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Talent development as career development in gifted African American youth

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JENNIFER R. CURRY AND
M. ANN SHILLINGFORD



AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' CAREER AND COLLEGE READINESS



THE JOURNEY UNRAVELED

African American Students' Career and College Readiness

The Journey Unraveled

Edited by
Jennifer R. Curry
and
M. Ann Shillingford

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*For Daniel, I hope you will always seek truth, justice,
and fairness for yourself and others. May peace, love,
and compassion follow you all the days of your life.*

—Jennifer R. Curry

*To Justin and Summer Joy: My most precious
gifts of hope, justice, and love...*

—M. Ann Shillingford-Butler

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Chapter 5

Talent Development as Career Development and College Readiness in Gifted African American Youth

Andrea Dawn Frazier, Jennifer Riedl Cross,
and Tracy L. Cross

Michael Jordan is considered a preeminent basketball player. His impact is so seminal that many *potentially* great players are cast in his shadow, with Jordan's prowess and accomplishments serving as the benchmark against which true prowess is determined. Considering his strength as an athlete, many expected his foray into baseball to be a runaway success. However, it turned out that Michael Jordan had long since aged past his ability to develop the visual motor skills necessary to hit a baseball expertly, thereby curtailing any ambition of becoming a talented baseball player (Klawans, 1996). Had Michael Jordan taken up baseball in childhood with the passion he brought to mastering basketball, the story about him as an athlete might well have been different.

Samuel Johansen¹ is a talented African American male from a low-income background. With the support of his family, he decided to attend a residential high school for students talented in math and science, a school noteworthy for being one of the finest high schools in the nation. During his first year in attendance, he enrolled in an introductory Japanese course. Prior to taking the course, Samuel had never spoken Japanese before. It became apparent that Samuel had a very good ear for Japanese, and for languages generally, and the Japanese instructor felt that Samuel was one of the best students he had ever had. Samuel is currently an assistant professor at an Ivy League university, with his research and teaching devoted to Japanese literature, performance studies, and art history.

Several years after Samuel graduated, Jeremiah Forester, another precocious African American male, attended the same high school. Jeremiah also had a passion drama. In a study exploring possible selves in high-ability African American males, Samuel was interviewed about his potential future

selves. He described the school as being pivotal in helping him understand that drama was important for him, and he had already participated in several school plays by the time of the interview. However, in the course of describing his journey as a thespian, he recounted this story:

I was in “Little Shop of Horrors” ... and I wanted to be like the main role for the guy, Seymour ... as soon as I walked in the door, the director said, I want you to sing “Feed Me.” That’s the song that the plant sings, and the plant’s supposed to be like this big horrible creature, and it’s supposed to have an Ebonic voice ... So, as soon as I walk in the door, they were like, “Sing that song.” [I said] I’ve been practicing the song that Seymour sings for like a month now. And then they said you can sing “Feed Me” first and sing the other song later if you want to ... And then I turned out being the plant ... I did a really good job, but still, they didn’t give me a chance (Frazier, 2012, p. 381).

At the time of the interview, Jeremiah was unsure of his future path. He wanted to pursue drama full time, but he was not confident in his ability to make drama his life’s work, with some of this lack of confidence appearing to be due to the racism he was brushing up against (Frazier, 2012). It may be that the residential school that had been so positive for Samuel might not have been as positive a place for Jeremiah in helping him develop his potential.

In this chapter, we will discuss African American students who have exceptional academic potential and the supports necessary to ensure that they are prepared for success in college. Embedded within these vignettes are several themes that will be addressed in more detail when considering the role that talent plays in preparing highly able African American students for careers:

1. Though youth may be successful in a variety of ways, it is helpful to conceive of talent as domain specific (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011) rather than generalized;
2. Talent development occurs along a trajectory, with the trajectory dependent on the domain (Subotnik et al., 2011);
3. It is important for children to have the opportunity to practice the skills of the domain in ways that are authentic. Mastery, as well as expectations that ratchet up based on level of expertise, indicate to an individual what they are capable of within the domain.
4. Proficiency in a talent domain needs to be recognized.
5. Schools are important to talent development to the degree they privilege academic press or challenge for all students, irrespective of ability;
6. Schools are not solely responsible for developing talent in children. Instead, talent development is embedded within and is influenced by a system of support that includes the home, the school, the child, and societal

influences (Subotnik et al., 2011; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). All are powerful entities.

Supporting the needs of African American students with exceptional potential begins with attention to the trajectory of their talent domain.

BECOMING HIGH ACHIEVERS

Who are gifted African American students? The only definition of giftedness accepted to a large degree in the United States appeared in a 1972 federal report to Congress. Marland (1972) proposed that 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:

1. General intellectual ability
2. Specific academic aptitude
3. Creative or productive thinking
4. Leadership ability
5. Visual or performing arts
6. Psychomotor ability. (p. ix)

A follow-up report in 1993 clarifies this definition, adding, “Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor” (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 3). Historically, gifted education was built around providing services to a child who had been identified with gifts and talents. This tradition continues to be the prevalent model in schools. Designed to follow the example of special education, services for gifted and talented students begin when they are identified as meeting a definition, according to the criteria specified by the school district.

