

Addressing the Career Development Needs of High-Achieving African American High School Students: Implications for Counselors

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African Americans face numerous obstacles in achieving their fullest developmental and career potentials in the current political, social, and economic environment. These barriers have produced, for the most part, workers who have been wage earners as opposed to being self-employed, and blue-collar workers rather than managers or proprietors (Daniel, 2001). This paper proposes solutions that would ensure that African American students who exhibit exceptional talent receive the kind of education to which they are entitled, in preparation for the careers of their choice. In addition to exploring the conditions that led to this underrepresentation, methods to desegregate gifted education programs and redress educational inequalities are analyzed. Specifically, the implications for counselors and teachers, those best situated to bring about positive change, will be discussed.

The phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” emphasizes the ideal known as the American Dream. To this end, Americans from all walks of life have fought for and died to pursue this plethora of social, political, and economic goals that would enhance their quality of life. Many Americans can claim a starting point to their success or to the beginning of their American Dream (e.g., Ellis Island), while others can make claim to being successful within a generation of being

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in America. However, for many African Americans, this American Dream is yet to be fulfilled.

African Americans constitute the second largest visible racial/ethnic minority group in the United States, numbering nearly 35 million and representing slightly more than 13% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). They are also the most disadvantaged; according to the 2001 census, nearly 32% of African Americans live in poverty as compared to Hispanics, the largest visible racial/ethnic minority. African Americans are underrepresented at every level of higher education, and their unemployment rate has hovered at more than double that of their non-Hispanic, Caucasian counterparts for the last 20 years. Those who do manage to succeed educationally nevertheless earn less than non-Hispanic Caucasians with comparable education. These dramatic statistics, combined with the African American history as the victims of slavery and racial oppression, illustrate why Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) argued that Blacks and Whites in America constitute two distinct nations.

Many African American children are born into impoverished environments (Hodgkinson, 2002). Growing up in these unfortunate conditions has left them susceptible to higher rates of crime and malnourishment, poor vision, lack of medical care, and inadequate access to appropriate educational resources (Rothstein, 2004). Thus, it may be quite difficult to locate potentially gifted and talented students within low-achieving schools.

The disadvantaged status of African Americans is further illustrated in the following comparative excerpt from a report by the Children's Defense Fund (1997), *Portrait of Inequality*: 78% of White children live with both parents, but only 39% of Black children do; 63% of White children live in homes their parents own, compared with Black children who live in homes that only 28% of their parents own; 23% of White children have both a father at work and a mother at home, but only 8% of Black children do; 30% of White children have a parent who completed college, but only 13% of Black children do; 71% of White children are covered by insurance, but only 44% of Black children are; 16% of White children are poor, compared with over 41% of Black children; 19% of White children live in central cities, but over 48% of Black children do; 7 of every 1,000 White infants die in the first year of life, compared with 16 of every 1,000 Black

infants; 6% of White children are born at low birth weight, but over 13% of Black children are.

As noted in a Children's Defense Fund (2000) report, many school districts in the United States were as segregated in 2000 as they were in 1954 at the time of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court decision that purportedly ended this practice. Schwartz (1997) reported that students of color and those who are poor and limited in their English proficiency continue to be severely underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students. This is not because they are less talented than their middle-class White classmates; rather, it is a result of their different experiences, values, and beliefs preventing them from fully demonstrating their abilities through commonly used assessment instruments. Because traditional IQ and standard test scores are inappropriate, it is not surprising that these students are underrepresented (Trotman, 2002). Some research suggests that these racial disparities persist even within the gifted programs themselves, which are among the most segregated educational programs in this nation (Ford, 1995a; Moore, Ford & Milner, 2005). If a pervasive achievement gap is holding back African American children both in admission to as well as meaningful participation in gifted education programs, what can be done to combat the inequity (Bernal, 2002; Ford, 1996)?

The purpose of this article is to: (a) to investigate the conditions that led to African Americans being underrepresented in high-achieving or gifted programs and (b) to identify strategies and techniques that school counselors and teachers can use to address the career development needs of African American youth.

