Inside and Outside Gifted Education Programming: Hidden Challenges for African American Students

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study used Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework to examine the meaning, context, and process by which 12 African American students in gifted education programs formulated perceptions of their experiences in those programs. The following themes emerged from the semistructured, biographical questionnaires and individual interviews: (a) critical issues facing gifted African American students; (b) ways that the students navigate the perils of gifted education; and (c) the benefits of gifted education. These themes highlight the salience of race inside and outside gifted education programs. The research findings also provide practical applications for teachers, principals, school counselors, and parents.

In popular and scientific literature, researchers have documented the academic shortcomings of African Americans in K to 12 settings (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005a, 2005b; Rothstein, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In these educational settings, African American students trail their White and Latina/o peers in participation in gifted programs (Ford & Moore, 2004, 2005; Jackson & Moore; Moore, 2003). African American students are frequently missing from or underrepresented in accelerated academic programs. Even when African American students meet the minimum academic qualifications and obtain strong teacher and school counselor referrals, many choose not to participate in advanced, accelerated, or gifted education programs (Ford, 1996; Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Moore et al., 2005a). For example, in 2000, fewer 12th-grade Black students took Advanced Placement (AP) examinations than their White or Hispanic counterparts. In 2003, fewer eighth-grade African American students took algebra courses than their
White and Latina/o peers. In addition, in 2003, fewer 11th- and 12th-grade African American students took AP courses than White or Latina/o students (National Center for Education Strategies, NCES, 2003).

A number of explanations in the research literature have attempted to clarify the reasons for the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education programs. For example, some researchers have indicated that these students frequently lack access to, drop out of, or choose not to participate in gifted education programs for reasons ranging from low teacher expectations, lack of motivation to do the work, and fear of separation from their social or peer group to the perception that the gifted education environment is “the wrong place” for African American students (Ford, 1996; Moore et al., 2005a, 2005b; Staiger, 2004). It is interesting that many of these common explanations have racial underpinnings. Staiger’s ethnographic study of a gifted magnet program in an urban California high school, for example, drew attention to the salience of ethnicity/race by explaining how, on the basis of her findings, ethnic minority students perceived that “giftedness was equivalent to whiteness” (p. 162). She further asserted that a glaring scarcity of ethnic minority students in gifted education programs is “likely to intensify the psychological damage that segregated schools had on minority children and that Brown v. Board of Education was supposed to overcome” (Staiger, pp. 161–162). Regardless of the rationalization, according to educational statistics, the presence of African American students in advanced classes, in general, and gifted education programs, in particular, is extremely rare (College Board, 2005; NCES, 2003).

In addition to their underrepresentation in gifted education programs, African American students whom educators have identified and placed into gifted education programming quite frequently underachieve or perform poorly (College Board, 2005; NCES, 2003). The explanations for this distressing phenomenon are plentiful. For instance, in a recent study, Worrell (2007) found that the level of ethnic identity of gifted African American students, as moderated by their environment, may play a large role in their academic success in gifted education programming. Indeed, a number of educators assert that racial identity may have significant psychological ramifications for academically talented African American students inside and outside gifted education programs (Arroyo and Zigler, 1995; Ford & Harris, 1997). These ramifications, in turn, may affect students’ level of academic achievement (Ford-Harris, Schuerger, & Harris, 1991; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

Some evidence indicates the impact of race and racial identity on gifted African American students; however, given the relative scarcity of research on gifted African American students as a whole (Ford, 1998; Ford et al., 2002), it is not surprising that the research literature related to the social consequences of being a gifted African American student is scant. Ogbu (2003), in his exploration of the lives of African American students (including the gifted) in an affluent suburban school district, offers one of the few examples of the social coping strategies of gifted African American students. He found that these students often disengage from academics in an attempt to gain acceptance from peers. In another investigation of the social coping strategies of gifted students, Swiatek (1995) reported that students frequently deny their giftedness. Unfortunately, because this study did not report the race of the students, generalizing these findings to gifted African American students is difficult. In her seminal book, Counseling the Gifted and Talented, Silverman (1993) thoroughly explored the many social and emotional needs of students identified as gifted as a whole. However, researchers rarely address the unique experiences of African American students.

**Significance of the Study**

Over the previous 4 decades, gifted education has been a topic of growing interest in the research literature (Colangelo & Davis, 2003; Ford, 1996; Landrum, 1987; Moore et al., 2006; Peterson, 2003; Renzulli, 1978). However, thorough examinations of the gifted education literature indicate that very few studies have focused on African American students and their experience in gifted education programming (Flowers, Zhang, Moore, Flowers, et al., 2004; Ford, 1998; Ford et al.,
In spite of the lack of attention paid to the issue, numerous educators have attempted to provide rationales for the underrepresentation and underachievement of ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans, in gifted education programs, but the problem still persists. Nevertheless, African American students represent a largely untapped reservoir of potential that—if nurtured—can help meet the nation's need for a more qualified, talented workforce (Ford, 1996; Maton & Hrabowski, 2004; Moore, 2006; Moore, Madison-Colemore, & Smith, 2003). Sadly, the research literature is replete with articles, books, and reports documenting the phenomenon of high-ability ethnic minority students who do not meet their academic potential (Jordan & Plank, 2000; Plank & Jordan, 1996). The cost to society of such abysmal educational outcomes is a substantial loss of talent, which the workforce of the United States can ill afford (Bush, 2006; Moore, 2006).