Increasingly, attention is being paid to the importance of identifying potentially gifted students as early in their development as feasible (National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2006; Subotnik et al., 2011). One of the considerations supporting early identification is the relationship between identification and specific talent trajectories (Cross & Coleman, 2005; Feldman, 1986/1991). For example, female gymnasts now peak in their

careers by age 17, while in the mid-1900s they tended to peak much later, often in their early 20s. Their physical development has also changed significantly, typically producing athletes who are much shorter and more muscular than in the 1950s. Likewise, their routines have become increasingly complex and challenging (Bloom, 1985).

The growing body of knowledge about developmental trajectories across talent domains allows for improved planning and increases world-class accomplishment. For example, world-class violinists began practicing violin at about 4 years of age and tend to come from homes where two parents are fine musicians and at least one parent is a very accomplished violinist (Bloom, 1985). Simply stated, families are very important to the process of developing world-class talent. Not enough is known about the trajectories dependent on academic learning (Subotnik, et al., 2011), but what patterns are known in various fields provide an advantage for parents in terms of preparing their child to develop in a particular talent domain. As knowledge is gained about these trajectories, the significance of appropriate early experiences becomes clear. When high-ability African American children do not have access to these early experiences, the effect on their later success in a field may be momentous.

In addition to information about specific developmental trajectories, other factors such as family financial resources, community resources, and cultural/societal prejudices can impact a child's development. Growth in some talent domains (e.g., gymnastics) begins early in the life of a student and requires obtaining specialized instruction and competition for the child to grow. This typically leads to considerable adult commitment (e.g., driving to competitions) and can even require moving to a location near a centralized training opportunity (Bloom, 1985). It is expensive to develop this form of talent. Families must commit to the process, and it is very helpful if communities have experts and facilities in place.

In areas like gymnastics, virtually all of the development occurs outside of school. In other types of talent domains such as mathematics, the school is typically the primary training ground where the student is provided the required resources. Early development is necessary, as evidenced by the positive relationship between, for example, early math performance and later college graduation (see Figure 5.1; Murnane, Willett, Duhaldeborde, & Tyler, 2000). Plus, the developmental trajectory is much longer, with world-class mathematicians revealing themselves after receiving a PhD in mathematics. In other words, instead of peaking by 17 years of age, receiving training outside of school, and moving to be near the best training, those who aspire to become mathematicians can develop their potential in their local schools, continue through college and graduate school and peak by age 45 or so.

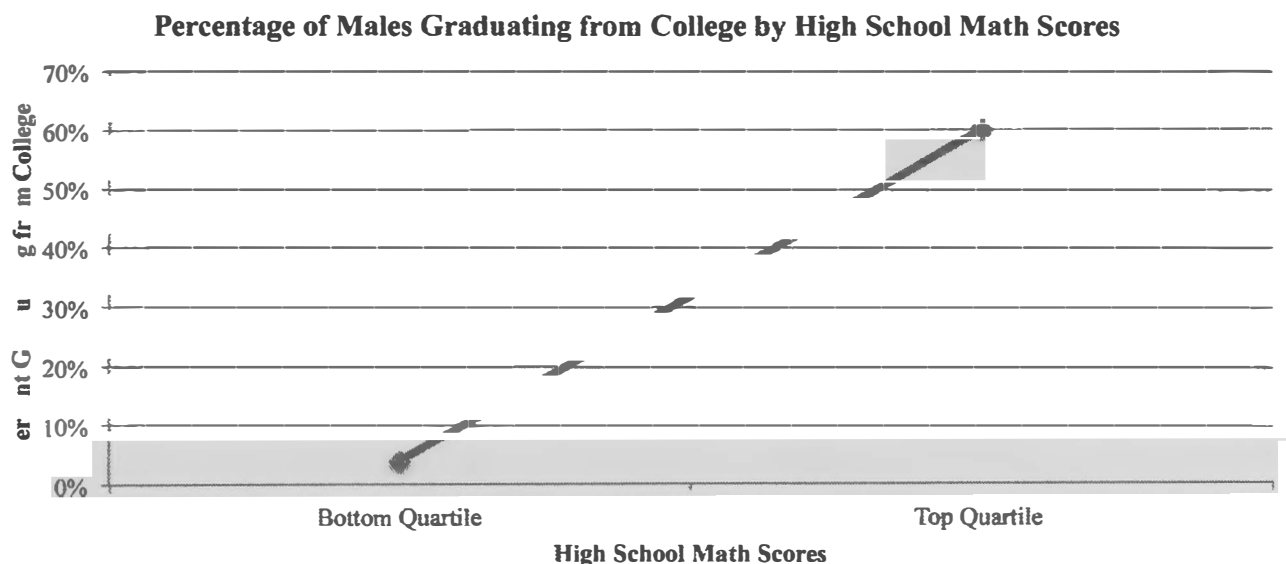


Figure 5.1 Percentage of Males Graduating from College by High School Math Scores. Source: High School & Beyond Dataset 1986–1992 (Murnane, Willett, Duhaldeborde, & Tyler, 2000)

