cultural, income, gender, and geographic backgrounds and may also be neurodivergent. However, the US federal definition of giftedness does not specifically address the unique psychosocial needs of gifted students from these diverse backgrounds. This definition, which appears on the next page, focuses heavily on the academic needs of the majority of identified gifted students, who are typically White and affluent:

"Harlem [2]" from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, associate editor, copyright © 1994 by the Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (US Department of Education 2004)

For over half a century, the field of gifted education has worked to develop, research, and advocate for appropriate instruction and support systems for our nation's students with high performance and ability across multiple domains. Sometimes these students have been labeled as genius, profoundly gifted, exceptional learners, or high-ability learners as compared to their same-age peers. Regardless of the label used, one very contentious issue has yet to be sufficiently addressed: the systemic underrepresentation of gifted students from racially diverse groups, of those who originate from low-income environments, and of those who may differ from the majority in gender identity, sexual orientation, other exceptional conditions, and language. Collectively, the aforementioned groups are known as "special populations." As underserved gifted learners, they struggle daily to have their exemplary strengths valued and developed in school settings that are often ill-equipped to support their unique needs and where, sadly, they sometimes even seem to be

invisible. As school programs for gifted students continuously overlook these populations, these students' gifts and talents continue to be underdeveloped and their future potential to become productive and innovative members of society continues to be destroyed, their dreams deferred.

Attempts to address the needs of underserved gifted students have typically been focused on how students are identified for programs and how educators are trained to work with gifted learners (Davis 2019; Ford 2014; Grissom and Redding 2016). Seldom has the conversation about improving education and support services for underserved gifted learners turned to asking students

As school programs for gifted students continuously overlook these populations, these students' gifts and talents continue to be underdeveloped and their future potential to become productive and innovative members of society continues to be destroyed, their dreams deferred.

themselves what they believe they need. The importance of listening to the voices of students has historically been understated. Only recently have scholars begun to focus attention on the power of student voice (Douglas 2018; Simmons 2020). In the past several years, more attention and conversation have focused on the need to teach gifted students to self-advocate, to tell us what their own needs are (Douglas 2018).

Student self-advocacy has the potential to bring the needs of underserved gifted students to the attention of advocates, administrators, policymakers, and practitioners. Hearing about students' lived experiences being gifted, underserved, and overlooked can have a more powerful effect on educators than hearing only from researchers and other adult advocates. Teaching students to self-advocate enables them not only to be a voice for themselves, but also to empower other students to speak up and ask for what they need from education to be able to realize their dreams.

About This Book and Its Definition of Self-Advocacy

To frame our conversations in this book around the self-advocacy of underserved and underrepresented gifted students, we developed a new and expanded definition of self-advocacy specifically for the gifted students who are also part of one or more special populations:

Self-advocacy is the dynamic process that enables high-potential students to claim their right to an education that addresses their unique intellectual, academic, psychosocial, and cultural needs without endangering their self-esteem or that of others. It is a compilation of culturally responsive and inclusive empowerment strategies that open opportunities for positive academic and life outcomes previously precluded for some students due to stereotyping, systemic biases, and limited access to resources.

This definition urges all stakeholders to action, prompting them to engage in creating and supporting dynamic and inclusive strategies that can lead to typically underserved students having their dreams fulfilled rather than nullified or deferred. It sets educators on a new course of action that centers equity-based conversations and program development in student voice. Gifted students are typically the most socially cognizant and sensitive of our student populations. It is our expectation that among this group are those who will, with some guidance, share with educators, parents, and policymakers their specific intellectual, academic, and social and emotional needs.

This book contains chapters that describe our expanded view of self-advocacy and has chapters written by students and expert scholars who specialize in addressing equity in our nation's gifted and advanced learner programs. Chapter one shares the stories of a group of secondary-level students from a specialized school for gifted students in Florida. These students formed an organization to advocate for the need to increase the number of culturally and racially diverse students at their school. Their self-advocacy convinced the school administration to host a forum to discuss the issue of equity so that they could share their stories and discuss why they believed more students like themselves should be able to attend a school like theirs. Other chapters in this book provide descriptions of specific groups of underserved gifted students whose academic and social and emotional needs have not been met in their schools. The expert authors share student vignettes, rooting each chapter in the voices of those we're serving.* At the close of each chapter, authors present key concepts and questions that readers can use to guide their own reading or discussion of the book (whether independently or with a PLC or book study group) and their pursuit of increased equity in their school gifted and talented program. One chapter is devoted to the voices of parents of diverse learners and provides advice to strengthen their advocacy skills.

