

To Be or Not to Be Gifted

The Choice for a New Generation

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The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision provided unrestricted access to educational opportunities for all students. Unfortunately, despite the passing of the 50th anniversary of this landmark decision, academic excellence remains a dream deferred for many Black students when compared to their peers. This disparity, more popularly known as the achievement gap, has garnered considerable attention in the educational research literature (Barton, 2003; Jencks & Phillips, 1998) and has been characterized as “the most significant educational problem in the U.S.” (Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, Ngoi, & Ngoi, 2004, p. 127).

Disparate participation, referred to as the participation gap, in rigorous coursework and programs is slowly becoming recognized as a contributor to the overall gap in achievement between Black students and their peers (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Black students are quite often the most underrepresented group in the nation with regard to participation in the types of courses designed to prepare students for challenging careers (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008). For example, according to *The 4th Annual AP Report to the Nation* (College Board, 2008), Black students represented 14% of all graduating college seniors in the U.S. but only 7.4% of them took Advanced Placement (AP) examinations. In comparison, White (64.0%) and Latino/Hispanic (14.6%) graduating seniors took 61.7% and 14.0% of the AP examinations in 2007, respectively. In 2001, 8.1% of the bachelor’s and 5.1% of the master’s degree recipients in science and engineering were Black (Hill & Green, 2006). Although this may be perceived as an issue separate from the achievement gap, it is no less important given the nation’s need for a more diverse workforce with duly honed skills, particularly in science,

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technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Bush, 2006).

Many educational researchers have written on the topic of the achievement gap between Black students and their peers; however, only a few have focused on the participation gap explicitly (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 2008). According to these educational researchers, many complex cultural variables might contribute to the widespread disparities. For example, researchers have contributed cultural concepts such as “acting White” and “acting Black” to the gifted education research literature (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008). Such concepts can be useful in terms of providing cursory knowledge related to the experiences of high-achieving and gifted Black students, which, in turn, may help explain why many Black students decline participation in advanced programs and courses. In this article, the authors will introduce the influence of hip-hop culture on education and explain how it interacts with Black students’ perceptions of “acting White” and “acting Black.” This explanation may help stakeholders understand the

unique factors influencing the educational decision-making of Black students in the new millennium.

Acting White and Acting Black

Racial identity development has been reported to have a significant impact on the academic experience of Black students (Kozol, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Racial identity development assumes added significance for gifted and high-achieving Black students who confront a barrage of stereotypes associated with race and intelligence as an inevitable aspect of their schooling (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008). For example, in a research study conducted by Henfield and others (2008), gifted Black students reported differential school experiences from that of their Black peers who were not enrolled in gifted and talented programs. These students often described being put in a position to defend their identities as “real” African Americans by their peers who were not enrolled in gifted and talented programs simply because they were participating in

advanced courses. Many of the participants in this study reported that being Black and gifted was something of an anomaly in their schools, and, at one time or another, had been told or knew someone who had been accused of “acting White” because they were Black and intellectual. Some participants in this study seemed to be more adept at managing their discomfort with racial stereotypes when they attended majority Black schools and participated in their respective gifted program for an extended period of time.

Ford et al. (2008) also explored “acting White” in their investigation of gifted Black students and the achievement gap. In this study, students were asked open-ended questions related to the term “acting White.” After analyzing participants’ responses, respondents overwhelmingly associated “acting White” with terms such as “being intelligent,” “caring about school,” and “taking advanced/honors classes.” Attitudes toward Black students who “acted White” were far more negative. For example, Black students accused of “acting White” were said to be “stuck up,” “uppity,” and “not embracing Black culture.”

In addition to “acting White,” the “acting Black” phenomenon also has been found to be a prevalent issue among Black students in general education, as well as gifted education courses (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004). “Acting Black” is considered to be the opposite of “acting White” (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008). For example, students perceived “acting Black” as “unintelligent,” “dumb,” and “ignorant.” Interestingly, according to Henfield et al. (2008), there were different perceptions associated with White students versus Black students who “acted Black.” Black gifted students perceived White students who “acted Black” as simply having an affini-

ty for Black culture. Black students who “acted Black,” on the other hand, were most often described as being “ghetto,” which is a derogatory statement associated with class status.