An emphasis on developmental trajectories represents a shift in gifted education (Dai & Chen, 2013) away from the traditional focus on the individual gifted child, albeit this shift is in its early stages. Developing into a skilled gymnast or as a skilled mathematician reveals the range in developmental trajectories about which parents, educators, and counselors need to be informed. With limited information, families will struggle to help their children grow in their passion areas to their fullest extent. Sharing information about talent domains, the talent development process, identifying potential early, and effective counseling and guidance are all critical in the talent development of our able African American children.

Underrepresentation of High-Ability African American Students in Gifted Education

Most African American high-ability students will be educated in settings built around the identification of a gifted child. Despite the popular myth that gifted students will “do fine on their own” (NAGC, 2009), an education targeting average students will be inadequate for the full development of high potential in students. To ensure early success of African American students with exceptional academic ability, educators must be able to recognize them. Thus, the underrepresentation of African American students has been lamented for decades within the gifted education field (e.g., Ford, 2003; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, Ngoi, & Ngoi, 2004; VanTassel-Baska & Stambaugh, 2007) and efforts have been made to increase the number of African American students in gifted and talented

programs. Whereas an exceptional performance on a standardized test of intelligence or intellectual abilities was once the sole criterion for entrance to gifted and talented programs, multiple criteria are recommended as best practice (NAGC, 2014) and are now the norm rather than the exception. These multiple criteria allow consideration of such alternative indications of exceptional ability as nonverbal ability test scores; teacher, parent, peer or even self-nominations; or outstanding performances or products. Yet, even with the addition of multiple criteria to the identification process in the past few decades, African American students continue to be underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students. Several broad explanations for this continued underrepresentation have been explored in the literature: teacher biases, test bias, and retention of identified students in gifted programming.

Teacher Biases

Teachers, who tend to be White and female in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2008), are key to the identification process. Studies by Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway (2005) and McBee (2006, 2010) found that teachers most easily recognize the stereotypical White, middle-class gifted student and are more likely to identify White than African American students as gifted, even when presented with identical academic profiles. In his study of statewide nomination effectiveness, McBee (2006; 2010) found that teachers significantly under-nominated minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Ford and her colleagues (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002) proposed that many educators suffer from *deficit thinking*, an orientation that inhibits the development of their African American gifted students. Educators who engage in such deficit thinking view culturally different students as deprived or deficient and are unable to recognize their exceptional abilities or potential. Teacher training can increase numbers of accurate identifications (Hunsaker, Findley, & Frank, 1997) and deficit thinking can be ameliorated with targeted professional development that increases their cultural competence (Ford et al., 2002). Unfortunately, few states require teachers to have specialized training for working with or identifying gifted students (NAGC, 2013).

Test Biases

Standardized tests are often the single most important criteria used in the identification process, even when multiple criteria are considered. Since 1978, African American students have consistently scored lower than White students in both math and reading (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). This achievement gap has barely changed, despite considerable attention to reducing the gap. Similar differentials are common in

intelligence testing, as well. In a variety of ability tests, including nonverbal tests such as the *Raven's Progressive Matrices*, African American adults perform on average about one standard deviation below White adults (Valencia & Suzuki, 2001).

Both Valencia and Suzuki (2001) and Phillips, Crouse, and Ralph (1998) have challenged the popular acceptance of the ability and achievement test performance differences. Valencia and Suzuki cite a number of studies in which the inclusion of socioeconomic status in analyses of differences between African American and White intelligence test scores nearly eliminates differences. Phillips and colleagues controlled for earlier knowledge (e.g., first grade scores) in assessing achievement differences in reading and math. When earlier knowledge differences were controlled for, the achievement gaps at 9th and 12th grade were substantially smaller. These findings should be considered in light of the research of Turkheimer and colleagues (Harden, Turkheimer, & Loehlin, 2007; Turkheimer, Haley, Waldron, D'Onofrio, & Gottesman, 2003) who have found that environment explains more variance in intelligence scores than genetics for poor children, whereas genetics explains more variance than environment among their more advantaged peers.

The implication of these varied studies is that test scores must be interpreted with caution and with recognition of the importance of previous learning opportunities and the effects of an impoverished environment, where present. When students are sifted out of an identification process by their test scores, advocates should be able to challenge such a decision with alternative evidence of high ability. As the most common gatekeeper to special services for gifted students, test scores can be a particular hindrance to African American students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds.