Intersectionality: Navigating Multiple Worlds

The special populations of gifted students included in this book are also those students whose lived experiences are very often characterized by challenges with converging identities and multiple worlds. These challenges can be framed by the concept of intersectionality. The term *intersectionality* was coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the overlap of social identities that contribute to the complexity of oppression and discrimination individuals face based on their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, or other social constructs. Crenshaw suggests that these unique social identities cannot be examined separately from each other, but only when consideration is given to the impact of the lived condition in each. Earlier, in 1903, Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois articulated his converging experience as a highly gifted Black man in a segregated society as “double-consciousness.” Du Bois described navigating between these two worlds as his constant state of “two-ness”:

*Throughout the book, the authors have used the terms *African American* and *Black* as well as *Latina*, *Latino*, and *Hispanic*. These terms are used interchangeably and varied authors have taken the liberty of using the terminology best suited to their work.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903, 3)

Crenshaw's description of intersectionality is an even broader view of Du Bois's double-consciousness. She posits that multiple identities create a more complex sense of self that is constantly impacted by social oppression.

Although the chapters in this book are separated by specific identities, readers must understand the complexity of the intersectional status of gifted special population groups. For example, consider the gifted low-income Black teen who lives in a rural community where many students may not be encouraged to pursue education beyond high school. His intersectional status impacts his life daily and should be considered as resources are made available to increase his self-advocacy. Or consider the twice-exceptional learner whose gender identity poses challenges in the social atmosphere of their school and community. Being twice-exceptional has its own unique traits and must be clearly understood for the student to become a strong self-advocate. Thus, educators and parents who are teaching this student self-advocacy need background knowledge of her disability, giftedness, and gender identity. Native American students with high potential who attend underresourced schools are at a particular disadvantage, as are gifted STEM students from culturally diverse backgrounds who typically have less access to high-level science, technology, engineering, and math courses than students from affluent White backgrounds do. It is recommended that readers, as they review each chapter, keep in mind the intersectional status of the students discussed, as well as that of students at their own school.

For too long, stereotypical beliefs have led many educators to presume that special populations lack the intellectual strengths that White and affluent students possess. Underserved gifted students have very likely encountered bias and even neglect in their education; and beyond missed opportunities, real harm has been experienced. The impact and oppression of racism and discrimination in school and community settings need to be considered when seeking to understand who students are and how they respond to schooling. Listed below are some of the realities and identities experienced by students discussed in this book:

- › Socioeconomic status
- › Language
- › Race and/or culture
- › Twice-exceptionality
- › LGBTQ+
- › Gifted/talented

How to Use This Book

We have intentionally organized the book to provide, up front, a foreword and introduction to help readers understand why self-advocacy for underrepresented student populations is important. We highly recommend that readers begin with those two sections and then read how diverse students respond to the need for self-advocacy in chapter one. After that, we welcome you to read the book in any order that works for you.

Each chapter presents one or more student stories that portray the lived experiences of particular gifted students and their experiences with self-advocacy. Also included in each chapter are recommended strategies and key questions educators may use to target the needs of their students. We urge readers to review and utilize strategies that reflect all of the potentially intersecting identities of their particular student groups.

It is our belief that students' multiple, intersecting voices are the key to securing the attention they so desperately need and deserve in school programs for gifted learners. We believe that arming special populations of gifted students with self-advocacy strategies will move all of us closer to ensuring equity, access, and excellence in GATE and AP programs and empowering these remarkable students to fulfill their dreams.

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Student Voices: The Power of Self-Advocacy

Vinay Konuru, President of the DIGS Taskforce, Pine View School for the Gifted and Talented, and Members of DIGS

In early 2019, I received an email invitation to speak at a town hall hosted by the Pine View School for the Gifted in Osprey, Florida. The Pine View School is one of the nation's premier secondary schools for gifted learners. The invitation was initiated by student Vinay Konuru, the leader of a diverse group of Pine View students who were actively working with the school on issues of diversity. The group, named Diversifying and Integrating Gifted Schools (DIGS), was created to draw attention to the need for Pine View to recruit and retain more students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The topic of the town hall was "How can we increase minority representation in gifted programs?"

