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James L. Moore III

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James L. Moore III
Donna Y. Ford
H. Richard Milner

Underachievement Among Gifted Students of Color: Implications for Educators

On a daily basis, teachers, school, counselors, and administrators are troubled by the unfortunate reality that a significant number of students of color (e.g., African American, Hispanic American, and Native American), including those identified as gifted, are not reaching their academic potential in school settings. This article presents an overview of social and psychological barriers that commonly impede the academic performance of gifted students of color. The authors assert that efforts to reverse underachievement among students of color have failed because these students have been misguided. It is argued that, until the needs and issues surrounding cultural diversity are addressed, gifted students of color will continue to underachieve academically. Implications are provided to teachers, counselors, and others to reverse the systemic cycle of failure that is too often prevalent among students of color in general and gifted students of color in particular.

James L. Moore III is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at The Ohio State University. Donna Y. Ford is the Betts Chair of Education and Human Development at The Peabody College of Education. H. Richard Milner is an Assistant Professor in The Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University.

Requests for reprints can be sent to James L. Moore III, College of Education, The Ohio State University, 1945 N. High Street., Columbus, OH 43210. E-mail: moore.1408@osu.edu

NUMEROUS REPORTS, ARTICLES, and books have highlighted the reality that students of color (e.g., African American, Hispanic American, and Native American) are often underachievers and low achievers in American school settings (Diaz, 1999; Ford, 1995; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Moore, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Pewewardy, 1993). In comparison to their White student counterparts, students of color are likely to perform poorly on high-stakes tests, earn lower grades, drop out of school at unreasonable rates, and otherwise fail to achieve at levels commensurate with their academic ability (Denbo, 2002; Shaffer, Ortman, &

Denbo, 2002). When students are underachievers or low achievers, educational professionals (i.e., teachers, school counselors, administrators, etc.) often become alarmed and intensively attempt to explain the negative educational outcomes and to identify effective educational practices to remedy the underachievement and low achievement of students of color. Despite decades of efforts (e.g., preschool programs, afterschool programs, summer programs, academic supports, etc.), many students of color still lag significantly behind their White counterparts academically. These educational outcomes are often referred to as the "achievement gap."

For a student to be perceived as an underachiever, someone, like a teacher, school counselor, or administrator, must first notice that the student is performing below his or her academic ability; but, when a deficit orientation exists, the teacher, school counselor, or administrator is often unable to recognize the student's true academic ability (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Frazier Trotman, 2002). Cloudy thinking often prevents them from seeing beyond the student's current level of performance (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Ford et al., 2002) and seeing the possibility that a student can do better. For example, if Malik receives low grades in school, educators who espouse deficit thinking may not consider the possibility that he can do better or might be a "gifted underachiever."

There are a number of factors that contribute to these negative school outcomes. In this article, we focus on four common factors: (a) cultural factors, (b) social factors, (c) school factors, and (d) psychological or individual factors. The research literature (Flowers et al., 2003; Howard, 2003; Moore, 2003; Ogbu, 2003) appears to suggest that these factors significantly influence academic outcomes for students of color in American schools. The family (e.g., lack of family involvement, poverty, low educational attainment, etc.), school system (e.g., low teacher expectations, teaching styles, inadequate resources, etc.), and society at-large (e.g., peer pressures, prejudice and discrimination, etc.) are specific variables used to explain the achievement gap for students of color. Individual factors (e.g., self-concept, racial identity, lack of academic motivation, test-taking skills, learning styles, etc.), unique to the student are also used to investigate underachievement. It is clear that, in isolation or some combination, these variables play a major role in the educational outcomes for students of color. To improve the achievement of students of color, it is critical that researchers examine all of the obstacles that impede their educational outcomes.

