African American Millennials

A Profile of Promise

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Resilience refers to positive adaptation in the face of present or past adversity (Wright & Matsen, 2005). It is the "ordinary magic" that rises from the minds of children and their families as they interact with their communities (Masten, 2001). Gonzales (2003) defined three major components of Resiliency Theory: risk factors, protective factors, and developmental assets. *Risk factors* include low socioeconomic status, dropping out, participation in violent activities, recent divorce, neglect, poverty, teenage pregnancy, and teenage parenthood. *Protective factors* help reduce the impact of risk factors, and they include support from family, friends, teachers, and community (Mash & Wolfe, 2002). Gonzales profiled these supportive relationships as having the following characteristics: caring with high expectations, a presence that produces a sense of belonging, and guidance focused on increasing self-esteem. *Developmental assets* are the third aspect of resilient positive adaptation. These are behaviors and opportunities in students' lives that help them adapt to new contexts (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Typically, these factors relate directly to success, like participation in college preparation, working with a mentor, or taking part in internship programs. Developmental assets also include behaviors like volunteering in the community and leading organizations, as well as possessing values like delaying gratification and valuing diversity (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). Finally, a key tenet of Resiliency Theory is a focus on what actually works in students' lives, instead of focusing on what has not worked in their lives (e.g., poverty status, at-risk behaviors, poor performance, and poor school environment).

The American Psychological Association's (APA) Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008) reported that increasingly the study of resilience is being driven by ecological models that see resilience as multilayered, including individual, environmental, and sociohistorical experiences. However, the APA report indicated that the ethnic and cultural experiences of African American youth have been left out of many of these studies. Therefore, it is important to examine the resilience ecology of students from different ethnicities and cultures who might benefit from gifted education.

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Method

The focus of this study was to create a descriptive profile of African American millennials who might benefit from gifted education. We based the selection of variables on Resiliency Theory (see Table 1) and on Renzulli's (1978) three-ring model of giftedness.

Sample

The source of data was the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002). To generate the ELS: 2002, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) surveyed 15,362 students in grade 10, including 2,033 African American students and 8,757 White students. The sampling design for the ELS: 2002 was multilevel, with a stratified sample of schools selected first, then students were randomly sampled from within the school. Because our use of these data is descriptive, we report only frequency counts and percentages; this includes the total number of students in all of the schools included in the ELS: 2002 (see Table 2). The counts and percentages reported are weighted, that is, adjusted so that they are fully representative of the year 2001 population of U.S. 10th graders, estimated to be 3,439,489 based upon recent Census data. The African Americans in the sample made up approximately 14.4% of all students in the data set.

The students in this report were born in the mid-1980s and were in the middle of their high school experiences at the start of the new millennium—classic millennials.

Instruments

The NCES surveyed each of the students about their educational experiences, beliefs, and attitudes, and conducted surveys of one parent, two teachers (one English and one mathematics), and one school administrator about the students, their schools, and the students' learning experiences. They also tested the students in reading and math to assess their ability in these domains. Math test items consisted of items derived from the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) assessments and covered arithmetic, algebra, probability, and some advanced topics (Ingels, Pratt, Rogers, Siegel, & Stutts, 2005). Reading test items were derived from previous National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) and PISA assessments including items that covered comprehension and synthesis of text (Ingels et al., 2005).