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The overarching purpose of this study was to provide teachers, school counselors, principals, and parents with valuable insider information that they can use to improve the recruitment of gifted African American students and the retention of identified gifted African American students in gifted education programs. In other words, if teachers, school counselors, and administrators better understand the experiences of African American students in gifted education programs, they might be able to develop comprehensive initiatives designed to increase the pool of high-achieving African American students who have an interest in taking advanced coursework in K to 12 educational settings; entering science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields in higher educational settings; and subsequently fulfilling the nation's need for a highly skilled workforce.

Far too often, research literature that addresses critical issues in the daily lives of ethnic minority students ignores the voices of these students (Fernandez, 2002). Therefore, this investigation purposefully sought to provide African Americans in gifted education programming a forum to express thoughts related to their educational experiences—in their own words. That is, this study explored the attitudes and perceptions of African American students in gifted education programs and allowed the students themselves to articulate their ideas.

**What educational contexts, processes, interactions, and experiences shape African American students' perceptions and attitudes toward gifted education programming?**

In summary, the topic of African American students' experiences and perceptions of gifted education programming represents a critical area for research and discussion within the field of education as a whole and gifted education in particular. It constitutes a nascent subject that has received little attention in the research literature. Although the topic of underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education programs has been well documented for decades (Ford, 1996; Worrell, 2007), the attention that the topic has garnered is scant relative to the overall history of gifted education. Further, even though recent research and scholarship have discussed this topic (Ford & Moore, 2004; Grantham, 2004; Moore et al., 2005a, 2005b; Worrell), in-depth information explaining the meaning, context, and process by which African American students in gifted education programs develop perceptions of their educational experiences is absent. Moreover, much of the literature related to the topic has been conceptual rather than coming from the mouths of the students themselves. The researchers sought to explore the following research question: "What educational contexts, processes, interactions, and experiences shape African American students' perceptions and attitudes toward gifted education programming?"

**METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

**Theoretical Framework**

The researchers used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical underpinning for interpreting the qualitative data for this study. CRT essentially posits that race, as well as the meanings attached to race, is socially constructed and that researchers
cannot ignore it as a powerful aspect of human social life. Moreover, scholars who embrace this notion view racial oppression as a normal facet of society that so intertwines with the social structures that it occurs naturally (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). Parker (2004) further suggests that CRT is a form of oppositional scholarship . . . [that] challenges the experience of White European Americans as the normative standard. Rather, CRT grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive conceptual experiences of people of color and racial oppression through the use of literary narrative knowledge and storytelling to challenge the existing social construction of race. (p. 86)

Researchers who employ this theory make explicit their concern for marginalized groups and show a deeply rooted desire to expose, advocate, and confront injustices concerning them. These values undoubtedly shaped this study, because the researchers were openly interested in the responses and reactions of these students to the educational isolation that they have experienced as one of a small number of gifted African Americans students in their schools. Using CRT as a framework for the current study allowed students to voice their concerns, particularly those related to race and race relations, in gifted educational environments. Such information contributes significantly to the educational research literature focusing on people of color (Fernandez, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002).

**Participants**

The participants in the present study were 12 gifted African American students (5 males and 7 females) who lived in the southeastern and midwestern regions of the United States (see Table 1). To qualify for gifted education programming, the participants had to score in the 95th percentile on a standardized academic achievement measure. Of the 10 students who reported their grade-point averages (GPAs), 45% of them had averages of 93 or higher, and 55% reported averages of 92 or lower. During the study, 10 of the participants were in the eighth grade, one participant was in the seventh grade, and another one was in the ninth grade. The age of the participants ranged from 14 to 15 years, with a mean age of 14 years. For more details about the participants, see Table 1.

**Data-Collecting Protocols**

**Biographical Questionnaires**

The researchers administered biographical questionnaires designed to gather pertinent data on a wide range of topics related to the study (e.g., community makeup, community type, and school size). The biographical questionnaires provided descriptive data that aided in achieving the goal of a more trustworthy study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Individual Interviews**

The general interview guide, or “semistructured” approach to individual interviewing, was the primary means of data collection in this study. The researchers selected this approach to ensure that each participant in the research study experienced the same general line of questioning (Patton 2002). With this method, the researchers were able to add or subtract questions depending on the responses of the participants before, after, or during the interview, thereby allowing the researchers to consider the emergent and constantly changing nature of qualitative research (Patton). Indeed, a major strength of this approach is that “the guide helps make interviewing a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive by delimiting in advance the issues to be explored” (Patton, p. 343), while simultaneously offering the interviewer the flexibility to divert from the interview guide and ask follow-up questions related to specific participant responses.