To understand, prevent, or reverse underachievement and low achievement of gifted students of color, researchers need to investigate these educational concerns from a cultural lens paradigm, a perspective that considers and centralizes culture in one's thinking and evaluation of underachievement and low achievement. When investigating issues centered primarily on students of color, it is helpful to utilize a culturally relevant framework, based on students' strengths rather than their deficits. Students of color may be both gifted and culturally diverse. In terms of meeting their needs, it is essential that educational professionals use a holistic approach that considers students' cognitive, academic, affective, psychological, cultural, and social needs and development. Furthermore, educators should not only be concerned with challenging gifted students cognitively and academically but should also focus their attention on students' identity, friends, belonging, and safety.

Similarly, when students present needs based on their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, it is important that school officials address them. To adequately understand or address these needs, educational professionals need to first ask themselves: (a) How does a student's culture affect his or her achievement? (b) How do the social needs of gifted students of color affect their achievement?, and (c) How do psychological needs affect the achievement of gifted students of color? To prevent or even reverse low achievement and underachievement among gifted students of color, educators must seriously consider their needs and development as human beings and the unique social and psychological issues they bring to educational setting related to their culture.

Cultural Issues and Needs Related to Achievement

When focusing on the cultural needs and issues of students of color, it is essential that educational professionals address both deficit thinking and cultural diversity. Later, in discussing social and psychological needs, we address peer pressures, racial identity, and concerns experienced by students of color in school settings.

Cultural Misunderstanding and Deficit Orientations

According to Frasier and her colleagues (1995), attributes associated with giftedness may vary from student to student. Stated differently, the perception of giftedness and gifted education may not hold the same value for different racial and cultural groups. For example, one gifted student may display his inquisitiveness by asking a lot of questions regarding a scientific conceptualization or formula that he or she recently discovered, and another gifted student might ask many questions regarding the original source of the scientific conceptualization. A gifted White student may be concerned about the future related to the importance of recycling; a gifted student of color may be concerned more about an immediate need, such as the lack of sanitation services in his community.

Few teacher education programs have courses or require future educators to take more than one course on diversity and social justice in education, including teachers seeking gifted education preparation (Banks, 1995; Ford & Harris, 1999). Thus, educators are seldom formally prepared for identifying cultural characteristics and associated behaviors. As a result, educators may not recognize giftedness in students of color. This lack of cultural awareness has negative implications for students of color. For example, teachers may fail to recommend capable students of color for gifted education programs if these students exhibit disinterested behaviors or appear unmotivated. Out of naiveté, teachers may neglect to use culturally relevant pedagogical approaches that are aligned with the learning styles of students of color. In both instances, students of color commonly underachieve (Ford, Grantham, & Milner, in press).

Although it is logical to assume that every teacher who pursues coursework in gifted education will learn about the characteristics of gifted students, it is not safe to assume that they will learn about the cultural and environmental factors that impede learning outcomes for students of color (Ford & Harris, 1998). It is critical that educators are exposed to culturally relevant teaching practices and that they learn how students' cultures interact, both positively and negatively, with school systems in general and gifted education in particular.

Cultural Needs and Underachievement

Many definitions of culture exist. It is commonly defined as a set of beliefs, values, dispositions, traditions, customs, and habits that are specific to a group. These beliefs, values, traditions, and so forth serve as the lenses through which students of color view themselves and others. It determines, in large measure, how students interact with and engage other groups outside their own identified groups. More specifically, cultural characteristics can be visible or invisible. Visible or obvious characteristics include foods, holidays, dress, and music preference, for example, shared by a cultural group. Less visible cultural characteristics (also referred to as "deep culture") relate to such variables as beliefs, values, and ways of perceiving and thinking. That is, different groups may have different beliefs or values about cooperation versus competition, about matriarchal versus patriarchal households, about nuclear versus extended family structures, about communicating verbally versus nonverbally, about being monochromic[1] versus polychromic, and more. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds may share different beliefs about a number of variables, including showing respect to elders or those in authority, showing emotions, asking questions, asking for help, handling conflict, solving problems, touching, and personal space (Shade, Kelly,

& Oberg, 1997; Storti, 1989). Clearly, understanding how an individual's culture operates and the relation of that culture to an individual's orientations and choices may help us understand how culturally diverse students approach learning and achievement.