Selection of Variables to Analyze

This public data set did not have a flag variable that indicated giftedness. Therefore, we used the data to identify a set of students who might benefit from gifted education. We chose a definition suggested by Renzulli (1978) as the starting place for finding suitable survey items that would be indicators of giftedness. Renzulli proposed that gifted behavior occurred when above-average intelligence or ability, task commitment, and high creativity interacted. The NCES data did not report direct measures of intelligence or ability, task commitment, and creativity. Therefore, for the current study, the criteria for potential giftedness included proxies for Renzulli's model of giftedness. With regard to *above-average ability*, we identified students who were in the highest quartile on both mathematics and reading standardized tests administered and reported by NCES as possessing above-average ability. Also, these students may have been enrolled in or a teacher may have recommended that they enroll in an advanced placement class in addition to being in the highest quartile. With regard to *task commitment*, students were selected based upon exhibited academic, leadership, or artistic involvement as defined by questions in the NCES surveys. We further defined those with leadership and artistic qualities as those who reported participation in extracurricular leadership activities or extra training in music, art, and drama as indicative of task commitment and also as defining those students who may be considered as *creative*. To allow for perspective, we included comparisons to White students who met the same criteria. We made our criteria expansive by including students who met any one of the above criteria.

To assess Resiliency Theory, we selected variables that related to risk factors, protective factors, and developmental assets. The first group of variables from the ELS: 2002 included risk and protective factors like socioeconomic status (SES) and the urbanicity of the school (see Table 1). To depict students' developmental assets, we chose variables that allowed students to express their beliefs and expectations about education. We also chose teacher opinions and observations about the same students. Test performance and teacher recommendations were used as possible criteria for outcomes that might indicate resilience.

Table 1
Resilience Variables From the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002

Risk/Protective Factors	Protective Factors	Outcomes
Family socioeconomic status	Student beliefs and expectations	Test performance
Urbanicity of school	Teacher opinions and observations	Teacher recommendations

Table 2
School Profile—Urbanicity

	African American (n = 131,634)	White (n = 1,106,663)
Urban	49%	17%
Suburban	37%	40%
Rural	14%	43%

Note. Values may not add up to 100 because of rounding.

Results

Students Identified With Potential for Inclusion in Gifted Education

Twenty-seven percent (n = 131,634) of African American millennial students and 57% (n = 1,106,663) of White millennial students met the criteria for

Table 3
Teachers' Opinion of Student

	African American (n = 131,634)	White (n = 1,106,663)
Student works hard for grades (English)—yes	57.6%	66.7%
Recommended for AP/honors (English)—yes	27.9%	34.2%
Student works hard for grades (math)—yes	49.4%	68.6%
Recommended for AP/honors (math)—yes	13.0%	23.4%

above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment as stated above. The African American sample consisted of 52% female, and 50% of the White sample was female. When the criteria were made more stringent by focusing on only academic achievement or above-average ability, 11% (n = 52,657) of African Americans and 44% (n = 916,616) of Whites met this criterion. These figures have been weighted to be nationally representative based upon figures from the 2000 U.S. Census.

Risk/Protective Factor: Family Socioeconomic Status

The average income for African American families in this sample was in the income category of $25,000 to $35,000. The average income for Whites in the sample was in the $50,000 to $75,000 income category. The median income for Whites was higher than the 75th percentile for African Americans. African Americans also had much more variance in income, with the lowest incomes represented in the African American group.

Risk/Protective Factor: Profile of Schools

In the sample containing those African Americans and White students identified with potential, 5,370 schools participated in the survey. These differences were noted:

- The schools where African Americans attended were primarily suburban and urban, whereas White students attended primarily rural and suburban schools (see Table 2).
- Nearly 85% of African American students attended public schools, and 74% of Whites attended public schools.
- For African Americans, 16% of students in the schools they attended were involved in community service projects compared to 23% of the students in the schools attended by White students.
- At the schools where African Americans in the sample attended, 10% of the students were involved in dropout-prevention programs compared to 5% at the schools where White students attended.
- Twelve percent of the students in the schools attended by African Americans participated in gang-prevention programs. In the schools where White students attended, less than 1% (0.43%) of the students participated in gang-prevention programs.
- In the schools where African Americans attended, 40% of the students were in college preparatory programs, compared to 52% of the students in schools where White students attended.