Factors and Issues in the Underrepresentation Equation

Several reasons help to explain the dearth of African Americans in public school programs for the gifted. Among the significant factors are: (a) the abstract and disparate definitions of giftedness, (b) practices of identifying gifted students, (c) differences among educators regarding their understanding about cultural differences in learning styles and achievement aspirations, (d) preparation of teachers to recognize giftedness among students from diverse cultural backgrounds,

(e) encouragement given to African American parents to become involved in the processes related to identification and selection of students for gifted education programs, and (f) definitions of underachievement that are particularly disparaging to African American students (Ford, 1995b; Moore et al., 2005). Finally, gifted African American children may become reluctant to participate in gifted education programs for fear of the stigmas attached to intelligence or “acting White” in general (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Without a challenging educational atmosphere, gifted and talented students may become vulnerable to underachievement (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). Unfortunately, once these students become accustomed to less demanding coursework when they are younger, it is often immensely difficult for them to become engaged by and thrive under the more rigorous coursework at the secondary level (Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004). The small number of African Americans currently present in these programs is overtly obvious to any potential candidates as well as their peers, and this fact is most likely discouraging to the former and symbolic to the latter (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Hence, both African American and other minority students (with the exception of Asian Americans) often face ridicule and disdain from their peers if they display academic excellence. These students may be perceived by their peers as “acting White” (Colangelo, 2001; McWorther, 2000). Thus, while managing more challenging assignments and additional responsibilities, gifted African American students might face additional stressors from their peers due to their participation in gifted education programs.

In 1978 the United States Department of Education defined gifted students as those who possess demonstrated or potential ability, intellectually or creatively, in specific academic areas, including the performing or visual arts and leadership (Ford, 1992). A shortcoming of this definition is that students whose gifts are in other areas were still being overlooked. For example, determining a student’s intelligence in terms of abilities measured by an IQ test is now considered too narrow and steps have been taken to correct this problem. Educators must be in a position to broaden their knowledge of gifted students. This can be done through their understanding of general affective and cognitive skills that gifted students possess (Clark,

2002). Such an understanding can help educators broaden their definition of gifted students beyond the traditional IQ-based definition (Sternberg, 1997).

Signs of constructive reform in this regard are already appearing and emphasis is shifting from what a child knows to how a child learns. After all, education is not simply about imitation, repetition, and memorization; it is about training students to use their own unique and innate abilities to thrive within whatever environment the world places them and respond effectively and creatively to its challenges. It is about understanding that in the real world there is more than one path, more than one solution to a problem. By expanding the ways in which a person might be special or even extraordinary, schools would be giving so many more students the potential to see that their greatest life ambitions are actually accessible.

To understand the challenges in meeting the diversity found within our own culture, it is illustrative to examine the difficulty accommodating the talents expressed by those who come here from other parts of the world. In both circumstances, it would be unfortunate if signs of strong character and ability were not realized and nurtured simply because they do not seem to have as much practical value in particular subsets of our society. In attempting to formulate a more culturally unbiased classification of superior intelligence, researchers such as Griffin (1992) and Coleman and Gallagher (1995) have nonexclusively emphasized many of the following:

- the ability to manipulate a symbol system;
- the ability to use stored knowledge to solve problems;
- the ability to reason by analogy;
- the ability to extrapolate knowledge to different circumstances;
- creative and artistic ability;
- resilience: the ability to cope with school while living in poverty with dysfunctional families;
- the ability to take on adult roles at home, such as managing the household and supervising siblings, even at the expense of school attendance and achievement;
- a strong sense of self, pride, and worth;
- leadership ability and an independent mind; and
- understanding of one's cultural heritage.

It is not surprising that young people raised in different countries, speaking and writing in other languages, consistently perform poorly on paper-and-pencil tasks and other tests (standardized or not) because of cultural bias, learning style differences, and test anxiety (Ford, 1992). Research findings by Ford and Harris (1991) and Patton (1992) indicate that multidimensional, multimodal-assessment strategies are used much less often, even though numerous researchers have emphasized the importance of these methods. Moreover, holistic assessment strategies, culturally and learning-style sensitive tests, parent and peer nominations, creativity checklists, student portfolios, and performance assessments have been recognized as promising strategies for identifying underrepresented student populations for gifted programs, but are often given less attention (Ford & Harris, 1991; Harris & Ford, 1991). If the American education system cannot better accommodate these students, it is effectively depriving our country, our culture as a whole, and our economy of a valuable asset toward positive growth.

The cost is just as significant if we ignore the great diversity that exists within our own native citizens. A number of researchers noted differences in the learning styles between African American and Caucasian students that have several implications for giftedness identification and teaching practices. For example, Dunn and Griggs (1990) suggested that the extent to which students are global versus analytical, visual versus auditory, highly mobile versus less mobile, or less peer-oriented versus more peer-oriented will affect their learning, achievement, motivation, and school performance. Wilson-Jones and Caston (2004) provided supporting evidence that cooperative-learning approaches help improve the achievement of low-performance students and are particularly suitable for low-income, African American and other minority families whose cultural patterns are different from those emphasized in traditional classrooms. Its awareness will enhance teachers' ability to recognize the strengths that African American students and others from diverse cultures bring into the classroom, resulting in increased opportunities for these students to be recognized and identified as gifted or to experience success in school.