Vinay also shared with me that he was reading my book *Bright, Talented, & Black: A Guide for Families of African American Gifted Learners* and believed that my message aligned well with the group's purpose. Within a few months, the school's principal, Dr. Stephen Covert, reached out to me with a formal invitation to serve as a keynote speaker at the Pine View School Town Hall/Equity Symposium. At the symposium, I met Vinay and the other members of DIGS and listened as they shared their stories. I was so moved by their testimonies that I believed we should share them in our book as an example of students self-advocating to address an issue of concern to them. I believe, too, that educators will benefit from hearing these students' views, as they represent some of the populations addressed in this book. In this chapter, members of DIGS share the story of their group and their own journeys toward self-advocacy.

—Dr. Joy Lawson Davis

Diversifying and Integrating Gifted Schools: A Student-Led Initiative

Diversifying and Integrating Gifted Schools (DIGS) is a student-led initiative from Pine View School, a second- through twelfth-grade gifted magnet school in Osprey, Florida. For the last several years, our members have aimed to bring attention to—and resolve—the lack of diversity on our campus. Through numerous trials and errors, we have learned lessons about how to effectively voice our beliefs as students. Though we are still learning every day, we hope that sharing our stories and advice will help other students in their journeys to self-advocate and become leaders.

Our Stories

Vinay Konuru, Grade 12

I started DIGS in my freshman year with the strong support of our principal, Dr. Covert, who is passionate and dedicated to eventually fixing the issue of underrepresentation of minority students at our school. I began working on this project in eighth grade. Of the two thousand students at Pine View, fewer than 1 percent are Black, even though our surrounding community has a student population that is nearly 20 percent Black. This has been a problem at my school since it was founded fifty years ago, and a similar divide exists in nearly every gifted program in our community. However, the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is so deeply rooted in our culture that it is simply accepted as a fact. The opportunity gap is detrimental to every group: the students who do not receive the education they deserve, the White students in schools for the gifted who lose out on the opportunity to learn in a more diverse community, and our communities that lose potential transformational leaders, inspiring authors, and game-changing scientists. As members of DIGS share their stories, I hope you find a story you can relate to and recognize that advocacy does not belong to any one race, group, or culture. Successful advocacy requires the combined voices of everyone. It has been difficult, but I truly believe that the work my friends and I initiated at DIGS has set the stage for real change in our community.

Kaila S., Grade 12

Ever since kindergarten, I've been the only Black student in my grade. I took advanced classes at a predominantly White school, and after being tested and identified as gifted, I began to attend an International Baccalaureate (IB) school. Shortly after, I moved to Sarasota, Florida, and attended an elementary school known for its diversity. However, I was put into the gifted SPARK class and, once again, I was the only Black student.

When I came to Pine View in the third grade, it did not take long to notice that I was the only Black student in my grade, again. While this was not new to me, I realized that, unlike in my previous schools, there were no other Black students for many grades above me at Pine View.

I'm now in twelfth grade, and I remain the only Black student in my class. Even with this prominent lack of diversity, Pine View does not show much discrimination toward its people of color. However, I am still faced with identity issues that no one around me can relate to. Honestly, before two summers ago, I barely had any close Black friends. I felt as if no one could understand my love for R&B and old-school hip hop or the many troubles I had with my hair, my body, and family traditions. Until I went to a historically Black summer camp in Massachusetts, I had no idea that there were other people who shared my experiences. I finally felt like I belonged.

I thought, I don't ever want any other Black girl to have to go through the same thing I did just to feel whole.

Over the years, I have noticed a steady increase in Black and Hispanic students at Pine View in the grades below me. Although I believe our school could be more diverse, I also believe it is taking the right steps toward improving its acceptance of diversity.

Diego P., Grade 12

When I was nine years old, my parents felt that it was in our family's best interest to leave our native country of Mexico. I was forced to leave behind everything I knew to seek a better future in an alien territory by the name of "Texas." A few years later, I was moving again. This time, it was from Dallas, Texas, to

Sarasota, Florida. As a new sixth-grade student with significantly better English than when I first entered the country, I did not struggle as much as I had in Texas to make new friends at my new middle school. Still, my parents suggested the unthinkable: moving schools.