A Case in Point: Cultural Characteristics of African American Students

Research on the modal characteristics of different cultural groups is vast and comprehensive. In perhaps the first treatise of students who are gifted and diverse, Maker and Schiever (1988) and their colleagues presented cultural models designed specifically for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. Since then, Ford and Harris (1999) and Frasier and colleagues (1995) have added their perspectives. Their collective works shed much light on the reality that the impact of culture on students is profound. In this section, because of space limitations, we use African Americans as a case in point.

Boykin (1994) and other scholars have conducted research that explores cultural styles among African Americans. These styles have been, for the most part, condensed into nine characteristics. The model provides educators with a framework from which to begin understanding and raising expectations for African American students. Some African American students will display all or a majority of these characteristics; some may display a few of these characteristics. Teachers should use these characteristics as a place to start to become learners in their particular contexts.

In his Afrocentric model, Boykin (1994) identified nine cultural styles commonly found among African Americans, namely, spirituality, harmony, oral tradition, affect, verve, communalism, movement, social time perspective, and expressive individualism. Movement refers to many African Americans being tactile and kinesthetic learners who show a preference for being involved in learning experiences. They are often active learners who are engaged when they are physically and psychological involved; otherwise, they may be easily distracted and off-task. Harmony refers to an ability to read the environment well and to read nonverbal behaviors proficiently. Thus, students who feel unwelcome in their classes may become unmotivated and disinterested in learning. Communalism refers to a cooperative, interdependent style of living and learning such that competition (especially with friends) is devalued. Hence, students with this learning preference may be unmotivated in highly individualistic and competitive classrooms, preferring instead to learn in groups. Communalism and harmony may explain why an increasing number of African American students (especially middle school and high school students) are choosing not to be in gifted programs. They recognize that such programs are primarily comprised of White students and, thus, express concerns about alienation and isolation (Ford, 1996; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Furthermore, communalism may result in some African American students shunning participation in gifted programs and equating high achievement with "acting white" (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Accordingly, these characteristics suggest that teachers should learn to modify their teaching styles to accommodate different cultural styles. For example, to accommodate African American students' preference for communalism, teachers can use cooperative learning strategies and place students in groups. To accommodate oral tradition, verve, and movement, teachers can give students opportunities to write and perform skits, to give oral presentations, and to participate in debates. More examples appear in Ford and Harris (1999) and Shade and colleagues (1997).

How does culture impact achievement? Research and theory suggest that teachers who understand and integrate the cultural needs and styles of African Americans into the curriculum promote and enhance achievement among these students (Ford & Harris 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Shade et al., 1997). Table 1 presents teaching strategies that align with the cultural styles proposed by Boykin (1994).

Table 1
Culturally Responsive Teaching Strategies: Applying Boykin's Model

Boykin's Afrocentric Expressions	*Teaching Strategies and Products*
Movement Harmony Verve Expressive Individualism	• Creative movement (mime, drama, dance, tableau techniques, body used to communicate) • Hands-on thinking; manipulatives (e.g., sculpting) • Role plays, simulations, theatre • Field trips • Physical activity • Sports and games • Learning centers
Movement Harmony Verve Expressive Individualism	• Singing, humming whistling, chanting • Curriculum songs (creating melodies, songs, rap, cheers, jingles, etc.) • Background music • Playing instruments • Poetry or poems • Drama
Social Time Perspective Harmony	• Environmental issues • Social issues • Outdoor activities • Flexible assignments
Social Time Perspective Spirituality	• Graphic-rich environment (visuals and graphic organizers, pictures, posters, charts, graphs, diagrams) • Mind mapping (webbing) • Puzzles and games (e.g., chess) • Patterns • Painting, collages, visual arts
Oral Tradition	• Lectures • Socratic questioning • Scientific investigations and experiments • Logical-sequential assignments (reports, experiments, research) • Problem solving; problem-based lessons • Logical puzzles and games • Competitions • Analogies • Independent study projects
Oral Tradition Verve Expressive Individualism	• Lectures • Seminars • Discussions and dialogues • Oral presentations and speeches; debates • Guest speakers • Word games (e.g., idioms, jokes, puns, riddles, homonyms, anagrams, mnemonics) • Poetry, proverbs • Storytelling and drama • Reading (choral, peer, individual) • Journal writing

