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Sharon Michael-Chadwell, *University of Phoenix*

Fred A Bonner, II, *Texas A & M University - College Station*

Dave A Louis, *Texas A & M University - College Station*



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# African American High School Males' Perceptions of Academically Rigorous Programs, Identity, and Spirituality

Sharon Michael-Chadwell

University of Phoenix

Fred A. Bonner, II

Dave Louis

Texas A&M University

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

*Sharon Michael-Chadwell* is adjunct professor in the School of Education at both the University of Phoenix and Liberty University. Email:

[msschadwell@email.phoenix.edu](mailto:msschadwell@email.phoenix.edu)

*Fred A. Bonner* is professor of educational administration in the College of Education at Texas A&M University.

*Dave Louis* is lecturer in the Department of Educational Administration & Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the perceptions of African American high school males regarding their experiences in academically rigorous programs. A specific investigation as to how this cohort defined giftedness or academic success is underscored along with their perceptions of factors they identified as hindrances to their academic success subsequent to their graduation from high school. The study also focuses on the implications for this cohort participating in gifted programming, given the intensity of these academic engagements. In many instances, spirituality and religiosity are two enduring and salient aspects of African American culture that have in many ways influenced identity development; these constructs have also been used as methods of coping and overcoming perceived injustices (Billingsley, 2003). Hence, how these African American males' perceived the role of spirituality in their daily lives, particularly their schooling experiences, was also examined.

## PURPOSE

Sternberg (1985) stated more than two decades ago, “What constitutes an exceptionally intelligent act may differ from one person to another. Thus, the vehicles by which one might wish to measure intelligence (test contents, modes of presentation, formats for test items, etc.) will probably need to differ across sociocultural groups...” (p. 224). For African American males, a definition that honors the nuances and unique cultural perspectives they bring to the education context is critical (Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, & James, in press). This article remains true to the scope of this special theme issue of the *National Journal for Urban Education and Practice* by focusing on African American students in general and a particular focus on African American males in high school urban settings—specifically gifted African American males.

The primary purpose of this article is to examine the lived experiences of six African American high school males concerning their perceptions of academically rigorous programs and the underrepresentation of African Americans in such programs. A focus on their engagements with ethnic identity and spirituality in the school context are also considered. The location of the study was limited to participants living and attending school in the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) in San Antonio, Texas. Three research questions were used to frame this investigation:

R1: How do African American high school males define giftedness or academic success?

R2: What barriers, if any, do African American high school males perceive as factors in achieving academic success in school and after graduation?

R3: What role, if any, does spirituality play among African American high school male cohorts?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Definition of Academic Success and Giftedness*

A student’s perception of his or her subjective well-being is contingent on a variety of school experiences (Suldo, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michaelowski, 2009). In a study involving middle school students, Suldo et al. noted the

participants associated academic success with educators who “connected with students on an emotional level, used diverse and best-practice teaching strategies, acknowledged and boosted students’ academic success, and demonstrated fairness during interactions with students, and fostered a classroom environment in which questions were encouraged” (p. 80). According to a report chronicling what business leaders in the United States perceive as the attributes of an academically successful student, they state that these individuals should be skilled in the following areas:

- Analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information;

- Communicating with others;

- Demonstrating proficiency in science, math, technology, foreign languages, history, geography, political and global awareness;

- Collaborating with culturally diverse environments;

- Ensuring projects meet completion deadlines; and

- Portraying ethical behaviors and a commitment to family, communities, and colleagues. (Brockman & Russell, 2009; para. 1)

Still others, such as Leverett (2003) contended academically successful students are those individuals who are socially and emotionally stable within and outside of the school environment.

To provide a more formal approach in looking at academic success or more pointedly in looking at *giftedness*, a federal definition of this term was created. In 1969, the U.S. Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland put forth the Marland Report or Public Law (PL) 91-230 which offered a definition of the gifted student (Scott, 1996; Walker, 2002). Within the context of PL 91-230, gifted students were noted to demonstrate the capacity of high-performance singularly or in combination in the following areas: “(a) general intellectual ability, (b) specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) visual and performing arts, and (f) psychomotor ability” (McClellan, 1985, para. 11). In 1993, the U.S. Federal Government revised the definition

for giftedness and provided a more inclusive codification of this term. This definition added the statement, "Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and all areas of human endeavor" (Ford & Moore, 2005, p. 77).

