Resisting Dark Chocolate: A Journey Through Racial Identity and Deficit Thinking: A Case Study and Solutions

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Research indicates that Black children with darker complexions experience more difficulty being accepted by Whites and their Black peers; and they are believed to be less intelligent than White and lighter complexion Black students. It also reveals that the innocence young children have regarding differences between themselves and others do not last long. Too often, children of color learn that others do not embrace their race, complexion, and/or cognitive abilities. These encounters can cause many darker complexion African-American children to feel inadequate and incapable of meeting social and academic standards. This case study examined the life events of Celise, an unidentified gifted Black female, through the lens of Cross' racial identity model (Cross, 1991; Vandiver & Cross, 2001) and deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010). Personal and elementary school events by her mother are discussed, and suggestions for educators of gifted Black female students are shared.

Keywords: gifted African Americans, African American girls, under-representation, under-referral, teacher expectations, deficit thinking

Many children living in homogenized and racially segregated communities where they attend schools with children who share their race, income, and background have little contact with those who do not (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2012; Losen, 2013). In such racially segregated communities and schools, these children rarely interact with children from different cultural groups whose lived experiences, beliefs, values, and customs/traditions are not only different from theirs, but can also be contradictory or oppositional.

Additional research reveals that the innocence young children have regarding differences between themselves and others does not last long, with many children noticing physical racial differences around age three, but without judgment (APA, 2012). When presented with an unfamiliar face, infants as young as six months old stared significantly longer at the faces of a different race than the face of their same race (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). Hirschfiled (2008) found that two-year old toddlers used gender to categorize behavior (i.e., the girl was crying), and by the time they reached the age of three, they expressed bias by race (i.e., exclude children from other races from activities) (Aboud, 2005).

Children become aware of race and ethnicity as early as age three but their grasp of these concepts changes over time. Initially, they see race in very literal terms but increasingly become aware of societal prejudices and biases (Quintana, 2006). For example, children in preschool and kindergarten see race in physical terms. They often believe that taking a bath or shower can change racial status, or that race is a function of the amount of time a person spends in the sun.

By the time they are six years old, they begin to understand that racial that racial background is a function of ancestry that influence how people look and the customs and traditions in which they engage. They also develop a literal understanding of race and culture. Around sixth grade, when they enter middle/junior high school, they begin to realize that race is linked to other socio-demographic variables, such as income and socio-economic status. During middle school they grasp that racial prejudice exists and they see how political resources are allocated in neighborhoods and how affirmative action affects non-Whites and those who are less privileged. By the time they become teenagers and are in high school, their view of race matures and they begin to express pride in their heritage and a sense of belonging to a racial/ethnic group; or, they feel pressured to assimilate to the majority culture (Quintana, 2006).

Like self-esteem and self-concept, racial identity plays a major role in children's overall psychological and social well-being and health. A positive or healthy view of self increases and improves social relationships, attitudes toward life, and school performance. In other words, non-White children must learn to value who they are as not just individuals, but also racial beings. Too often, children of color, Black children in particular, learn that their skin color and shade are not viewed as attractive, which was highlighted in the past, via the infamous past doll studies by Clark and Clark (1947) and more contemporary studies in the 2000s by Margaret Beale Spencer (2008), Kiri Davis (2005), and such news broadcasts as CNN Billante & Hadad, 2010 (2010; Spencer, 2008).

Girls Just Want to be Accepted

With the aforementioned in mind, there is a vital need to focus on gender issues and identity among Black girls in general and those formally identified as gifted. Sexism, grounded in gender roles, remains prevalent in the U.S. More so than boys, girls are reared to focus on physical appearance rather than intelligence, achievement and careers. Much appears in the literature and social media about raising females in a sexist society that places the most values on males (see Evans-Winters in this special issue).

In the United States, society places expectations on the characteristics and behaviors that females and males 'should' exhibit along gender lines or 'norms'. The expectation is that males must be decisive, brave, strong, and athletic (Seem & Clark, 2006). In many cultures, men are more socially valued and considered to be more competent than women in a variety of activities and domains (Sadker & Sadker, 1990; Wagner & Berger, 1997; Williams & Best, 1990). Survey data derived from a diverse population across multiple regions of the Unites States revealed that men were consistently rated higher than women on a multidimensional scale of competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002).