Some initiatives by various states have begun to institute several measures aimed at increasing the pool of gifted students (Bernal, 2002; Moore et al., 2005). These include screening the files of all

students for indications of giftedness and requiring staff development of regular education teachers to increase their ability to recognize nontraditional students who may be gifted.

Hearne and Maurer's (2000) findings on diversity preparation revealed that staff development (including one or more courses on the diverse learner, including identification and characteristics), curriculum integration, and modifying the curriculum to accommodate the wide range of individual student needs are essential to recognizing the various types of intelligence. In addition, teachers need to understand the unique emotions and social needs of gifted learners. Teacher preparation programs should include a course on the needs and characteristics of gifted learners, and all educators must be skilled in identifying and retaining these unique learners from various backgrounds.

Research has shown that family setting and associated parental influences are primary factors affecting students' achievement over time (Catsambis, 2001). It is important to understand that some African American parents, particularly those from low socioeconomic status groups, face numerous barriers when it comes to being involved in their children's schooling. These parents not only have to contend with the difficult task of often raising their children alone but also additional barriers, such as underemployment and poverty. These challenges may hinder parents' participation in their children's schooling. As such, it should not come as a surprise that low-income parents have less contact with schools than their better-off, White counterparts (Yan & Lin, 2002). Given the lack of parental involvement that may be evident in the lives of some African American children, it becomes important for teachers and school counselors to understand how to effectively assist with the career development of these students.

Impact of Discrimination, Stereotyping, and Racism on Low Achievement of African American Youths

It is extremely important that counselors and school personnel understand how discrimination, stereotyping, and racism impact career decision making by African Americans and other minority individuals. As noted by Constantine, Erickson, Banks, and Timberlake (1998),

being exposed to acts of racism or discrimination could have an effect on career choice for people of color (Carter & Constantine, 2000). Given the climate affecting today's African American youths—high rates of incarceration, high unemployment rates, and low graduation rates—career counseling must become a priority if positive changes for this population are to occur. Many African Americans and other minority groups do not see employment opportunities as a positive in creating a better quality of life; instead they see it as being restricted to certain groups as a result of discrimination and racism (King & Madsen, 2007).

As with a traditional definition of giftedness, underachievement definitions are usually based on the norms of White middle-class students and, as such, do not necessarily match characteristics common to African American students. African American students who do not manifest achievement in the same way as White students may go unidentified as gifted and/or underachieving (Ford, 1995a). Using traditional standardized instruments to test whether a student of color is gifted may be inappropriate. Historically, persons of color have not performed well on these instruments as they were developed and normed on White, middle-class samples (Anthony, 1991). Ford (1995b) completed a cross-sectional study of 152 middle and high school African American students in five mid-Atlantic school districts and reported that in every school district that took part in the study, African American students were underrepresented in the gifted education programs. The results revealed that the variables most effective at discriminating among the gifted and average achievers and underachievers were: (a) students' attitudes towards reading, math, and science; (b) students' perceptions of parental achievement orientation; and (c) students' own achievement ideology.

African American students labeled as gifted may deal with a host of issues. For example, African American students who are gifted experience more emotional distress (Exum & Colangelo, 1981; Ford, 1996). These students have to negotiate between their academic success and peer acceptance. Academic success among peers can be devalued; thus, an academically successful African American may be labeled by peers as "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In addition, Tomlinson (1992) stated that many African American students perform poorly in school because they have low expectations,

feel helpless, blame others, or give up in the face of failure; but not because they lack intellectual capacities or specific learning skills.

Ford (1994) found that African American students in gifted programs often complain of (a) being a minority within a minority because they are often the only or one of few African American students in the gifted program; (b) feeling isolated from their Caucasian classmates; (c) experiencing intense and frequent pressure from other African American youths not in gifted programs; (d) feeling misunderstood by teachers who often lack substantive preparation in multicultural education; (e) feeling misunderstood by teachers who do not understand the nature of giftedness, especially as it relates to culturally diverse students; and (f) feeling misunderstood by family members who do not appreciate the nature of giftedness.

