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# Another Look at the Achievement Gap

## Learning From the Experiences of Gifted Black Students

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Many studies have been conducted on the achievement gap, with most findings pointing to how school and family variables affect Black students' achievement. Another body of work focuses on how social variables (i.e., peers) impact Black students' achievement, including how accusations of "acting White" affect the performance of Black students and contribute to the achievement gap. The current descriptive and exploratory study extends this work by examining peer pressure among Black students identified as gifted ( $n = 166$ ). As part of a larger study, gifted Black 5th through 12th graders were surveyed regarding their achievement-related attitudes and behaviors and perceptions of "acting White" and "acting Black." Many of the gifted Black students demonstrate an attitude-behavior discrepancy, face negative peer pressures, and attribute acting White to school achievement, intelligence, and positive school behaviors and attitudes; most attribute acting Black to negative school achievement, low intelligence, and poor behaviors and attitudes. Recommendations are provided.

**Keywords:** *achievement gap; gifted education; African American students; underrepresentation*

Two issues have been heavily debated in education relative to African American<sup>1</sup> students. The first is their lower academic performance compared to White students, referred to as the "achievement gap." The second relates to their underrepresentation in gifted education (e.g., advanced placement [AP] classes).

Much has been written about the first issue—that of the achievement gap specifically between Black students and White students. A litany of studies has been conducted, as well as conceptual and theoretical pieces, in response to this stubborn and pervasive problem (e.g., Barton, 2003; Education Trust, 2006; Ferguson, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006). That is, theologians, policy makers, administrators, and educators have offered their views on this issue, but the Black-White achievement gap has been resistant to change.

Equally difficult to change has been the representation of Black students in gifted education. Reports indicate that Black students are underrepresented by as much as 55% nationally in gifted education; although Black students compose 17.2% of school districts, they represent 8.4% of those identified as gifted (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Despite federal legislation (e.g., The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Public Law 107-110) calling for educational reform, and numerous intervention and prevention efforts (such as Head Start, preschool, and talent development programs), both the achievement gap and underrepresentation persist.

The research and literature base is replete with concerns and frustrations regarding not only the inadequate school performance and outcomes of Black students (e.g., high drop-out rates, low college attendance rates) but also their comparatively low performance when compared to White students. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Barton (2003) identified 14 factors found to be associated strongly and consistently with the achievement gap. The factors were categorized as school influences ( $n = 6$ ) and before-school and after-school influences ( $n = 8$ ). The school factors included lack of rigor in curricula in schools serving Black students, less access to technology-assisted instruction, having less qualified teachers, having less experienced teachers, and lower levels of feeling safe at school. Some of the before- and after-school influences were defined as factors in the home and community, including less family participation, lower levels of parental availability to their children, lower rates of parents reading to children, and more frequent TV watching by Black children. Also included are health-related variables, namely, higher rates of low birth weight, higher rates of lead poisoning, and poorer health and nutrition among Blacks. Although the 14 factors do not exhaust the list of explanations for the achievement gap, they have been commonly studied and discussed.

Although curricula, teacher qualifications, and family participation all contribute to the achievement gap, researchers also contend that social variables are taking their toll on the motivation and academic engagement of Black students, thereby contributing to the achievement gap (Fordham, 1988;

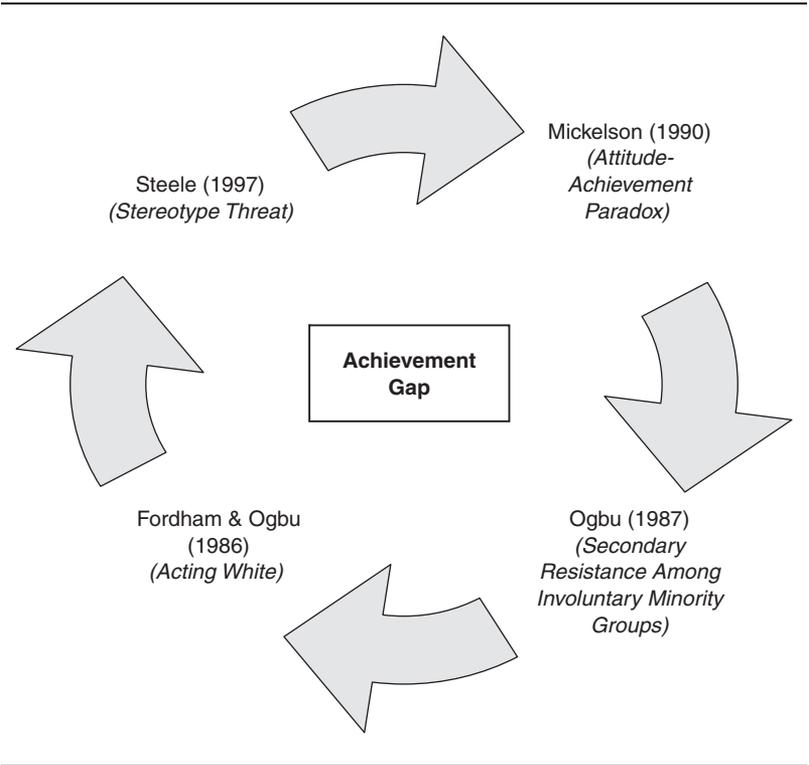
Fryer & Torelli, 2005; Ogbu, 2004). This body of work focuses extensively on the scholarship of Ogbu (1987, 1990, 2003, 2004), who studied oppositional attitudes among some Black adults and youth and the impact of these attitudes on their behaviors and subsequent achievement, as described later. One particular outcome has been the misperception among some Black students and adults that certain achievement-oriented behaviors (e.g., being studious, valuing high grades, speaking standard English, and so forth) are associated with “acting White.” It is our belief that the peer culture, namely, when negative, has an effect on students’ achievement and must, therefore, be included in research, theory, and other scholarship on the achievement gap.