(continued)

Table 1 ***(Continued)***

Boykin's Afrocentric Expressions	*Teaching Strategies and Products*
Spirituality	• Visualizations
Harmony	• Proverbs, poetry
	• Self-paced, independent instruction and assignments
	• Choices and options; interest-based assignments
	• Reflection time and opportunity (e.g., journals, poetry)
Communalism	• Social and cooperative learning
Affective	• Opportunity to help others (e.g., tutoring, mentoring)
	• Service and community involvement
	• Conflict mediation lessons
	• Simulations

Source: Ford, Grantham, and Milner (in press).

Psychological Needs and Underachievement

We now turn to a discussion of variables in the psychological or individual context. A plethora of work has focused on the relationship between students' self-concept and achievement. It is widely accepted that students who have higher self-concepts tend to do better academically. Related to the discussion of self-concept is racial identity. We propose here that students of color who have a low, poor, or negative racial identity are less likely to perform well academically than students of color who have a high or positive racial identity. In other words, racial identity development (RID) is positively related to achievement among gifted students of color—individuals with high RIDs often have high achievement; students with low RIDs often have low achievement (Ford, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1999).

Racial Identity Issues

Race and racial identity affect one's socioemotional and psychological health in significant ways. The issue of race may be more salient for students of color than White students (Flowers et al., 2003; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003). For instance, White Americans are much less likely to experience the chronic stress and problems associated with race (and racism) because the color of their skin is not viewed with a deficit orientation and, thus, is not a barrier to academic and social success. In short, racism, prejudice, and discrimination can negatively affect the extent to which students of color identify with their racial heritage; it can negatively affect their racial identity. As with self-concept and self-esteem, racial identity influences students' motivation, persistence, and achievement (Ford, 1996; Grantham & Ford, 2003).

Social Issues and Underachievement

Social influences are closely linked with underachievement. Although there are many strands related to social influences, peer pressure often has the most pervasive impact on educational outcomes for students in general and students of color in particular. In the research literature, it is well documented that negative peer pressure has profound effects on school experiences and educational outcomes for students of color. Unfortunately, African American and Hispanic students seem particularly susceptible to negative opposition from their peers (Ogbu, 2003; Shaffer et al., 2002). These students, especially in urban settings, are frequently teased by their peer groups as acting white when they appear to be academically engaged (Corwin, 2001; Fordham, 1988; Suskind, 1998).

As noted earlier, people tend to define themselves according to their membership in a particu-

lar racial group. In fact, the person's apparent racial background serves as the referent that connects the individual with his or her identified cultural roots and historical experience (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2000). This "collective identity" represents the sense of belonging that is psychologically important for so many people of color. As a way of reinforcing their legitimacy as a member of the racial group or community, students of color may disengage psychologically, socially, and emotionally from school achievement to maintain their perceived cultural identity (Corwin, 2001; Shaffer et al., 2002; Suskind, 1998). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) referred to this notion as a pyrrhic victory for students of color, that is, a victory gained as a ruinous loss.

Recommendations

According to the research literature (Moore et al., 2005; Ogbu, 2003), there are a number of factors that influence the school outcomes of gifted students of color. However, there are promising practices for addressing underachievement and low achievement for these students (Ford, 1996; Shaffer et al., 2002). Using the research literature as the primary data source, we focus our recommendations on three broad areas: (a) teacher education, counselor education, and professional development; (b) counseling development; and (c) multicultural gifted curriculum.

