# Under-Representation of African American Students in Gifted Education: Nine Theories and Frameworks for Information, Understanding, and Change

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An old adage goes "time flies when you are having fun." Time flies, as well, when you are working hard. The first author has spent almost two decades lamenting professionally (and longer personally) the poor presence of African American students in gifted education. The second author has also devoted a great deal of her time bemoaning this very issue. In our collective efforts and scholarship – studies, articles, presentations – and teaching and advising, we focus on finding equitable and defensible ways to increase the representation of African American students among those identified and served as gifted. Time has passed, but we are as passionate as when we wrote our first article, made our first presentation, and taught our first class on the topic. At the same time, we are sad and perplexed that little progress is evident nationally. As we have noted elsewhere, in 2006, Black students represented 17.13% of the public school population, but only 9.15% of those in gifted education – a 47% discrepancy. This percent is significant in and of itself, but takes on new meaning when translated into actual numbers. Specifically, these unidentified students equate to over 250,000 Black students who are not participating in gifted education. This is not a trivial number of students. Each one will be hard-pressed to become an achiever and to have his/her dreams fulfilled, because they are not placed in classes designed to meet their needs.

Admittedly, several scholars have tendered theories and conceptual paradigms or frameworks that shed light on one or more vital aspects of under-representation. Collectively, these works have much to offer educators seeking to decrease and/or eliminate under-representation. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of what we believe to be among the most promising works for guiding educators – teachers, administrators, decisions makers – in their efforts to effect meaningful change, to correct inequities, and to be advocates for this group of Black students. Due to space limitations, we cannot possibly describe the theories and framework in depth; instead, we present an overview and place the responsibility on educators to delve into the frameworks and theories. The table presents the theories and frameworks, and a sample of authors whose works we use. This list of authors is by no means comprehensive.

| Theory or Conceptual Framework/Model | Sample of Scholars |
|---|---|
| Deficit Thinking | Richard Valencia |
| Voluntary and Involuntary Minority Groups | John Ogbu |
| Paradox of Underachievement | Donna Ford[1]; Rosa Mickelson |
| Acting White | Signithia Fordham, John Ogbu, Donna Ford, Roland Fryer |
| Racial Identity Theory | William Cross Jr., Janet Helms, Thomas Parham |
| Stereotype Threat | Claude Steele, Joshua Aronson |
| Afro-Centric Cultural Styles | A. Wade Boykin |
| Multicultural Curriculum | James Banks, Donna Ford, Carl Grant, Christine Sleeter |
| Culturally Responsive Education | Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Barbara Shade, Jacqueline Irvine, Donna Ford, Michelle Foster |

## Deficit Thinking Theory

We begin the discussion with deficit thinking because of our belief that such thinking rests at the heart of under-representation (and underachievement and the achievement gap). Deficit thinking is the major reason under-representation exists, persists, and is so extensive. Educational deficit thinking is a form of blaming the victim that views the alleged deficiencies of poor and minority group students and their families as predominantly responsible for these students' school problems and academic failure, while frequently holding structural inequality blameless (Valencia, 1997) and takes a myriad of forms, all of which have in common low expectations. Deficit thinking strongly affects decisions, behaviors, and policies – definitions, theories, models, identification criteria and measures, placement, and services. When deficit thinking exists, educators perceive Black students to be genetically disadvantaged and/or

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[1] Ford (1996; submitted) refers to this as the 'attitude-achievement paradox.'

culturally disadvantaged; they believe them to be less capable than other students. Like all thinking, deficit thinking influences behaviors. At the classroom level, this can be seen in less challenge and rigor in the curriculum for Black students, which a significant factor in the even larger issue of the achievement gap (e.g., Barton & Coley, 2009). In gifted education, deficit thinking can take the form of teachers not referring Black students for gifted education screening, identification, and placement (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Every study on teacher referral has found that Black students are under-referred (see Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008a).

## Voluntary and Involuntary Minority Groups Theory

Like John Ogbu, we have been asked countless times to explain why Blacks, on average, perform lower than White and Asian students in schools and on tests. This is certainly a legitimate question. An even more intriguing question is why Asian students, on average, outperform not just Black students, but also White students. Ogbu's (1972) theory on voluntary and involuntary minority groups is informative. According to the theory, all minority groups have a different history, culture, and experience in the U.S. Thus, it should come as no surprise that they have different outcomes. In general, voluntary minorities have in common the experience of immigrating to the U.S., viewing the U.S. as *the* land of opportunity and believing in the American Dream. Thus, there is optimism, hopefulness, and a belief that their lives (educationally and financially) will improve and/or be better than in their homeland. They are often willing to assimilate, to give up much of their culture, in order to achieve/advance. When faced with discrimination, it is likely to be viewed as a temporary setback that can be overcome, particularly with assimilation and effort (hard work).