2006 Racial Composition of U.S. Elementary and Secondary Students

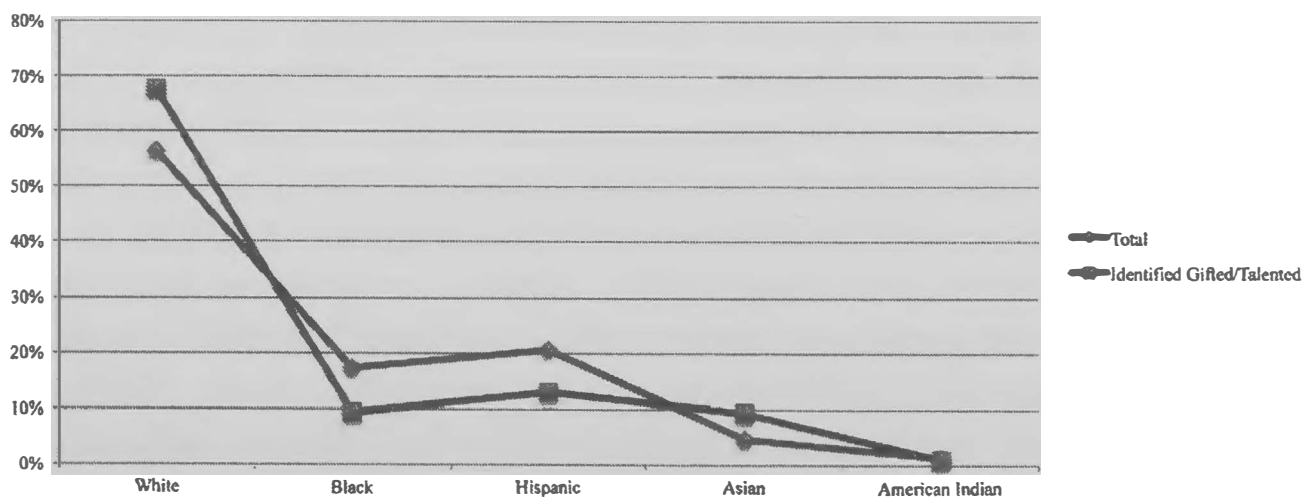


Figure 5.2 Identified Gifted and Talented Students by Race. Source: <http://nces.ed.gov>

Retention in Gifted Programs

However high-ability students are identified for special services, they must be able to perform at an advanced level in order to be ready for college at the time of matriculation. This is most likely to happen among students who have had the opportunity for advanced-level work from an early age. Most students in gifted programs are White and middle- or upper-socioeconomic status (see Figure 5.2; Donovan & Cross, 2002; NCES, 2008), so the gifted African American student identified for placement in a special program is likely to be one of few demographically similar students. The potential exists for a culturally based mismatch for African American students attempting to fit into a majority White class. Citing Hale-Benson (1986), Ford and Thomas (1997) suggest that “Black students tend to be field-dependent, visual, and concrete learners, whereas schools teach more often in verbal, abstract, and decontextualized ways” (p. 5). Competition in an advanced class may be uncomfortable for minority students who are unaccustomed to pressure from teachers and peers with competitive goals for performance (Hale-Benson, 1986), but it is important to note that many gifted students feel different from their average ability peers (T. Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1995; Robinson, 1996). This differentness is compounded for the African American student in a majority White gifted class (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Peternal, 2010). Finding intellectual peers can be an affirming experience (Coleman & Cross, 2005), but the feelings of differentness may still exist when those peers are not from the same racial or cultural background (Lee, et al., 2010).

A specific form of cultural mismatch is the “acting White” phenomenon. In their study of Black students’ underachievement, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) identified the concept of “acting White” among several of the students they interviewed, who reported being criticized by peers for seemingly rejecting their own culture by pursuing academic (a.k.a., “White”) interests. Since the publication of their study, there has been mixed empirical support for this phenomenon. For example, in an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) dataset, Fryer and Torelli (2010) found that African American students with a GPA above 3.5 had smaller friendship networks—evidence supporting the social cost of high academic performance. In contrast, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) found high academic achievement orientations among the 40 African American students in North Carolina secondary schools. A majority of the students interviewed in their qualitative study reported no cultural prohibition against achievement, although this was present in one high school. Wildhagen (2011) found that, not only did the nearly 10,000 African American high school students in the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 dataset have more positive opinions of school in general than Whites, there was also no

evidence that victimization was higher among higher performing African American students. These studies suggest that different communities may respond positively or negatively to African American students who are focused on academic achievement.

Despite its appearance in the literature as a uniquely African American explanation of underachievement, the social rejection that underpins the “acting White” phenomenon is actually a commonplace experience for many high-ability students. Multiple studies have found studious peers are rejected (e.g., Bishop et al., 2004; Schroeder-Davis, 1999; Tannenbaum, 1962), suggesting a more powerful and widespread social proscription against academic pursuits. Whereas Fordham and Ogbu (1986) described “acting White” as peers rejecting academically oriented African American classmates because they were behaving inconsistently with social norms for academic performance, the rejection of peers for their studiousness in the broader community happens when local social norms, irrespective of race, prohibit high academic achievement. Anti-intellectual attitudes can inhibit the possibilities for high-ability African American students if they are insufficiently supported by adults and peers who hold positive attitudes toward academic achievement. Their feelings of differentness may be further validated in an anti-intellectual environment.