I had heard of Pine View School from friends, and the stories that I heard terrified me. They had impossible tests, scary teachers, snobby kids filled with self-interest, and endless amounts of homework. My parents scheduled an appointment to have my IQ tested, and it put me into a serious internal conflict. I could either take the IQ test and probably pass (I had previously been identified as gifted), or I could purposefully fail and not have to worry about the stories I had heard. Why would I intentionally make my life more difficult if I simply did not have to?

Then it hit me. I realized that maximizing my academic opportunities was unarguably in my best interest. High school is supposed to be a time of growth and maturity, and holding myself back from opportunities to grow and mature seemed irresponsible. I made the decision to try the hardest I possibly could on that IQ test and, thankfully, I met the admission criteria for Pine View. Although it was tough to adjust to a new school, a new level of rigor, and a brand-new set of people, things eventually fell into place.

Making the decision to push myself to my academic limits has not been easy, but I do not recall ever being told that life is supposed to be easy. Gifted education has benefited me in ways I never thought possible and has provided me an environment in which students grow, learn, and mature together.

Andrea C., Grade 12

I was born in a city called Barranquilla on the Atlantic coast of Colombia. When I was twelve, my parents told me that we were making a very big move—to the United States. Despite it being sudden, I accepted the move pretty quickly. I had always dreamed of traveling to America. And since I had spent a lot of time on the internet, I spoke English fluently. When we got to Florida, I was enrolled in a public school in Nokomis. I had little difficulty adjusting academically and was weirdly automatically enrolled in an ELS (English Language School) class despite not needing it.

Academically, it was not challenging for me to receive perfect grades in classes. My history teacher recognized that I would do better in a more advanced curriculum and recommended me for gifted testing. Initially, I did not score high enough, but later, once my success in school continued, I got tested again and met the criteria for admission. So, by the end of my first year in the United States, I had been admitted to Pine View School. I am thankful to the teacher who recognized my capabilities because I know many other gifted students are not as fortunate. If there was anything that made my transition possible, I think it was the devotion I had to my classes and to learning. It might have been what made me stand out.

Cara K., Grade 12

I was fifteen when I moved to Sarasota, Florida, and began attending Pine View. Not only did I struggle with a new experience of gifted education, but I was also dealing with being diagnosed with dyscalculia, a math disorder similar in effect to dyslexia. I frequently mixed up numbers, struggled to count change, and took longer to process mathematical information. Consequently, my sophomore year, and my first year at Pine View School, consisted of late-night math practice and homework that took me far longer to complete than it took any of my peers. And frankly, I had moments when I thought that there was no place for somebody like me in gifted education. Thankfully, I had teachers, friends, parents, and a school system that cared.

At past schools, I struggled to find ways I could learn outside of the classroom. Gifted education has given me the opportunity to find those unique, unconventional ways to process information. My grades in math improved, and I now take accelerated math courses. I have learned that being gifted does not mean that you do not struggle in language arts, math, science, or another subject. However, it does mean understanding that you struggle, and tackling your problems head-on.

I believe that it is vital that the teaching staff at a school know the backgrounds of gifted students such as myself. It is vital to have teachers invested in students' upbringings, their stories, and their struggles.

Christiana G., Grade 12

I've been a student at Pine View since second grade, which means I've been here for most of my life. I've always been cognizant of the lack of diversity in the school. But what I did not realize until recently was the impact this lack of diversity had on Pine View itself. This summer I had the chance to attend a summer program focused on diversity and inclusion, and the culture there starkly contrasted with what I had experienced at Pine View. It was an overall refreshing experience. Many of the students there also attended predominantly White schools, and my experience in the program made me realize how much diverse students miss out on.

The lack of diversity at Pine View is reflected in various ways, both obvious and more subtle. There's the obvious lack of physical diversity, which is evident upon entering campus or in viewing photos, but there are also the more out-of-sight effects. For instance, even though Pine View is generally inclusive, there's still a level of ignorance in the culture that is reflected in cultural appropriation and the stigmatization of diverse students. Creating a more understanding student body is so important in improving diversity, and diversity is vital to any student's experience.

Aidan C., Grade 11

After I completed eighth grade, my parents enrolled me at Pine View School in Sarasota. I was eligible to go since I had met the requirement with an IQ test when I was in sixth grade. Initially, the only people I met at Pine View were the people I talked to in my classes. The only time I got to meet students outside of my grade level was at soccer club. Yet soccer club had a large base of members, and I struggled to know people beyond their first names.