Protective Factor: Teachers' Selected Characteristics and Opinions of Students

On some characteristics, African American and White students' teachers were similar, even in their opinions of their students (see Table 3). African American students' English teachers averaged 13 years of teaching experience. White students' English teachers averaged 14 years of teaching experiences. For both groups, the average years of math teaching experience was 16. Additionally, for both groups 65% of the English teachers held degrees in English. However, 54% of African American students had teachers who had degrees in math as opposed to 63% of White students. Even though all students in our study met our criteria for above-average ability, African American millennials were less likely to be regarded as hardworking. Fifty-eight percent of African American students' English teachers regarded them as working hard for grades in English compared to 67% of White students. When mathematics teachers' opinions were considered, 49% of the teachers said that the African American students work hard compared to 69% for White students. African American students had fewer recommendations to Advanced Placement or honors courses.

Developmental Assets: Beliefs, Behaviors, and Expectations

Table 4 reports students who answered "strongly agree" to each survey question. When questioned concerning beliefs about key academic behaviors, African Americans were similar to Whites, with the notable exceptions of "reading is fun," "math is important," "gets absorbed in read-

ing," and "people can learn to be good at math." The two groups were indistinguishable on the following items of "math is fun," "reads in spare time," and "you have to be born with math ability." Although fewer African Americans strongly agreed that reading is fun (11.4% vs. 17.7%), they had stronger, more positive beliefs than Whites that "people can learn to be good at math" (20.2% vs. 12.8%).

When questioned about their life values, African American students and their White counterparts presented an interesting mix of similarities and differences. Both groups were strongly positive about marriage (see Table 5). However, more African American students believed that having money was important (52.4% vs. 30.4%). Furthermore, African American students regarded giving children better opportunities as more important than their White counterparts. On the other hand, having strong friendships was more important to the Whites than to the African Americans. Although both groups' percentages were low, African American students viewed working to correct inequalities as a more important value than White students (26.8% vs. 13.1%). A large majority of both groups reported that "being an expert in a field of work" and "a good education" were very important to them.

In profiling career-related activities and service, African American students appeared to have more experience with internships and mentoring opportunities, exceeding Whites in choosing these types of opportunities (see Table 6). Both African Americans and Whites had similar participation rates in job shadowing (16.4% vs. 13.4%) and community service (20.4% vs. 23.4%).

When asked about their academic expectations, the groups were similar. When asked how far they thought they would get in school, African Americans were indistinguishable from Whites, with 37% of African Americans planning on graduating from college and 36% of Whites saying the same. However, while a higher percentage of African Americans (27% vs. 22%) expected to obtain a Ph.D., M.D., or some degree above the master's degree, slightly higher percentages (29% vs. 22%) of Whites expected to obtain a master's degree. African American parents' expectations outstripped those of White parents, with 39% desiring that their children obtain a Ph.D., M.D., or some degree above the master's degree. Only 21% of Whites had the same expectations for their offspring.

Table 4
Key Academic Beliefs and Behaviors—Strongly Agree

	African American (*n* = 131,634)	White (*n* = 1,106,663)
Reading is fun	11.4%	17.7%
Math is fun	8.6%	6.0%
Reads in spare time	12.1%	15.8%
Gets absorbed in reading	17.1%	24.0%
Math is important	15.8%	10.2%
People can learn to be good at math	20.2%	12.8%
You have to be born with math ability	6.9%	5.7%

Table 5
Selected Personal Values—The Importance of . . . —Very Important

	African American (*n* = 131,634)	White (*n* = 1,106,663)
Marrying the right person	71.7%	79.9%
Having lots of money	52.4%	30.4%
Having strong friendships	71.5%	87.0%
Giving children better opportunities	85.8%	73.3%
Working to correct inequalities	26.8%	13.1%
Being an expert in a field of work	78.5%	67.9%
A good education	84.5%	83.5%

Table 6
Career-Related Activities and Service

	African American (*n* = 131,634)	White (*n* = 1,106,663)
Internship	8.9%	3.3%
Job Shadowing	16.4%	13.4%
Mentoring	10.6%	3.7%
Community Service	20.4%	23.4%