A review of many publications on the achievement gap reveals that although a limited number have examined the gap with high-achieving Black students (Ferguson, 2002; Ogbu, 1990, 2003), to our knowledge no studies have examined the gap with Black students formally identified as gifted. Furthermore, although research has examined the notion of acting White, only three bodies of work could be found that studied the meaning and experiences of Black students who are accused of “acting Black” (Henfield, 2006; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004; Willie, 2003). All scholarship on this specific type of peer pressure, whether data-based or conceptual, begs several questions: How do Black students who have been identified as gifted achieve compared to their White counterparts? What can we learn about the achievement gap and underrepresentation from studying Black students who have been identified as gifted? How do gifted Black students view the terms *acting Black* and *acting White*? Finally, how is acting White similar to or different from acting Black, according to gifted Black students?

## **The Achievement Gap: Exploring Psychological and Social Factors**

Four theories inform the current study and offer key insights into some psychological and social factors that play a critical role in the development of Black students’ beliefs and subsequent achievement (Fordham, 1988; Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1987, 2004; Steele, 1997). In the sections that follow, and as illustrated in Figure 1, we summarize these theories (focusing specifically on secondary or oppositional attitudes, acting White, attitude-achievement paradox, and stereotype threat) and then discuss how these theories and research inform problems of low achievement<sup>2</sup> and underachievement. Our proposition is that low achievement and/or underachievement among Black students contributes to the achievement gap. We begin with Mickelson’s

**Figure 1**  
**Theoretical Framework of Social and Psychological Factors Affecting Black Students' Academic Attitudes, Behaviors, and Performance**



(1990) work on attitudes (attitude-achievement paradox) and build on her research with explanations of the remaining theories.

**Attitude-Achievement Paradox**

Attitudes have a powerful effect on behaviors. For instance, many American citizens are strong proponents of the American Dream phenomena; they believe that anyone can succeed with the “right” attitudes and behaviors that support those attitudes. That is, with hard work and effort, anyone can achieve or reach his or her goals. Regardless of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) level, and gender, it appears that most people agree with the

belief—the idea and ideal—that “education is the key to success in life,” or some version of it. However, one of the most complex and perplexing paradoxes in education is the gap between attitude and achievement displayed by some students, in this case Black students. On one hand, a student will profess that he or she believes that getting an education is important and valuable for success in life. On the other hand, that same student will report that he or she does not put forth much effort in school; this behavior (i.e., low effort) contributes to low achievement. Unfortunately, research has shown that this attitude-behavior-achievement discrepancy appears too often among Black students (e.g., Ford, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1996). Why do these attitudes and ideals not translate into action or behaviors for some groups of students? What contributes to or causes this inconsistency in attitude and behavior, and why is this paradox more prevalent in one student population than in others?

Although not focused directly on the achievement gap—which compares Black students’ performance with that of White students—Mickelson (1990) has studied low achievement and underachievement among Black students. Low achievement focuses on students failing to meet average academic performance, whereas underachievement focuses on a discrepancy whereby students are performing below the level expected or predicted (Ford, 1996, 2006; Ford & Harris, 1996). In a seminal study, Mickelson explored low achievement and underachievement among Black students. She acknowledged that many Black students express a high regard or reverence for education even though their academic achievement is poor. After studying a sample of almost 1,200 Black high school seniors, Mickelson concluded that a serious discrepancy exists between their abstract beliefs and concrete beliefs. The model holds that Black students tend to exhibit an attitude-achievement paradox in which there is a discrepancy between beliefs and subsequent behaviors. Mickelson found that the Black high school students supported the belief that hard work plays a major role in one’s success (abstract belief); however, they also believed that hard work does not necessarily result in success if one is Black because of such social injustices as prejudice and discrimination (concrete belief).

Abstract beliefs toward education embody the Protestant ethic’s promise of schooling as the vehicle for success and upward mobility (Mickelson, 1990, p. 45); abstract attitudes are global—they are based on social or cultural values that express the *ideal* connection between education and opportunity. Conversely, concrete attitudes are less idealistic and more realistic. These attitudes reveal students’ perceptions of their probable returns on education from the opportunity structure (p. 46). That is, concrete attitudes display