African American gifted students may also experience racial prejudice in a gifted classroom (Ford, 2013; Kitano, 2012). The effect of negative stereotypes, regardless of one’s belief in them, can impact students’ performance. When African American subjects were told that a test diagnosed their intellectual ability, they performed more poorly than when told the test was not for diagnostic purposes (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The same conditions did not affect White subjects’ performance. A substantial body of research indicates that this *stereotype threat* has adverse effects on the intellectual performance of African American students (e.g., Inzlicht, & Ben-Zeev, 2003; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002).

The traditional practices used to identify and serve gifted students have had a negative effect on African American students with academic potential (see Figure 5.2). In fact, gifted education built on the *gifted child model* (Dai, 2010, 2011) has not served the African American community well. In a sad intersection of cultural bias and ignorance about gifted education, African American students tend to be overrepresented in programs for students with disabilities and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002; NCEs, 2008). The cascading effect of missed opportunities begins in the earliest years of schooling (Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). This underrepresentation is found at all levels of education, from kindergarten to graduate and professional schools, including among faculty members at higher education institutions (Miller, 2004).

Rectifying this inequitable situation requires a change in the conceptualization of gifted education. The *talent development paradigm* (Dai & Chen, 2013; Subotnik et al., 2011) emphasizes the extensive provision of opportunities to all students, followed by intensive provision of supports to develop talent among those showing potential. Over time and with the right resources, talent is developed among students with the motivation and ability to succeed. This approach requires substantial effort on the part of educators in the early years, when potential must be transformed into achievement. For students from families of economic means, this can be accomplished outside of school. For those who have fewer economic resources, schools will necessarily be a critical part of their development.

Good Ingredients for Rigor Within a Curriculum

According to Nord et al. (2011), NCES data shows that 13% of all high school graduates completed a rigorous academic track in 2009, a significant increase from the 5% rate of completion in 1990. At present, and depending on the source, approximately 6% (Nord et al., 2011) to 8% (Horn & Nuñez, 2000) of African American students are completing rigorous academic tracks in high school. It is encouraging that more students, including African American students, are choosing to complete a rigorous program in high school (Nord et al., 2011). However, the types of schools African American students attend may delimit this opportunity. African American families are likely to live in more segregated neighborhoods that are also more impoverished (Logan, 2011; Patillo, 2003, 2005; Patillo-McCoy, 2000), therefore, African American students from low-income and middle-income families are often enrolled in schools with high rates of poverty in the student body. Neighborhood schools wherein a large number of students are impoverished are characterized by limited, high rigor academic offerings (Galster, Marcotte, Mandell, Wolman, & Augustine, 2007), making it difficult for willing students to pursue a higher academic standard. It is thus not all that surprising that high-ability students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to matriculate into college, attend selective colleges, and pursue graduate degrees (Wyner, et al., 2007).

The college readiness of African American students with even the highest potential will depend upon the opportunities they are afforded in their schooling. African American students with great potential need an appropriate education, one that challenges, stimulates, and potentially facilitates transformation from a novice as a student to an elite as an adult in a talent domain (Lee et al., 2010; Subotnik et al., 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that academic press is an ingredient across the curriculum for all students at all grade levels and is not dependent on an identification process (Rogers, 2007).

Numerous studies have established that a rigorous academic track in high school is one of the best preparatory tools available for success in college and beyond (e.g., Horn & Kojaku, 2001; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Wyner et al., 2007), with one example of rigorous academic preparation encompassing Algebra I in middle school; four years of English; three years of a foreign language; three years of science, with science encompassing biology, physics, and chemistry; four years of math, with students completing pre-Calculus, three years of social studies; and at least one honors/AP course (Horn & Nuñez, 2000). A curriculum of this nature has the potential to overcome several correlates to low success in college, including an impoverished background and poor scores on standardized tests (Horn & Kojaku, 2001). Along with disciplinary breadth, practitioners of gifted education are in agreement with practitioners of general education when they stipulate that a rigorous curriculum is also challenging; driven by meaningful outcomes, thus enhancing authenticity; and accommodates student differences (Hockett, 2009). Such a curriculum is only possible with deliberate attention to its development.

Challenge in the Curriculum

Because many educators may underestimate what students can successfully master, the basis for stimulating a highly able student, particularly a student not so identified, is querying and upending personal assumptions about developmental appropriateness and, instead, investigating what works for an individual student (Gibson & Mitchell, 2005; Hockett, 2009). A challenging curriculum encompasses going more in-depth, enhancing breadth, building in complexity and interdisciplinary connections, developing conceptual lesson plans, varying pacing based on need, and using real problems as the spring board (Hockett, 2009). In addition to these curricular adjustments, consistent, and potentially daily challenge in the talent area is recommended and is supported by gains in learning that exceed typical yearly growth (Rogers, 2007; Wallace, 2005). Consistent challenge in a talent domain has the added benefit of enhancing motivation and self-efficacy (Lee, et al., 2010; Rogers, 2007).

