

Enhancing Culturally Diverse Males' Scholar Identity:



Suggestions
for Educators
of Gifted Students

by
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Juan recently tried out for the baseball team and made it; he also plays for the local YMCA. A look through his school records indicates that, in the third grade, he scored at the 98th percentile in math and 97th percentile in science on an achievement test. Juan had a high GPA (3.8) throughout elementary school. His grades began to fluctuate in middle school. As a ninth grader, he has an IQ that places him in the gifted range (132); however, his GPA is 2.9 and he does not participate in honors or AP classes. He does just enough not to fail classes. For the most part, he dislikes school; he says that he cannot compete with the “smart” students, so he does not bother. Instead, he has decided to put his energy into sports. Juan states, “I used to be smart. I’m not good in school. But, I can play ball, so that’s what I focus on.”

How students’ view themselves as learners is important to consider when trying to promote their achievement and confidence in school. It is clear that students who lack confidence in school become unmotivated and unengaged, and they find their identities in other areas (such as sports and entertainment). In other words, children with an underdeveloped sense of self-efficacy are less likely to persist in school, less likely to be high achievers, and less likely to be identified as gifted. Too often, these unmotivated, underachieving, and unidentified children are disproportionately Black and Hispanic males (Ford, 1996; Grantham, 2004; Hébert, 2001; Whiting, 2006). Nationally, statistics reveal that Black males comprise 8.37% of school districts nationally, but 3.54% of gifted programs; and Hispanic males comprise 7.85% of the school population, but 4.59% of gifted programs (Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Survey, 2000). Thus, while educators are rightfully concerned with the most effective ways to identify giftedness in students and ways to promote higher achievement and motivation, the need is most urgent for Black and Hispanic males.

The role of self-efficacy in student achievement is not a trivial one (Bandura, 1977). Like other aspects of identity (self-concept and self-esteem), one’s self-efficacy plays a critical role in how a student performs in school settings. This article is based on the proposition that both underachievement and the underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic males in gifted education programs is influenced by their identities as a student, specifically, their scholar identity. In the pages that follow, I describe the components of a scholar identity and set forth two propositions: (1) Black and Hispanic males are more likely to achieve academically when they have a scholar identity; and (2) Black and Hispanic males are more likely to be viewed as gifted if they achieve at higher levels. To repeat, both of these propositions have clear implications for the persistent and pervasive underrepresentation of these culturally diverse males in gifted education.





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Characteristics of a Scholar Identity

As already noted, Black and Hispanic males represent two school populations that have been overlooked frequently for gifted education referral, screening, and placement. What can educators do to remedy the situation? Why do so many Black and Hispanic males find their identities on the athletic fields and in the entertainment industry? Why do so few find their niche, their identities, and their self-efficacy in academic settings? What can educators do to develop or enhance a scholar identity among these male students? What is a scholar identity?

I define a *scholar identity* as one in which culturally diverse males view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings (Whiting, 2006). Having worked with Black and Hispanic males for more than two decades, I have found several characteristics that contribute to what I am calling a scholar identity. I begin with a discussion of self-efficacy, which lays the

foundation for other components of a scholar identity.

Self-Efficacy

Diverse males who have a scholar identity believe in themselves; they are resilient; have self-confidence, self-control; and a sense of self-responsibility. They like who they are and believe that they are stellar students. They are unwilling to succumb to negative stereotypes about Black and Hispanic males because they consider themselves to be intelligent and talented. Resilience is a noticeable characteristic of high-achieving or gifted Black students (Ford, 1996). They are not distracted by challenges or setbacks because they have personal faith and even seek out academic challenges.

Willing to Make Sacrifices

Many adults have learned through experiences and trials and tribulations that sacrifices are necessary for reaching both short-term and long-term goals. Diverse males who have a scholar identity also understand how

some sacrifices are necessary in order to reach many goals. Therefore, they are more likely to relinquish some aspects of a social life (e.g., parties, joining a fraternity, dating, popularity, and so forth) and other distractions (e.g., TV) in order to reach those goals that they desire.

Internal Locus of Control

Diverse males who have an internal locus of control are optimistic; these males believe they can do well because they work hard, study, and do school assignments. Just as important, when they fail or do poorly in school, they are willing to ask for help. Thus, these Black and Hispanic males are less likely to blame low achievement, failure, or mistakes on their teachers, families, and/or peers.

Aspirations

Motivation theories (see Dweck & Elliott, 1988; Graham, 1991, 1994) indicate that people who have aspirations tend to stay focused and to prepare for success. They think about both the present and the future, particularly regarding how one's current behaviors and decisions influence future achievements. Diverse males with aspirations are not overly concerned about immediate gratification and short-term interests and goals. These students set realistic goals; likewise, they recognize the importance of a high GPA, excellent school attendance, and participation in challenging courses in reaching their dreams.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is an honest appraisal and understanding of one's strengths and limitations. They do not let their weaknesses distract them

from learning. Black and Hispanic males are able to adapt and find ways to compensate for their weaknesses (e.g., they seek a tutor in classes where they are not doing well; they study longer and more often).