Gender stereotypes continue to persist in classroom settings. For example, boys continue to receive active teacher attention via praise at a higher rate than girls at both the elementary (Halpern, 2000) and secondary levels (Sadker & Sadker, 1990). And, as time progresses, females tend to speak less in classroom settings (Sadker & Sadker, 1990), which can be attributed to a diminishing level of confidence Bachman, Hebel, Martinez, & Rittmayer, 2009).

For decades, educators have adhered to and promoted the notion that girls are more social, talk more, and are better at recognizing and dealing with emotions compared to their male counterparts (Brizendine, 2006). However, none of these assumptions are scientifically based, nor do they hold any scientific merit (Eliot, 2009). The belief that boys have 'math brains' and girls are 'better with reading and writing' may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, causing girls to forgo pursuing a career in math and science fields, and/or lead teachers to continue believe in gender-based stereotypes (Eliot, 2009).

While the workforce is comprised of almost 50% women, only 24% are in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) positions and they earn substantially less than their male counterparts (Beede, et al., 2009). When race is entered into the gender stereotype equation, Black women represent only 2% of those working in science and engineering occupations in 2010 (National Science Foundation, 2013). However, the number of minorities (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans) earning bachelor degrees in STEM fields in 2010 increased, as did those who earned masters degrees from approximately 3% to 11% and 6% to 8% respectively (NSF, 2013). In addition, Black women are now being portrayed in STEM positions in the media and they have found their way into animation with Disney's 2012 creation of Doc McStuffins which features a little Black girl who wants to become a doctor like her mother (Ayot, 2013). Doc McStuffins' positive portrayal of a Black female in STEM (in this case medicine) was so influential that a group of Black female medical doctors created a collage of themselves and sent it to Disney's headquarters proclaiming "We are Doc McStuffins". This movement led to the founding of the Artemis Medical Society, an organization devoted to attracting Black females into the medical profession (Ayot, 2013).

The positive portrayal of Black females has been long overdue, so is the need for Black females of all ages to embrace the color of their skin. . So, what does this mean for gifted Black girls? Gifted students are inquisitive and insightful learners who are quick to sense problems and inconsistencies. While it is developmentally typical for a 4 year old to notice race, a gifted student may notice race at an earlier age and be more inquisitive about such differences. An earlier and heightened sense of awareness and the need to focus on racial issues, including racial identity, is important for caregivers and educators so that they can promote a healthy development socially, psychologically, and academically.

Given the on-going studies, blogs, and concerns about racial identity, a focus on race and racial issues is in order. This case study examines the life events of Celise, an unidentified gifted fifth grade student as shared by her mother through the conceptual and theoretical lens of Cross' racial identity model (Cross, 1991; Cross & Vandiver, 2001) and the general notion of deficit thinking (e.g., Valencia, 2010). Personal stories and elementary school events are discussed and teacher suggestions are shared.

Celise: Background and Context

Currently (i.e., 2014), Celise is a 12-year-old sixth grade student. This is retrospective case study of her development from birth through fifth grade narrated through the voice of her mother, Vivian. Celise lives in a blended family with her mother, stepfather, and older stepsisters. She is very close to her father who lives in another state.

Celise in an unidentified gifted student, which is described later. She met the school district's criteria for formal identification but teacher checklists have prevented her from being identified. As Ford (2013) has written extensively about Black students more than other children of color being gravely underrepresented in gifted education, Celise is one such child. How does a child (of any racial background) receive A's throughout grades K-5, excel on statewide tests, and not get identified as gifted?

Anyone asked to describe Celise would mention her extremely dark skin. She is typically the darkest child in her school and participant in extracurricular activities. Strangers often comment on her skin tone by stating "she is so beautiful to be so dark." Lupita Amondi Nyong'o, the Academy Award winning, Kenyan actress, comes to mind when describing Celise's complexion.