Gifted education theorists advocate for several best practices when considering the ingredients of a challenging curriculum for high-ability youth. Acceleration in pacing and with advanced content has the strongest research base establishing effectiveness, with researchers examining the impact of this approach over several decades (VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). Acceleration comes in a number of guises, but is broadly defined as fast-paced delivery of content, early entrance to school at differing levels, and grade skipping. Examples of grade acceleration include skipping one to several grades, grade telescoping (completing three to four years of content in two to three years), testing out of classes, and early admission to college (Rogers, 2007).

Subject-level acceleration involves using higher level content, with students accessing this content either through participating in one or more classes above grade level or being taught with material that is above grade level (Southern & Jones, 2004).

Highlighting two forms of acceleration, fast-paced delivery of content, or grade telescoping, can be a successful strategy with high-ability learners. For example, the Study for Mathematically Precocious Youth's (SMPY) 30-year research base consistently shows that gifted students can learn two years' worth of math content in one year. Students who successfully navigate grade telescoping need less practice to gain mastery and are able to demonstrate mastery on standardized tests (Rogers, 2007). Curriculum compacting, another form of acceleration, can also be beneficial for disseminating content in a way that appropriately challenges students. With curriculum compacting, a student is pre-assessed to determine mastery. Replacement work of advanced content is provided when mastery of basic precepts for the learning objective is demonstrated. Curriculum compacting has resulted in advanced knowledge gain and does not impair a student's knowledge base (Reis et al., 1993; Rogers, 2007).

In light of concerns that acceleration might lead to emotional distress, Rogers (2007) reports that subject-level acceleration approaches have shown not only positive academic growth but also no report of heightened likelihood of psychological distress, especially when acceleration involves a mentoring relationship, subject acceleration, advanced placement, or IB programs. Academic gains were especially strong in science and math. Grade acceleration has also resulted in both positive academic gains and small positive impacts on affective characteristics like motivation and self-esteem (Rogers, 2007).

Authenticity in the Curriculum

Authenticity in curriculum can be captured by hewing more closely to the activities of experts in a field of study, using and solving problems reflective of real issues in the discipline, using processes and products from the field, and integrating across disciplines. This type of curriculum should enhance relevancy for students and could potentially result in outcomes that are meaningful. Outcomes that manifest authenticity could also include deep learning and developing expertise, with expertise development considered talent development by gifted education practitioners (Hockett, 2009).

One approach to instituting authenticity in the curriculum is integrating research opportunities into lesson planning. Affording students the chance to engage in research is considered a best practice in gifted education, because it provides for independent practice (Subotnik et al., 2011) and builds in

meaningful outcomes (Hockett, 2009; VanTassel-Baska & Brown, 2007). The benefits of research are also highlighted in the literature on students of color and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) collegiate experiences.

When examining predictors of success in STEM degree programs, a requisite for developing an affiliation with a STEM area are research experiences (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Eagan, Hurtado, Chang, Garcia, Herrera, & Garibay, 2004), with research experiences and upper level math and science courses at the high school level serving as important ingredients for developing an interest in a STEM career (Hurtado, Newman, Tran, & Chang, 2010). Several studies exploring the impact of research on undergraduate students of color have demonstrated that research experiences can help students identify a clearer connection between their preparatory classes and careers in science, encourage better time management skills, and are related to higher graduation rates with STEM degrees and higher entrance rates into STEM graduate programs (Barlow & Villarejo, 2004; Slovacek, Whittinghill, Flenoury, & Wiseman, 2012). Odds are better for African American students to sustain interest in STEM coursework if they have the opportunity to engage in research early (Hurtado et al., 2010). Understanding that the quality of the research experience is an important factor for sustaining a student through additional training at the graduate level and/or an eventual career (Barlow & Villarejo, 2004; Carlone & Johnson, 2008), research experiences are also important to developing an identity as a scientist (Carlone & Johnson, 2008).

Accommodating Student Differences in the Curriculum

Finally, a rigorous curriculum should accommodate student differences and be flexible. Not all students will thrive with a curriculum that is accelerated or delivered at a fast pace, even if pre-assessment shows they are capable of managing such an approach. As well, not all students welcome daily or consistent challenge. Curriculum guided by flexibility and acceptance of student difference may include pretesting to find out where coursework should begin and could also include variability in pacing (slower or faster depending on the need), the ability to make choices, and the ability to be independent (Hockett, 2009). Curricula guided by these principles acknowledge that all students are individuals with talent, with such talent needing to be identified and developed (Rogers, 2007; Subotnik et al., 2011). With the needs of the individual serving as the foundation, educators can facilitate a menu of options that best meet the needs of the student and stem from what the student feels she can handle. The child determines what is appropriate and is ultimately the one in control based on what is approached and avoided (Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012).