neither adherence to ideological shibboleths nor hopes for the future (p. 46). Instead, they are context specific and they reflect realities based on personal experiences; in other words, these attitudes are race, gender, and class specific. By way of illustration, if a Black child sees a pattern of Blacks getting a college degree but remaining unemployed, he or she comes to question the efficacy of an education. This doubt and second-guessing may result in the child believing that an education benefits or pays off for some groups but not others, namely, Blacks. That is, these qualified beliefs (concrete beliefs) result in academic disengagement, low motivation, and a sense of hopelessness that appear specific to Black or marginalized groups. Hence, although Black students certainly have the ability to do well in school, too many of them do not exert the effort necessary to achieve at high levels. Some of these students, specifically if discouraged, believe that hard work is a waste of time and energy given the reality of social injustices. According to Mickelson (1990), the contradiction between these two sets of attitudes lies at the heart of the paradox of positive attitudes and poor performance among Blacks (p. 50). Stated another way, an effective way to examine the contradiction between what Black students say about education and what they do is to compare their abstract and concrete attitudes toward education. One way to better understand low achievement and underachievement within the context of the achievement gap is to examine students' educational attitudes, perceptions, and subsequent behaviors.

## Secondary Resistance

Ogbu's (1987, 1990, 2003, 2004) theory on voluntary and involuntary minorities sets forth a similar explanation regarding attitudes and resultant behavior and academic performance. According to his theory, minority groups can be categorized as voluntary or involuntary based on their history in the United States. Voluntary minorities (immigrants) are those who, for a myriad of reasons, have chosen to come to the United States. They have come to the United States because of a strong belief or faith in the American Dream (an abstract belief, according to Mickelson, 1990). Once here, they are more willing to assimilate, compromise, negotiate, and otherwise adopt the attitudes and behaviors they believe will result in economic and academic success or advancement.

On the other hand, there are involuntary minorities, which include African Americans. Blacks are not immigrants; they did not choose to come to the United States. They did not seek asylum in the United States or come to this country in search of the American Dream. Instead, they were forced to come

to the United States during slavery. Accordingly, the desire to assimilate—the willingness to adopt mainstream values, customs, and traditions—is not as strong as we see with voluntary minorities or immigrants. Instead, there is a propensity for involuntary minorities to resist assimilation and to adopt attitudes of resistance; there is a desire to maintain their indigenous values, customs, and traditions. According to Ogbu (1987, 2003, 2004), these attitudes of resistance, referred to as “secondary resistance,” display themselves in a low commitment to values and beliefs that are considered typical of mainstream Whites or those who have been their oppressors. Thus, if speaking standard English is associated extensively or exclusively with White Americans, then Blacks who feel disconnected from mainstream society and its institutions will resist speaking standard English. Summarizing Ogbu’s work, we contend that the achievement gap can be better understood when we examine the differential histories and experiences of racial and ethnic groups and the belief systems they bring to academic settings.

### **Peer Pressures: Acting White**

All students are living in a culture of negative peer pressure (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Yet, it has been argued that Black students and adults face a type of peer pressure that is unique in many ways. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (1988) explored this notion of disconnection and resistance as advanced by Ogbu (1987, 1990, 2003, 2004) and attitudes as set forth by Mickelson (1990) in their work with Black high school students, who often equated certain achievement-related behaviors with acting White. The findings indicated that many of the Black adolescents associated acting White with getting good grades, being intelligent, speaking standard English, dressing in certain ways, having White friends, and other attitudes and behaviors. Regardless of the issue being focused on (grades vs. friendships), the student who is accused of acting White is viewed as someone who has betrayed his or her racial group, has given up his or her racial or cultural ties, and has adopted the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the oppressor or enemy. This type of peer pressure (charges of acting White) seems to be effective at hindering too many Black students from taking full advantage of certain academic opportunities available to them, including opportunities to participate in gifted education (Ford, 1996). For example, when Black students do not participate in gifted education, especially AP classes, their chances to attend the more elite colleges and universities can be diminished, thereby contributing to the achievement gap in higher education (Ford, 2006).

Ford (1994, 1996) has likewise studied the notion that achieving, getting good grades, speaking standard English, and so forth are viewed as acting White by some gifted Black students. She reported that both high-achieving and underachieving gifted Black students are familiar with this concept and that some gifted Black students will deliberately perform poorly in school when accused of acting White. Ford asserted that both underachievement and underrepresentation can be partly explained by the beliefs Black students hold about acting White and the extent to which they endorse this belief. Her findings indicate that even for gifted Black students, the need for affiliation and the desire to avoid negative peer pressures may be so great that it outweighs the need for achievement. The desire to have friends and to be popular, as well as to avoid alienation, isolation, and rejection, plays a critical role in the decisions gifted Black students make relative to staying success oriented and academically focused (also see Whiting, 2006).

As examined in the current study, one concept that has received little attention in this discussion is that of acting Black. In other words, if acting White is getting good grades, being intelligent, speaking standard English, and so forth, then what is acting Black? According to Henfield (2006), Peterson-Lewis and Bratton (2004), and Willie (2003), acting Black is frequently viewed by Black students as the opposite of acting White. Acting Black is interpreted as having a poor academic orientation, low intelligence, high aggressiveness, being highly antisocial and anti-authority, liking hip-hop music (rap, specifically), and dressing in urban clothes (that is, clothes that are not considered acceptable or professional by mainstream standards). Students who view acting Black as being the antithesis of achievement are less likely to perform at high levels. We believe that this belief contributes to the achievement gap and underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education.