**Document Collection Procedures**

The primary researcher collected the names of African American students who qualified for gifted and talented programming from a database at an international gifted and talented center at a university in the midwestern United States. The primary researcher initiated contact with prospective participants by mailing a packet containing an informed consent form, a thorough description of the study, a biographical questionnaire,
# Table 1

## Participant Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Advanced Courses Taken</th>
<th>Community Makeup</th>
<th>Community Type</th>
<th>School Size</th>
<th>Free/Reduced Price Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>83–86</td>
<td>Honors English and science</td>
<td>Mostly Black</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93–100</td>
<td>Algebra in 7th grade; geometry in 8th grade</td>
<td>Mostly White</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93–100</td>
<td>Honors algebra I and geometry; gifted language, science, and geography</td>
<td>Mostly Black</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1145</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>87–92</td>
<td>Honors algebra I and geometry; integrated science and French II</td>
<td>One-half Black and one-half White</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93–100</td>
<td>Math and English</td>
<td>Mostly White</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>660</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortland</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93–100</td>
<td>Honors algebra I; all gifted classes</td>
<td>One-fourth Asian; one fourth Black; one-fourth White; one-fourth Hispanic</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>87–92</td>
<td>Honors algebra I; geometry; biology; English I; integrated science; world history</td>
<td>One-half Black and one-half White</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>87–92</td>
<td>Honors language arts and geometry; gifted language arts</td>
<td>One-third Hispanic, one-third White, one-third Black</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>1558</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shariff</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>93–100</td>
<td>Algebra, English, science, business tech</td>
<td>Mostly Black</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>2019</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keshia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>87–92</td>
<td>All gifted classes</td>
<td>Mostly Black</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Exceptional Children*
and a prestamped envelope so that the participant could return the documentation needed to begin the study. Because participants lived in numerous cities across the southeastern and midwestern United States, conducting the interviews online was the most convenient method of gathering the information. The researcher obtained the names of a total of 52 students and mailed each of them the packet containing the aforementioned items. Of those 52 potential participants, 12 responded and participated in the study.

Participation in this study involved an interview that lasted approximately 1.5 to 2 hr. The interviewer and the participants used AOL Instant Messenger, which is "a free Windows-based program (available from www.aol.com) that anyone with Internet access can download and use to transfer messages instantly with other users (i.e., interviewer to interviewee and interviewee to interviewer)" (Moore & Flowers, 2003). This online approach allowed the researchers to interview all participants individually from their homes, thereby removing the need to meet face-to-face—a substantial benefit, since the method increased the likelihood that the students would participate. Also, because the researcher and participants keyed the interview queries and responses, the researchers were able to save the data on a hard drive, thereby eliminating the need for transcriptions—another benefit of collecting interview data through AOL Instant Messenger.

After the participants' families returned the signed informed consent forms and biographical questionnaires, the primary researcher contacted the student by telephone to arrange a time to conduct the online interview and to provide instructions on establishing an AOL Instant Messenger account (Moore & Flowers, 2003).

DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS

This qualitative investigation used the grounded theory approach—namely, constant comparative analysis—to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Moore, 2006; Moore et al., 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach entails collecting data and simultaneously analyzing it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After receiving all the informed consent forms and biographical questionnaires, the primary researcher contacted the participants and conducted individual interviews. Because the researchers used a constant comparative approach to analyze the data, they did not wait until they had conducted all interviews. Therefore, the data analysis process began after the first interview and ended after the researchers had collected all data.

Open coding was the initial step. During that step, the researchers broke interview data down into more manageable categories on the basis of information obtained from informal interviews with colleagues and reviews of the literature. This process of open coding continued until the researchers had conducted all interviews. At that point, the researchers and the research team began the process of axial coding, or combining open codes into similar categories. With axial coding, themes began to emerge from the data. When themes emerged, the primary researcher contacted students again or member checked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), using AOL Instant Messenger. These steps allowed the researchers to confirm the findings. As a result, none of the participants had anything to add or change because they believed that the researchers had accurately depicted their experiences.

AUTHENTICITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA

In essence, authenticity is the attempt to synchronize the goals of the researcher with the needs of the people studied (Spradley, 1979). To balance the needs of the participants with the needs of the researcher, both openness and honesty were crucial. The researchers told the African American participants that the main reason for the study was to find out more about their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences in gifted education programming and informed them that the information would help improve gifted programming for other African American students. All participants were, therefore, aware of the importance of this study.

RESULTS

In the spirit of trustworthy qualitative research (Patton, 2002), the researchers used rich in-depth descriptions (i.e., lengthy quotations) to fully capture the meanings of participants’ experiences and
perceptions, as communicated in their own words. The researchers took the liberty of correcting some misspellings for increased clarity and understanding. However, they carefully avoided distorting the meaning of the participants' statements.

Three general themes that were pertinent to the participants' perceptions of their experiences in gifted education programming emerged from the data: (a) critical issues facing gifted African American students, (b) ways that the students navigate the perils of gifted education, and (c) the benefits of gifted education. The researchers identified these themes as crucial in the lives of the participants, and all members of the research team verified them by consensus.

