College and Career Readiness for Gifted African American Girls: A Call to School Counselors

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Current literature on college and career readiness highlights the role of educators in promoting the success of all students. However, few studies have focused on the specific needs of gifted African American girls. This article discusses the school experiences and career development of gifted African American girls and it provides a culturally responsive and gendered framework for school counselors to promote college and career readiness of gifted African American girls using the components of college and career readiness counseling endorsed by the College Board National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA, 2010). Implications for future research, school counseling training, and professional development are discussed.

Keywords: gifted African American girls, school counseling, college and career readiness

In one of his weekly addresses, President Barack Obama (August, 2012) stated, "If we want America to lead in the 21st century, nothing is more important than giving everyone the best education possible – from the day they start preschool to the day they start their career..."

Although there have been a number of federal initiatives over recent years addressing educational reform (such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and its subsequent amendments), African American students still have lower levels of academic success (Brown, Anthony, Boykin, 2008; Davis, 2003), limited access to rigorous and advanced placement courses, compared to their more privileged White classmates (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; College Board, 2014; Education Trust, 2014; Ford, 2013), and are often in classes and schools where the curriculum and school environment does not reflect positive images or contributions of themselves (Banks, 2008). As a result, they are caught up in the achievement gap. They achieve at low levels or underachieve (Ford, 2010, 2011; Strickland-Dixon, 2011), i.e., perform below their potential indicated by intelligence or aptitude tests.

African American students are also likely to drop out of high school at disproportionate rates and they are more likely to receive disciplinary action that is often discriminatory, when compared to their White peers (Gardner & Mayes, 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Strickland-Dixon, 2011; Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, & Frank, 2012). Whereas educators are often called upon to target low-performing students for remediation and intervention in an effort to promote academic and career success, other students, particularly girls with gifts and talents from underrepresented groups (i.e., African American and Latino girls), have needs that remain neglected and unmet.

In general, gifted students are regarded as self-sufficient, self-directed, mentally healthy, and not needing additional supports to ensure success (Maxwell, 2007; Peterson, 2006). However, some research suggests that gifted students face challenges related to asynchronous development, perfectionism, achievement, and career decisiveness (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010; Grantham & Ford, 1998; Peterson, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006).

While there are a number of studies examining various aspects of students in gifted programs, many of these studies rarely include gifted African American students, and gifted African American girls, in particular. And, there are fewer studies that have focused specifically on the academic and career needs of gifted African American females (Grantham & Ford, 1998).

This article focuses on the representation of African American girls in gifted education programs and highlights some of the unique experiences and needs of this population. It also provides strategies that school counselors can use to promote college and career readiness of gifted African American girls. In addition, the article discusses implications for future research, school counseling training, and professional development.

Identification of African American Girls for Gifted Programs

Ford (2013) noted that African American females are underrepresented by almost 40% in gifted education nationally. Among the variables that hinder their representation in gifted education programs are: racial bias (racism), gender bias (sexism), and lack of teacher referrals/nominations that are meshed in deficit thinking.

When gifted identification procedures include teacher nominations, race is one variable that teachers consider when referring or not referring students for gifted programs. Research has shown that teachers are more likely to refer Asian and White students for gifted programs, not likely to refer African American students, and less likely to refer Latino students (Ford, 2013; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; McBee, 2006). Research has also shown gender bias in teacher nominations and educational practices in gifted education (Bianco, Harris, Garrison-Wade, & Leach, 2011; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). For example, Bianco and colleagues found that when teachers were provided similar profiles of gifted characteristics only differing by gender, they were more likely to identify male profiles as being gifted (Bianco et al., 2011).

Moreover, racial and gender studies suggest that teachers are influenced by their expectations and preconceived notions about giftedness, particularly on what is gifted and who can be gifted as it relates to gender and racial status (Ford, Trotman Scott, Moore, & Amos, 2013). Such stereotypes and biases, fueled by deficit thinking (e.g., Valencia, 2010), have led to significantly lower overall nomination rates of African American girls for gifted education screening and services. Therefore, it is not surprising that gifted African American girls take fewer Advanced Placement (AP) classes when compared to their high achieving peers – White males and White females (The Education Trust, 2014).