While there appears to be noted changes in the ways that academic success and giftedness have been conceptualized, especially with the more inclusive language of the contemporary definitions, researchers (e.g. Flowers, Zhang, Moore, & Flowers, 2004; Golden, 2004; Robinson, 2005; Staiger, 2004) have noted a continual underrepresentation and underinclusion of African Americans in gifted and talented programming throughout the U.S. public education system. Factors related to these maladies include issues related to teacher nomination, assessment, and identification procedures (Bonner, 2005; Ford & Moore, 2005; Joseph & Ford, 2006; Michael-Chadwell, 2008).

To further elaborate, several additional factors can be attributed to the underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted programming: (a) misperceptions regarding a student's race and ability; (b) the lack of parent awareness programs about issues related to gifted and talented education; (c) the need for professional development training related to the needs of minority gifted students; and (d) issues related to testing and assessment instrumentation (Bonner, 2005; Ford & Moore, 2005; Huff, Houskamp, Watkins, Stanton, & Tavegia, 2005; Joseph & Ford, 2006; Michael-Chadwell, 2008).

While limited literature exists that captures African American high school students' perceptions of how they define giftedness, Michael-Chadwell (2008) conducted a study involving 12 regular classroom teachers and 11 African American parents located in San Antonio, Texas. The parents discussed their lived experiences and perceptions concerning the nomination and identification of their children for testing for gifted and talented programs. While the statement uncovered in this investigation, "my child is bright; I don't understand his or her exclusion from the gifted program" was elevated to the level of a theme, a secondary statement and

subsequent theme included "key decision makers refusal to recognize giftedness among students of color." Many of the parents expressed concerns that governmental definitions of giftedness, such as the definition included in the Marland Report, did not factor in ethnicity, culture, and race.

#### *Spirituality, African American Culture, and P-12 Schooling*

The importance of cultivating and maintaining a strong spiritual foundation has been a mainstay within the African American community (Riggins, McNeal, & Herndon, 2008). For many African Americans, incorporating spirituality into their experiences with racism has provided a means of hope for improvement in future endeavors. However, the availability of research investigating African American students' commitment to spiritual beliefs in relation to their perceptions of giftedness and academic rigor is severely limited, especially given their continued underrepresentation in gifted and talented programs (Baldwin, 2005; Bonner, 2000; Bonner & Jennings, 2007; Callahan, 2005; Elhoweris, 2005; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Michael-Chadwell, 2008).

To counter this lack of focus on spirituality among adolescent populations in school, Moore-Thomas and Day-Vines (2008) found that the salience of religion and spirituality among African American adolescents was an important part of their experiences. In addition, data from a study focusing on young people's religious views and behaviors suggested that 56% of African American high school seniors believe religion is important and 45% attend religious services regularly (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 2005). Still another study of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders reported that 78% of African American adolescents found religion to be "pretty" or "very" important, while 72% prayed 1 to 7 times a week (Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regnerus, 2003). Overall, self-reported baseline rates of religious activities and beliefs are higher for African American adolescents than for White, Hispanic, or Asian adolescents (Bachman et al.; Smith et al.). It is important to note that for all adolescents, higher levels of religious involvement have a positive correlation with prosocial behavior and

self-regulatory skills, well-being, resiliency, and coping skills. Similarly, higher levels of religious involvement are inversely related to maladaptive and less positive lifestyle choices including substance abuse, early sexual activity, and stress (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Bridges & Moore, 2002).

Although the focus of this article is on African American males in the high school setting, also worthy of note is the research conducted by Riggins, McNeal, and Herndon (2008). These researchers replicated a study originated by Herndon (2003) analyzing spirituality among postsecondary African American males in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs); however, they used the Historically Black College and University (HBCU) context for their investigation. One critical theme emerging from Herndon's study indicated that spirituality served as a key factor in the retention of African Americans in the higher education setting. Findings from Riggins et al.'s study also suggested spirituality served as a coping mechanism and tool for guidance when matriculating through college for these students. Similar to the outcome of Herndon's study, these findings potentially suggest that a relationship exists between African American male spirituality and their subsequent decisions to remain at an institution of higher learning.