Implications for Career Development of High-Achieving African American Youths

Census 2000 data clarify the changing demographics in U.S. diversity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Currently, 67% of the United States population identify as White, 13% as African American, 4.5% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 13% as Hispanic, and 7% as other. There is a coming demographic shift, commonly known as the “Browning of America.” By the year 2020 persons of color will outnumber Whites for the first time (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). Individuals of Hispanic descent will contribute the most to the growth in the minority population (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). This reality underscores the need for multicultural education training among the nation’s current and future teachers.

After recognizing and nurturing talent, it is the responsibility of educators who come across these gifted students to guide them on choosing a path toward a successful career. Gifted students can be just as unsure and indecisive as most people their age, and they have likely not settled on a particular vocational ambition. Many students will face difficulties in this regard due to “multipotentiality” (Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994). The impact of multipotentiality continues to be addressed as a barrier in career counseling with intellectually talented youths (Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999). Rysiew et al.

(1998) pointed out some of the main concerns with having multiple potentials:

- Because students have a number of equally viable options, they have a difficult time narrowing down and deciding on one career path.
- Because students who display multipotentiality often are perfectionists, they feel that they need a perfect fit for a career.
- Students may feel pressure from parents or other loved ones to choose a career that offers status or high earning potential.
- Often, students must make long-term school commitments (if attending graduate or professional school). These long-term commitments to school can often be both emotionally and financially difficult to change once they have progressed for several years.

Although past educational definitions and achievements tests ignore the nation's changing demographics and increasing diversity as well as individual and cultural differences among students, at least one theory of intelligence and giftedness promises to capture the strengths and abilities of gifted African American learners. Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences defines intelligence as the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural settings. Gardner argues that in order to fairly measure intelligence, culturally valued activities should be used to determine giftedness. Moreover, he contends that assessments for placement in gifted programs should take place within familiar contexts because performance inevitably depends on a person's familiarity with the materials and the demands of the assessment experience.

Meaningful evaluation of intelligence is impossible if students have had little or no experience with a particular subject matter or type of material. VanTassel-Baska (1994) identified some qualities to look for in a strong program of gifted education. The program would include the following:

- Written philosophy, goals, and anticipated outcomes for students.
- Multiple options at and across grade levels.
- Modified scheduling and differentiated staffing to achieve its goals.
- Multiple criteria for identification, appropriate instrumentation, and a process for ongoing admission.
- Articulated curriculum across years of schooling.

- Teachers who were selected according to key characteristics and trained to work with gifted young individuals.
- Diverse and multiple resources including the community to carry out its goals.
- Models responsive to the needs of the student in the particular setting.
- Instructional emphasis on problem solving, higher level thought processes, inquiry-based discussion, and high efficacy in the student's work production.
- Parent education component and an ongoing school/community awareness component.
- Curriculum development as an ongoing effort that actively involves teachers in the process.
- Monitored implementation with revisions made as needed in the context.

Perspectives on individual differences attributable to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographic locale must be infused throughout the curriculum for gifted teacher education to reeducate educators and school personnel and replace inaccurate deficit models that impede learning, leaving many gifted minority students unrecognized. In addition, professional development should include learning focused on comparative education issues, the sociology of education, urban education, African American and other racial/ethnic group studies, individual and cultural differences in learning, and bias-free identification and assessment techniques (Ford, 1995a).

Scott-Jones (1992) maintains that academically successful, African American children have mothers who are involved in their children's schoolwork. Harry (1992) stated that African American parental involvement should be manifested in four indispensable and substantive roles, including the following: (a) becoming members of the official assessment teams that determine students' placement in special or gifted education programs; (b) assisting in the preparation of reports on issues affecting the educational status of minority, gifted, and underachieving students; (c) serving on local educational agency committees or boards, school site-based management teams, and other educational advisory committees; and (d) working in the school as teachers' aides, parent liaisons, and in peer support positions

from which they can more directly offer advice and input to school personnel on the assessment and placement of their children. In addition, parents of African American children must lobby their school boards and other school officials to ensure that high-achieving programs' assessment and selection boards include parents and community leaders who reflect the demographics of the community with respect to race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Recommendations for Counselors and School Personnel

It is imperative that African American students who are identified as gifted receive counseling aimed at diminishing the negative effect associated with being in a gifted program, such as heightened peer pressures, feelings of isolation, and the fear of being viewed as "acting White" or being "different" from the traditional students in these programs (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993).

Magnuson and Starr (2000) stated that teachers need to understand that career planning begins early in a child's life, and continues as a lifelong process. This is founded on the following five premises: (a) life career development is a lifelong, spiraling process; (b) life career planning includes a series of subskills; (c) career awareness and career exploration form the foundation of effective life career planning; (d) idiosyncratic factors influence the decision-making of each person; and (e) child development and career development theories are inter-related. Teachers and school counselors recognizing these principles can play an important role in the career development of all children.