## **Stereotype Threat**

Steele (1997, 1999) has added another perspective on the achievement gap discussion with his theory of stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype and the associated fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype. His research indicates that Black students are particularly vulnerable to negative stereotypes associated with Blacks and their intelligence. When faced with such stereotypes, Steele contends that many Black students do not achieve at high levels and their test performance is, likewise, stifled.

In various studies on stereotype threat, Steele (1997, 1999) found that when told that the test was a measure of ability (e.g., verbal ability), Black

students' confidence and subsequent performance were depressed. Steele and his colleagues have concluded that although some Black students do less well on tests than White students due to less academic motivation, fewer academic skills, and other factors associated with tests (e.g., bias), they also do less well because of stereotype threat. Thus, if ability per se was comparable, or held constant, between a group of Black students and a group of White students, Black students may still perform lower on tests due to negative stereotypes about the intellectual capacity of Blacks. Steele argues that stereotype threat must be studied to get a more complete picture of the achievement issues among Black students. Although the current study does not focus on testing issues, it does focus on Black students' perceptions of intelligence; hence, the stereotype threat sheds light on the achievement gap. Students' internalized beliefs, as Mickelson, Ogbu, Steele, and others have found, must be examined and considered when studying and theorizing the achievement gap.

All of these studies and theories, and others not discussed herein, emphasize that many—too many—Black students have internalized negative perceptions of achievement and intelligence. Some value an education; others question it. Some are optimistic and confident; others are ambivalent, frustrated, and confused. Too many Black students, often adolescents, appear to equate achievement with acting White; too many do not believe they can do well in school settings; and too many believe that others, particularly White American educators and adults, have low expectations of them academically, intellectually, and socially.

We can learn much from listening to students. Perceptions are a powerful determinant of behaviors. As Van Tassel-Baska, Feng, Quek, and Struck (2004, p. 365) noted, it does not matter whether something is so or not; what is important is what people *perceive* the situation to be. What beliefs and concerns do Black students hold about school, learning, and achievement? What can they tell us about why Black students fail to achieve? What concerns do gifted Black students have about doing well in school? How much do they value learning and achievement? What barriers do gifted Black students face in academic settings?

The current study was designed with these questions in mind. Gifted Black students, an understudied group, were surveyed regarding different aspects of achievement. Building on previous conceptual models by Ford (1994, 1996), Ford and Harris (1996), Fordham (1988), Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Mickelson (1990), Ogbu (1987, 2004), and Steele (1997), the current study focused on achievement attitudes and achievement behaviors, along with inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviors with a group of Black

males and females who have been identified as gifted. It also explored their perceptions of social barriers to achievement, namely, peer pressures associated with acting White and acting Black.

## Study Overview

The current study is descriptive and exploratory. It builds on the aforementioned theories and research by further describing and exploring some of the explanations for the achievement gap as well as low achievement and underachievement among Black students who are gifted. This study is unique in several ways. First, it focuses on gifted students who are African American. As has been consistently reported, Black students are sorely underrepresented in gifted programs. Furthermore, Black males are less likely to be identified as gifted than are Black females. A paucity of studies on low achievement, underachievement, and the achievement gap has been conducted with Black students identified as gifted (Ford, 1996, 2006). Second, the study goes beyond the focus on acting White to focus on acting Black—a construct that has received virtually no attention in the literature. Finally, the study examines perceptions. Many studies have been conducted *about* students, with little information collected *from* them. In other words, researchers have surveyed educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators), theorists, and (less often) parents about why Black students underachieve or perform at low levels academically. Fewer studies have asked students questions regarding their own beliefs and behaviors. It is with students themselves that many of the answers and solutions to underachievement, low achievement, and the achievement gap may be found.

## Sampling Procedures and Sample

Several school districts were contacted about their willingness to participate in a study of high-achieving and gifted Black students' perceptions of factors that affect their achievement. School personnel with whom the first author had previously worked were asked to serve as the key contact persons for the study. In return for participation, the districts received a report with recommendations to address the findings associated with their specific school. The findings from two districts are described in this study.

The school personnel were asked to administer the survey to gifted Black students and to other students with high grade point averages (GPAs; A and

B averages), resulting in a sample size of 372 students. This study focuses only on those students who were formally identified as gifted according to district criteria ( $n = 166$ ). The two school districts are located in Ohio; they are similar in racial diversity (both have 70% Black students) but are different in other ways. One middle school from District A participated in the study. The district has more than 17,000 students; it is inner city, low SES, and one of the lowest performing districts in the state. At the time of the study (2005), the district was in academic emergency, having passed only 1 of 18 state standards. Little more than half of the students (54%) graduate from high school. All of the middle school students from District A that participated in the study were Black and low SES, as indicated by free or reduced-price lunch status.

District B is suburban, with a student population of approximately 6,800 students. Students from five middle and high schools were surveyed. This district is higher performing, having passed 6 of the 18 state standards. According to its annual report (2002-2003 school year), the district has received several awards for student achievement, including almost 30 AP scholars (17 national, 4 with distinction, and 8 with honors). The graduation rate is 88%.