The following events took placed when Celise was in the third grade and the story from this narrative serves as the backdrop for this case study:

> Teacher/Mrs. Phillips: "You all did so well on your test; I am going to give you a treat!"
>
> Students: "YAY! What kind of treat?"
>
> *Mrs. Phillips goes to the drawer and pulls out a bowl full of Hersey's miniatures. The level of excitement heightens as Mrs. Phillips walks to the front of the class with the clear, crystal cut, bowl.*
>
> Students: "Ssshhh! Be quiet! She won't call on us to pick our candy if we're not quiet."
>
> *Mrs. Phillips waits patiently and the students become silent, but some are on the verge of explosion.*
>
> Mrs. Phillips: "I am so proud of each and every one of you. I will call you by rows. When your row is called, please come up and choose one piece of candy from the bowl. You have a choice of milk chocolate, white chocolate, and dark chocolate."
>
> *Mrs. Phillips called the children row by row. Each student picked his or her bar of chocolate and rushed to sit down to indulge in one of America's favorite pleasures.*
>
> *As the last students approached the front of the classroom, disappointment began to ensue. The pickings were slim and all that was left in the pretty bowl were several bars of dark chocolate.*
>
> Student 1: "I don't like that kind."
>
> Student 2: " Dark chocolate is nasty".

> Student 3: "Well, I earned this candy, so I'm going to take it. It's better than nothing".
>
> He unwrapped the bar on his way back to his seat. Once the bar was opened, he burst out "this chocolate bar sure is dark".
>
> He took a bite and before he sat in his seat, he immediately spat the chocolate in the wrapper, threw it in the trash, returned to his desk, mumbling, "I don't really like chocolate, anyway." He then laid his head down on his desk in dejection.

What messages have students learned that seem applicable to race? And, what are the implications for gifted students, many of whom are insightful at an early age and emotionally over-excitable (Piechowski, 2006)? What messages are sent to Black students who are often affective oriented and harmonious oriented (Boykin, Tyler, & Miller, 2005)? As Ford (2010, 2012) noted for several decades, at least three lens are essential to be responsive to students who are gifted *and* Black *and* female. She asserts that a comprehensive frame of reference is needed that is inclusive of being gifted, female, and non-White.

Delivering Dark Chocolate

Vivian, Celise's mother, recalled the day her daughter was born. She immediately became defensive because of the issues she knew her daughter would face as a child with a dark complexion:

> *"She was the darkest baby I had ever seen. Out of the womb, I knew that I would have to affirm her on a daily basis; tell her that she was beautiful and smart, that her skin was beautiful, that she looked like she was dipped in chocolate. I intentionally purchased the darkest shades of dolls so that Celise would know her skin tone was beautiful and special. If someone asked my daughter why was her skin so dark, I wanted her to reply, because I am special."*

From birth, Vivian knew her daughter would experience more than one encounter based on the color of her skin that would affirm that Celise was indeed, a Black girl. She wanted her daughter to embrace her race.

Karyn Washington launched the website *For Brown Girls,* to empower Black women, more specifically, dark skinned women who "don't always feel the love" of society. Prior to launching the website, she developed and maintained a blog after feeling better about herself upon venting with her cousin. Her self-esteem and racial pride suffered because of her skin complexion (Uwumarogie, 2014).

Karyn had drive… Karyn had initiative... but Karyn committed suicide. Karyn Washington was unable to withstand the negative comments and callused treatment she received because of her dark skin. Karen experienced self-hatred (Vandiver & Cross, 2001) to the point of committing suicide … because of her dark skin. Vivian did not want her daughter to experience this. She

wanted to protect Celise as she experienced the psychology of Nigrescence – of becoming Black and into her blackness (Cross, 1991).

The Nigrescence Model

Cross (1991) and Vandiver's (2001) expansion of Cross' original Nigrescence model (1971, 1991) is divided into three categories—pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization—that describe the racial experiences of African Americans.

