Capitalizing on Leadership Capacity: Gifted African American Males in High School

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Leadership is one of the most underemphasized dimensions of high ability cited in the current federal definition of giftedness. This particular ability area is highlighted here in an effort to offer helpful information and recommendations to administrators, educators, parents, and policymakers who seek plausible solutions to the problem of underidentification among gifted secondary African American male student populations. Key topics and issues addressed include definitions of giftedness, school context and environment, identity development, resilience, and leadership potential. The analysis concludes with practitioner- and researcher-focused recommendations.

African American males continue to go underidentified for our nation's gifted programs. This lack of identification has led to underrepresentation by as much as 50% nationally (Office of Civil Rights, 2002). According to Lee (1996), “Black males encounter formidable challenges to their educational development and many of them experience a serious stifling of achievement, aspiration, and pride in school systems throughout the country” (p. 5). Both current and historical arguments (e.g., Bennett, 1992; D’Souza, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Simon, 2007), much like Armstrong Williams’ dire report on African American male crime statistics cited in a 2004 column in the New York Amsterdam News, would have many of us believe that Black males are pathological and failing miserably in our nation’s schools; when, in actuality, our nation’s schools seem to be the purveyors of pathology and are miserably failing our Black males (Dunbar, 2001; McNally, 2003).

Despite our efforts at expanding the definition of giftedness to include several categories and criteria in the identification process, we continue to see a high degree of underrepresentation among African American male cohorts. The literature in the past two decades has been noteworthy (e.g., Fashola, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Ford, 2003; Ford, Moore, & Milner, 2005; Grantham, 2004; Hopkins, 1997; Hrabowski, Maton, & Greif, 1998; Kunjufu, 1990, 2005a; Lee, 2005; Morris, 2002; Ogbu, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999; Porter, 1998; Taylor & Phillips, 2006; Watson & Smitherman, 1996; Whiting, 2006; Wynn, 1992) regarding the “underachievement” and underrepresentation of African American males in U.S. schooling. According to the literature on these phenomena, African American males have been disproportionately placed in special education classrooms (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Kearns, Ford, & Linney, 2005; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001) and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Ford, 1995; Bonner, 2001; Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999).

In this article, we discuss the promise offered by one of the ability areas cited in the federal definition of giftedness—leadership ability—to address and circumvent this cycle of underrepresentation. An examination of an array of contributing factors found to impact African American male readiness and identification for gifted programming is explored; namely, definitions of giftedness, secondary school contexts, identity development, resilience, and leadership potential each are considered in turn. Perhaps by considering this often overlooked form of giftedness among African American male populations, we can “...increase the representation of Black males in gifted education. Maybe then these young men can have the opportunity to fulfill their potential” (Whiting, 2006, p. 227).

DEFINING GIFTEDNESS

What has historically and currently served as formidable barriers to the identification of African American males for gifted and talented programs are the definitions of giftedness used by most states. These definitions tend to focus narrowly on giftedness as a construct measured overwhelmingly, if not solely, by academic ability. According to Sternberg (2007), “Different cultures have different conceptions of what it means to be gifted. But in identifying children as gifted, we often use only our own conception, ignoring the
cultural context in which the children grew up” (p. 160). Hence, an unfortunate outcome of our truncated views regarding the necessary and sufficient attributes to be identified as gifted is that they create a template that all children do not fit neatly. Even more problematic have been the attempts at identifying a definition that is parsimonious, inclusive, and flexible while also being heuristic.

Hence, finding a definition that adequately describes an elusive and multifaceted concept like giftedness has been an ongoing task since the field began. Posing the greatest challenges to this process are the many ways that giftedness can be operationalized (Gardner, 1983; Renzulli, 1981; Sternberg, 1985) nationally and in various cultures (Bonner, 2001; Ford, 1995; Hilliard, 1976). Matthews (2004) stated,

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

A first step in expanding how giftedness was defined came by way of Congressional mandate and the subsequent efforts of Commissioner of Education Sydney Marland (1972), who published the first federal definition of giftedness. According to Marland’s definition, giftedness was defined as follows:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons, who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas singly or in combination: (a) General Intellectual Ability, (b) Specific Academic Aptitude, (c) Creative or Productive Thinking, (d) Leadership Ability, (e) Visual and Performing Arts, and (f) Psychomotor Ability [This was dropped from the definition. It was thought that students with great athletic talent were being discovered.]