A number of researchers (e.g., Armstrong, 2000; Borland, 2004; Flowers et al., 2004; Morris, 2002) identified giftedness as a social construct; therefore, many of their views concerning what comprises this construct are based on socially constructed traditional frameworks advanced by those who occupy the dominant culture. Borland (2004) and others (Flowers, Zhang, Moore, & Flowers, 2004; Morris, 2002) described this traditional framework as being narrowly based on White, male, middle and upper-middle class standards that overlook key cultural distinctions and nuances important within communities of color. Walker and Dixon (as cited in Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, Lewis-Coles., 2006) reported higher levels of spiritual beliefs and behaviors supported African American students' ability to: (a) acquire higher grade point averages,

(b) obtain more academic honors classes, and (c) receive fewer disciplinary actions.

As educators attempt to improve the opportunities for success among African American male cohorts, it will be critical to consider the unique cultural, socioeconomic, and political realities they bring to the education context. A prime example is Boykin's (1986, as cited in Moody, 2000) work that described several contrasting characteristics among African Americans and White populations. Respectively, these dichotomies were presented as "spiritualism vs. materialism; harmony with nature vs. mastery over nature; organic metaphors vs. mechanistic metaphors; expressive movement vs. impulse control; interconnectedness vs. separateness; person-to-person emphasis, with a personal orientation toward objects vs. person-to-object emphasis, with an impersonal (objective) orientation toward people" (p. 7).

#### *Identity and Identity Development*

Much of the literature has been silent on the topic of African American (Black) racial and cultural identity development (Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Majors & Billson, 1992). Adding descriptive terms like academically successful or gifted even further limits the extant literature on this topic. Rowley and Moore (2002) in their research found that,

The role of race in the lives of gifted African American students is an understudied phenomenon. The discourse in the literature regarding the influence of racial identity on academic achievement has been relatively narrow, often ignoring such important conceptual issues as the fact that racial identity is dynamic across situations; that race is not important to all African Americans; that the individual's assessment of what is African American is most important; and that racial identity cannot be understood without examining the social context. (para. 1)

To fully grasp the experiences of academically successful or gifted African American males in school contexts, understanding the implications of their racial identity development becomes critically important. A review of the major models of racial

identity development uncover Asante's (1988) *Afrocentric Cultural Identity* and Cross' (1991) *Negro to Black Conversion* model. Each one of these cultural identity typologies provide valuable information on ways to engage with gifted African American males; however, it is William E. Cross, Jr. who first introduced his theory as a means to frame the racial identity development process found to occur among African American populations in 1971 that has held the most promise. Cross (1971) referred to the four stages or themes as they are sometimes referred to in his model—pre encounter, encounter, immersion, and internalization—“each describes ‘self-concept’ issues concerning race and parallel attitudes that the individual holds about Black and White as a reference group” (p. 169). Without providing an exhaustive discussion of Cross' theory, suffice it to say that what each theme is found to represent is an individual's ever-increasing sense of self as a racial being and an ever-deepening sense of understanding regarding the establishment of a healthy racial identity.

For both academically successful and gifted African American males, identity development, particularly racial identity development, significantly influences their achievement, motivation, and attitudes toward school (Grantham & Ford, 2003). These cohorts often find that they are negotiating multiple and competing identity formations. They also find themselves at the intersections of racial, cultural, and academic identity development on a routine basis. According to Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, Hill-Jackson, and James (in press),

As far as racial identity is concerned, negotiating what it means to be African American in the school context presents a unique set of challenges, while at the same time this very same school context can potentially provide a cultural setting that is diametrically opposed to the home or community cultures from which this student emerges. To further problematize this negotiation are the added complexities of trying to negotiate an academic identity; namely, a gifted identity that oftentimes completely removes the African American

male from family, friends, and community. Thus, to isolate and focus solely on one aspect of the identity development process that these gifted African American male students are going through offers a severely limited view of how to best create educational programming and policy that will lead to the success of these students. (p. 9)

## METHOD

This study explored the experiences of African American male high school students attending predominantly Hispanic high schools in San Antonio, Texas. Qualitative research methods were implemented to collect data for the study. In qualitative research, the emphasis is on collecting information concerning the lived experiences of the research participants (Scott, 2005). The qualitative researcher, according to Scott, remains concerned regarding the veracity of the participants' statements and their effects on the proposed epistemic framework that is based on collected data. Research questions guided the development of the interview protocol that addressed how African American males attending non-African American high schools perceived academically rigorous programs, barriers impacting their schooling and post-schooling success, as well as the role of spirituality in their lives—particularly in framing their coping skills.