CRITICAL ISSUES FACING GIFTED AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Peer Influences. Several educational scholars have explored the effects of peer influence on the academic achievement of African American students and have determined that negative peer pressure has a detrimental effect on students who opt for academic success (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). According to Lindstrom and Van Sant (1986), gifted African American students often encounter peer rejection. In that study, students mentioned numerous critical issues that faced them, as a result of being one of a few gifted African American students in their schools. Students frequently used the word normal to describe the way that they wanted educators and peers to treat them. It is interesting that participants perceived that normal students were nongifted African American students or students who were not in gifted classes. The participants therefore attached a stigma to their identity as "abnormal" gifted students and desired to be classified as normal instead of being considered "just another nerd." Indeed, 10 of the 12 participants mentioned that nongifted African American students ridiculed them for being intelligent. These students mentioned that others had branded them with such terms as nerd, geek, and know-it-all and had made other disparaging remarks.

Like many other gifted students (Silverman, 1993), the students in this study spoke explicitly of "standing out" or being viewed differently by their peers because they were gifted. Although three students enjoyed the recognition that accompanied being one of a small number of African American students identified as gifted in their schools, the other nine students offered contrasting accounts. These students repeatedly stated that they wanted others to consider them to be normal students. Although their teachers expected them to gravitate toward the role of leader to African Americans in their schools, they shunned that notion. As previously mentioned, researchers frequently observe such feelings among gifted students. However, because of the pervasive negative perceptions of African American students in our nation's schools, it is not difficult to understand how the pressures accompanying such perceived expectations can become exasperating for many gifted African American students.

Deficit Ideology. Ford et al. (2002) posited that a disturbing number of educators evaluate African American youngsters by using deficit perspectives. Such perspectives focus on students' shortcomings to the exclusion of their strengths. The research of Ferguson (1998), which offered similar findings, concluded that many teachers believe that African American students lack the intellectual capacity to function successfully in gifted programs. For instance, 10 of the 12 participants claimed that they had experienced differential treatment by teachers in their gifted classes. One female respondent, Amanda (93-100 GPA), spoke of instances where her teachers repeatedly discouraged her because, according to her, they had low expectations of gifted African American students in general and females in particular; a practice that she called anti-intellectualism.

Gender. The research of Sadker and Sadker (1994) concluded that teachers' behaviors reinforce a certain feminine socialization that requires females to remain passive and avoid the perception that they are being obnoxious, too loud, or unladylike. Sadker and Sadker found that teachers call on boys more frequently than they do girls, permit boys to dominate classroom discussions, and reward boys more often than they reward girls for class participation, thereby effectively silencing female students. Many gifted girls who proudly exhibited academic excellence in previous stages of their schooling gradually abandon lofty goals in an effort to avoid isolation and exclusion (Henfield &
In the current study, students mentioned that their experiences in school were extremely difficult, because educators forced them to confront many stereotypes and dispel many myths. Female participants, as well as the males in the study, repeatedly stated that contending with teachers and peers who think of African Americans in terms of deficit ideological notions was inevitable because gifted education programs include so few African American students. However, four female participants stated that, in addition to race, they faced the problem of attempting to prove wrong the stereotype that females are not on the same intellectual level as males. In fact, one student, Amanda, reported that a teacher in her school refused to believe that a female student would take an interest in advanced literature, math, and sciences.

All students considered gender to be the least difficult of the identities (i.e., gender, race, and giftedness) to manage—further illuminating the significance of race and giftedness as they relate to the educational experiences of these students. Moreover, 11 of the 12 participants reported that in middle school, racial identity was of the utmost concern; however, they predicted that in high school, their giftedness would present a larger challenge because they would have to interact more often with nongifted African American students and others might ridicule them for standing out.

**Acting White.** The primary researcher introduced the phrase “acting White” to the participants. When the researcher asked participants their understanding of, as well as their experience with the phrase, 11 of them were familiar with it; and 8 participants indicated that nongifted African American students had accused them of acting White. Similar to students in Fordham and Ogbu's 1986 study, these respondents stated that nongifted African American students felt that certain attributes, such as being gifted or speaking Standard English, were not representative of Black people. Angela (female, 83–86 GPA), for example, stated that when she spoke Standard English, other nongifted African American students said she “sounded White,” thought she was smarter than everyone else, and was “a nerd.” Another student, Cortland (male, 93–100 GPA), explained that he, too, gets accused of acting White by nongifted African American peers: “I'm one of those kids; many of my friends say that I'm White.” Further, he said that in his school, White students who have adopted urban African American culture “say that they are Blacker than me.” “Acting White” accusations seemed to cause a certain degree of angst among many participants.

This angst prompted gifted African American students to attempt to befriend their nongifted African American peers in order to gain acceptance. For instance, all students participated in such extracurricular activities as drama, cheerleading, and football—activities that would assure them of increased contact with many more nongifted African American students than they would meet in their gifted classes. They reported that participating in activities with nongifted African American students served as an opportunity to prove that they were “not just another nerd.”