Successive refinements of the Marland definition have since been developed. Theorists have acknowledged the multifaceted, complex nature of intelligence and how contemporary tests (often overly simplistic and static) fail to do justice to this construct (Ford, 2003; Frasier, 1989; Grantham & Ford, 2003; Hilliard, 1976; Sternberg, 2007). Thus, the United States Department of Education (1993) broadened the definition of giftedness:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school. Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor. (p. 19)

Readily apparent across the states is the wide variation in the use of this definition (Davidson Institute, 2007; National Association for Gifted Children, 2005); consequently, depending on state mandates and local norms, how and if this definition is used in its current form is debatable. It is important to note that states are not required to use the federal definition and can opt for their own definitions. According to the Education Commission of the States (2004), “The states vary in how they identify gifted and talented students as well. Twenty-five states use ‘gifted and talented,’ or some variation, as the classifying term. Eighteen states have chosen to only use the term ‘gifted,’ or some variation and not mention the word ‘talented.’ Finally, three states use the term ‘high ability student’” (p. 1). Also, it is important to note that some states embrace more traditional definitions of giftedness—those focusing on academic ability and intelligence, while others use more multifaceted and fluid criteria.

Although there is great variability across these state’s definitions, many have been consistent in employing leadership capacity or leadership potential as an area of importance. According to the 2004–2005 State of the States Report provided by the National Association for Gifted Children and the Council of State Directors of Programs for the Gifted, 13 states included leadership in their definition of giftedness. Significant in these definitions is Matthews’ (2004) observation that, “Leadership has been retained in the federal definition of giftedness across major revisions, since its inclusion in the Marland Report (1972) definitions more than 30 years ago” (p. 77).

Gifted African American Males: The Secondary School Context

A number of factors have been cited as contributing to the widespread underrepresentation of African American males in gifted programs. According to Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Frazier-Trotman (2002), lack of teacher referral, low test scores, and student and family choice are the three most significant factors. Moreover, Hughes and Bonner (2007) found that structural inequalities also serve as major barriers. These barriers include teacher propensities to pathologize African American males in their early school experiences, education tracking that locks African American
males into substandard classes, and ineffective classroom learning environments. Hughes and Bonner (2006) asserted,

For Black males, the acquisition of an education is often a catch-22 situation in which to fully understand what academic accoutrements are necessary for success they must possess certain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). Yet, the Black male is expected to have certain cultural capital in order to understand what academic accoutrements are necessary for success. (p. 4)

This conundrum often has resulted in findings akin to what the Office of Civil Rights (2002) reported; namely, that the representation of racial and ethnic groups in gifted and talented programs favors some groups more than others. The study found that gifted and talented programs were comprised of: 7.64% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 72.59% of White students, 8.43% of African American students, 10.41% of Hispanic/Latino students, and 0.93% of American Indian/Alaskan American students. However, when these data are juxtaposed with data highlighting the representation of each group across the entire public school education spectrum during this same year (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), disparities become readily apparent: 4.30% of all Asian/Pacific Islander students, 59.50% of all White students, 17.30% of all African American students, 17.80% of all Hispanic/Latino students, and 1.20% of all American Indian/Alaskan American students.

Most noteworthy is the data that report White students as representing 59.50% of the overall student population in the nation’s schools during the 2002 fall term while garnering a whopping 72.59% of the spots in gifted and talented programs. These data are but one indicator of the need to identify additional and alternative measures to ensure that all students are fairly represented and have an equitable opportunity at participating in gifted and talented programs.

For the African American male student, the secondary context is a time in which giftedness should be cultivated and honed for the critical next step in the educational journey—higher education. We must take measures to ensure that these individuals are successful. To address this problem head-on, one viable strategy is to focus on areas in which giftedness is promoted and valued among African American populations. From W. E. B. DuBois’ (1903) notion of the Talented Tenth to some of the contemporary initiatives enacted by civic, Greek-letter, and clergy-based organizations, leadership or leadership capacity as it is codified in the federal definition of giftedness serves as an excellent starting point.