> Pre-encounter. This category is comprised of two identity clusters—*Assimilation and Anti-Black (miseducation & self-hatred)*. Black Americans who experience life with low levels of racial salience *assimilate* to the culture in which they live. They see themselves as Americans who just so happen to be Black. Black Americans, who have been *miseducated* to believe that only White is right and/or have developed *self-hatred* due to their skin color and appearance are said to be experiencing life in the *Anti-Black* phase of the pre-encounter category (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, O Cokley, & Cross, 2001).
>
> Immersion-emersion. Immersion-emersion also embodies two identities— *Intense Black Involvement* and *Anti-White.* Attitudes of Black Americans experiencing this level of racial development are completely immersed in everything affiliated with the Black race. In other words, they are pro-Black and are only interested in things affiliated with 'Blackness' or, some may develop an anti-White fixation. Nonetheless, Black people who are in this stage of racial development have experienced a type of encounter that brings them to the realization that they are indeed a Black person, meaning their color does make a difference. Their views and attitudes are no longer myopic. Instead, a difference between the races and cultures is realized.
>
> Internalization. The third category, *internalization,* encompasses four levels of identity—Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, Multiculturalist Racial, and Multicultural Inclusive. Black Americans who are identified as Black nationalist have "a strong focus on Black empowerment, economic independence, and heightened awareness of Black history and culture" (Vandiver et al., 2001, p.180). Those who identify themselves as both Black *and* American are considered to be bicultural, while those who identify themselves as Black but also appreciate interactions with those from other cultural and ethnic groups (i.e., Asian, Latino, Native Americans, etc.) are considered to be multicultural racial. Finally, Black Americans who identify themselves as such and also appreciate connections with other cultures such as that include White, gay men, and lesbians are considered or identified as Multicultural inclusive.

Vivian's concerns were valid. She knew that society would pass judgment because of Celise's dark skin, which might in turn cause her to lack self-love. She wanted Celise to realize that although she was different, she was still special; and when she celebrated others, she could be celebrated, too. Vivian wanted to protect her daughter from the presumption that she was dumb, lazy, ill-behaved, and less attractive when compared to her White and lighter skin Black classmates. While these assumptions are false, they are the realities for both White and Black preschool and elementary-aged children. A study conducted by Clark and Clark (1939), which

has been replicated by numerous researchers (e.g Spencer, 2008; Davis, 2005) revealed that, on average, White children believe that darker skinned Black children were mean, bad, and ugly when compared to White and lighter skinned Black children, via the use of dolls and/or pictures. When given the option to choose between darker and lighter skinned Black dolls or illustrations, White and Black students selected lighter skinned children when asked to identify students with whom they had positive attitudes and beliefs, social preferences, and color preferences. Specifically, less than 22% of White preschool children indicated that they would play with a darker skinned doll or person. More disturbingly, less than 4% of them stated that they wanted dark skinned students as classmates. When White elementary aged students were asked the same questions, 29% stated that they would play with a darker skinned doll or person, and less than 15% of them stated that they preferred dark skinned students as classmates (Billante & Hadad, 2010).

In contrast, when Black preschool participants were presented with Black dolls and/or pictures, approximately 60% indicated that they would want to play with dark skinned children, but less than 25% of them wanted dark skinned children as classmates. When Black elementary-aged children were asked, almost half of them preferred to play with dark skinned children, while about 40% wanted them as classmates (Billante & Hadad, 2010). The situation heightens when one puts this into the context of intelligence. Half of the Black preschool students thought that dark skinned children were dumb and three fourths of the White students felt the same (Billante & Hadad, 2010). If this is the perception of children in general, imagine how a 'dark chocolate' child, who is gifted, must feel when he or she is stereotyped … because of such perceptions.

Unfortunately, the negative perceptions of dark skinned people continue into adulthood. Dark skinned Blacks typically maintain a lower socioeconomic status (Hochschild, & Weaver, 2007), are more likely to be raised in segregated communities (Massey et al., 2003), are less likely to marry (Edwards, Carter-Tellison, & Herring, 2004), and are less likely to be elected into political office (Graham, 2006) compared to their lighter skinned Blacks. A recent study also revealed that darker skinned African American men perceived more discrimination from White people, than African American men who were lighter skinned (Ben-Zeev, Dennehy, Goodrich, Kolarik, & Geisler, 2014). Hence, it is necessary to instill racial pride at birth.