In my sophomore year, I was sitting in class when my teacher, Mr. Schweig, said that a club named DIGS was going to present to our class. The presentation was about the imbalance in racial demographics at Pine View and the importance of solving this issue. Though I had never been negatively impacted by this issue, I realized that the imbalance largely impacts underrepresented demographics of students through their opportunities and interactions within gifted education. After the presentation, the leader of the club, Vinay Konuru, asked those who were interested in joining the club to write down their email addresses. I was the first sophomore in the club. Vinay gave me more information at the end of the meeting about the club's plans to set up a town hall meeting to share ideas for fixing the racial imbalance at Pine View.

This year, I got to be a part of the presentation process in Mr. Schweig's room. This time, I was the older student presenting information about DIGS to incoming sophomores. Overall, DIGS has been an awesome experience. I have met new friends who are passionate about making a necessary but difficult change that, if done, will leave a legacy on both Pine View School and gifted education for many years to come.

Gabe M., Grade 12

I was born in the heart of New York to parents who never went to college. Statistics would tell you that I would not go to college either. A Hispanic born in that area? Statistics would tell you that I would live my whole life in Brooklyn too. But many times, statistics are wrong. I now live in Sarasota, Florida, and attend Pine View School, the greatest opportunity I have ever received. Hear me out and you'll begin to understand why there is a need for gifted education in my life and in the lives of all gifted students.

The reason gifted education is so important in my life is very simple. I was too smart to stay at the level I was being taught at. Now I don't say that to brag; it's simply true. In the fourth grade, I would get a perfect score on the pretest before we even started learning the subject. It was obvious that I needed more. When I came to Pine View, I finally gained the right amount of rigor and competition I needed to succeed. But that's not all I got at Pine View. I also found a community, a family. I found other people who were in the same boat I was in. They may not have looked like me or acted like me, but they thought like me. This is what I needed, and it has led me to achieve a higher degree of success in academics than anywhere else I've been.

My life has completely been turned for the better. I am no longer simply a Dominican boy from New York. I am a committed, challenged, hardworking student ready to make the world a better place. I hope all the gifted students in my area and in the world can have the same opportunity regardless of their background or color so that together we can change the course of history.

Steps for Advocacy

Through our experience in this work, the DIGS team formulated four steps that we feel can encourage any student to begin advocating for their beliefs. It is important to note that these steps should be regarded as general guidelines. Every situation is unique. Even so, with this plan we hope to give student leaders a base from which to build their own projects and initiatives.

1. Research
2. Find and build a team
3. Build a base of awareness
4. Implement practical ideas

Step 1. Research

Learn the facts and history behind the problem that you hope to tackle.

Before DIGS was created, a serious amount of work was put into learning the facts and history behind the lack of diversity in our district's gifted programs. This began with finding and comparing accurate data on the demographics of both our school and the surrounding district. We then dug deeper by researching the underlying causes that contributed to this problem in the first place.

When we first began this work, there was no clear path to address the issue. The prominent lack of African American students at Pine View was already well known, but there was no obvious place on campus where we could openly address the topic.

It started as a debate in speech class about the critical importance of this issue. But without any research to back up our claims that Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented at Pine View, our

points were based on nothing more than feelings and impressions. This experience affirmed our conviction of the importance of building a solid base of evidence to effectively back up claims in any advocacy work.

The next several months were some of the most critical. We spent this time gathering demographic data, interviewing retired and active administrators, and reading reports from other school districts

One cannot consider how to bring more diversity to gifted education without first exploring what economic, cultural, geographical, and historical issues restrict certain groups from accessing these resources.

that faced similar issues. Our conversations and research debunked many of the beliefs and assumptions we'd held regarding this topic. We didn't yet have answers to solve the problem at hand, but our eyes were opened to an entirely new perspective on it. We began to understand the sheer complexity of the opportunity gap and the intricate-yet-delicate system surrounding it. This process of reshaping ideas on an issue is where the power of thorough research lies.

We initially only saw the diversity problem at Pine View in a very two-dimensional sense. We thought that the source of the problem was purely the demographic numbers on a page. It was not until we spoke with our assistant superintendent, Dr. Kingsley, that we realized how many layers there really are to the issue. One cannot consider how to bring more diversity to gifted education without first exploring what economic, cultural, geographical, and historical issues restrict certain groups from accessing these resources.