Gifted African American Males: Identity Development

Perhaps one of the most complex topics associated with gifted African American male cohorts stems from their development of identity—that is, how these individuals develop an identity that concomitantly embraces their multiple statuses as gifted, African American, and male. For African American gifted males, identity development (which includes forging a coherent and strong sense of who they are, where they are a heading, and where they “fit in”) is closely aligned with their sense of self-concept; that is, a holistic and realistic awareness of their unique attributes and traits. In this manner, gender, race, and ethnicity each becomes an integral part of their identity development (Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992).

Thus, for African American gifted males, embracing their multiple identities—Black, male, and gifted—impacts their peer interactions as well as their psychosocial and personal development (Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Sedlacek, 1987; Thomas, 1981). In essence, embracing their race, culture, ethnicity, and gifted status is critical in fostering a positive self-concept and identity.

Further, it could be argued that the very meaning of identity, particularly as it is associated with such constructs as ethnicity, gender role norms, and giftedness, evolves into internalized attitudes and cultural constructions among African male cohorts (Akbar, 1979a, 1979b; Asante, 1988, 2000; Cross, 1991a,b; Helms, 1993; Kunjufu, 1987, 2005a, 2005b; Monroe & Goldman, 1988; Wilson & Constantine, 1999). In fact, a widely held belief is that the development of a positive identity among gifted African American males helps to create simultaneously a healthy attitude toward and confidence in their academic abilities and, we believe, possibly the cultivation of leadership ability.

In terms of giftedness, many African American students find that their abilities and academic successes move them farther away instead of closer to members of their peer groups and home communities. Much like Bonner (2001) reported, “In the school setting, students are expected to achieve and perform at levels commensurate with their gifted and talented designation. At home, students are expected to act in a manner that conforms to their environment and social climate” (p. 651). What often happens is that the student, especially the African American male, becomes caught in this unforgiving middle position—not “real enough” and “too smart” to be part of the home community and not “cultured enough” and “too foreign” to be part of the mainstream. Thus, many of these students are left to their own devices and experience profound difficulties in navigating these two worlds.

This cohort encounters an additional set of complexities in their attempts to develop their racial and ethnic identities. According to Grantham and Ford (2003), gifted African American students experience numerous barriers associated with identity development, especially in terms of their racial identity development. Additionally, Grantham and Ford state, “Racial identity concerns the extent to which people of color are aware of, understand, and value their racial background and heritage. The main premise of this theory is: Do people of color recognize and value their background and appearance” (p. 20)?
Although not all gifted African American male students develop their cultural values and belief systems within a purely African or African American cultural and historical framework, the development of identity for the majority of this group continues to be heavily impacted by these structures. Therefore, Asante’s (1988) Afrocentric Cultural Identity and Cross’s (1991b) Negro to Black Conversion models are two of the major cultural identity typologies found useful in providing a theoretical and empowerment identity model for understanding gifted African American male students.

William E. Cross, Jr., first introduced one of the primary theories used to frame the racial identity development process found to occur among African Americans in 1971. The four stages or themes as they are sometimes referred to in Cross’s model (preencounter, encounter, immersion, and internalization) “each describes ‘self-concept’ issues concerning race and parallel attitudes that the individual holds about Black and White as a reference group” (p. 169). Without providing an exhaustive discussion here of Cross’s theory, worthy of note is that what each theme is found to represent is an ever-increasing sense of self as a racial being and an ever-deepening sense of understanding regarding the establishment of a healthy identity.

What can be problematic for the African American male who seeks to establish his racial identity in a school context is that these enclaves are ill-prepared to provide the necessary encouragement and space for this process to unfold. Additionally, as institutions they are generally opposed to a developed sense of identity that does not readily embrace all aspects of the Eurocentric frameworks upon which American education is based. According to Howard (2003), “Some researchers posit that the dissonance that exists between school and student culture is the primary reason for the academic underachievement and social maladjustment of racially diverse students” (p. 6). Without a better alignment between cultural, gender, racial, and academic identity development, the typical outcome for the gifted African American male is often underachievement primarily associated with feelings of alienation and incongruence with the educational environment.