Skin preferences are taught. Children are not born thinking that brown skin looks dirty, ugly, or nasty. However, many come to school thinking just that. The *"dark chocolate"* child comes to school and, at times, is left in the bowl to be picked over and rejected, which can lead to a melted mess.

Celise Goes to School

By the time Celise reached school age, Celise's parents had divorced and Vivian and Celise relocated to the south. Again, Vivian became defensive because she was aware of racial tension that existed in the south. Celise, however, was excited about starting kindergarten! She breezed through the kindergarten entry assessments and as the school year progressed, Vivian saw that her daughter excelled academically. Up to that point, Vivian and Celise had pleasant encounters with the school system. They had not yet experienced a negative encounter that would possibly thrust them to next level of Cross' (1991) racial identity model.

Deficit Thinking – The Rocky Road

Vivian remarried and relocated to another district. When Celise entered school in the fall as a first grader, she aspired to be in the gifted program. She was aware of the program because both of her stepsisters were identified as gifted.

Vivian was confident that her daughter would continue to flourish and, thus be identified as a gifted student. In December of Celise's first grade year, Vivian inquired about her being assessed for the gifted program. The teacher informed her that Celise did not meet the mental abilities criteria on the CogAT, a cognitive test administered to all first grade students. When Vivian asked the teacher if she recommended Celise using creativity and motivation criteria, she responded, "If students score 8's and 9's, I notify the office. Celise scored 7's and 8's, and 9's so I did not notify the office." Vivian realized the first year teacher was not familiar with the alternative criteria and unfortunately for Celise, her teacher's lack of knowledge denied her the opportunity to be assessed. When Celise realized that she did not qualify for the gifted program, she was devastated. Vivian shared:

> "*I told her that she would be tested again when she entered the third grade. I assured my baby that things would be different when she got into third grade. I was confident that she would meet the criteria during the next testing cycle."*

Celise did well academically for the duration of her first grade year and scored at the advanced level on all of her first grade statewide tests. She also excelled academically during second grade. Celise scored at the advanced level on all statewide high-stakes tests, scoring perfectly on the reading test. Celise was confident when she entered third grade and was eager to share her accomplishments with her new teacher. Vivian also informed the new teacher that she wanted Celise to be challenged academically, that she was interested in her being assessed for the gifted program and would be readily available to discuss Celise's progress. As the year progressed, the teacher contacted Vivian to discuss Celise's deficits, not progress:

> "*She told me that my daughter was not reading on grade level and that she was not focusing in class. She also told me it took my daughter 2 ½ days to take a test that should have only taken her 20 minutes. I was very confused because she had done so well the year before and I knew that my daughter was smart! When I asked Celise about the testing, she told me that it was hard for her to concentrate because she was distracted. She also told me that her teacher would only allow her to check out books that were on her (mistaken) reading level. I knew I needed to advocate for my daughter. I had to come to her defense."*

Deficit Thinking

Deficit Thinking is the thought process of a person or situation focusing on that which is negative (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002; Valencia, 2010). In this instance, discrimination is the negative trait that is learned. Children are not born prejudice. Instead, they watch the actions of those around them and emulate what is seen. Impressionable children grow up to become the adults of whose behavior children will emulate. If a child is taught to think

negatively about a person or situation, then the thought process will most likely continue into adulthood.

Vivian suspected that deficit thinking was at the root of the issues that her daughter was experiencing with teachers. She wanted to pinpoint and/or rule out any issues that Celise may have had, so she agreed to complete an executive functioning assessment. The assessment protocol required both the teacher and the parent(s) to complete the questionnaire, and an analysis of the results showed that the teacher viewed Celise in a negative manner and the teacher and the parent scores were so statistically different, that the teachers' (subjective) scores were determined to be invalid.