**Acting Black.** The primary researcher also introduced the term “acting Black” to the participants. In their research of the attributes that a group of teenagers ascribed to acting Black, Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004, p. 86) reported the following five underlying content dimensions:

1. Academic/Scholastic: Education or school-related qualities or dynamics.
2. Aesthetic/Stylistic: Attire, style, or leisure-related qualities or activities. This category also reflects aesthetic practices such as wearing a particular style or engaging in a particular pastime.
3. Behavioral: Concrete, specific acts or activities—except for style-related actions, which are grouped in the aesthetic/stylistic dimension.
4. Dispositional: Qualities that reflect intentions, motives, values, philosophies, worldviews, that may underlie, motivate, or inform behavior.
5. Impressionistic: The overall impression, image or effect that one projects.

Consistent with the assertions of the youths in the Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004) study, respondents in the current study also reported observations that fit into the aforementioned dimensions of acting Black. However, students in the
current study specifically attributed these dimensions to nongifted African American students. For instance, participants in the study indicated that nongifted African American students were “academically poor” and “ignorant” in their academic/scholastic ability. One student, Carlos (male, 87–92 GPA), even suggested that “ungifted students want to make a lot of money but don’t want to do the work.” When the researchers asked participants their understanding of the meaning of the phrase acting Black, Angela stated, “Acting White is preppy, rock or pop. Saying stuff like ‘cool’ and ‘sweet’... and acting Black is rap, baggy jeans, sweats, laid back, and saying a lot of profanity.” That statement is an obvious example of the aesthetic/stylistic dimension. In describing the behavior of nongifted African American students, participants indicated that they “get into the most fights,” and “use a lot of slang.” Another participant, Cortland, said that nongifted African American students are very different in terms of personality and/or thought. The majority of nongifted African American kids that I see are the stereotype that I wouldn’t fit in with. The Ebonics, the clothes, the behavior. I’m very different in terms of attitude and behavior.

Participants’ responses related to dispositional/constitutional dimensions of acting Black included the suggestion of Shariff (male, 93–100 GPA) that the students who act Black “always get in trouble and do things to get attention.” Nine of the students reported that nongifted African American students who act Black are “lazy” and “ghetto” or used other similarly negative terms, which is an example of an impressionistic dimension of acting Black. Although it is unclear how participants developed such racially charged views of nongifted African American students, they clearly held stereotypical views of those students.

WAYS THAT THE STUDENTS NAVIGATE THE PERILS OF GIFTED EDUCATION

Racial identity development functioning assumes added significance for African American students, who confront a barrage of racism and oppression as an inevitable aspect of their schooling (Kozol, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Racial identity development functioning can have a significant impact on the academic achievement of gifted African American students (Colangelo & Exum, 1979; Exum & Colangelo, 1981; Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Ford-Harris et al., 1991). Many scholars have asserted that in response to racism in educational environments, African American students at earlier stages of racial identity development often use oppositional coping styles that interfere with their academic achievement (Ford & Harris, 1997; Ford et al., 1993; Fordham, 1988; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Ogbu, 1988). Understanding that these students attribute meanings to their individual and collective experiences as gifted African American students is important. These meanings subsequently result in specific actions or inactions in response to their environment.

Academic Disengagement. When faced with difficult circumstances, 10 of the 12 students in this study chose to find resolutions independently. For example, Angela mentioned that instead of asking a teacher for assistance with class assignments, she would “rather sit there the whole class hour and figure it out by myself.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.” This response to difficult schoolwork is common among gifted students, who have been, in many cases, self-reliant (Silverman, 1993). However, when researchers asked Angela what she would do if she continued having difficulty, she stated, “I would put my head down or look at another problem.”
have a detrimental impact on academic achievement if students do not understand the coursework well. Such behavior may have played a role in Angela's relatively low GPA (83–86). Nevertheless, half the respondents did not use academic disengagement. Indeed, these students found other mechanisms to cope with their identity as a gifted African American student.

**Gifted Identity Distancing.** Like participants in the study of Swiatek (1995), participants in this study frequently seemed to practice denial of or distancing from their gifted identities. In response to their circumstances, for example, some students characterized other gifted students as being “snobs” or “stuck up.” However, when describing themselves, students offered the following statements: “I’m smart, but I’m real,” “being gifted doesn’t change me. ... I don’t think much of it,” and “sometimes they [nongifted African American students] get the wrong idea about the gifted program and think that everyone in it is a nerd.”

Instead of employing academic disengagement in response to their identification as gifted students, the students more commonly embraced their giftedness. However, in many instances, they tried to disassociate themselves from stereotypical gifted behavior or downplay their gifted identity. Indeed, although 11 of the 12 students mentioned that they were proud of their giftedness, distancing themselves from their gifted identities seemed like a reasonable response to this identity—particularly for students who attended schools where other students often ridiculed African Americans identified as gifted. For example, Carlos explained how he resorted to hiding his giftedness from his nongifted African American peers, as indicated in the following dialogue:

*Henfield:* How do you think they would respond if you told them?
*Carlos:* They wouldn’t believe me.
*Henfield:* They don’t think you’re smart?
*Carlos:* No.