In District A, 189 students completed the survey; there were 183 completed surveys from District B. Of these, there were 166 gifted Black students, with the majority attending District B ( $n = 142$ , 85.5%). In Ohio, students are identified as cognitively gifted with an IQ score of 127 or higher; academically gifted students are identified at the 98th percentile or higher on an achievement test. The students were in Grades 5-12, with most being in Grades 6 ( $n = 75$ , 45%), 7 ( $n = 34$ , 21%), and 8 ( $n = 36$ , 22%). There were 80 males (48%) and 86 females (52%).

## Research Questions

This study was guided by several research questions. (a) What are their achievement-related behaviors? How do gifted Black students spend their time each week, and how much of their time is devoted to academic-related activities (e.g., studying, doing homework, reading)? (b) How consistent are students in terms of their academic-related attitudes and behaviors? (c) What peer pressures do gifted Black students face (i.e., How do gifted Black students characterize the notions of acting White and acting Black)? (d) According to these gifted Black students, why do some capable students not perform well in school?

## Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Students were administered a survey whose items were based on a previous survey developed by Ford (1996) that looked at underachievement among gifted Black students. Based on literature reviews, we developed items that focused on social and peer pressures, interests and hobbies, time devoted to education (e.g., reading, homework) and other activities (e.g., sports), and work and study habits, as these variables have been found to affect student achievement and contribute to the achievement gap (Barton, 2003; Ferguson, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lee & Burkham, 2002; Peske & Haycock, 2006).

The survey was administered in groups by teachers in both schools, with oversight by the enrichment counselor in District B and school director in District A. Students were informed that the survey was designed to explore students' views about achievement. The survey took approximately 1 hr to complete.

In addition to demographic information, the survey consisted of 22 items, which contained multiple-response formats: yes or no responses, Likert-type ratings, and open-ended responses. The survey was divided into seven major parts:

- (a) *Demographic information*: Students were asked to indicate their age, grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, and indicate if they had been identified as gifted. Students were given the option of not writing their name on the survey.
- (b) *Academic achievement*: Students were asked about the grades they received in school and overall GPA (school records were examined to corroborate self-reported achievement). They were also asked to rate, on a scale of 1 (*weak or poor*) to 3 (*excellent or strong*), seven academic-related skills (study skills, test-taking skills, reading skills, organizational skills, vocabulary/language skills, and reading skills).
- (c) *Course enrollment*: This item asked students to check whether they participated in gifted education courses (honors, AP, etc.).
- (d) *Academic resources and other resources at home*: Students were asked to indicate the number of books, CDs, DVDs, and games they have at home.
- (e) *Interests and hobbies*: Students were asked about their favorite genre of literature, as well as the names of their favorite and least favorite books and authors. Also, students were asked "What are your hobbies?"
- (f) *School work habits*: Students were given a list of 10 activities (along with an "other" option) and asked "Try to imagine a 'typical' week. During the week, approximately how many *hours* do you devote to the following (sample activities were studying, working/job, sports, watching television, being with friends, being with family, etc.). Students were also asked "How would you

describe your school work habits?" (Response options were *poor*, *good*, *very good*, and *excellent*, along with a prompt to explain their responses. Also asked was "Do you put forth your best effort in school?" (yes or no option, along with space for explaining their response).

- (g) *Social or peer pressures related to achievement*: Seven questions addressed this area. For example, students were asked "How popular are you at school?" with the option of checking *not popular*, *somewhat popular*, and *very popular*. Another question asked "Have you ever been teased/ridiculed for doing well in school?" (yes or no response option). "If yes, by whom?" Students could select from seven options, including classmates, friends, and family member. Two items pertained to acting White and acting Black. "Have you ever heard of the phrase 'acting White'?" Students were given the option of responding yes or no and then asked to explain a yes response. The same question and response options related to acting Black. Another question was open-ended: "Some capable/smart students do not do well in school. Why do you think this happens?"

## Findings

### Academic Achievement

One hundred thirty-three students reported their GPA. The self-reported (S-R) GPA had a mean of 3.4 and a median of 3.5. Due to missing names (providing their names was optional), the actual GPA of all students was unavailable for most students. However, school personnel provided the GPAs of 53 students who listed their names on the survey; the actual mean GPA was 3.1 with a median of 3.0. The correlation between S-R GPA and actual GPA was 3.8 ( $p < .05$ ).

### Academic Achievement: Attitudes and Behaviors

Students were asked whether they put forth their best effort in school. More than one fourth of students responded no ( $n = 46$ , 28%). These students are considered underachievers, given the strong possibility that they (most people) can perform at higher levels with greater effort; stated another way, even if they are earning As and Bs, if one does not apply himself or herself, this is a form of underachievement (see Ford, 1996).

Students were asked to indicate whether they study and do homework on weekends; 69% ( $n = 115$ ) responded no on this item. Students reported spending an average of 7.2 hr per week studying and doing homework (mode = 1 hr) and 4.6 hr per week (mode = 1 hr) on readings assigned by teachers.

