





# Never Too Young to Lead:

## Gifted African American Males in Elementary School

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Just within the past two decades, we have witnessed the proliferation of a variety of literature, both academic (Fashola, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Hopkins, 1997; Polite & Davis, 1999; Taylor & Phillips, 2006; Watson & Smitherman, 1996) and popular (Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Kunjufu, 1985, 1989, 2005; Porter, 1998; Wynn, 1992), regarding the underachievement and underrepresentation of African American males in U.S. schools (Holzman, 2006). According to the literature, African American males have been disproportionately placed in special education classrooms (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001) and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Bonner, 2000; Ford, 1995; Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999). Despite the efforts at broadening the definition to include multifaceted categories and criteria in the identification of giftedness, we continue to see widespread underrepresentation of African American students in gifted and talented programs, by as much as 50% nationally (Donovan & Cross, 2002). In this article, we discuss the promise offered by one of the ability areas cited in the federal definition of giftedness—*leadership ability*—as a potential means of addressing the problem of underrepresentation. We not only focus on key mentoring initiatives but also on promising national programs. The article concludes with practical recommendations for practitioners.

## Defining Giftedness

The terms *gifted* and *giftedness* have both undergone significant changes over the years in their functional and symbolic definitions. According to Matthews (2004),

Beginning with its origins in the early history of psychology, giftedness was defined primarily in terms of intellectual ability. By the 1950s, however, spurred by factors that included the multifaceted model of intelligence developed by Guilford and the elaboration by DeHann and Kough of 10 categories of gifts and talents, a variety of efforts began leading toward a broader conceptualization of giftedness. (p. 77)

Perhaps the most significant attempts at broadening the conceptualization of these terms came by Congressional mandate and the subsequent efforts of Commissioner of Education Sydney Marland's attempt in 1972 to publish the first formal definition of giftedness.

According to the United States Department of Education's (1993) *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* report, giftedness includes,

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or

activities not ordinarily provided by the school. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 19)

When considering the amount of variation found to exist in state definitions (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2005), it becomes readily apparent that some states embrace more traditional definitions of giftedness—those focusing on academic ability and intelligence, whereas others use a more multifaceted and fluid approach in this process. Although there is great variability across these state's definitions, many have been consistent in employing leadership capacity or leadership potential as an area of importance. Significant in these definitions is Matthews' (2004) observation that, "Leadership has been retained in the federal definition of giftedness across major revisions, since its inclusion in the Marland Report (1972) definitions more than 30 years ago" (p. 77).

### Gifted African American Males: The Elementary School Context

The story of the African American male in gifted and talented programs is one of widespread underrepresentation. Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Frazier Trotman (2002) offer some plausible explanations for this phenomenon—lack of teacher referral, low performance on standardized norm-referenced test scores, and student and family choice. According to Grantham and Ford (2003), these barriers are but a few in the list of many that have impeded the progress of gifted African American males, but they appear to be the most pernicious.

Other potential barriers for African American males that are particular to the elementary school context are included in Bonner's (2001) article. Due to the potential for underachievement among African American students in first, second, and third grade, a time in which most identification processes for these programs are implemented, these students often go unidentified. The outcome of this conundrum is typical in what Donovan and Cross (2002) reported. Namely, that the representation of racial and ethnic groups in gifted and talented programs favors some groups more than others. The study found that gifted and talented programs were comprised of:

- 7.64% Asian/Pacific Islander students,
- 72.59% White students,
- 8.44% African American students (of which 3.65% are African American males),
- 10.41% Hispanic/Latino students, and
- 0.93% American Indian/Alaskan American students

For the African American male, the elementary context is a time in which capitalizing on gifts and talents is critical, especially if these gifts are going to be harnessed and channeled in positive and rewarding directions. Unfortunately, much like the information reported by Donovan and Cross (2002), unless we tackle the issue of underidentification and underrepresentation early on, we will continue to see inequities. Perhaps one way of addressing these inequities is to focus on areas in which giftedness is promoted and valued among African American populations. From W. E. B. Du Bois' (1903/2003) notion of the "Talented Tenth" to some of the contemporary initiatives enacted by

civic, Greek-letter, and religious organizations, leadership or leadership capacity as it is codified in the federal definition of giftedness promises to be an excellent starting point.