Teacher Education, Counselor Education, and Professional Development

In regard to teaching students of color, it is critical that gifted education teachers are multiculturally competent and are able to apply culturally relevant teaching practices (Flowers et al., 2003; Ford & Harris, 1999; Milner et al., 2003). As the nation's student demographics become increasingly diverse, gifted education teachers are bound to enter classrooms with students of diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic orientation. Therefore, it is imperative that gifted education teachers are equipped for the multifaceted needs as well as the challenges that these students bring to the school setting in general and classroom in particular. In fact, gifted education teachers, both inservice and preservice, need to continuously pursue and receive training to effectively work with these students. In addition to requiring specific courses related to diversity, equity, and multicultural education, Milner and colleagues (2003) suggested that teacher education programs infuse opportunities in the curriculum for preservice teachers to have ongoing exposure interacting and working with diverse student groups. Such opportunities provide preservice teachers with opportunities to relate cultural pedagogical principles (e.g., understanding cultural diversity, appreciating cultural differences, eliminating deficit thinking, raising expectations for diverse students, etc.) to practice. Over the years, numerous educational scholars and researchers have outlined specific suggestions for teacher education degree programs and professional development initiatives.

It is common knowledge that students bring an array of academic and personal concerns to the classroom. In most cases, school counselors are in the best position to address these issues (Sears, 1999). According to The Education Trust (1997), school counselors hold central positions in schools and arguably are the most equipped in these settings to focus their efforts in developing programs, strategies, and interventions that address barriers to student achievement. Bailey, Getch, and Chen-Hayes (2003) advocate that counselor education programs infuse multiculturalism and social advocacy throughout the school counseling graduate curriculum.

Multicultural Gifted Curriculum

Students' cultural heritage and unique learning styles must be considered not only relative to pedagogy, but also relative to the curriculum. In one study (Ford, 1996), gifted diverse underachieving students reported a lack of interest in school because they could not relate to what was being taught. These students exhibited behaviors that communicated disinterest and boredom for the subject matter. Many of these students made com-

ments, such as "I would be more interested in school if I were learning about my culture," "School is more interesting when we learn about African Americans and what they have done for this nation," and "I like being in school more when we talk about my heritage." It was concluded that underachievement among gifted students of color was highly associated with culturally irrelevant and unresponsive curriculum (Ford, 1996).

To address students' concerns about a culturally bland curriculum, Ford and Harris (1999) created a framework using Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1985) and Banks' (1999) multicultural education model to assist educators of gifted students in developing learning experiences that are multicultural and challenging. The Ford–Harris model (also known as the Bloom–Banks model) is presented in Table 2. Four levels of the 24 levels are described (see Ford & Harris, 1999, for a more complete application of the model).

At the knowledge–contributions level, students are provided information and facts about cultural heroes, holidays, events, and artifacts. For example, students might be taught about Caesar Chavez and then asked to regurgitate several facts about him on a test. They might be introduced to the Chinese New Year and be required to recite its dates and key celebrations. At the comprehension–transformation level, students are required to explain what they have been taught, but from the perspective of another group or individual. For instance, students might be asked to explain events leading up to the Trail of Tears, and then to talk about how Native Americans might have felt being displaced. At the analysis–social action level, students are asked to analyze an event from different points of view. Students, in this case, might be asked to compare and contrast events during U.S. slavery with events associated with Apartheid in South Africa. Following these comparisons, students could be asked to develop a plan for decreasing discrimination in certain settings. At the evaluation–social action level, students might be asked to conduct a study or survey about prejudice in sports. This information would be given to league owners, along with a plan of action for change (such as developing a culturally sensitive training and hiring program).

A primary rationale for multicultural education is the promise that it holds for engaging students and giving them opportunities to identify with, connect with, and relate to the curriculum. It is deliberate, continuous, planned, and systematic opportunities to avoid drive-by teaching—to make learning meaningful and relevant to students, and to give students of color perspectives to reflect the gifted education curriculum.