Experiences of Gifted African American Girls Following Identification and Placement

Once African American girls are identified as gifted, their participation in gifted programs may be quite challenging, both academically and socio-emotionally. No only do they have to adjust to the increased rigor of gifted programs, they must also adjust to peer pressures. Some students may feel pressured to be perfect and all-knowing because they have been labeled as gifted (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010; Peterson, 2006) and have surpassed the achievements of their less-stressed White females counterparts who contend with sexism but not racism. As a result, gifted African American girls may not ask for assistance or counseling when working on difficult issues or problems (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010; Henfield et al., 2008; Maxwell, 2007; Peterson, 2006) for fear of being viewed as not gifted – a false positive.

Also, gifted African American girls may not see themselves represented in the curriculum (and the school as a whole), which can potentially cause them to disengage from academics and be at risk for underachievement (Ford, 2010, 2011; Grantham & Ford, 1998). And, their achievement may also be affected by their socio-emotional needs, which includes their racial and gender identity.

For gifted African American girls, being placed in a gifted program can be an isolating experience. Some gifted African American girls are unable to relate to their gifted counterparts; are susceptible to negative, stereotypical, and racist messages; (Ford, 2010, 2013) and have lower self-concepts and self-esteem when in such school programs or educational settings (Greene, 2006; Maxwell, 2007). In short, gifted African American girls are consistently exposed to stereotypes about Black inferiority in which, to be intelligent, means that the student is 'acting White' (Ford et al., 2008; Ford, 2010; Henfield et al., 2008).

Because academic and socio-emotional development are interrelated to career success (ASCA, 2012), the challenges that gifted African American girls face in academic and socio-emotional development will undeniably have an impact on their career development; and, as cultural-based academic preparation and experiences lead to greater career opportunities, gifted African American girls are influenced at an early age by societal expectations of the types of careers females should have as well as the pressure to choose between having a family, an education, and/or a career (Greene, 2003; Maxwell, 2007). These societal expectations have been perpetuated in schools and they have influenced gifted African American girls to take fewer math and science courses, and opt for more stereotypical female careers (Booth & Myers, 2010; Greene, 2003, 2006; West-Olatunji, Shure, Pringle, Adams, Lewis, & Cholewa, 2010) such as teachers, nurses, and caregivers.

Research on College and Career Readiness of Gifted African American Students

To understand the college and career needs of gifted African American girls, the authors conducted a comprehensive literature search. Initially, the authors searched for articles focused college and career development of solely gifted African American girls. Because this search yielded few articles, the authors broadened the search to include career development of gifted

girls, gifted students, African American girls, and African American students. These studies provided a framework for understanding the college and career needs for gifted African American girls.

Factors Influencing Career Decision Making

Career decision-making is often influenced by cultural and familial attitudes and by family of origin experiences (Booth & Myers, 2010; Greene, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). For gifted African American girls, college and career aspirations are shaped by the collectivistic cultural background of these girls, and they may incorporate multiple roles (i.e., spouse and parent) into their future planning, which influences their overall career aspirations (Maxwell, 2007).

When gifted African American girls experience career indecisiveness, their college decision and enrollment can be challenging. They may be reluctant about being admitted to college and doubt their ability to be successful as a college student. They may also struggle in their efforts to identify sources to fund their college education and support their success, which creates more challenges in retaining gifted African American girls in postsecondary institutions (Greene, 2006; Olszewski-Kubilius & Scott, 1992).

Thus, when gifted African American girls hold high expectations for their future and for themselves (i.e., obtaining college degrees), they are more likely to be academically successful and have fewer relationships with peers that engage in risky behaviors that hinder school success (Cunningham, Corprew, & Becker, 2009). Also, as gifted African American girls develop a positive sense of self (that includes racial and gender identity), they are more likely to be academically successful and better able to negotiate tasks associated with career decision-making—despite the presence and magnitude of stereotype threat (Gushue & Whitson, 2006; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003; Steele, 1997).

When students do not have a positive sense of self, they lack the skills to stand strong in the face of stereotypes and are at risk for falling into a self-fulfilling prophecy that confirms the negative stereotypes and messages made about their identities (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Creating high expectations can be challenging if the school environment fails to promote the success of these student. When schools fail to recruit and retain gifted African American girls, and when they promote or support negative perceptions about their abilities, it can result in these girls struggling to see a promising future beyond high school.

Counseling Gifted African American Girls

Gifted African American girls often underutilize counseling services (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Their underutilized use of these services may be due to a lack school counseling services, school counselors performing non-counseling related task, or schools employing undertrained or culturally unaware school counselors, thus, limiting the opportunity for these students to take advantage of school counseling services (Ford, 2010; McDonough, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001; West-Olatunji, et al. 2010).