*Henfield:* Do you do things to make them think you’re not all that smart?
*Carlos:* Not really, they just think that I wouldn’t be a person to be in gifted.

This example shows a student distancing himself from his gifted identity. Although Carlos did not do or say anything per se, similar to students in Swiatek’s (1995) study, he did not want his peers to know that he was gifted. Educators could therefore easily construe that he withheld identifying himself as gifted to his friends because of the stigma that is often associated with identification as gifted. As another example, Angela added that because “there are more normal kids than gifted kids ... the normal kids will not accept you for being gifted. In fact they try to bring you down and call u dumb.”

Like gifted students as a whole (Silverman, 1993), many respondents desired to be classified as normal rather than as “just another nerd.” To accomplish that goal, some students sought the acceptance of nongifted African American students. As previously indicated, one popular means to accomplish this goal was gifted identity distancing. However, another popular tactic was participation in extracurricular activities, as indicated in the following dialogue with Carlos:

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*Henfield:* How do the nongifted African American students treat you?
*Carlos:* Good, they know me as smart Carlos and they come to me for help.

*Henfield:* Why do you think they don’t call you a nerd or try to avoid you?
*Carlos:* I play sports with most of them and I am very athletic.

*Henfield:* So you think that because you are involved with activities outside of gifted classes that you are more accepted by nongifted students?
*Carlos:* Yes.
Clearly, acceptance by nongifted African American students was of the utmost importance to many students in the study.

Benefits of Gifted Education

Academic Rigor. Although significant demographic and contextual differences existed among the participants, all of them identified the challenging curriculum offered by gifted education programs as a key benefit. For example, Kelly (female) mentioned that teachers "go at a fast rate that teaches me more," and Angela gave the following explanation: "I believe you're [gifted students] smart and you need classes that really challenge you and teach you things that are on your level or higher." Samantha (female, 87–92 GPA) noted that the best thing about being in gifted courses was "knowing that I make great grades and I'm taking higher than normal classes." Shariff reported an experience in his class where "the other gifted students at first used to have a competition in class to see who is the smartest. But soon we all became friends." When the researcher asked him how the competition ended, he replied, "I don't know, it just got old and people were tired of someone shoving their test scores in their face to see who got the highest." These students seem to be intrinsically motivated and valued the difficulty associated with an advanced curriculum.

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Highly Skilled Teachers. Even though participants in this study seemed to be intrinsically motivated, six students mentioned external forces, such as qualities exhibited by their teachers, as an influence on their lives. Cortland characterized his teachers as "less strict, more open-minded, and friendlier" than the other teachers in the school. Another student reported that his teachers offered overt encouragement, which also operated as a source of motivation. According to Carlos, "They give [you] encouraging words and tell u things u need to here to keep u going." Samantha, who educators accelerated into a gifted education magnet high school, offered another response documenting the qualities of skilled gifted education teachers: "The teachers don't pressure you to turn in something or do your work. If you turn it in, you do, if you don't, you don't. They teach you to realize you must push yourself to succeed." This response appeared to echo the sentiments of another female student, Kelly, who stated that her teachers "help me become more independent." These comments suggest that participants' teachers valued and promoted independence, which seemed to motivate the students and make them want to learn. The students also expressed appreciation for teachers who offered encouragement as a way to sustain students' motivation after acceptance into the gifted program.

Equally Skilled Peers. The participants indicated that they appreciate learning in an environment with equally skilled peers. In the words of Carlos, "As I continue to learn with kids who are gifted and want to learn I can push myself to do well and I will be better off." He further stated, "You get to be with other children on the same skill level as you and we learn at the same pace. If I don't understand something the children can help me and vice versa." This statement seems to suggest that learning with peers who are at an equal skill level provides additional support that may not be available outside an inclusive gifted classroom, further demonstrating the support that African American students found in a gifted education environment.

Future Preparedness. Six students perceived their participation in gifted education as a means to better prepare themselves for future challenges. Keshia (female, 87–92 GPA) suggested that gifted courses would help her "pass my classes by giving me a lot of work so that can help me get ready for things ahead of me." Another student, Shanice (female, 87–92 GPA), mentioned that gifted courses prepare students to excel in high school and on standardized tests:

They help me by exposing me to types of literature that I, myself would not have independently selected . . . such as classics & British literature. The class has higher standards thus presenting me with ample preparation for high school in the coming year . . .

In the future because of the advanced vocab-
I've been in gifted since the 2nd grade and in elementary school. I didn't like being separated from all of my old friends from regular classes. They never told us the benefits. I found out this year... the school I attend now is basically a gifted school I guess you can say. It's known for its smart students. At the beginning of the year we held assemblies for every grade level and they discussed our grades and our classes with us so we would knew specifically what we were there for. ...
those in gifted education programs, in particular. Nongifted African American students who viewed academic achievement as a quality that African Americans should not value subjected the students who participated in this study to ridicule. Many of the gifted African American students developed such social coping skills as gifted identity distancing in response to a racially charged learning environment. Obviously, such results will be of particular interest to educators who desire information on the behaviors of gifted African American students.