Asante’s (1988) Afrocentric model readily addresses many problems stemming from cultural misalignment. This model engenders a worldview aimed at constructing a collective Black consciousness leading to a new sense of empowerment and identity. The cultural values of the Afrocentric model are consistent with the basic principles of the African American worldview characterized by interdependence, cooperation, unity, mutual responsibility, and reconciliation. There is a constant interplay among systems and subsystems where the focus is on cooperation and group cohesiveness, on the corporate whole (the African American community), rather than the individual. This means that the gifted African American male is not seen as alone, but rather as an intricate part of the African American community.

GIFTED AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES: RESILIENCE FACTORS

A question that often plagues the minds of scholars and the broader education community is often stated: Why is it that some African American males overcome various education and non-education-related obstacles (i.e., academic integration, social integration, family pressure and influence, peer pressure and influence, self-esteem, identity development) during their P-12 experiences while others fail to prevail? These obstacles are found to be somewhat fluid according to Ford and Moore (2004), who refer to the challenges encountered by gifted African American males in assimilating and forming key relationships in school contexts as paying a Black tax. Defined as incessant psychological and social stress faced by African Americans, as a result of being the minority or pioneer in nontraditional domains (e.g., gifted education programs), this Black tax often leads these students to feel isolated, excluded, and depressed (Bailey & Moore, 2004; T. A. Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Moore, Flowers, Guion, Zhang, & Staten, 2004; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005; Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003).

Students who have the ability to rise despite the many obstacles (including the Black tax) they encounter develop protective processes that neutralize and in many ways offset these challenges that inhibit their pursuits for success. Identified by Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, and Maton (1999) as the maintenance of healthy development despite the presence of external and internal threats or the ability to recover from major traumatic life events, resilience is a concept that should be viewed as evolving and worthy of cultivation across the student’s life continuum; this cultivation can mainly be facilitated by offering them protective processes at critical life junctures (Garmezy & Masten, 1991; Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1993; Winfield, 1994). These protective processes that operate at turning points in the individual’s life enable him to respond positively to perilous situations (Winfield, 1994). Rutter (1987) summarized this point by saying,

Protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in the ways in which people deal with life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantaged circumstances. Particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms operating at key turning points in people’s lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path. (p. 329)

Protective processes, which include supportive families and communities, school staff, and internal locus of control, compared to the risks experienced in external environments determine the level of resilience that one possesses (Winfield, 1994). A key example is Floyd’s (1996) utilization of 20 high-achieving African American high school
seniors with families from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Floyd found that family support, the influence of teachers, and school counselors, and personal beliefs of optimism and persistence were positively associated with resilience and academic success (L. A. Flowers, Zhang, Moore, & Flowers, 2004). Family support was noted in several studies as one of the most influential factors in determining the resilience of gifted African American males. Winfield (1994) asserted that parents of resilient children give their adolescents structure in their everyday tasks, actively participate in their educational pursuits, and show interests in their children's ambitions. Likewise Maton, Freeman, Hrabowski, and Grief (1998) affirmed that African American males who are academically successful were reared in families characterized by "high levels of academic engagement, strictness, nurturance, and community connectedness" (p. 662). While the belief that "it takes a village to raise a child" is still very prevalent within the African American community, the only way to possibly offset negative peer, neighborhood, and societal challenges associated with being gifted, African American, and male is for parents to encourage and nurture the resilience among these youth.

Additionally, teachers play an integral role in the academic success of gifted program participants. Teaching styles, cultural sensitivity, and expectation levels have also been cited as influential factors in the resilience of gifted students. In a phenomenological study of African American high-school students in gifted education programs, T. A. Flowers et al. (2003) noted that teachers and school counselors needed to improve their level of cultural awareness, make their behaviors and teaching styles congruent with those of the population and environment of the school, and display care for the constituencies of their classrooms by appropriately managing classroom discipline. Teachers are primarily responsible for the learning experiences of students; therefore, if they collaborate with school counselors encourage true learning and achievement, then both the intended and unexpected outcomes of resilient behavior will persist among the members of this cohort as they transition into higher education.