By gaining a wider understanding of the problem, we could now provide more compelling reasons for its importance and have a focused direction to channel our efforts. We realized that our district's lack of representation could be simplified into two core problems.

First, to be identified as gifted in the state of Florida requires a student to score 130 or above on an IQ test. Initially, in recognition of a divide in scores between low-income and high-income students, there was a policy created to lower the cutoff score to 120 points for low-income students. However, this did not grossly change the lack of representation in gifted programs like Pine View. We learned that the fundamental issue lay in the requirement of a teacher recommendation for a student to even take an IQ test. With fewer students of color being offered the opportunity to take IQ tests, coupled with a lack of access to private psychologists (who often administer the tests and are paid for independently by parents), the number of identified students from these groups is bound to be significantly lower.

Second, the snowballing nature of this issue only makes the situation worse. For example, with so few African Americans on our campus, new African American students often feel out of place. With not many people to relate to and not many who look like them, these students tend to leave for an environment where they feel more comfortable. With growing cultural divides between already separated communities, the lack of integration within our gifted schools and programs only deepens.

Identifying and recognizing these two major contributors to the issue has allowed DIGS to push for change that we believe will make a real impact. Our research, however, has never really stopped, and it never should. The body of information on which we base our work is constantly evolving, and, therefore, so should our understanding of it. We continue to learn about new developments in this field, which lead to fresh ideas that we could bring to light and advocate for. Keeping ourselves informed and up-to-date with relevant discussions has been vital to having our own voices be heard and taken seriously.

We cannot stress enough the importance of research being a key element of advocacy. To have your efforts be a powerful contributor to change, it is essential that your words be informed and your ideas be relevant. By thoroughly researching a topic and continuing to expand and reshape your understanding of it, the message you send will ring much louder and the effects will be much greater.

Step 2. Find and Build a Team

The force of a team is exponentially more powerful than a single voice.

One of the most challenging aspects of student advocacy can be finding someone who is willing to listen. Although having the necessary research and evidence to back your points can help, support may still be an uphill battle. By gathering a group of voices, both student and adult, with an equal commitment to the same idea, your message will strike with greater force. It may take time and persistence, but finding a committed team will be invaluable to your journey of advocacy. This is exactly how we started DIGS.

When DIGS began, the first thing we had to do was find teachers who were willing to sponsor our work. This took several months, but the long wait would prove to be worth it. Up to that point, we had already spoken with many faculty members about this issue to learn more about its history. We wanted to learn if there was a group already working on a similar project within the school because we recognized that joining an existing effort would be more productive than creating a new one. In this search, we were able to learn more about past attempts to target this issue at our school, one of which had occurred only eight years earlier. Although this initiative had not lasted, we reached out to the faculty that had spearheaded it: Mrs. Steele and Mr. Schweig. Both of them were extremely receptive to our goals and ideas and, ever since the day we came to them with this project, they have been extremely generous with their time, knowledge, and advice. We cannot thank them enough for all the help they have given us.

The next step we took was building a stronger student membership. We knew that keeping the group small in its early stages would be necessary because of the sensitive nature of the work, but we also needed a dedicated team that would be large enough to make an impact. By presenting to several students in classrooms, clubs, and around campus, we found a group of members who were excited about the work and passionate about making a change.

Our principal, Dr. Covert, recognized the potential of our team early on and offered to work with us in targeting the issue. Over the last three years, he has encouraged our drive and has been highly supportive of our ideas. Mr. James, a local activist and Pine View alumnus who was introduced to us by Mr. Schweig, has also been a strong supporter of our work. He has given us advice and guidance amid difficult decisions. These adults, along with the core student members, have been essential to the success of DIGS.

By building a team of passionate student advocates and utilizing the guidance and knowledge of adult supporters, your group will be equipped for success. However, patience and persistence are necessary in this process. Seek out others who care as much as you do about whatever you are advocating for. Look for ongoing projects at your school and join them. Approach everyone you can and learn what has been done before and who did it. All of this may take months of hard work, but by bringing together group members that all stand behind the same idea, you amplify the voice of each person involved.

Step 3. Build a Base of Awareness

Awareness is not change in itself, but rather is the prerequisite to change.