**Table 1**  
**Hours Per Week Gifted Black Students Spend**  
**in Various Activities**

Activity	Mean Weekly Hr	Modal Weekly Hr
Being with family	27.1	24
Watching TV	13.7	5
Being with friends	10.5	1
Listening to music	10.4	1
Playing sports	8.2	0
Studying and doing homework	8.2	1
Talking on telephone	7.2	1
Playing video games	6.5	0
Assigned reading	4.6	1
Personal reading	4.1	1

How do the gifted Black students spend their time when not in school? Students reported spending more time with their family (27.1 hr per week), followed by watching TV (13.7 hr), listening to music (10.4 hr), and being with friends (10.5 hr). Fewer than 10 hr were spent studying and doing homework (8.2), extracurricular activities (8.2), talking on the telephone (7.2), playing video games (6.5), reading assigned by teachers (4.6), and personal reading (4.1). In all but two cases, the modal hour was 1 or 0 (see Table 1).

The gifted Black students were also asked about the number of books, CDs, DVDs, and video games in their homes.<sup>3</sup> The mean numbers were 212, 80, 45, and 21, respectively. Students were asked to indicate their hobbies by responding based on a predetermined list (e.g., reading, writing, sports, music, other). Thirty-five students (21%) indicated that reading is a hobby. Even fewer indicated that writing is a hobby ( $n = 14$ , 8%). More than one fourth of students ( $n = 46$ , 28%) reported that music is a hobby. The picture looks different relative to sports. Almost half of the students reported that sports is a hobby ( $n = 79$ , 48%).

## Perceptions of Social and Peer Pressures

Students were asked several questions regarding social pressures. Many of the questions at this point are open-ended, designed to explore beneath the surface of students' responses to close-ended items. In this way, we can gain a clearer picture and understanding of peer pressure and the characteristics that gifted Black students associate with such notions as acting White and acting Black. With this in mind, students were asked the following questions:

1. Do you know anyone who has been teased/ridiculed for doing well in school?
2. Have *you* ever been teased/ridiculed for doing well in school? If yes, by whom?
3. Have you ever heard of the phrase “acting White”? If yes, what does this phrase mean?
4. Have you ever been accused of “acting White”? If yes, then by whom?
5. Have you ever heard of the phrase “acting Black”? If yes, what does this phrase mean?
6. Some capable (smart) students do not do well in school. Why do you think this happens?

Most students ( $n = 110$ , 66%) report knowing someone who has been teased/ridiculed for doing well in school, and 42% ( $n = 69$ ) report that they have been teased for doing well. One third report being teased by classmates ( $n = 58$ , 35%); 27% ( $n = 44$ ) are teased by students in other classes; 25 (15%) are teased by older students; 21 (13%) are teased by their friends; 13 (8%) are teased by family members; and 10 (6%) are teased by younger students.

### Perceptions of Acting White and Acting Black

The majority of students are familiar with the phrases acting White ( $n = 134$ , 81%) and acting Black ( $n = 129$ , 78%). Their responses to this open-ended item were examined for patterns and themes. Relative to acting White, four major themes were found. As reflected in Table 2, acting White is characterized by (a) language, (b) behavior, (c) intelligence, and (d) attitude. When students mentioned such terms as “speaking properly,” “using poor English,” “speaking slang,” and “talking loud,” they were coded under the heading of language. Behavior referred to actions such as “being/acting ghetto,” “being thuggish or gangsta,” “acting mean,” “being perfect,” and “acting good.” Intelligence referred to such descriptors as “being smart,” “being astute,” and “getting good grades in school.” Finally, the notion of attitude was a recurring comment, particularly as it relates to acting White (i.e., being “arrogant,” “stuck-up,” and “uppity”). In essence, participants reported that they perceived that Blacks who act White think they are superior to others. Sample responses to acting White and acting Black are presented in Table 2.

Relative to acting White, language was mentioned 60 times by students, behavior was mentioned 48 times, intelligence was mentioned 45 times, and having an attitude was mentioned 31 times. Furthermore, many comments reflected blatant stereotypes about Blacks and Whites, as indicated

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Themes and Sample Terms Based on Gifted Black Students' Perceptions of Acting White and Acting Black**

Acting White	Acting Black
1. Language (60) <sup>a</sup>	1. Behavior (119, including 61 ghetto)
2. Behavior and image (48)	2. Language (48, including 25 slang)
3. Intelligence (45)	3. Intelligence (20)
4. Attitude (31)	4. Dress (19)
<b>Stereotypes</b>	
Not acting your race	Conforming to stereotypes placed on Blacks
Acting like "typical" White person	Doing things that are stereotypically Black
<b>Attitude</b>	
Stuck-up/uppity	Have an attitude/Have a don't-care attitude
Boogy/boogie/snobbish/snooty	Loose
Sucking up	Laid back
Not embracing Black culture	A wannabe
<b>Intelligent</b>	
Smart/Being too smart	Dumb
Does work/Does homework	Uneducated
Doing well in school/Gets good grades	Stupid
Uptight about school/Private school uptight	Acting ignorant
Taking advanced/honors courses	Underachiever
Would rather study than chill	Pretend not to be smart
<b>Clothes/dress</b>	
Dressing preppy/Not wearing urban gear/Not sagging	Sagging/saggy pants
Dressing different	Urban gear
Dressing White	

a. The number in parenthesis indicates the number of times this theme or term was mentioned by students.

by such statements as "Acting White is acting like a typical White person would act," "Acting White is not acting like your group," "Acting Black is not acting like your own kind," "Conforming to stereotypes placed on Blacks," and "Doing things that are stereotypically Black." These references to stereotypes were not directed toward any behavior, attitude, or language; thus, they were not placed into any of the prior themes.