Celise and Vivian experienced another encounter. It can also be argued that the deficit thought process was intensified because of Celise's dark complexion (see Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). One teacher's deficit thought process was even more apparent during a parent teacher conference when she stated, "I know that you want her to perform at the highest level, but at times, I can't even get her to perform at the lowest level." Vivian shared:

> *"When I asked her how she engaged Celise during instruction, she did not respond. And, it wasn't until I requested that she allow Celise to check out books on a higher reading level that she admitted that Celise was now "on grade level" because she scored "a little higher" on the reading level test when she pulled her aside to re-test her. But she insisted that the books that Celise selected were "too high" for her. She was so negative. For every compliment she made a statement to negate any positive academic trait that my daughter had. Even after I reminded her of Celise's perfect score on the state standardized reading assessment, she shook her head and said that since the test was read to the second grade students her score didn't tell her much about Celise's reading ability and that she would know her 'real' reading level when she got her results this year. And she kept on digging. She went on to say that as far as math was concerned, Celise was not at the top, or the bottom, but was just in the middle. By that time, I was furious and I decided not to ask any more questions or make any more comments because I knew that I was dealing with a negative and callused teacher and I didn't want to loose my cool."*

Vivian was upset! This was a major encounter. However, she did not progress to the immersion-emersion category in Cross' (2001) revised model. Instead, she moved directly to the internalization category. Vivian understood the concept of deficit thinking. Her thought process was that of a biculturalist; she realized that *because* she was a dark skinned Black, living in America, she and her family would constantly experience discriminatory treatment.

Light in the Dark

Celise's fourth grade teacher was very supportive. She was quick to share that Celise was very bright and a joy to have in class. She believed in Celise, including nominating her for a principal award and modifying her coursework to include higher level thinking assignments., Celise often earned the highest grades in her class. However, in December of the school year, her teacher relocated and a veteran teacher assumed classroom responsibilities. She too was very supportive

of Celise. About two months after her arrival, this veteran teacher asked for permission to send Celise to an enrichment class:

> *"When Celise got home, she excitedly asked me if I received her teacher's email. I told her that I had but I also felt compelled to tell her that although it was not the gifted classroom, she would be able to go to the gifted teacher for a class on Mondays. But, Celise didn't care. She was just excited that one of her teachers finally recognized that she was smart."*

Seeing the Light

As time progressed, Celise's emotions changed and her level of confidence waned. She went from being an excited, excelling student to one who questioned her own abilities. With encouragement and reassurance from her family, she continued to work hard and excel in school and on state standardized tests. Her family constantly told her that she was beautiful, witty, special, unique, and smart. So, Celise was able to persevere, despite the deficit thoughts of and being overlooked by her teachers.

Suggestions for Change

With Celise's story in mind, the following suggestions offer some guidance for teachers to advocate for and be proactive with *all* of their students.

1. Recognize your own biases and address them head on. Identify Black students' strengths, set goals, and share them with students and parents. Inform them of expectations to accomplish during the school year.

2. Multicultural curriculum promotes racial pride. Use the color-coded Ford-Harris Matrix (Ford, 2011; Trotman Scott, in press) as a tool to infuse multicultural content, increase rigor, and ensure differentiation. This tool will allow all students to be seen within the curriculum being used. Such lesson plans will also address skin color so that gifted Black girls do not cave in to colorism.

3. Prepare students of all ages for colorism encounters by surrounding them with multicultural toys, crayons, posters, and books that represent the full ray of skin tones. Use books such as *The Color of Us* or *The Crayon Box that Talked* (DeRolf, 1997).

4. Be mindful of examples, literature, and images used within the classroom. Make sure that males and females of all shades and hues are represented so that students are provided with a daily reminder of their worth and beauty.

5. Utilize parents as resources for professional development and dialogue. Invite them to share their stories, experiences, and suggestions as racial beings.

As educators, it is our duty to not only teach all students, but also affirm them—no exception! Let all students know they are smart and valued. If you leave the dark chocolate in the chocolate bowl, it may melt before it is able to enter into the chosen pool.

AUTHOR NOTES

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