Scholars have discussed several possible reasons for the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted and talented programs. One primary reason that has emerged relates to the definitions used in defining giftedness. Research by Ford (1994) and Bonner (2001) found that existing definitions of giftedness have not taken into account the unique attributes, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds of African American male students. One of the primary components of these definitions of giftedness is an emphasis on the characteristic of leadership (Matthews, 2004). This emphasis on leadership as a requisite for defining giftedness raises concerns regarding how leadership potential is perceived and defined vis-à-vis African American male students. The implications of these perceptions are of particular importance for African American males in elementary school because the study of leadership ability in young children has possible implications for leadership development in older children (Parker & Begnaud, 2003).

Walters and Smith's study (as cited in Kershaw, 2001) found that the role of leadership in the African American community has been a contested issue since at least the turn of the last century. Although there are numerous discussions in academic literature about African American leadership, most of this literature is focused on the development of political and community leaders at the national level (Kershaw, 2001). There has been little discussion in mainstream academic literature regarding the development of leadership qualities among African American student cohorts,

particularly at the elementary education level.

Developing leadership qualities is of paramount importance to enhancing access to gifted and talented programs for African American males. This is especially significant given the fact that leadership ability has consistently been recognized as an important component of how giftedness is defined (Matthews, 2004). Despite this recognition, leadership remains the most underinvestigated aspect of the several domains that define giftedness (Matthews, 2004). One of the reasons that leadership has not been more thoroughly investigated in relation to giftedness may be due to the difficulty of defining the characteristics of leadership. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the various definitions of leadership, it should be noted that such definitions are numerous (Edmunds & Yewchuk, 1996; Simonton, 1995), complex (Bass & Stogdill, 1990), and highly contested (Matthews, 2004). Notwithstanding these complexities, it is possible to draw connections between the identification and development of leadership potential and the identification and development of gifted and talented African American male students.

In a recent examination of the existing literature on leadership and its connection to gifted and talented youth, Matthews (2004) identifies several specific studies as particularly compelling. One study in particular was completed by Roach et al. (1999). According to Matthews, this is "The only study addressing the long-term development of youth leadership and its relationship with adult leadership" (p. 94). Roach et al. note that theories of adult leadership tend to focus on individual abilities, whereas theories of youth leadership are primarily situational in orientation and focus

on *self-knowledge*. This emphasis on self-knowledge stands in contrast to the emphasis on charisma that permeates theories of adult leadership (Matthews, 2004).

Although there is a lack of academic literature focusing on leadership as a component of giftedness, an even greater scarcity of literature specifically focuses on leadership among African American gifted student cohorts. A body of literature related to self-knowledge could potentially inform the development of leadership models for African American boys. This literature fits readily into the areas of mentoring and rites of passage programming (henceforth referred to as RITES). Many of these initiatives, especially RITES programs, are designed specifically for young, African American males; however, they largely have been overlooked by researchers in the field of gifted and talented education.

## Encouraging Leadership Potential

Mentoring has been frequently discussed as an appropriate intervention for aiding African American boys who are struggling with academic achievement (Hrabowski et al., 1998; Price, 2002; Struchen & Porta, 1997). Organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America (<http://www.scouting.org>); 100 Black Men of America, Inc. (<http://100blackmen.org>); and Concerned Black Men (<http://www.cbmnational.org>) have traditionally offered group mentoring for young men throughout the country. More specifically, African American fraternal organizations, such as the Prince Hall Masons (2004), Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (Wesley, 1981), and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (Crump, 1991) have offered men-

toring programs targeting African American males. Although these programs have existed for many years throughout the United States, they have generally operated in isolation from each other, as well as from schools. In addition, there has not been a sustained and unified attempt at achieving key mentoring goals among these groups.

RITES programs in particular have been found to be highly effective in promoting successful achievement among African American boys (Alford, 2003; Hare & Hare, 1985; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Hill, 1992). Generally speaking, RITES programs have discouraged labeling students as gifted. Instead, Hill (1999) points out that RITES programs are based on African-centered principles that strive to eliminate distinctions such as “gifted,” “average,” or “impaired.” Grantham (2004) discusses the role of mentoring and its potential to increase the representation of African American males in programs for the gifted and talented and highlights the importance of personal motivation and racial identity development as important factors for practitioners to understand in their attempts to recruit and retain African American male students who are gifted and talented.

This concept of racial identity development corresponds with the focus on the development of self-knowledge that is endemic of many RITES programs. RITES programs offer a unique opportunity for African American males to develop the leadership skills necessary to garner academic success in school-based gifted and talented programs and to subsequently make a successful transition into adulthood. Alford (2003) describes RITES ritualistic acts as “symbolic and meaningful events that mark transitional periods for individ-

uals as specified stages of life occur” (p. 3).