Acting Black is most often described by gifted Black students as (a) language, (b) intelligence, (c) behavior, and (d) dress. Behavior was mentioned 119 times by students, with "ghetto" being mentioned 61 of the 119; language was mentioned 48 times; intelligence (lack of intelligence) was mentioned 20 times; and dress or clothes was mentioned 19 times.

Regardless of grades earned in school, and effort, gifted Black students held similar perceptions of acting White and acting Black. Only one of the students indicated that acting Black was positive. The responses suggest that they hold negative perceptions and stereotypes of acting Black but positive perceptions of acting White. Specifically, acting Black is associated with negative behaviors, low intelligence, disinterest in school and achievement, poor language skills, and a preference for urban clothes. On the other hand, acting White is associated with positive behaviors and positive stereotypes—being intelligent, caring about school, doing well academically, being well behaved, and being perfect. Acting White is also associated with being arrogant or believing that one is better than others.

### **Views Regarding Why Some Capable Students Do Not Perform Well**

As already indicated, the gifted Black students were asked to respond to the following question: “Some capable (smart) students do not do well in school. Why do you think this happens?” Students mentioned that having other priorities, laziness, depression, overconfidence, lack of academic confidence, problems at home, and a dislike for their teachers cause students not to do well. However, the overwhelming majority of the students indicated that peer pressures contribute to students underperforming in school. Relative to peer pressures, one male 11th grader responded “They might be afraid to be criticized or ridiculed for their achievements.” Another male 10th grader stated

I think it happens because they are afraid that others, not gifted like them, will tease and ridicule them. They want to fit in so they intentionally do poorly. Some smart students just may not be good on tests, homework, class work, etc.

A male 8th grader stated, “Because they are pressured into making the wrong decisions by their peers.” Two female 7th graders indicated “They don’t want to be teased for being smart.” And “Some people are scared to show how smart they are.” A 6th-grade female noted “Some smart students don’t do well in school because they may think that their friends might make fun of them for being SMART!” Two older females (12th grade) responded “I think they are scared of what their peers will think about them. They also may suffer from lack of confidence and feel they cannot succeed in school. There are other factors concerning home life, friends, and parents.” And

“This is because they don’t want to be associated with the stigma attached with achieving and doing well: plus they try to keep up with friends and don’t want to be singled out or ‘played.’”

## Summary

This study looked at achievement, more specifically, underachievement, by examining the perceptions of gifted Black students on a number of attitudinal, social, and behavioral variables. It is our position that Black students who fail to reach their potential contribute to the ever persistent achievement gap and to their underrepresentation in gifted education. The purpose of this study was to shed additional light—or new light—on the achievement gap with a population of Black students who are gifted. This population has received little attention in the achievement-gap discussion and research. What can we learn about achievement and underachievement, not only from Black students but from Black students who are also gifted?

Findings from the current study are consistent with other research on low achievement and underachievement among Black students. In other words, the gifted Black students may personify an attitude-achievement paradox (Mickelson, 1990) or paradox of underachievement (Ford, 1994, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1996) to the extent that (1) one third are effort-related underachievers (or nonproducers; see Delisle, 1990; Rimm, 2001) because they do not put forth their best effort in school; (2) 15% are academic underachievers because they have less than a B average; (3) too few spend time in academic-related activities (i.e., reading, studying, and doing homework) compared to nonacademic activities (i.e., sports, video games, music, television); and (4) most do not have reading or writing as a hobby. Paradoxically, most of the students rate their work habits as good or excellent, and most rate their academic skills (study skills, test-taking skills, time management skills, and organizational skills) as strong. This confidence in their skills, while stellar, is nonetheless troublesome given that many teachers have expressed concerns that many gifted Black students have weaknesses in academic skills; these weaknesses often prevent teachers from referring students for gifted education screening and identification (Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2004).

The literature is saturated with data indicating that Black students, especially Black males, are at the greatest risk for poor school achievement as well as low academic engagement and commitment (Whiting, in press). These findings hold true even when the Black students are gifted (Ford, 1994, 1996). As in previous research on gifted Black males, those in the current

study were more likely than females to underachieve. The current study supports previous findings of this nature. Therefore, it is unfortunate, but not surprising, that most of the underachievers (students with low effort, students with low GPAs), students with the weakest or poorest work ethic, and students with the lowest academic commitment are Black males.

The study is also consistent with previous research on how negative peer pressures undermine the attitudes and performance of Black students (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The findings also support previous works indicating that Black students equate acting White with being intelligent, with doing well in school, with enjoying school, with speaking standard English, and so forth. Although acting White is described with positive characteristics, it also viewed as being bourgeois or arrogant. A Black student who acts White is thought to be uppity, stuck-up, and uptight. He or she is not popular.

Finally, the concept of acting Black was explored. Research on this topic is miniscule. Tragically, only *one* student indicated that acting Black was positive. Instead, the gifted Black students, males and females alike, believe that acting Black means lacking in intelligence, placing a low priority on academics, speaking poorly, behaving poorly, and dressing in ill-fitting clothes. These findings lend support to Steele's (1997) notion of stereotype threat—the gifted Black students clearly hold negative stereotypes about Blacks, namely, their attitudes, behaviors, and intelligence. In this respect only, gifted Black males and females were homogeneous in their views.