These high expectations are tempered by the finding that 67% of African Americans had a computer in the home compared to 91% of Whites. Also, 61% of African Americans had home access to the Internet compared with 87% of Whites. Interestingly, nearly double the percentage of African Americans participated in vocational-technical programs (12% v. 6%) when compared to White students. Sixty-two percent of African Americans were in college preparatory programs compared with 65% of Whites. Finally, as an updated note on this ELS cohort in 2006, Bozick, Lauff, and Wirt (2007) reported that 62.6% of African American students had attempted study at a college or university compared with 83.3% of all White students. For those students who had discontinued their postsecondary education, financial reasons were the most named factors. For a future study, the authors will attempt to secure follow-up data to expand the study of outcomes for these students.

This drop indicates that larger percentages of African Americans might be identified as gifted if leadership and artistic endeavors were considered as opposed to only academic achievement.

Discussion and Conclusions

Using our broad definition, 27% of African Americans and 57% of Whites met at least one criterion for potential giftedness and were selected for our study. However, the percent of African Americans meeting the criteria dropped to 11%, a 16% reduction, when only math and reading proficiency were considered. This drop indicates that larger percentages of African Americans might be identified as gifted if leadership and artistic endeavors were considered as opposed to only academic achievement. These findings support the work of Bonner, Jennings, Marbley, and Brown (2008) in their study of the factors in secondary school context that leads to the underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted programs. For African American males, these authors named several factors as culprits, including low test scores, lack of teacher referral, tracking, substandard classes, and poor classroom learning environments.

Risk Factors

Together, structural issues at the school and psycho-social issues seem to conspire to reduce the percentages of African American students identified as gifted. In fact, using Renzulli's model, our results closely mirror those of Donovan and Cross (2002) in a report that used data from the Office for Civil Rights collected in 1998. They reported that African Americans comprised 8.6% of children placed in gifted programs and were less than half as likely as White students to be selected for a gifted program.

Donovan and Cross (2002) indicated that this trend of underrepresentation of African Americans and overrepresentation of Whites in gifted programs was evident in 1976 when data were first collected and has continued to date. We found the same trend among these students using our expansive definition of potential giftedness. Perhaps the core problem is not in the students, but how theorists, government, and educational agencies define giftedness.

As a marker for achievement risk, no factor surpasses SES, with students from poor families consistently performing less well than those students who are from wealthier backgrounds (Milne & Plourde, 2006). Across numerous outcomes (e.g., emotional, physical, educational), Felner (2006) names poverty as the greatest risk factor of all—historically and currently. In our study, across all categories of ethnic group and gender, total family income appeared to be related to potential giftedness, with fewer percentages of students with potential in the lower income categories and higher percentages of students with potential in the upper income categories. Thus, we can speculate that this difference between African American and White students may be driven by socioeconomic status. In one example, 9% of African Americans had total family incomes between $75,000 and $100,000 compared to 16% for Whites. This trend continued with African American students dominating less wealthy categories and Whites dominating wealthier categories. The logical extension of this finding is that wealth, or the lack of it, may be related to the underidentification of minorities for gifted programs. Because both groups met the same criteria for potential, it seems safe to conclude that African American do more with less, which may be a function of a variety of variables.

Protective Factors

In terms of school and teacher opinions, two potential protective factors, we found differences. African Americans

attended predominately urban schools, while Whites attended overwhelmingly suburban and rural schools. Combining the SES categories with this finding about the schools supports Ogbu and Stern's (2001) much praised and criticized depictions of academic disengagement resulting from caste-like systems in American society. From this, Ogbu and Stern would suggest that African Americans in this group are walled by poverty and urbanicity. Even though their teachers may have similar backgrounds, their opinions of student effort and ability appear to be significantly different. Clearly, this is an area requiring further study.