When DIGS first began, one of the biggest hurdles we faced was getting the necessary support for the initiatives we attempted to introduce. Although we had support from the adults who sponsored our effort, the majority of people we met had never even recognized this issue. Almost every discussion we had began at square one: attempting to illustrate the importance and urgency of fixing the underrepresentation of diverse students at our school. Many times, if we were not able to secure a meeting with some important official, it would mean that a project we had planned would not happen. The whole

process often felt like pushing a boulder up a steep hill. We realized that if this pattern continued, we would be left with burnt-out spirits and wasted efforts—the exact thing that ended every other initiative on this topic before ours.

In time, we began to recognize the importance of momentum in any type of advocacy. We needed people to know what the problem was and why a solution was so critical. We needed to start a conversation about why there was a lack of low-income students of color in our gifted programs and what we could do to fix it. We needed more people to be aware and to care about the situation. With that, the issue itself would become the fuel necessary for people to find and drive its solution.

In order to build this base of awareness, we began to organize a town hall workshop and discussion. We invited alumni of Pine View, local principals of other gifted programs, current Pine View students, and district administrators to speak about this issue, with a keynote address given by Dr. Joy Lawson Davis. We invited teachers and community members from across our county to attend. Organizing this event was a huge logistical challenge, but the effects it had were powerful. The stories our speakers shared made the audience emotional. They illustrated how this issue has split our school district across racial and socioeconomic lines and the difficult experiences many students have faced as a consequence.

Although this town hall did not directly solve the issue of underrepresentation, it made a difference by increasing the relevance of the issue to more people's lives. Most issues that advocacy targets cannot be solved overnight, but by giving people a reason to care and talk about it, you can keep the conversation alive. When working on your own student advocacy efforts, keep in mind the importance of building and maintaining a strong base of awareness, because when the conversation ends, so does the solution.

Step 4. Implement Practical Ideas

Use the resources you've gathered to implement developed ideas.

This final step is the culmination of all the hard work that took place in the previous three steps. Based on the research you've gathered, with the guidance from your supporters and the momentum you've built, you can effectively implement ideas that have real impact. Of course, this is not an exact formula. Many times, you may start advocating for ideas much earlier on, but following the previous steps will help your team implement projects or programs with fewer obstacles.

Currently, DIGS is working on a few different avenues for tackling the opportunity gap in gifted education in our area. One of these avenues has been advocating for the implementation of a universal screening program to replace teacher recommendations in the gifted identification process. There has been a pilot program for second graders in Title I schools for the last two years, and it has proven to significantly increase the number of identified low-income students of color. The solutions your team will come up with will be a result of the work you've done up to this point. But each idea you intend to implement must still be thoroughly planned, discussed, and thought out.

We hope these steps can be helpful in guiding your students on their journeys of self-advocacy. Because they are largely based on our own experiences, the challenges you face may be different. Nevertheless, these steps can give you a solid base from which you can launch your work.

Educators Listening to Gifted Student Voices

It is extremely important for educators to listen to the voices of gifted learners. Oftentimes, we feel a strong sense of purpose in improving situations for the benefit of those around us. However, it can be difficult to pursue our passions in the face of adversity, or even worse, apathy, from those whom we learn

from and respect. When educators discount the thoughts and opinions of students, it not only discourages our involvement in advocacy efforts in the future, but it also may be a lost opportunity for the school. As students, we understand the problems we deal with on a daily basis. By listening and taking student voices into account, educators gain an invaluable perspective that allows them to make better and more informed decisions.

Key Concepts

- › It is critical that programs and schools for gifted learners recruit and retain more students and staff from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- › Diversity is vital to every student's experience.
- › Creating a student body that is more knowledgeable about gifted programming is important to improving diversity.
- › By sharing their personal stories, students play an important role in increasing awareness of the problems caused by lack of diversity.
- › Successful advocacy on issues of diversity requires the combined voices of everyone.
- › Four steps can help increase the effectiveness of student advocacy:
 1. Research
 2. Find and build a team
 3. Build a base of awareness
 4. Implement practical ideas

Discussion Questions

1. Does the diversity in your gifted program accurately reflect the diversity in your community?
2. Which populations in your community might be underserved and/or underrepresented by your gifted program?
3. Which students in your program might have feelings similar to those of the Pine View students?
4. How can you encourage students from underserved populations to share their stories with you and other decision-makers?