Counseling Development

Not only is it important for gifted education teachers and school counselors to learn about themselves and how their attitudes and perceptions affect students of color, it is equally important for students of color to learn about themselves in the context of their cultural heritage and other student groups. Those gifted students of color who are underachieving often need the assistance of not only teachers but school counselors. School counselors are arguably in the best position to help students of color with academic issues related to social and personal experiences (e.g., coping with negative peer pressures, working and living in mainstream society and schools, developing a positive and strong racial identity, etc.; Bailey et al., 2003; Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Moore et al., 2005). We advocate for all students of color to become, at minimum, bicultural to work and live—to thrive—in their own culture and mainstream society (Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2000).

One of the most effective ways to help gifted students of color cope with negative peer pressures is to involve them in initiatives where they have an opportunity to learn from and interact with similar peers academically. These positive interactions provide students of color with opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with peers on the same academic level. In addition to positive peer interactions, college students and adult professionals from diverse racial groups can serve as mentors and role models for students of color. Gifted students of color can also be exposed to other positive influences through books, career shadowing experiences, and virtual Internet interactions (e.g., synchronous chat rooms, asynchron-

Table 2
Ford–Harris Multicultural Gifted Education Framework: Description of Levels

	Knowledge	*Comprehension*	*Application*	*Analysis*	*Synthesis*	*Evaluation*
Contributions	Students are taught and know facts about cultural artifacts, events, groups, and other cultural elements.	Students show an understanding of information about cultural artifacts, groups, etc.	Students are asked to and can apply information learned on cultural artifacts, events, etc.	Students are taught to and can analyze (e.g., compare and contrast) information about cultural artifacts, groups, etc.	Students are required to and can create a new product from the information on cultural artifacts, groups, etc.	Students are taught to and can evaluate facts and information based on cultural artifacts, groups, etc.
Additive	Students are taught and know concepts and themes about cultural groups.	Students are taught and can understand cultural concepts and themes.	Students are required to and can apply information learned about cultural concepts and themes.	Students are taught to and can analyze important cultural concepts and themes.	Students are asked to and can synthesize important information on cultural concepts and themes.	Students are taught to and can critique cultural concepts and themes.
Transformation	Students are given information on important cultural elements, groups, etc., and can understand this information from different perspectives.	Students are taught to understand and can demonstrate an understanding of important cultural concepts and themes from different perspectives.	Students are asked to and can apply their understanding of important concepts and themes from different perspectives.	Students are taught to and can examine important cultural concepts and themes from more than one perspective.	Students are required to and can create a product based on their new perspective or the perspective of another group.	Students are taught to and can evaluate or judge important cultural concepts and themes from different viewpoints (e.g., minority group).
Social Action	Based on information on cultural artifacts, etc., students make recommendations for social action.	Based on their understanding of important concepts and themes, students make recommendations for social action.	Students are asked to and can apply their understanding of important social and cultural issues; they make recommendations for and take action on these issues.	Students are required to and can analyze social and cultural issues from different perspectives; they take action on these issues.	Students create a plan of action to address a social and cultural issue(s); they seek important social change.	Students critique important social and cultural issues, and seek to make national or international change.

Actions taken on the social action level can range from immediate and small scale (e.g., classroom and school level) to moderate (e.g., community or regional level) to large scale (state, national, and international levels). Likewise, students can make recommendations for action or actually take social action. Source: Ford & Harris (1999).

ous electronic communications, etc.). To also assist with developing effective coping skills when faced with negative peer pressures or social slights (e.g., discrimination), school counselors may want to develop and offer anger management and conflict resolution programs for these students. Ford et al. (in press) postulated that students are more likely to persistent academically when they are able to cope with academic, social, and personal challenges.

Conclusion

Many school and nonschool factors contribute to underachievement and low achievement among students, especially students of color. Regardless of the factor, they commonly require specific interventions. Too often, the solutions appear to be obvious; however, when it comes to students of color, they are relegated to phantom strategies and approaches. We postulate that underachievement and low achievement among gifted students of color can be better understood and addressed when teachers, school counselors, and administrators deal first with their deficit thinking related to students of color and focus on the school and nonschool needs of these students. The more knowledgeable and well-trained these educational professionals are, the more likely they will be to improve educational outcomes for students of color.

Notes

1. Anthropological term relating to one versus multiple colors.

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