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These studies provide powerful illustrations of how intelligence, positive academic attitudes and behaviors such as caring about school, and taking advanced/honors classes can be perceived somewhat negatively when such attitudes and behaviors are internalized and projected by Black students (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008). According to these findings, Black gifted students may be viewed as traitors to their race and, thus, accused of “acting White.” Many Black students hold extremely negative views of what it means to be a “real” Black student and may perceive “acting Black” as not performing well academically (the opposite of “acting White”; Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004; Willie, 2003).

Hip-Hop: A Culture of Influence

Popular culture has a profound impact on youth of any generation. With the advent and increased usage of innovative mass communicative and technological devices, however, the influence of popular culture on today’s youth is unmatched with any other time period in history. Given the easy accessibility of such stimulation, adolescents are constantly receiving messages that help them self-evaluate the appropriate ways to establish their identities in areas such as race, class, and gender. According to Erikson (1968), adolescents are, indeed, very concerned with the notion of who they are and what others think of them as they develop positive identities. For Black students, though, a large part of the development of a healthy perception of self involves their beliefs about themselves as not only a person, but also as a Black person, in particular. Although many educators have asserted the significant impact of school culture on Black students’ perceptions of themselves, popular culture impacts Black students’ lives inside as well as outside the context of school. As such, it could easily be argued that popular culture is the major influence of millennial youth.

According to Hughes (2002), hip-hop culture is considered to be “the culture of America’s urban youth. It’s a way of dressing, speaking, and behaving, all with an in-your-face attitude” (Hughes, 2002, p. 72). More accurately, in the U.S., hip-hop culture derived its prototypic cultural aesthetics (e.g., language/grammar, attire) from the fusion of Latino and African-Caribbean racial and cultural traditions that existed in numerous urban communities in the mid- to late 1970s (Kitwana, 2002; Ogbar, 2007). Hip-hop’s four funda-

mental elements include rapping, Disc Jockey (DJ), graffiti, and break dancing. MC is an acronym for Master of Ceremony and the act of MCing is better known to the masses as rapping. DJ is an acronym for disc jockey, whose function is to provide the music that contains the message that the MC is trying to convey. Break dancing is theorized to have evolved from capoeira, which is an African Brazilian martial art believed to have originated in Angola, where many Brazilians were enslaved. It is an African and Latin tradition of dance that has been practiced and has been evolving long before it was officially termed break dancing and became part of the Black culture (Ogbar, 2007). Finally, graffiti consists of tagging, or painting one's name, a group's name, or simply beautiful artwork on public property. This art form also is closely tied to African culture, specifically Egyptian culture. Much like the ancient Egyptians, contemporary graffiti artists leave their mark as to not be forgotten. Therefore, leaving your mark, or pictorial representation, is a part of African/Black culture and so is graffiti.

Of hip-hop's four elements, rap has become the most influential. From its beginnings in New York City during the mid-1970s, rap has emerged as the most commercially successful genre of Black music to date, accounting for 89.2 million or 11.7% of the 762.8 million records sold in the United States in 2001 (Hughes, 2002). In fact, when these revenues are combined with clothing, film, and television revenues, the figures grow exponentially. Although hip-hop's impact has been witnessed both globally and domestically among individuals from various racial/ethnic and social backgrounds, its most resounding influence has occurred among African American consumers (Dyson, 2007; Kitwana, 2002).

Despite hip-hop's staggering commercial success, the genre has received

considerable criticism for the adverse influence it exerts on young impressionable minds. Social conservatives often indiscriminately describe rap music as filthy and reprehensible; these scathing characterizations have been the primary ammunition used by critics who advocate for censorship of hip-hop's inappropriate material (Dyson, 2007). For instance, McWhorter (2000) insinuated that rap music has a deleterious impact on the development of young people, especially minority youth who reside in urban communities. McWhorter implicated rap music in promoting anti-intellectualism, abhorrent behavior, and rampant victimization among minorities, all of which, according to him, prevent them from attaining success in this society. From this perspective, hip-hop constitutes a very real and ominous threat to the psychosocial and intellectual development of those who consume it.