Gifted students, in general, are often hesitant to embrace their gifted identity for fear of ridicule by nonaccepting peers (Silverman, 1993; Swiatek, 1995). However, according to the findings of this study and other research studies (see Ogbu, 2003; Staiger, 2004), race seems to further amplify such feelings of apprehension. For example, when the researchers asked Amanda the most difficult aspect of her identity, she stated that “worst is probably my race, then my gender, then my giftedness. But the combo is positively deadly.” On the basis of this profound quote and other pertinent findings in this study, one could argue that the scarcity of African American students in gifted education programs may produce significant psychological distress. Indeed, as Staiger found, gifted African American students may feel a sense of “whiteness as giftedness” because African American students outside of gifted education programs believe that such programs are not where they belong. If this perception is true, being an anomaly—a gifted African American student—may have a detrimental impact on African American students in gifted education programs. Such students may have very little, if any, interaction with students of their own race and therefore may have limited opportunities to dispel such myths as the myth of “whiteness as giftedness.” Indeed, students who place high emphasis on, and truly value, their identity as African Americans may experience tremendous angst in their interactions with nongifted African American students who do not perceive them to be real African Americans. Clearly, if nongifted African American peers perceive that African American students who participate in gifted education programs are “not Black enough” or act White simply because of their enrollment in such programs, the social and psychological impact on these students can be devastating. Educators must understand this problem, since they may be aware of odd behavior, such as academic disengagement, inside the classroom but may be unaware of the specific meanings, processes, and contexts outside the classroom that elicit such behavior.

The undeniable importance of race in the daily lives of the participants in this study should be helpful to educators who find themselves baffled when academically talented African American students make a conscious decision not to participate in gifted education programming. These students may decline admission to such programs because they fear being accused of acting White. However, this study indicates that gifted African American students who value education may view nongifted African American students (whom they may perceive as not valuing education) as “ghetto,” or belonging to a lower class. If these types of beliefs are common among gifted African American students, they may also hinder any attempts to attract potentially gifted students into gifted education programs. For example, although the participants in this study overwhelmingly seemed to have low expectations of nongifted African American students, it is not clear how well, or to what extent, they purposefully obfuscate these feelings in their interactions with nongifted African American students. Because many gifted students have advanced levels of intuition, insight, and the ability to see through superficiality (Silverman, 1993), African American students whom educators have identified as gifted may choose not to enter gifted education programs because of potentially negative interactions with African American students who were previously identified and are currently enrolled in gifted education programs. In other words, these students may fear that gifted African American students will have low opinions of their academic aspirations and capabilities because educators had not previously identified them as gifted students.

Principals, in particular, may glean much from the findings of this study. For example, principals who do not understand the experiences of gifted African American students and the critical issues that they encounter daily may perceive those who underachieve in deficit terms, thereby ignoring their considerable strengths. Principals
may assume that gifted African American students who appear to be inattentive in class are either trying to be difficult or do not understand the material being taught. As previously mentioned, however, such behaviors inside the classroom may originate in circumstances outside the classroom. Sadly, principals who focus solely on in-classroom behavior and ignore the experiences of gifted African American students outside the classroom may react by disciplining the student, removing the student from gifted programming, or refusing to admit other African American students into gifted programming. That is, negative perceptions derived from an incomplete account of students’ experiences in gifted education programming may result in knee-jerk reactions. A principal who experiences such a reaction may subconsciously convey the message to school counselors, teachers, and others—albeit unintentionally—that African American students are ill-equipped to handle, or even unworthy of consideration for, gifted education programs, resulting in the maintenance of the status quo—African American underrepresentation in gifted education programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the findings of the study, the following recommendations for teachers, school counselors, principals, and parents can help improve educational standard practices and policies for African American students in gifted programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- After parents and teachers have established a trusting relationship, teachers should help parents understand the potentially negative impact that academic disengagement can have on the academic achievement of students. Further, since most of the participants in this study seemed to embrace gifted identity distancing as opposed to academic disengagement, teachers should also work with parents to teach students that other less destructive options can help students cope with standing out as gifted African American students.

- According to the findings of this study, many gifted African American students chose to distance themselves from their gifted identities to gain acceptance from nongifted African American students. Teachers should, therefore, collaborate with other educators (e.g., school counselors and principals) to develop activities aimed at increasing the opportunities for gifted and nongifted African American students to interact with one another, such as participation in extracurricular activities, since such opportunities were effective in creating gifted—nongifted African American friendships. This interaction may aid in normalizing gifted education and increasing the willingness of African Americans to enter gifted education programs.

- Teachers should participate in professional development training activities that increase their awareness of personal beliefs regarding the potential of African American students. In addition, they should use professional development activities to learn more about the needs of gifted African American students and methods of identifying potentially gifted African American students.