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES AND LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL: THE SECONDARY CONTEXT

The academic literature of the past 20 years has revealed much about the experiences of African American males in educational institutions. While the overrepresentation of African American male students in special education has received a great deal of attention in academic literature, there has been less attention paid to the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted and talented programs. Several reasons have been given to explain this underrepresentation (Ford, Grantham, & Bailey, 1999). However, many of the explanations are related to the definition(s) utilized in defining what constitutes gifted and talented. Specifically, Bonner (2000) found that the unique attributes, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds of African American male students were not taken into account by existing definitions of giftedness utilized by most school districts. For example, Hebert (1998) found that the underachievement pattern can be reversed through modification of the instructional program to increase the student's motivation to participate in school and achieve at higher levels of performance. Additionally, Ford et al. (1999) stated that educators may work diligently to provide a learning environment that is culturally responsive. Such a classroom or school is characterized by positive student-teacher relationships, multicultural curricula, and culturally compatible instructional styles.

One of the primary ability areas used to define giftedness that shows great promise in increasing the numbers of African American males identified is leadership. The use of this ability area has, to date, proven to be especially difficult because leadership remains the most underinvestigated aspect of the several domains that define giftedness (Matthews, 2004). However, given the importance of leadership ability in definitions of giftedness, it is critical that the leadership potential of African American male students be recognized and developed as part of the secondary educational experience. Developing leadership ability among African American male high-school students is of particular importance due to its implications and translation of these abilities into future adult contexts (Roach, Adelma, & Wyman, 1999).

An examination of the existing literature on leadership and its connection to gifted and talented youth identifies several specific studies as particularly compelling (Matthews, 2004). In particular, Matthews described the research of Roach et al. (1999) as "monumental" and stressed that their work is "the only study addressing the long-term development of youth leadership and its relationship with adult leadership" (p. 94). This relationship is of special importance because Roach et al. noted that theories of adult leadership tend to focus on individual abilities, whereas theories of youth leadership are primarily situational, thus inviting a focus on "responding to challenges posed by particular situations" (Matthews, p. 94). A central focus of this situational orientation is the idea that self-knowledge is a primary component of youth leadership (Roach et al., 1999). This emphasis on self-knowledge stands in contrast to the emphasis on the charisma and influence of individuals that permeates theories of adult leadership (Matthews, 2004).

The importance of self-knowledge thus stands as a potentially important component in the development of youth leadership. While there remains a limited amount of academic literature focusing on leadership as a component of giftedness, there is an even greater scarcity of literature specifically focused on leadership and African American
ENCOURAGING LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL

As a primary means for building self-esteem, developing ethnic pride, transitioning into independence, developing identity, and helping to negate the risk factors faced by African American male adolescents (Alford, 2003; Campbell-Whatley & Algozzine, 1997; Futrell, 2004; Grantham, 2004; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003; Vanderverslale, 1998), culturally specific Rites of Passage programs, particularly those with strong mentoring components, have been advanced. Within such programs, mentoring is offered as a means to aid African American males who are struggling with academic achievement (Hrabowski et al., 1998; Price, 2002; Struchen & Porter, 1997). A number of long-standing organizations, including the Boy Scouts of America, 100 Black Men of America, Inc., and Urban League have offered mentoring activities for young men throughout the country. African American fraternal organizations have offered mentoring programs targeting African American males for several decades. Specifically, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (Wesley, 1981), and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. (Crump, 1991), have established mentoring opportunities that continue to focus on leadership development among adolescent African American males. These types of programs have existed for many years; however, they have generally operated in isolation from one another without a unified program or clear method on how to develop and manage emerging models of mentorship.

One leadership development framework found to be highly effective in promoting successful achievement among African American males (Alford, 2003; Hare & Hare, 1985; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Hill, 1992) is the African American Rites of Passage (AA-RITES) program. The focus on skills related to the development of self-knowledge and mentoring inherent in the AA-RITES program offers a unique opportunity for African American secondary students to develop a set of effective leadership skills. In many cases, African American males have not been provided with opportunities to master crucial developmental tasks during childhood and adolescence, and this in turn negatively influences their academic, career, and social success in later stages of life (Lee, 1991). Therefore, the development of these skills has implications for the transition from adolescents to adulthood as well as for increasing the matriculation of African American male secondary students in gifted and talented programs.