Possible Selves as a Framework for Psychosocial Coaching

Gifted Education as Part of a System of Support

A student of high ability will not only need a curriculum of appropriate rigor. Rather, Ziegler and Phillipson (2012) argue that the education of highly able youth is part of a system of supports, with the educative process embedded within a cultural context. They posit that this system is comprised of the total body of actions a person can take, or the actions repertoire; goals; the environment; and subjective action space, or a person's ability to make decisions relative to perception of how potential actions, the environment, and goals interact to proscribe possibilities. To facilitate talent development, gifted programming must act on these components as a unit. These arguments are in keeping with Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological model of child development.

An example of talent development as a holistic enterprise that is comprised of systems is demonstrated in Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, and Yamamura's (2007) study contrasting the college preparatory experience of African American students attending a medical magnet high school and a nonmagnet high school in California. The schools were located in urban, low-income communities (approximately 30% of the students attending both schools were participating in the free/reduced lunch program) and the graduation rate for both high schools was over 90%. The magnet school had a more robust college preparatory culture, including a larger selection of AP courses (21 courses vs. 9 courses at the nonmagnet school). As a likely consequence, all students attending the medical magnet school at graduation had met admission requirements for the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU) systems, as compared to the 8% rate for the nonmagnet school.

The students at the medical magnet school had applied to attend the school, and parents were supportive of this more rigorous path. As with the nonmagnet school, the college counselors were overextended, and the students of the magnet school were very aware of the insufficiency of the college preparatory counseling offered. However, the students attending the magnet school were able to draw more effectively on their parents, siblings, and peers as sources of information about the college process. The admissions counselors from University of California, California State University, and other universities were very aware that these students had agreed to a more rigorous academic track, so visits from universities were numerous — so numerous that students were becoming expert in identifying clear admittance criteria and could complain about the lack of specific entry information from a representative from Princeton University (Griffin et al., 2007).

Psychosocial Coaching

Because the education of children does not occur in an emotional vacuum, talent development will also depend upon systematic psychosocial coaching (Subotnik et al., 2011), with emphasis on helping young people see the path between academic tasks in school and possible selves of the future. The literature base exploring the psychology of high-ability students is healthy, with researchers identifying psychological processes such as perfectionism (e.g., Schuler, 2000), compromising social coping strategies (e.g., T. Cross & Swiatek, 2009), entity versus incremental beliefs about intelligence (e.g., Ablard & Mills, 1996), stereotype threat (e.g., Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2003), and underachievement (Ford, 1996) as possible barriers to achievement. A possible underlying theme for these areas of study is the potential struggle a young person experiences harnessing his or her motivation (Subotnik, et al., 2011; Miller & Brickman, 2004). Yeager and Walton (2011) argue that social psychological interventions that target areas like motivation have the important benefit of releasing students to fully engage in learning opportunities offered in their schooling contexts.

As the Griffin et al. (2007) study demonstrates, family and other knowledgeable others who are important to the child are also key in helping a young person understand what opportunities are actually available for them to credibly pursue, as well as how to pursue them (Miller and Brickman, 2004; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). So, a child is likely to be able to master the path to becoming a concert pianist if a parent is also a musician (Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012). In the same way, families that are stymied from identifying and living into their potential are potent examples for their children (Fordham, 1996; Kao, 2000). Though late adolescence is generally a time when people craft ambitious possibilities for themselves (S. Cross & Markus, 1991), many African Americans may be unable to translate these aspirations into outcomes like graduation from high school (Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011), college (Horn & Kojaku, 2001), and graduate programs (Eagan et al., 2004), in part because the path to these outcomes are murky or unknown. Thus, our job as counselors and educators is helping young people problem-solve well enough to find answers about the steps to realizing success in a talent domain (Miller & Brickman, 2004).

Possible Selves as Framework for Psychosocial Coaching

The theory development of possible selves could serve as an important framework for psychosocial coaching with high-ability youth. Markus and Nurius (1986) define possible selves as future selves that are expected, hoped for, and feared. These future selves are more than aspirations. Instead, they are “vivid images of the self attaining a future state” (Oyserman et al., 2011, p. 475).

Possible selves are components of a working self-concept, or a self-concept that is temporal and can be destabilized. A working self-concept feeds a stable sense of self in part through the negotiation of possible and negative feedback about potential selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Possible selves are identity based (Dunkel, 2000; Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008). As such, constraints to the identities young people claim can also serve to restrain possible selves, especially in light of known life events for important people like family, peers, and friends (Kao, 2000). For example, it will be difficult for an African American female to see a potential self as a chemist as credible in light of stories of racism and sexism pushing her mother away from a science career when she was younger. Therefore, children will need help sustaining possible selves that are nonconventional, with one source of support potentially being recognized from important others like teachers, family, and professionals in the talent domain (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Frazier, 2012).