While a lack of trained school counselors (or school counseling services) pose a challenge for schools, school counselors are necessary for fostering college and career readiness of students (Bryan et al., 2011). Having a supportive relationship with a school counselor can help gifted African American girls mitigate the effects of a negative school environment and champion their overall success both academically and socially, and especially in the areas of college and career readiness (ASCA, 2012; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014; Gardner & Mayes, 2013).

As such, school counselors must facilitate college and career development activities and disseminate information to prepare gifted African American girls for a postsecondary education (ASCA, 2012; Chen-Hayes et al., 2014). In addition, they must cultivate a college-going culture to foster an environment where going to college is the norm and not the exception (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014).

Components of College and Career Readiness

School counselors are in an ideal position to assist gifted African American girls in developing their career aspiration and they can help them create a pathway to college and career readiness. To support gifted African American girls with college and career readiness, school counselors are encouraged to use the eight components of college and career readiness endorsed by The College Board National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA, 2010). They include: (1) college aspirations, (2) academic planning for college and career readiness, (3) enrichment and extracurricular engagement, (4) college and career exploration and selection process, (5) college and career assessments, (6) college affordability planning, (7) college and career admissions processes, and (8) transition from high school graduation to college enrollment. These components provide a systemic approach that all school counselors can implement, across elementary, middle, and high school to ensure equity both in process and results (NOSCA, 2010).

1. *College Aspirations.* NOSCA encourages school counselors to develop the confidence of students by creating a college-going culture that cultivates early college awareness; and to assist students in overcoming barriers they may encounter.

   School counselors can work with gifted African American girls by conveying high expectations and encouraging academic success and the belief that college attendance is achievable. One example of providing support for gifted African American girls is through group counseling. School counselors can facilitate a group counseling session with gifted African American girls around college and career aspirations using techniques like bibliotherapy or cinematherapy. Bibliotherapy and cinematherapy will allow these girls to craft their own stories and identify their own heroes and heroines that have overcome trials and tribulations just as they would (Maxwell, 2007).

   Since peer influence impacts college applications and enrollment (Hines, Harris, & Ham, 2014; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), school counselors should encourage gifted African American girls to share their experiences about giftedness and how this characteristic will help them get to college. School counselors can also work with parents of gifted African American girls in nurturing the college aspirations of their daughters (Peterson, 2007).

Several researchers have recognized the positive impact that parental involvement has on encouraging students to attend college (Bergerson, 2009; Hines et al., 2014; Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013; Perna & Titus, 2005; Sandefur, Meier, & Campbell, 2006). Engaging gifted African American girls in conversations about college, helping them choose courses appropriate for college readiness, and identifying resources for these students are some of the activities school counselors need to share with parents as tools for helping their daughters enroll in and succeed in college.

2. *Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness.* NOSCA encourages school counselors to ensure that students are engaged in an academic curriculum with rigorous, engaging content that aligns with their career interests and aspirations.

   To do this, school counselors must: (a) create an academic plan to ensure that gifted African American girls are properly identified and placed in courses matching their intellectual ability; (b) collaborate with teachers consistently to support them; and (c) connect academic coursework to gifted African American girls' career interests (Harris, Hines, & Ham, 2013; Hines et al., 2014). Reid and Moore (2008) noted that academic planning maximizes students' ability to obtain a college education.

3. *Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement*. NOSCA recommends that school counselors engage students in extracurricular experiences to develop their leadership abilities, academic talents, and nurture their career interests.

   School counselors can create (if one does not exist) a debate club for gifted African American girls to develop their public speaking skills, formulate arguments/counter-arguments, and improve their research skills. Developing skills in this area will help gifted African American girls gain confidence in speaking with others and prepare them for various interactions with students and professors in college.

4. *College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes*. NOSCA suggests that school counselors provide activities, experiences, and information to help students make the best decisions when discussing or choosing colleges.

   One way is to do this is to take gifted African American girls on a college tour and expose them to college culture. This can be followed by an exercise (such as a writing marathon) for students to reflect on their experience during the tour to better gauge if this college is suitable for their career interests (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; Radcliffe & Stephens, 2009). School counselors can use this exercise to assist gifted African American girls in creating an academic plan that coincides with their career interests or the type of post-secondary institution that fits their needs.

5. *College and Career Assessments*. NOSCA recommend that School counselors encourage and prepare all students to take career assessments and nurture their career aspirations.