There is no denying the existence of socially irresponsible rap music. Unfortunately, mass media oftentimes fails to promote the assortment of rap music that is being created. As a result, consumers get a skewed vision of the music and believe that the most popular rap music is the embodiment of hip-hop culture, and rap music, in particular. Hip-hop culture is not monolithic, and rap music may be one of its most diverse forms of expression, as a wide variety of artists create many different types of music for countless audiences. For example, a wealth of rap music encompasses and reflects the beliefs, concerns, and frustrations espoused by many African American youth (Dyson, 2007). From this perspective, it becomes more than merely a form of musical expression but an instrument of self-examination and societal critique (Boyd, 2004). Sadly, this type of rap music does not garner the attention of mass media executives

and, as a result, is strikingly absent on many radio and television stations.

Parents, teachers, and school counselors should achieve a richer understanding and appreciation of hip-hop culture and how its promotion is related to Black students' conceptualization of "authentically Black behavior," as it may have implications for education in general and academic excellence in particular. To more clearly illustrate this point, a case study of a gifted Black student is provided. The data presented in this case study is part of a larger qualitative study that investigated the experiences of African American students in gifted education programming (Henfield et al., 2008). In it, three *contextual clues* will be provided to shed light on the role of hip-hop culture in the life of a gifted African American student, which may provide reasons for why a Black student may be apprehensive about enrolling in advanced academic courses.

The Case Study

Name: Amy
Race: Black
Gender: Female
Mother's Highest Educational Level: High school (single-parent home)
Age: 15
School Enrollment: 939
School Location: Southeastern U.S.
School Demographics: 967 students (61% Black; 28% White; 8% Hispanic; and 3% Asian American)
Grade: 8th
Grade Point Average (GPA): 2.75–3.24

Contextual Clue #1: "Black Kids Run the School"

Amy attends a predominantly Black school and has developed a great deal of racial pride in this environment. Speaking to this point, Amy stated that

“even the White kids” prefer to be Black because “the Black kids run the school. The White kids want to do everything the Black people prefer to do, including listening to rap, dressing in a certain [hip-hop] dress code, using profanity and saying the new slang.” Amy’s racial pride seems to be tied to tangible measures of what it means to be Black (music listening tastes, dress, and speech). When asked, specifically, what it means to “act Black,” she said, “Acting Black is rap, baggy jeans and sweat pants, and saying a lot of profanity.”

Contextual Clue #2: “It’s Not Benefiting Me”

Amy seems to enjoy being a Black student in a predominantly Black school; however, she says it is quite difficult to be a gifted Black student in her school. She stated that although she has been in her school since the sixth grade, they “are always looking for someone to pick a fight with.” She further explained that many of her troubles are focused on her weight and her skin color: “[I] used to weigh a lot and they [nongifted Black students] would constantly make fun of my weight, calling me ‘Big Amy,’ you know, or because my skin was too dark they would call me ‘Blacky.’” She went on to say “it’s hard being gifted because they call you nerd, even if you are cool” and has even been accused of “acting White,” which she defines as “acting preppy, rock, or pop” and saying “stuff like ‘cool’ and ‘sweet.’” When asked how she feels about being a gifted student, she said, “It don’t do anything for me. It’s not benefiting me.”

Contextual Clue #3: “They Are Fine With It”

When asked about her career goals, Amy said that she wants to do something beneficial for teenagers.

I want what I do [as a career] to be fun and cool but at the same time safe.