Alford (2003) uses the work of Warfield-Coppock (1990) to further characterize RITES as bringing “. . . stability, ease of transition, and continuity to life, as well as groundedness, balance, and order” (p. 6). Warfield-Coppock (1992) explains that the primary goal of RITES programs is “instilling a strong, positive sense of self and achievement in African-American youth” (p. 472). Successful RITES programs for African American youth across the country revealed that most of these programs had improvement of self-concept as one of the major indicators for success of the program and that self-knowledge was a crucial attribute for African American youth making the transition to adulthood. For those who are tasked with designing curricula or implementing effective programming to encourage the leadership potential among gifted African American males, both features should be taken into consideration during key planning stages.

Other examples of programs that show promise for enhancing the leadership potential among African American males in general and gifted African American males in particular include the Young Leaders’ Academy (YLA) in Baton Rouge, LA. YLA “exists to nurture the development of leadership abilities of young African American males, empowering them to improve the quality of their lives and assist them in becoming productive citizens” (The Young Leaders Academy of Baton Rouge, n.d., ¶ 1). Still another program is the African American Male Achievers Network (A-MAN), a California state-approved mentoring initiative with the expressed purpose of “increasing the number of African American and other minority students who are excited about and who enter the

fields of science and technology” (A-MAN, n.d., ¶ 2). Whether the focus on African American male leadership potential is on specific academic fields or more general academic and social endeavors, programs can be found at local, state, regional, and national levels—from the state-focused Gentleman on the Move program in Georgia to the nationally focused Youth to Leaders Institute sponsored by the Tavis Smiley Foundation.

## Conclusion

By targeting both mentoring and rites of passage programming initiatives, leadership potential can be cultivated as early as elementary school. To offer administrators, faculty, and parents’ viable information on how to effectively meet the needs of these students, we offer the following recommendations.

1. *Involve civic, clergy-based, community, and historically Black Greek letter organizations in the planning process when designing curriculum emphasizing leadership ability.* These groups have a longstanding history of cultivating and providing leadership experiences for African American males. To capture important cultural nuances and idiosyncrasies, it is important to get input from those individuals who are indigenous to these communities.

2. *Infuse “authentic” experiences into leadership ability curriculum or training opportunities.* It is critical to avoid a purely academic approach to leadership, one in which students only learn lessons in leadership processes through temporal exercises. Even at the elementary school level, leadership opportunities can be structured in classroom or schoolwide interactions that are meaningful.

3. *Create a more seamless connection between youth leadership behavior and*

adult leadership performance (Roach et al., 1999). Students, especially at the elementary level, are not afforded the opportunity to see how current leadership training will manifest itself later in leadership opportunities. Using adults in leadership capacities might be more of a stretch for this population (although this practice is not discouraged), but junior high school or high school leaders might be more reasonable models.

4. *Refrain from treating African American males as a monolithic group.* The development of programs emphasizing leadership ability for African American gifted males must take into account the range of background experiences these students bring to the educational setting. Some students will have had many opportunities to be exposed to leadership and decision making in home or community settings; others will have not been exposed to such opportunities and will flounder when first presented with these opportunities.

5. *Establish clear criteria in how leadership ability is to be used in the evaluation of giftedness.* The literature affirms the confusion and lack of specificity related to defining this particular form of giftedness. Thus, it is important for administrators, teachers, and personnel responsible for identifying gifted African American males to not only establish effective programs to enhance these abilities, but to also recognize them as viable identification constructs.

Leadership ability is a key area highlighted in the federal definition of giftedness. This particular area provides a great deal of opportunity to promote the gifts and talents of African American males, primarily due to its longstanding tradition within the African American community. It is never too early to begin

recognizing giftedness, particularly as it is manifested through leadership potential among African American males. Thus, in order to improve the chances for optimal development, both short and long range for these learners, identification at any early age is not only encouraged, but required (Callahan, 2001; Guralnick & Bennett, 1987).

For practitioners who seek to tap into the leadership potential of gifted African American male cohorts, efforts should be aimed at using existing community agents and structures as a means to “jump start” their efforts. This approach will add a much-needed level of authenticity, genuineness, and legitimacy to the work they are attempting to engage in with these communities. Also, by using the indigenous agents and systems within these communities, practitioners are afforded the opportunity to cut across each of the recommendations cited above. **GCT**

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