Developmental Assets

When looking at beliefs and behaviors that reflect developmental assets, African American students and Whites were similar. Interestingly, African Americans were more inclined to believe that working hard would lead to achievement in math. In terms of personal values, the two groups were indistinguishable, except when asked about the importance of money. More African Americans agreed that having lots of money was important; however, this makes sense when one considers that African Americans were generally poorer. Finally, despite SES status, school characteristics, and teacher opinions, African American students were more apt to be involved in job-related activities like internships and mentoring.

Based upon these risk factors, protective factors, and developmental assets, we consider that the great promise of African American millennials is in their capacity for resilience. To reiterate, resilience "refers to patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 4). Resilience also may be likened to the ability to cope with sources of distress in such a way that is availing or advantageous to the individual. Additionally, resiliency often is thought of as additive, so in our study, one can picture a model for resilience as SES + Teachers and Schools + Developmental Assets. For many African American students, SES represents a negative or risk factor, but their developmental assets are generally positive and little different from their White counterparts. The malleable factors left are the beliefs and expectations of the teachers and schools.

Implications for Practices

Even though the African American millennials met the criteria that might merit inclusion in gifted education, they had less family income and were clearly more urban. However, their untapped potential can be seen in their values and behaviors, despite these potential stressors. Teachers need to nurture this ability to recover from distress and support the aspirations of these students. That is, teachers and schools have the opportunity to powerfully shape learning environments so these students may excel. Teachers, schools, and educational agencies need to rethink placement strategies for gifted programs. New strategies could include clear and consistent information for students and parents about the advantages of being in a gifted program. Then, programming needs to be in place to help students get ready or to nudge them into these gifted programs.

Ford and Harris (1999) recommended a multicultural gifted curriculum for gifted African American students. Such a curriculum should provide both challenge and affirmation of African American students' needs and goals. For example, in this study, teachers indicated that African American students worked less hard for grades than White students. However, even if this is true, African Americans still met the criteria for potential giftedness. Teachers may need additional training to help them identify and capitalize on potential gifts and talents of African American children (Harmon, 2002). From this study, it was clear that African American students saw making money, giving children opportunities, and working to correct inequalities as important. Project-oriented instruction related to these types of values should pique students' interest and enrich their educational experiences. Projects aimed at students' home community improvement should be particularly attractive. This type of curriculum change in an urban setting also could have a positive consequence of helping nongifted students to perform better, even helping them to emulate the achievement and aspirations of exemplary students. In fact, the goal of a school that knows it has potentially gifted African American students should be to develop more of them and move them to the next level. Gifted instruction could follow this logic by focusing on the strengths of students who do not meet formal gifted criteria and providing them with targeted gifted programming that could lead to admittance into traditional gifted programs. The idea is to groom students who have potential for gifted instruction. This targeted programming will give teachers and counselors the space to observe directly student behavior and achievement, to build rapport with students and parents, to help them plan, and to push students in attempting increasingly difficult academic challenges. Not only would such a program try to increase students' access to resources like the computers, it would be a time where teachers could become a better resource for students in terms of

building confidence and appropriate academic efficacy.

This last point cannot be stressed enough. Bonner (2001) found that a gifted African American student who attended a predominately White postsecondary institution felt reticent at displaying confidence in his academic achievement. However, a gifted student at a historically Black college or university readily displayed confidence in his academic ability. This student pointed to academic and social support from peers that led to increased confidence. Creating an inviting learning environment for the peers of gifted students can only increase the gifted students' chances of finding peer connections and validation (Harper, 2006). The underidentification of gifted African American children may in part also be lessened by the creation of an inviting multicultural learning environment, where these students may feel freer to engage in the learning process and participate in school activities. In other words, the gifted program could lead many potentially gifted students to higher levels of resilience, despite other family, community, and school problems.

With a school response of increasing the number of positive school assets students have, be that instructional programming, teacher training, or the opportunity for positive peer support, schools can increase student chances of success, even while they change their school cultures for the better. African American gifted millennial students represent a source of much potential for schools and the surrounding communities that these schools serve. This potential must not be smothered before it has been truly developed. GCT

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