Initially, she said she wanted to be a “teen psychiatrist but that don’t really pay.” However, she still wants to help youth and plans to do so by opening recreation centers nationwide because “I want what I do to be fun and cool but at the same time safe.” When asked about the other career goals of some of her Black peers outside of the gifted program, she said they “want to be rappers, singers, backup dancers, just things that will get them famous. Nothing realistic.” She went on to say that she does extensive research on hip-hop moguls and has come to understand that “they all make more money from their advertisements than their music.” When asked why she thinks her nongifted peers do not want to follow these rappers’ steps and open their own business, she said it is because “they have adapted to their roles [acting Black], to what they are labeled as and they are fine with it.”

Discussion

The complexities associated with navigating Amy’s school are numerous. Although the difficulties demonstrated in the case study may not be a direct function of hip-hop culture, one could easily argue that given the genre’s ubiquitous presence in mass media, the relationship between hip-hop culture and the education of Black students in general is in desperate need of further exploration. There is a small yet growing body of literature detailing

the issues associated with being a Black student enrolled in gifted education programs, particularly as they relate to racial identity (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 2008; Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993; Henfield et al., 2008; Moore, Ford, & Milner, 2005). Even fewer researchers have detailed the experiences of gifted Black students with regard to the notion of “acting White” as well as “acting Black” (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008). To date, however, there is no research related to the impact of hip-hop culture on gifted Black students’ educational experiences. As such, the case study of Amy is very informative.

In the first contextual clue, Amy conveys a great deal of pride in being or acting Black, which she describes in terms of dress, speech, and taste in music. According to her, the culture of hip-hop has come to define what it means to be Black. As such, when she suggests that “even the White kids” want to act Black, what she is really saying that in her school, White students have an affinity for hip-hop culture. This assumption brings the salience of the popularity of hip-hop culture to the forefront of K–12 education; it has managed to transcend race to the point where how people speak, how they dress, and the music they listen to have become intertwined with Blackness and, more importantly, is valued when juxtaposed with Whiteness. Although Amy is proud of being a Black student in her school, when discussing being a Black gifted student, she is much less

enthusiastic. Apparently, despite her school being predominantly Black, few Black students are in gifted programs; as a result, she is somewhat of an anomaly. In Contextual Clue #2, she describes instances of being ridiculed by students who are not in the gifted programs (nongifted students) because of her body type and skin tone. Such unfortunate instances are not uncommon in the lives of all gifted students. Nonetheless, Amy attends a school that highly values hip-hop culture; as such, her difficulties should be explored using a hip-hop cultural lens, as this is a unique situation. For example, hip-hop culture has a rich tradition of uplifting and empowering Black youth through socially and politically conscious, positive rap music (Dyson, 2004; Kitwana, 2002; Ogbar, 2007). However, the rap music most often played on the radio and television could be considered misogynistic because of its degradation of women. In fact, in a study of music that degrades women, rap was found to contain the most offensive lyrics (Primack, Gold, Schwarz, & Dalton, 2008). Black women, in particular, often are portrayed in rap music as sex objects and belittled if they do not fit into narrowly constructed views of beauty, as defined by body type and skin tone (Neal, 2004). In addition to this, Amy's issues are compounded as a function of her not fitting into popular rap music's definition of beauty. Multiplying her unfortunate school experience is her identification as a gifted student, which disassociates her from what it means to be Black, as evidenced by claim of being accused of "acting White."

Despite her negative interactions with Black students not enrolled in the gifted program, Amy seems to value their opinion of her Blackness, nonetheless. Contextual Clue #3 reveals she also seems to have a low opinion of these students' Blackness: "they have

adapted to their roles [acting Black], to what they are labeled as and they are fine with it." She has an appreciation for certain aspects of Blackness as defined by hip-hop culture but in terms of career aspirations, she views herself as being different from these students and maybe even superior to them, in a sense, by saying that they "want to be rappers, singers, backup dancers, just things that will get them famous. Nothing realistic."