- Teachers should improve teacher—student and student—student relationships. In this study, students reported that they confronted many racial and gender-specific stereotypes (e.g., deficit ideology) in and out of the classroom. Teachers should, therefore, become sensitive to potential racial and gender biases and examine how such biases may affect their teaching styles, expectations, and general interactions with students.

- Teachers should also work proactively with school counselors, principals, and parents to consistently inform gifted and potentially gifted students of the tangible benefits of gifted education programming. Educators can thereby instill a sense of pride in giftedness, which may combat the need of gifted African American students to distance themselves from their gifted identity, as well as increase the number of high-achieving African American students who opt to enter gifted education programs.
Recommendations for School Counselors

• School counselors should collaborate with other educators (e.g., teachers and principals) to develop culturally sensitive gifted education recruitment and retention practices. For example, they might openly discuss gifted identity distancing as a means for academically talented students to enter gifted education programs yet maintain acceptance from their nongifted African American peers.

• School counselors should be proactive about alerting all students in their schools to the benefits of gifted education. This tactic may assist in normalizing gifted education and reducing the stigma associated with giftedness.

• School counselors should advocate for the infusion of multicultural content in school curricula. Students' exposure to both genders and persons from various racial groups operating in nontraditional roles may reduce the generalizations associated with what it means to be of a certain gender and/or race.

• School counselors should advocate for increased opportunities for interaction between gifted and nongifted African American students.

• Because gifted African American students seemed to feel more comfortable with teachers than with school counselors, counselors may try inviting teachers into counseling programming as a means of building rapport.

• School counselors should be vigilant in their attempts to build rapport with gifted African American students. One method is to gain the trust of parents by illustrating to them how school counseling services can benefit their child. When school counselors earn the respect of parents, the parents are more likely to recommend school counseling services to their children.

Recommendations for Principals

• Administrators should closely monitor representation in gifted education programs. They should use data to identify disparities by race and gender in gifted education enrollment. If representation by race and gender is not adequate, administrators should take such steps as revising recruitment and retention processes to address the problem.

• Principals should establish times for gifted and nongifted African American students to mingle to help normalize gifted students and to reduce the angst associated with standing out from other students.

• Principals should recruit school personnel who have received training to help them recognize and meet the unique needs of gifted African American students, as well as the needs of potentially gifted African American students.

• Principals should establish regularly scheduled professional development training sessions for teachers, school counselors, and administrators to increase their understanding of the actions and inactions of gifted African American students, as well as to increase their understanding of the students' experiences both inside and outside the gifted education classroom.

Recommendations for Parents

• Parents should advocate on behalf of their children in a variety of ways (e.g., school visits, school board meetings, parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, e-mails, and personal letters to educators). Parents can play an active role in forming a trusting parent-educator relationship by communicating their involvement in their child's education and by showing their desire to see that educators meet their needs and the needs of their child.

• Parents should work with educators to normalize visits to the school counselor, who should be well-versed in the benefits of gifted education. High-achieving African American students may be more apt to participate in gifted education programming if they fully understand the ways that participating in gifted education programs can benefit them.

• Parents should promote academic engagement to their gifted children. They should urge
their children to participate more often in class and to ask for assistance when necessary.

- Parents should play an active role in the recruitment of their child into gifted education programs. They should insist that educators inform them of the means by which students can gain entry into gifted education programs so that they may be in a better position to assist in the recruitment process.

- Parents should vigilantly reinforce the benefits of gifted education programs to their children. This reinforcement can help students sift through the advantages and disadvantages of enrollment in such programs and can help them reach a more informed decision. Such information may also serve to ease the transition into gifted education programs, as students will better understand the rationale behind their placement.

**CONCLUSION**

This study offers detailed information regarding the experiences of gifted African American students. However, as in all research studies, the findings have certain limitations. First, the researchers collected the perceptions of the students only. The attitudes of teachers, school counselors, principals, and parents could have also provided insightful information and could have strengthened the findings of the study. Second, observations of the gifted education classroom environment could have yielded valuable information, because they would have given the researchers firsthand knowledge of the worlds of the participants. However, such observations were not feasible. Third, because of the decision to use AOL Instant Messenger for data collection, the researchers could not obtain additional meanings from students' nonverbal behavior.

Future research studies should focus on the perceptions of high-achieving African American students who choose not to enter gifted education programs. This information could help pinpoint the exact reasons for their decisions and aid in improving future recruitment efforts for gifted education. Additional research should also attempt to determine whether the findings of this study are generalizable to other African American students in gifted education programs. Further, since the current study has offered considerable evidence of the importance of race in gifted education, conducting further research on the social coping strategies of gifted African American students would be useful. Finally, future studies should explore, in depth, the meanings that gifted and nongifted African American students attach to the phrase "acting Black." Such information will aid in constructing interventions designed to dispute unsubstantiated stereotypes and possibly decrease instances of self-hatred.

**REFERENCES**


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