   School counselors are charged with the responsibility of fostering the career development of their students (ASCA, 2012), including gifted African American girls, and promoting their preparation for college and career assessments. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is

a career assessment personality inventory that school counselors can use to assist gifted African American girls in not only gaining insight about themselves but also help them understand their interests, personal characteristics, and preferences. The Self-Directed Search (SDS, Holland, 1994), is another career assessment tool designed to help students match their personalities with potential jobs, careers, college majors, etc.

6. *College Affordability Planning*. According to NOSCA**,** the goal of this component is for school counselors to provide students and parents with detailed information about college costs, options for paying for college, and eligibility requirements.

   School counselors should provide gifted African American girls and their parents with comprehensive information about college costs, different ways of paying for college (e.g., scholarships, financial aid), and explore eligibility requirements. This will help the girls and their families to create a plan to ensure an affordable college education.

   At the middle and high school levels, school counselors should have conversations with both the gifted African American girls and their parents about academic success and its correlation to financial aid. School counselors can communicate with parents the importance of their girls doing well in school as it could lead to more scholarships and grant money to reduce student loan debt or out-of pocket expenses for college.

   Also, school counselors must discuss and explain the Free Application for Financial Aid and the timeline for submitting requisite materials for student eligibility. In addition, school counselors should have a parent-student meeting to discuss the cost-to-benefit ratio of college degrees so parents and students will make the appropriate decision regarding post secondary options. Freeman (2005) noted that African American parents as well as their children looked at salaries and lifestyle benefits (i.e., healthcare) to determine whether college attendance was worth the cost.

7. *College and Career Admission Processes.* NOACA states that school counselors should disseminate information about the college admissions processes to students as early as possible so that they can make the best selection based on their interests.

   School counselors can facilitate this endeavor through a curriculum guidance unit on applying for college. They can teach gifted African American girls about the multiple components of the college application process (e.g., submission process, deadlines, reference letters) and work with students in meeting the deadlines of their local and state post-secondary institutions. Additionally, they can collaborate with these institutions to create a pipeline for gifted African American girls to have an efficient and effective way of meeting deadlines and successfully submitting their college application.

8. *Transition from High School Graduation to College Enrollment.* The goal of this NOACA component is for school counselors to help students successfully transition from high school to college by connecting them with community and college resources.

   School counselors should collaborate with college outreach programs to give gifted African American girls an immersion experience before the college semester begins to help them in

locating resources (i.e., financial aid office, African American organizations, Disability Support Services, etc.) on college campuses to meet their academic and personal needs. Further, school counselors should work with colleges to pair gifted African American girls with mentors (preferably, other gifted students) to talk about their transition experiences and how they were able to successfully persist and succeed in college (Maxwell, 2007).

Implications for Future Research

There is a paucity of literature and research on the college and career readiness of gifted African American girls. Although current findings on the academic and career needs of gifted students provides school counselors with some insight about the needs of gifted African American girls, it lacks a concerted focus on this unique population. What is clear is that gifted African American girls need school counselors who will provide them with equitable services and supports to address their specific college and career needs. It is also clear that there is a need for preservice training for school counselors to increase their knowledge and skills for working effectively with gifted African American girls, as well as a need for quantitative and qualitative research on college and career readiness which focuses specifically on gifted African American girls to better understand the strengths and challenges these girls experience in preparing for and achieving their career goals. Also needed is research that seeks to develop evidenced-based practices that focus on career development of gifted African American girls and studies that investigate within-group differences among gifted African American girls' career development by exploring the impact of geographical (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban) and socioeconomic variations (e.g., low-income, middle-income, and high-income).

Closing Thoughts

Gifted African American girls face a myriad of challenges in schools. They are likely to be under identified for gifted education and are likely to face negative stereotypes and marginalization while managing their intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, giftedness). If gifted African American girls internalize negative messages, they may face challenges in actualizing their potential and being successful in school. Therefore, school counselors need to serve as a support system by helping them develop positive racial and gender identities to navigate their school experiences.

School counselors are in a pivotal position to create a pathway for gifted African American girls to attend college. They can do this by creating a college-going culture and providing targeted interventions like group counseling, individual college planning, and mentorship experiences.

Attaining a post-secondary education is imperative for higher salaries and broader career options. As such, school counselors must ensure that gifted African American girls are receiving an equitable education prior to the post-secondary years if they are to be competitive for admission to a college or other post-secondary institutions. One way of ensuring career and college readiness for gifted African American girls is by using the eight components of college and career readiness counseling discussed in this article.

AUTHOR NOTES

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