Involuntary minorities are not immigrants. Slaves, for example, did not choose to come to this nation. They were not seeking the proverbial American Dream. They were not seeking to assimilate. Consequently, they and many of their descendants may exude what Ogbu refers to as secondary attitudes of resistance whereby there is anger, resentment, and resistance to some American values, customs, and behaviors. There is, instead, a desire to retain African and African American culture even as they co-exist in the U.S.

This important, complex theory can be simplified by comparing voluntary and involuntary minorities to participants at a workshop (or meeting or class, etc.). Those who *choose* to attend the workshop come there with different attitudes, expectations, and behaviors than those who are *forced* to attend because (a) it is mandatory and/or (b) there is a penalty for not attending. Those who want to attend the workshop are often more optimistic, open-minded, and pleased. They are attentive, take notes, ask relevant questions, and believe the speaker is informative or has some information that will be useful, etc. However, participants who are involuntary often have more complaints (not all legitimate), pay little attention, and show disrespect to the presenter (e.g., read newspaper, grade papers, talk to colleagues, ask angry/challenging/undermining/hostile questions, or even leave during the session).

## Paradox of Underachievement

Rosa Mickelson's (1990) work on the paradox of underachievement concerns the extent to which Black students show congruence in the academic beliefs and behaviors. According to the paradox, Black students who profess to believe in the American Dream may demonstrate behaviors that show otherwise. For example, they will state or agree that doing well in school will increase their chances of going to college and getting a job. However, their study habits and school attendance might be poor. School and academics may not be a high priority. Mickelson distinguished between abstract and concrete ideas, which seem to be unique among Black students. She found that the Black high school students she studied did have dreams and goals, and believed in the American Dream (abstract values), but their belief in the American Dream was qualified (concrete values). One illustration is a Black student who says: *"I think that if I work hard in school and get good grades, then I can go to college and get a job. But I also know that because I am Black, I (and other Blacks) have to work harder than Whites to get into the college (or get the job, or get equal pay, etc.)"*. They see a stronger glass ceiling, one that is less easy to break – like Plexiglas or even bulletproof glass (Ford, 2010). Much data bear this out – Blacks face more discrimination in school, college, and the workforce, they are under-represented in many professions (including teaching), and are more likely to be both under-employed and unemployed, even when they have the same (or higher) academic credentials as Whites. These realities can and do compromise the motivation of Black students. When less motivated, they are not likely to be viewed by educators as hard workers, high achievers, and/or gifted. This hinders referral to gifted education and their retention if placed.

## Acting White (Negative peer pressures)

It is our belief that an anti-achievement ethic among students, especially secondary students, is rampant. Gifted students and high-achieving students are very likely to be victims of teasing/taunts and threats. With Black students, as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and Fordham (1988) reported, charges of 'acting White' abound. Ford, Grantham, and Whiting (2008b) found that most gifted and high-achieving Black students had been accused of acting White. Acting White is primarily associated with being intelligent, getting good grades, speaking mainstream English, and having White friends. When accused, many gifted and/or high-achieving African American students begin to sacrifice their high performance and enrollment in gifted education to reduce and/or eliminate negative peer pressures. This forced choice contributes to under-representation.

## Racial Identity Theory

It is has been our experience that most educators believe that self-esteem and self-concept affect students' performance; those with positive self-images or self-perceptions are more likely to do well in school than those who have negative perceptions of themselves. When one is African American, it is crucial that racial identity be considered within the notion of self-perception as much as self-concept and self-esteem. William Cross Jr.'s research and subsequent theory of Black racial identity can help all educators better understand African American students in the context of racial identity, salience, and/or pride. In the most recent version of the theory, there are three identity exemplars (pre-encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization) comprised of eight identity types (Cross & Vandiver, 2001). Specifically, pre-encounter includes three identity types (assimilation, stereotypes/miseducation, and self-hatred). While each identity type has unique features, they share a sense of low racial salience or racelessness and, instead, a strong 'American' identity. Movement from the pre-encounter exemplar to the immersion-emersion exemplar occurs with encounters – specifically, racial assaults and insults. Encounters can be direct or indirect, subtle or blatant, and a major event or series of smaller events. Encounters can be verbal (insults, negative comments, backhanded compliments), visuals (negative, stereotypical images, pictures, posters), or behaviors. Immersion-emersion is the height of Black anger or rage, and includes two identity types (intense Black involvement or White hatred). The internalization exemplar (the most positive and healthy identity) includes three identity types (nationalist, biculturalist, and multiculturalist). All have in common a commitment to social justice and equity, along with a strong, positive racial identity. The nationalist identity is high Black racial salience, the bicultural has high racial salience and commitment to another identity, while the multiculturalist has multiple identities and commitments.