According to Alford (2003), Rites of Passage can be defined as "symbolic and meaningful events that mark transitional periods for individuals as specified stages of life occur" (p. 3). Utilizing the work of Warfield-Coppock (1990), Alford (2003) characterizes Rites of Passage Programs as bringing "... stability, ease of transition, and continuity to life, as well as groundedness, balance, and order" (p. 6). In essence, Rites of Passage are a part of every human society and have their earliest roots in ancient African societies, particularly those developed in the Nile Valley of present day Egypt (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Traditional cultures utilize Rites of Passage to mark the important transition from adolescence to adulthood (Eliade, 1958, 1994). Although the roots of these rites are several centuries old, they remain a primary cultural activity for many African cultural communities throughout the world (Goggins, 1998; Hare & Hare, 1985; Hill, 1992; Maye & Maye, 2000).

Warfield-Coppock (1992) noted that Rites of Passage programs for African American males have existed for at least several decades. However, she discussed the contemporary revitalization of these programs and traces their recent resurgence to the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s (Warfield-Coppock). Although the historical connections discussed by Warfield-Coppock (1992) are valid, she failed to consider that the contemporary use of Rites of Passage programs for African American male adolescents has been heavily influenced by the hip-hop culture that emerged nationwide in the 1980s.

In describing the goals of Rites of Passage programs, Warfield-Coppock (1992) framed the development of a "strong, positive sense of self and achievement" (p. 472) as being of primary importance in the personal growth of African American young men. However, conducting research on the effectiveness of these programs for African American male adolescents has been difficult because most Rites of Passage are historically private in nature and are usually tightly held by local community and fraternal organizations (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Despite this, research on Rites of Passage programs for African American males across the country revealed that (a) most of these programs had improvement of self-concept as one of the major indicators of success of the program, and (b) self-knowledge was a crucial attribute for African American youth making the transition to adulthood (Warfield-Coppock).

Individuals who are responsible for designing curricula or implementing effective programming to encourage the leadership potential among gifted African American males should address both areas. A good example of these tenets is revealed in Courtland Lee's Black Manhood Training program, designed to emphasize not only the importance of understanding Black history but also the contemporary societal challenges facing African American males (e.g.,
incarceration, unemployment, teenage fatherhood, drugs, violence, education). Programs such as this provide not only an opportunity for gifted African American males to develop a better understanding of their cultural history and tradition but also allow them to tackle thorny contemporary issues of importance in a "safe space."

CONCLUSION

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

1. Avoid treating African American males as a monolithic group. The development of programs emphasizing leadership for African American gifted males must take into account the range of background experiences these students bring to the educational context. Some students will have had many opportunities to be exposed to leadership and decision-making in home or community settings. Others will not have been exposed to such opportunities and may flounder when first presented with them.

2. Infuse "real-world" experiences into the leadership curriculum and provide "authentic" training opportunities. It is critical to avoid a purely academic approach to leadership, one in which students only learn lessons in leadership processes through temporal exercises. At the secondary level, a wealth of opportunities is available in academic and sports-related venues for students to develop and display their leadership abilities in meaningful ways. Examples include student council, special interest clubs, and various team sports (i.e., sports emphasizing camaraderie, esprit de corps, and teamwork).

3. Include civic, clergy-based, community and Historically Black Greek Letter Organizations (HBGLOs) in the planning and development of the curriculum emphasizing leadership ability. These groups have a history and tradition of cultivating and providing leadership experiences for African American males. To capture important cultural nuances and idiosyncrasies, it is important to get input from those individuals who are indigenous to these communities. According to Whiting (2006), "Such organizations as fraternities, the Boys and Girls Clubs, 100 Black Men, National Urban League, YMCA, and others recognize that one person can make a difference in a child's life" (p. 226).

4. Develop more seamless connections between youth leadership behavior and adult leadership performance (Roach et al., 1999). Students at the secondary level are not afforded the opportunity to see how current leadership training will become manifest. Proximal peers are essential—college is viewed as a next step; therefore, connections to college student leaders who could serve as proximal-peer mentors would be beneficial. Additionally, college graduates and working professionals could serve as mentors and role models to expose students to leadership expectations and roles.