This case study supports the theory that Black students enrolled in advanced education courses and programs may have dissimilar experiences from their peers. Although this has been reported in numerous other gifted education literature (Ford, 1996; Ford et al., 2008; Ford et al., 1993; Henfield et al., 2008), to date, there has not been an explicit emphasis on hip-hop culture and its influence on the educational experiences of African American students in advanced education courses and programs in general. To remove such a salient issue as academic performance from its proper cultural context negates the complexity of the issue and continues the tradition of rendering students of color voiceless as it relates to their lived experiences and subsequent values (Fernandez, 2002). For educators unaware of the hip-hop culture and its influence, Black students' reluctance to enroll in advanced coursework such as that provided in gifted and talented programs and classes may seem rather perplexing; however, if educators examine the decision of whether or not to enroll in such programs and classes through a cultural lens—a hip-hop cultural lens—it may be easier to understand.

Summary

Recruiting Black students into gifted courses can be quite a daunting task.

Although there have been studies that have investigated this phenomenon, little, if any attention has been given to the influence that hip-hop culture may ultimately have on students' decision to enter such courses and programs. This article is an attempt to fill this void and help parents, teachers, and school counselors understand the influence of hip-hop culture in the new millennium. By doing so, it is hoped that they will be able to harness this power and use it as a tool to create hip-hop influenced interventions aimed to better market gifted education to students who qualify for such programs, yet do not perceive them as places where they belong.

Recommendations

Based on this research, the following recommendations will be provided to assist parents, teachers, and school counselors help Black students explore, and seriously consider, all of their options as it relates to advanced academic programs and classes. In addition, information will be provided to help stakeholders assist gifted Black students who find it difficult to be successful learners in environments that may view giftedness and Blackness as mutually exclusive.

Recommendations for Parents

The following are suggested recommendations for parents:

- Hip-hop culture has been spreading across the world and growing in influence since its inception in the 1970s. It is a powerful force that is here to stay. Most students will have some contact with aspects of the culture at some point in their educational experience. As such, parents should make attempts to become more

knowledgeable of hip-hop culture in general, and rap music in particular, in order to fully understand its potential influence on their children. Students have the ability to understand that what they hear on the radio is purely entertainment, much like many popular movies. Furthermore, there are a number of rap artists who create music that may be considered “positive” (e.g., Common, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def). Parents should explore the culture of hip-hop to better understand the range of rap artists and the music they produce. This will enable them to have a discussion with their child about the meanings of the music and make decisions regarding what is appropriate for their child.

- If a child exhibits an affinity for hip-hop culture, parents should not hastily conclude that this necessarily threatens their child’s academic functioning. Frequently, rigid and overly simplified representations of rap music have been portrayed by a plethora of media outlets (Dyson, 2007; Ogbar, 2007). Parents should understand that these portrayals do not encompass the wide array of rap artists who currently exist. This increased understanding will help prevent parents from overgeneralizing and making judgmental, presumptuous indictments of hip-hop, thus allowing students to discuss the role that hip-hop plays in their lives more openly.
- Parental support can be an invaluable asset in facilitating academic success; however, parents may not understand how difficult it is to excel academically as a Black student in today’s schools. Parents should invite their children to have candid discussions with them pertaining to their experiences in

school to equip them with a better understanding of how to support their children and best meet their needs. For instance, students may share with their parent that they don’t want to enroll in a gifted program because doing so would mean that they are “acting White.” In response, a parent may explain to their child that intelligence and Blackness are not mutually exclusive. For example, some of the most successful rap artists have managed to parlay their musical success and notoriety into other, even more successful, business ventures that have nothing to do with music (e.g., Reverend Run, 50 Cent, Jay-Z, Nelly).

Recommendations for Teachers

The following are suggested recommendations for teachers:

- Teachers should first and foremost be honest with themselves and challenge any existing notions they may have of the intellectual ineptitude of Black students. Stereotypes they may hold about the uneducable nature of Black students can act as a deterrent to their nominating Black students for gifted education programs. If teachers explore how they have come to internalize these negative beliefs and take necessary steps to dispel them, they may be more apt to recognize the talents of Black students who embrace hip-hop culture. It is important to understand that how a student communicates is not a determinant of their interest in education and/or academic ability. As such, teachers should not associate students’ appreciation for aspects of hip-hop culture (e.g., language, attire/style) with a devaluation of academic success. Although some of the most

popular rap music seems to glorify anti-intellectualism, it should not be assumed that students who like this music and adopt the language and styles associated with it will lack the motivation, interest, and skills needed to excel academically.