## Stereotype Threat Theory

High stakes testing is a reality in gifted education. Few students are labeled and placed without at least one test. In some states and districts, only one test is used; in others, several pieces of information are collected, but test scores frequently trump any and all other potentially corroborating information. Test anxiety is a reality for some Black students, including those identified as gifted. For Black students in particular, Steele's (1999) early and on-going research on 'stereotype threat' is instructive. Stereotype threat is a type of confirmation bias. A typical example of stereotype threat manifests when a categorical group is told or shown that their group's performance is worse than another group before giving them a test; the test results are often lower than for control groups after such information. This race-related form of test anxiety cannot be ignored in explanations regarding why many Black students may have depressed scores on intelligence tests. These lowered scores decrease their chances of being identified as gifted. When tests and measures are used that contain less bias, more Black students will achieve higher scores. Professional organizations have principles and guidelines in place to increase equity in the testing and assessment processes (see Whiting & Ford, 2006). In addition, to decrease test anxiety and stereotype threat, Black students will need formal assistance in test taking skills, time management skills, and organizational skills, along with reading, writing, and vocabulary skills (Ford, 2004; Ford, submitted).

## Afro-Centric Cultural Styles Model

The level and type of instruction students receive play a vital role in understanding what they are taught. Boykin's (1994) early and ongoing research and model has important implications for making teaching styles and learning styles more compatible. Boykin's model includes spirituality, harmony, affect, movement, verve, expressive individualism, oral tradition, communalism, and social time perspective. Ford and Kea (2009) use Boykin's model under the notion of 'culturally responsive instruction,' meaning that instructional styles are modified to respond to how many Black students learn (and/or prefer to learn). When Black students' learning styles are unaddressed, misunderstood, and unappreciated, their performance and grades often suffer; hence, they are less likely to be viewed as gifted. When instruction is colorblind or culture blind (Ford & Kea), Black students may even be misperceived as having learning disabilities or other special education needs. For example, verve (high levels of energy) can be misinterpreted as hyperactive; communalism may be misinterpreted as lacking independence; affect may be misconstrued as too sensitive and emotional. Independently or in combination, misunderstandings about these cultural styles can contribute to underachievement, under-referral, and mismatches between learning styles and teaching styles. If underachievement results, these students will not be referred to gifted education or may be removed from such classes.

## Multicultural Curriculum Model

Every teacher knows that students learn when the material is personally meaningful and viewed as relevant by students. In a fairly recent study of culturally different students, the majority (88%) of whom had passing grades but dropped out of school, lack of relevance in the curriculum ranked as one primary reason (Bridgeland et al., 2006). While students may not take the most drastic and telling step of physically dropping out, some drop out psychologically. Banks' (2006, 2008) model consists of four levels of how to infuse multicultural content into the curriculum – contributions level, additive level, transformation level, and social action level. These levels range from being somewhat culturally assaultive and reactive (contributions and additive) to being culturally responsive and proactive (transformation and social action (Ford, submitted).

## Culturally Responsive Education Framework

Several features of culturally responsive education have been presented above. A culturally responsive education is student centered, which means that it cannot be culture blind. Ford's model (e.g., Ford & Harris, 1999), relying upon the works of Gay (2000, 2002), Ladson-Billings (2009), and Shade, Kelly and Oberg (1997), and others, includes five components: (1) philosophy (about working with and teaching African American students); (2) learning environment (creating an environment that is family and community oriented; that values diversity and differences); (3) curriculum (multicultural); (4) instruction (matches teaching and learning styles), and (5) assessment (equitable, fair, biased reduced). The goal of culturally responsive education is to be comprehensive at understanding and addressing the needs of African American students; this framework is proactive and inclusive – it is a form of differentiation that does not rely on 'business as usual' or 'one size fits all" ideologies and practices. Instead, educators who are culturally responsive make intentional, concerted efforts to ensure that *all* students feel a sense of membership, ownership, worth, and empowerment in their classrooms.

### Summary and Final Comments

There is no magic bullet for reversing the persistent and pervasive under-representation of African American students in gifted education. Educators must not deny that many past and current practices have been ineffective. However, we have many theories and conceptual frameworks from which to make change for those 250,000 Black students who are under-identified and under-served. The probability that these students' needs are being met in the general education setting is low; hence, the existence of and need for gifted programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). It is our belief that the above theories and frameworks are relevant in every school district and classroom. No time is better than today to become more assertive and proactive for these current and future African American students who are indeed gifted but for whom traditional practices have proven to be unhelpful. A mind is, indeed, a terrible thing to waste (United Negro College Fund) and erase (Ford, 1996).

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## An Interview with Dr. Margie Kitano   San Diego State University

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On July 29, 2009, during the New Mexico Association for the Gifted (NMAG) Summer Institute on Gifted Education in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Dr. Shaughnessy and I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Margie Kitano. Our questions and a summary of her responses are provided below:

**Dr. Kitano, could you begin by telling us a bit about your background and experiences?** I began my professional career as an assistant professor in special education at New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Las Cruces, where I organized the Preschool for the Gifted. In 1988, I moved to San Diego to serve as associate dean for faculty development and research. There I collaborated with San Diego Unified School District's gifted and talented education program on the professional development of teachers who work with gifted students.