5. Establish clear criteria for how leadership ability is to be used in the evaluation of giftedness. The literature affirms the confusion and lack of specificity related to defining this particular form of giftedness (Matthews, 2004; Roach et al., 1999). Thus, it is important for administrators, teachers, and personnel responsible for identifying gifted African American males to not only establish effective programs to enhance these abilities but also to recognize them as viable identification constructs.

6. Recognize the barriers that may potentially prohibit African American male participation in leadership development initiatives. The literature addresses the structural inequities that are exacted on African American male populations in schools (Bonner, 2000; Ford, 2004; Ford et al., 1999; Grantham, 2004). Additionally, a number of other sources, such as family and peers, can be equally prohibitive. As a result, many African American males adopt an oppositional stance toward anything "scholarly." Thus, it is important to note that "The earlier we focus on the scholar identities of such males, the more likely we are to develop a future generation of Black male scholars who are in a position to break the vicious cycle of underachievement" (Whiting, 2006, p. 223).

7. Recognize and encourage resilience among gifted African American male cohorts. Even being afforded the opportunity to participate in the school context is a major feat for many of these gifted African American males. Many have overcome numerous barriers and obstacles from both externally and internally motivated sources; thus, their resilience in the face of these impediments should be recognized. Notwithstanding their giftedness, it is critical to understand that not all students are operating on a level playing field.

Additionally, the lack of empirical data focusing on gifted African American males and leadership have prompted us to offer several implications and recommendations for future research. The following research initiatives should be undertaken or expanded:

1. Research focusing on how leadership development theories and leadership development models interface with models of identity development among gifted African American male cohorts. There are a number
of leadership development theories and models that have been uncovered in the extant literature (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1977; Kouzes & Posner, 1989; Moyley, 2000; Northouse, 2001; Owen, 2000; Brett, 2004). Each provides a unique perspective on this construct. Additionally, there are several theories and models that have been made available to explain identity development (Allen, 1986; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 1994; Salazar & Abrams, 2005), both as content and process. Thus, research aimed at revealing how leadership and identity development interfaces is critically needed. For example, one potential question that might be addressed by this research includes: Are there particular stages along the identity development continuum that are ideal for particular approaches to leadership development among gifted African American male cohorts?

2. Research focusing on the roles that faith-based, fraternal, and civic institutions play in the cultivation of leadership competences and skills for gifted African American males. Research to determine the relative impact of key organizations and institutions on the leadership development and potential specifically for gifted African American males should be undertaken. According to Bonner and Jennings (2007), “These groups have a longstanding history of cultivating and providing leadership experiences for African American males” (p. 34).

3. Research highlighting the unique characteristics of the African American family, particularly characteristics that foster leadership among gifted African American males. The primacy of the family, although at times contested, continues to serve as the main unifying force within the African American community.

Notwithstanding constellation, particularly for the gifted African American male, the family provides an important source of ongoing support. Targeted research aimed at exploring how the family contributes to the success of these gifted males speaks to what Grantham and Ford (2003) alluded to in their work as the critical need to focus on and avoid overlooking the important role that the African American family plays.

4. Research is needed that focuses on Rites of Passage Programs specifically targeting gifted African American males. The goal of Rights of Passage Programs is “To prepare African American youth to reclaim their history and transform the circumstances of their lives” (Cooper et al., 2003, p. 4). How these programs intersect with their multiple identities (i.e., gifted, African, and male) is critical in understanding how their leadership potential can be cultivated.

The federal definition of giftedness highlights leadership as one of the key ability areas of focus. A wealth of opportunity is afforded to those responsible for the identification of gifted students, particularly among African American male populations. With the longstanding tradition of leadership in the African American community via civic and clergy-based organizations as well as HBGLOs, targeting leadership ability as an area of emphasis could only provide tangible benefits.

Giftedness at its highest levels can be found across all ethnic and racial groups (Bonner, 2000; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Ford et al., 1999; Sternberg, 2007). However, the manifestations of giftedness differ from group to group due to differing values, attitudes, and opportunities. Essentially, what is valued in the culture is produced by the culture. Therefore, because leadership is cultivated and promoted as a form of giftedness within the African American culture, it is incumbent on schools and school officials to recognize and honor this form of ability in an effort to ensure the development of the unique talents of all gifted and talented students.

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