- Teachers should seriously consider the utilization of culturally relevant pedagogical strategies and styles whenever possible (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Stovall, 2006). For example, after becoming more aware of the variety of rap artists, teachers may then select certain artists’ music (e.g., Nas, Tupac, The Fugees) as examples of popular Black artists utilizing witty, intelligent lyrics, yet maintaining their popularity as authentically Black rap artists. Using rap artists as role models is, potentially, a way to help Black students learn that intelligence and Blackness are not mutually exclusive, thus increasing their racial identity, as well as their affinity for education, because the rap artists are someone with whom they can identify.
- Gifted education teachers in particular should think about using different aspects of hip-hop to pique the interest of students who may qualify for gifted programming but believe that gifted programs are not for them. For instance, besides rapping, there are a number of lucrative occupations associated with hip-hop culture, including professional DJ, dance choreographer, radio and television personality, clothing designer, or artist. Gifted teachers may be able to collaborate with a local college or university to develop a program that is designed to infuse academics into courses designed to expose students to such careers, which may help to remove some of the stigma attached to being in

a gifted program because it would then be associated with hip-hop culture and, thus, considered a place for Black students, as well.

Recommendations for School Counselors

The following are suggested recommendations for school counselors:

- Many societal influences have negatively impinged on Black students' academic performance. By being Black, students have historically had to encounter and overcome extreme difficulties in school. However, some research suggests that Black students enrolled in advanced courses may have added difficulty in school as a function of their race, as well as their giftedness (Ford, 1996; Henfield et al., 2008). With this in mind, school counselors should acknowledge gifted Black students' unique academic experiences when rendering services and develop anticipatory measures as a means to address "predictable" cultural issues common among gifted Black students. Those students who qualify for

gifted programs but are hesitant to enroll, as well as those currently enrolled, can meet with school counselors who can explain the benefits, as well as the difficulties, associated with taking advanced courses. In the explanation, school counselors can help them understand that it is not uncommon for Black students to face educational challenges.

- School counselors should appropriately inject aspects of students' culture into their therapeutic approach. On several occasions, counselors have used dimensions of hip-hop culture to broach issues associated with students' academic functioning (Lee, 1987; McFadden, Lee, & Lindsey, 1985; Muller, 2002; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003). For example, McFadden et al. (1985) introduced hip-hop lyrics to a group of Black males in order to examine their beliefs about the role confrontations play in the professional mobility of Black people. Through subsequent meetings and discussions, students were able to understand the academic implica-

tions of the poor decisions they were making, which is a critical step toward behavioral change. Contemporary school counselors could utilize similar resources and conduct classroom guidance lessons designed to examine the notion of what it means to "act White" and "act Black." For instance, school counselors can use Jay-Z as an example of an intelligent, highly successful Black male. He has successfully transitioned from music artist to mogul. This sort of classroom guidance activity could, ultimately, serve two purposes: (a) help students to associate hip-hop culture with intellectualism and (b) help students to associate intellect with Blackness, given that hip-hop culture often is associated with Blackness (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2008).

- In addition to personal/social issues, school counselors also are in a unique position to assist students with their academic and career development using their state's comprehensive guidance model (American Counseling Association, 2005). As such, they should be proactive in collaborating with teachers, as well as parents, to develop culturally relevant activities that invoke hip-hop culture. For example, school counselors can help teachers develop an assignment requiring students to research hip-hop-related careers that may require some level of academic achievement. The report could include pertinent information such as the salaries and the course requirements, as well as potential future opportunities. School counselors could then collaborate with parents to arrange for a visit to a college campus where students can speak to Black college students who are also hip-



hop enthusiasts and are in school to pursue similar career goals, which would help increase students' knowledge and awareness of careers, while crystallizing the need for academic excellence. **GCT**

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