The importance of recognition is highlighted in Carlone and Johnson's (2007) study exploring the experience of 15 women of color who were successful in creating science identities. They developed three profiles to help explain the results: (1) the research scientist identity, (2) the altruistic scientist identity, and (3) the disrupted scientist identity. The research scientists were fully welcomed into the science community by their colleagues and professors, and were recognized as good students with something important to contribute. The altruistic scientists were more concerned with being recognized by other important people –family, their church members, and people they hoped to serve. They were in science because of the good it could do for people.

The women with disrupted science identities felt they encountered situations and people who were unfriendly and sometimes hostile and were thus withheld from recognition from influential others that mattered to them. For example, one woman, who was squeamish about killing an animal with her bare hands as part of her responsibilities, was encouraged to change majors and was then fired from her job as a laboratory technician. Importantly, this student was one of the best students in her class and was pushed out of this opportunity (Carlone & Johnson, 2007).

All of the women remained committed to a science identity, and the women with altruistic and disrupted identities were successful in identifying other sources of supports for their potential selves as scientists. Furthermore, the women in the study were aware of the components of the path needed to develop as scientists and were regulated enough to follow the path. In light of all of the women remaining committed to a science identity, one critical implication of Carlone and Johnson's (2007) study is the power

of personal agency, especially in light of racism and/or sexism one might confront.

Cross and Markus (1991) demonstrated that there is a readjustment in possible selves over time that is reflective of the success and failures one has experienced. The grandiose aims of youth are modulated and possible selves are scaled back. Miller and Brickman (2004) argue “anticipated future outcomes are an important self-regulatory factor in human functioning. Future goals influence self-regulation through their role in the planning of a path of proximal subgoals leading to future goal attainment” (p. 23). The linchpin between proximal subgoals and possible selves of the future is the instrumentality of current activity.

Oyserman et al. (2011) found that children living in poorer neighborhoods were likely to have school-aimed possible selves. In fact, the poorer the neighborhood, the more focused children were on school. Aspirations are thus not the place where one should expect to see the impact of disadvantage. Instead, it is the creation of strategies to realize their aspirations that could suffer, with the potential being that low-income youth are not sure how to make some of their aspirations reality. In support of this hypothesis, Oyserman et al. found that children from poorer neighborhoods and poorer families have a harder time creating strategies that support academic possible selves, possible selves aimed at academic performance, and possible selves that pursue teacher engagement.

The inability to activate the motivational chain between current activity, subgoals, and future selves is connected to failures to develop possible selves, concrete strategies to realize these possible selves, and an awareness of the instrumentality of current action (Miller & Brickman, 2004). So, a further benefit to the possible selves framework is the connection between future selves and the selves of the moment through the development of actionable, concrete steps (Oyserman et al., 2011; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). To facilitate talent development in a domain, children must understand what the path entails and plan accordingly (Miller & Brickman, 2004). This process can occur through knowledgeable others and fact-finding. Children must believe they have the ability to realize their possible selves, and they must work through value systems that could be at odds with the possible selves they envision (Miller & Brickman, 2004). This process requires the participation of the child, the family, peers, and the educational culture.

Oyersman and her colleagues (Oyersman et al., 2006; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002) have investigated this motivational chain as an intervention in several studies with low-income youth who are predominately African American, with the intent being enhanced academic achievement. In particular, the studies addressed the importance

of identifying role models congruent with possible selves as good students, balance (i.e., hoped-for selves and feared selves in the academic domain), the development of plausible strategies to realize academic possible selves, the construction of a community of students that values the academic possible selves the students created, and confronting stereotypes. Possible selves in these studies were selves of the next year. Several of the outcomes from these studies were long term (2 years), with students having higher GPAs, fewer absences, greater self-regulation, less disruptive behavior, greater school bonding, and greater concern about doing well in school following the intervention. Oyserman notes, “when social context is limiting and group membership functions to subtly or not so subtly shape the selves one ‘tries on’ in the process of adolescent development, we propose that by conceptualizing oneself as a group member, becoming aware of stereotypes and limitations, and developing a perspective of oneself as succeeding as a group member, allows a way out” (Oyserman et al, 1995, p. 1230).

CONCLUSION

A search of Google will produce quite a few examples of talented African American children and young adults pursuing passions and on the trajectory to being contributors and potential elites in their fields. Some talents that children pursue can only be developed outside of school settings, and parents and other knowledgeable mentors are essential to continued growth. Other talents can only grow in school settings, with the educational gestalt being the foundation for development. In all cases, talent grows in the face of rigor. Students must also have the opportunity to engage in authentic work guided by key questions from academic disciplines and that accommodates a child’s strengths and weaknesses. Likewise, as part of this process, psychosocial coaching is recommended, as a family member, friend, or teacher is helping an African American young person move past internal and external barriers. Motivation is connected to an understanding of the path that leads to a future self as well as the willingness to walk that path. Parents, teachers, and the child can lay the path together, setting a series of subgoals that depend upon the instrumentality of current action. Educational curriculum and sensitive, timely counseling are key to unleashing the “goodness and genius” (Marshall, 2014) of our children.

NOTE

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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