When the data are taken collectively, they have important ramifications for the achievement gap. It seems obvious that gifted Black students who equate intelligence with acting White (and lack of intelligence with acting Black), who do not put forth much effort into academics, who spend more time with social life and nonacademic activities, and who succumb to peer pressures are not likely to achieve at levels compared to their White counterparts; this can and does contribute to the achievement gap.

## Recommendations

Children are not born underachievers. Underachievement is learned.  
Underachievement can be unlearned.

—Ford (1996)

We have much work ahead of us as we strive to narrow or, preferably, eliminate the achievement gap. The achievement gap is not only social and

behavioral, it is attitudinal. As Mickelson (1990) noted, the achievement gap is not likely to close until attitudes or beliefs are changed. Likewise, the gap cannot close until negative stereotypes about Blacks are eliminated (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 1999). What can educators and families do to help change—improve—Black students' achievement attitudes, academic behaviors, and their views of Blacks and themselves as scholars?

## **Recommendations for Gifted Educators**

More research is needed in gifted education to increase our understanding of underachievement (and underrepresentation) among Black students. It is clear that students—especially Black students—who underachieve are not likely to be referred for gifted education screening (Ford, 1996; Van Tassel-Baska et al., 2004). It is important that those studying the achievement gap include gifted students in their research.

Administrators, teachers, and counselors need to work together to improve the image that Black students have of themselves as learners. Prevention and intervention programs that focus on improving students' achievement ethic and related behaviors are essential. These programs must focus on helping students see—and believe—the connection between effort and success in both concrete and abstract terms (Mickelson, 1990). These programs must point out discrepancies that students exhibit in this regard. For example, educators must talk to students who exert little effort, who put little time into their schoolwork, and who place a higher priority on sports, entertainment, or their social life at the expense of their education. These discussions can be held with students individually and in small groups.

It is important that schools develop strategies to promote an achievement ethic throughout the school district, in buildings and classrooms. Posters, symposiums, guest speakers, and mentorships can be helpful in this area. Because these students are Black, these posters, speakers, and mentors should include Black people. Likewise, the curriculum must be multicultural, as described by Banks (2006) and Ford and Harris (1999). These authors offer sample lesson plans and activities that are culturally sensitive and responsive. Stated another way, a multicultural curriculum must hold promise for improving students' image of themselves and people of color as scholars. Finally, gifted Black students are likely to benefit from counseling to cope with peer pressures, stereotypes, and their poor identities as intelligent and capable students. Specific strategies for gifted Black students appear in Ford (1996) and Whiting (2006).

To better understand how gifted Black students view themselves as learners, educators can administer instruments to students that examine their interests, motivation, and academic image or self-concept. Relative to self-concept, counselors must be familiar with racial identity and its impact on achievement. Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, and Alexander's (2001) book is a comprehensive treatise on various theories of racial identity, along with prevention and intervention strategies. With this information, prevention and intervention programs can be designed. Of course, these programs must consider gender differences (see Whiting, 2006).

## Recommendations for Families

Clearly, educators cannot bear sole responsibility for closing the achievement gap. A great deal of the responsibility rests with families. As with educators, it is essential that families focus deliberately and consistently on their children's academic identity, racial identity, and skills at coping with social pressures.

Many of the students in this study spent a lot of their time watching TV and playing video games. How do these activities influence the students' images as learners? How does this help to improve their achievement and hence narrow the achievement gap? Families must monitor the media their children are exposed to as well as the children their students spent time with. Are their friends interested in school? Do they place a high priority on learning? Or do peers exert a negative influence on students?

Families are urged to connect their children with mentors and role models who are academically oriented and who have a positive racial identity. Adults in the family must also see themselves as role models and personify a strong work ethic—an image of school being important and an image of resilience. Students need support, encouragement, and guidance in the face of whatever barriers they encounter. The achievement gap is real, the achievement gap is complex, the achievement gap is stubborn; we—educators and families—must be just as stubborn and diligent in our efforts to eliminate the gap. If we cannot close the gap, who can?

We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do so must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. We know that our work is not done. We continue to see evidence that poor urban students and students of color are left out of the success equation. Unless we accelerate and sustain what we know

and what we do on behalf of urban children, we will not have fulfilled our mission and commitment to urban children. If we recommit to learning to lead and leading for learning, then together we will go far towards enabling all our children to use the power of their minds.

—Ron Edmonds (1982)

## Notes

1. The terms *Black* and *African American* are used interchangeably in this article.
2. We distinguish between the terms *low achievement* and *underachievement* and do not use them interchangeably. Low achievement refers to below-average academic performance, specifically grades of D and failing, and/or performing below the 50th percentile on an achievement test. Low achievement says nothing about how a student is capable of performing. However, underachievement does refer to a discrepancy. An underachieving student is one whose school performance is below what is expected.
3. U.S. Department of Education's Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (2000) has examined educational resources in children's home by racial status, economic status, family's educational level, and other demographics. Consistently, Black children and low socioeconomic status (SES) children have fewer books in their homes, are read to less often, read less often on their own, and go to the library less often than White children and higher SES children.

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