Strong Need for Achievement

For these diverse males, the need for achievement is stronger than the need for affiliation. Thus, their identity is not determined by the number of friends they have or their popularity. While they may be social and want to have friends, they are not troubled about being popular for the sake of popularity. Black and Hispanic males with a strong need for achievement understand that high academic achievement will take them far in life. Accordingly, school and learning come first—they do not sacrifice school achievement for friendships or a social life.

Academic Self-Confidence

Diverse males with academic self-confidence believe they are strong students. They feel comfortable and confident in academic settings, learning, and playing with ideas. Most importantly, they do not feel inferior in school, and they do not feel the need to negate, deny, or minimize their academic abilities and skills. These males have a strong work ethic—they spend time doing schoolwork, they study, and they require little prodding from parents and teachers. Ultimately, those with a high academic self-concept understand that to be successful, effort is just as important, or more important, than ability.

Racial Identity and Pride

Like self-esteem and self-concept, racial identity and pride affects students' achievement and motiva-

tion (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). For these males, race has high salience; they are comfortable being a person of color. They seek greater self-understanding as a racial being, but are also aware of the importance of adapting to their environment and being bicultural (Cross & Vandiver). Just as important, they do not equate achievement with “acting White” or “selling out” (Ferguson, 2001; Ford, 1996; Fordham, 1988). These young men refuse to be constrained by social injustices based on gender, socioeconomic status, and race or ethnicity.

Masculinity

Masculinity is a sensitive and controversial topic. Here, I refer only to the sense that Black and Hispanic males with a scholar identity do not equate being intelligent or studious or talented with being “feminine” or “unmanly.” Rather than take on these ideas, these diverse males believe that males are intelligent and that being gifted or intelligent does not subtract from one's sense of masculinity.

Suggestions for Promoting a Scholar Identity

As already stated, just as many Black and Hispanic males find their self-efficacy in nonacademic settings, they can, and must, find their identity in school settings. Recognizing that parents and primary caregivers lay the foundation for children's identity, teachers cannot neglect this area of development. In other words, teachers also affect how students view themselves as scholars or students. How do we promote a scholar identity among Black and Hispanic males, too many of whom feel marginalized in school settings, too many of whom feel that

they are unintelligent and incapable of succeeding in gifted education or rigorous courses? Four suggestions are offered below.

Mentors and Role Models

The importance of mentors and role models in the lives of students cannot be underestimated. They have always played a fundamental role in developing gifts and talents and motivating students. Organizations such as fraternities, the Boys and Girls Clubs, 100 Black Men, Urban League, and others recognize that one person can make a difference in a child's life. These male role models and mentors can focus on leadership skills, notions of manhood or masculinity, developing positive relationships, ways to resolve conflicts and manage anger, ways to cope with social injustices, strategies for improving learning strategies and techniques (e.g., study skills, organizational skills, time management skills), career development, social skills, soft skills, and networking. They can also provide exposure to college settings and vocational internships for older Black and Hispanic males. Another promising strategy is peer mentoring. This arrangement includes older diverse males mentoring younger diverse males (e.g., class valedictorians and salutatorians, members of National Honor Society) and providing similar types of experiences as those just described.

Multicultural Counseling (Academic, Social-Emotional, Vocational)

Diverse males can also profit from counseling experiences where they are able to talk about their concerns and needs, as well as listen to how

other diverse males cope with and overcome personal, social-emotional, academic, and vocational challenges. Both individual and group counseling can address their needs, interests, and concerns. More specifically, multicultural counseling holds much potential for being relevant and meaningful to diverse groups when it focuses on their specific needs and concerns (Lee, 2005; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2001).

Academic School Events

School functions and events provide an ideal way to reinforce a scholar identity in culturally diverse males. The development of career days, the use of frequent and ongoing (e.g., monthly) motivational speakers in classes and schoolwide assemblies, and leadership development workshops represent a few examples of relevant academic-related events.

Multicultural Education

Proponents of multicultural education argue that diverse students will become more motivated and engaged when they see themselves affirmed in the materials and content (Banks, 2006; Ford, 1996). Reading the biographies of diverse heroes can help inspire culturally diverse males, as well as develop their sense of social justice (e.g., W. E. B. DuBois, Jose Hernandez, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Vivien Thomas, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Manny Ramirez, Carter G. Woodson, Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, and Michael E. Dyson).

Conclusion

It is a sad truth that Black and Hispanic males are tragically under-

represented in gifted education and overrepresented among those who underachieve. Many efforts have been initiated to address both of these concerns. In this article, I have proposed another suggestion, namely that educators must recognize the importance of developing and nurturing a scholar identity in these populations. With an improved focus on scholarly identity, hopefully, more Black and Hispanic males will find a sense of belonging, a sense of worth, an increased sense of efficacy in school settings, and will achieve at higher levels. What more can we ask?

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