Research has shown that African Americans and other minority groups perceive their racial status as a barrier to career development (Luzzo, 1993). Similarly, research by McWhirter (1997) comparing Mexican Americans' and Caucasian Americans' perception of future career barriers, found that Mexican Americans anticipated more future career barriers than did the Caucasian Americans. These studies are good indicators that African American students and students of color tend to have decreased self-efficacy when it comes to future career success. As such, teachers and counselors need to be aware that as a result of this negative perception, African American students may see their future as a lost cause if adequate support is not provided.

Teachers and counselors who understand how to provide or obtain appropriate support for minority students will see a shift in attitudinal and behavioral change. Research that examined the relationship between perceived resources and barriers in inner-city adolescents found that perceived general support and family support were related to behavioral and attitudinal indexes of school engagement, career aspirations, expectations for attaining career success, and future work success (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). Moreover, in an attempt to understand the impact of parenting, role models, socioeconomic status, social support, and career intervention programs on the career development of African American men, Chung, Baskin, and Case (1999) found the following themes:

- The effects of role-modeling by fathers and financial support were important factors in career aspirations.
- Parental support and social support were very influential in the educational and vocational decision process.
- Ethnic minority students who were given the opportunity to explore various career opportunities through school programs seem to develop better career aspirations.
- African Americans continue to see their experiences with racism as a career obstacle.

Similar research on American Indians' career aspirations by Juntunen et al. (2001) found that inadequate parental supports, as well as lack of support from school personnel or other significant support were seen as significant career barriers.

Jackson and Nutini (2002) conducted a study with middle school students from low-income families and, based on the results, they recommended a conceptual model for assessing contextual barriers and resources and psychological barriers and resources. Their findings indicate that counselors and teachers need to be aware of the following contexts in order to assist students with their career aspirations:

- Contextual barriers—includes the student's community, attending school in environments that are unsafe, discrimination, low income, and negative peer pressure.
- Psychological barriers—includes the student's self-efficacy for academics and his or her perceptions regarding opportunities that exist in education.

- Contextual resources—includes support from family, positive role models, cultural support, and school support.
- Psychological resources—includes high coping efficacy for discrimination, bicultural competence, and the belief that racial and ethnic discrimination could be ameliorated; as well as the type of coping strategies the individual has for managing peer conflict, stress, and pressure.

Understanding what roles these various contexts play in African Americans' underachievement in gifted programs and low career aspirations is paramount if appropriate interventions are to be provided. As such, interventions need to be designed to provide contextual and psychological support, thus reducing the barriers that hinder these individuals from overcoming obstacles leading to low self-efficacy and subsequent low career aspirations.

In addition to the above stated recommendations, counselors and teachers need to understand that in order to be effective with providing career counseling services to African American students in schools, students need to develop a sound understanding of the relationship between education and work. Moreover, recognition that assisting students early in their development in developing a positive attitude toward school and career aspirations is essential if students are to be successful in their later careers. Finally, educators must develop an unbiased attitude toward African American youths' self-efficacy, be supportive of their career goals, and equip students with the proper career development information.

Conclusion

Given the confluence of (a) the continued diverse social, economic, educational, and political circumstances faced by African Americans; (b) the increasing scientific, technological, information-based, and global society; (c) the growing anti-affirmative action sentiments; and (d) the shifting and changing American political ideology; it is necessary for African Americans to have greater access to high-level, quality education, with an institutional commitment to those students achieving at the highest possible academic levels (Daniel, 2001).

Herr (1995) stated that career counseling primarily involves career planning and decision making, while encompassing many other matters, such as integrating life, work, family and social roles, discrimination, stress, bias, stereotyping, inequalities, and “tokenism.” As such, a holistic approach is therefore necessary to adequately address the career needs of gifted African American youth. This would involve redefining intelligence and giftedness, redefining underachievement, increasing multicultural training for teachers of the gifted, enhancing parental involvement, increasing use of multidimensional and multimodal assessment, and increasing the retention of African American students in gifted education programs.

It is extremely important that African American students gain access to the best resources of a given institution, and that they share equally in the resources provided for all students. The presence of programs and special class selection specifically designed for African American students labeled as educationally disadvantaged naturally communicate low expectations.

Gifted and talented students need career counseling throughout their lives. This guidance must offer occupational information as well as evaluations of competencies, preferences, and creativity—always stressing the importance of the decision-making process and the factors that must be weighed with thoughtful prudence.

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