### *Sample*

The participants in the study were six African American high school males who were all members of two predominantly Black churches in San Antonio, Texas. The Black church was a reasonable location to identify participants for this qualitative study, as it has been the recognized center of the “spiritual, social, and political life of Black Americans” (Thomas, Quinn, Billingsley, & Caldwell, 1994, p. 576). Furthermore, Thomas et al. determined that the selection of African American participants through Black churches was more efficient than trying to access them through mainstream systems for research studies such as those involving public health or social services.

Table 1 highlights the demographic data pertaining to the participants. The participants in

**TABLE 1: Demographic Data of Study's Participants (n=6)**

Participant	Grade	In a gifted and talented program	In an advanced placement course	Tested but not identified as a gifted student
STU 1	12	Yes	Yes	
STU 2	9		Yes	
STU 3	9		Yes	
STU 4	10		Yes	Yes
STU 5	10		Yes	Yes
STU 6	11		Yes	

**TABLE 2 Percent Students Enrolled in Gifted Programs in the United States by Ethnicity (1992, 2002)**

Year	White American	Hispanic American	African American	Native American	Asian American
1992	72.4%	7.9%	12.1%	.5%	4%
2002	72.59%	10.41%	8.44%	.93%	7.64%

Note: From "Minority students in gifted and special education programs: The case for educational equity," by D. Y. Ford, 1998, *The Journal of Special Education*, pp. 41-43; and from "Never too young to lead: Gifted African American males in elementary schools," by F. A. Bonner & M. Jennings, 2007, *Gifted Child Today*, pp. 30-36.

the study represented different schools within the San Antonio area. Although the students were not asked which school they attended, it is important to note that African Americans do not constitute a majority in any of the 15 school districts in the SAISD. Based on 2006-2007 enrollment data, Table 2 delineates the percentage of students who are enrolled in each school district by ethnicity as well as their enrollment in gifted and talented programs.

This study was limited to participants in San Antonio, Texas; however, important trends are noted in the National Research Center data that provides information on the total student population in the United States. Important to observe in this data is the percentage of students nationally who have been identified as gifted, while concomitantly noting the percentage of African American students identified as gifted and who are afforded the opportunity to participate in gifted programs ("GT-Minority," 2003). Table 2 presents data based on the National Research Center's study. Based on data noted in Table 3, the San Antonio citywide average on student enrollment indicates that 58% of the overall

student population enrolled in San Antonio schools is Hispanic with 49% being identified for placement in gifted and talented programs (2006-2007); African Americans represented approximately 9% of the total student population with 6% being recommended and subsequently placed in gifted and talented programs.

Table 4 highlights the percentage of students in gifted and talented programs. A review of this Table underscores the typical patterns of underrepresentation found in most cases across the school districts. In a few rare instances, African American students were overrepresented in gifted programming; however, it is important to note that these schools in which overrepresentation was noted were typically associated with United States military installations in which more diverse populations are typically the norm. In order to determine if a specific student population group was under- or overrepresented in a gifted and talented program, one of two formulas was used contingent on either of the following scenarios:

If the percentage of a specific student population group within a system is greater

**TABLE 3: Percent Students Enrolled in San Antonio Schools Districts and Gifted and Talented Programs (2006-2007)**

School Districts	African American		Asian American		Hispanic		Native American		White	
	% Total	% GT	% Total	% GT	% Total	% GT	% Total	% GT	% Total	% GT
Alamo Heights	2.1	0.24	2.2	1.98	31.6	10.53	0.2	0.12	63.9	87.11
Harlandale	0.6	0.59	0.1	0.33	95.6	92.43	0.1	0.11	3.6	6.58
Edgewood	1.4	0.92	0	0.12	97.5	97.47	0.1	0	1	1.49
Randolph	20.8	15.46	4.6	4.12	18.7	9.28	0.4	0	55.6	71.13
San Antonio	8.1	5.73	0.2	0.6	88.5	87.12	0.1	0.21	3	6.33
South San Antonio	1.5	0.23	0.2	0.23	95.8	95	0.1	0	2.4	4.55
Somerset	1.4	0.87	0.3	0.44	84.1	68.56	0.1	0	14.1	30.13
North East	9.5	3.33	3.6	5.39	45.5	22.85	0.3	0.25	41.1	68.17
East Central	11	6.29	0.4	0.63	57.1	38.84	0.3	0.31	31.2	53.93
Southwest	3	2.6	0.7	1	88.3	78.8	0.2	0.2	7.8	17.4
Lackland	20.8	23.26	3.8	2.32	19.5	18.6	0.6	2.32	55.4	53.49
Fort Sam Houston	32.6	15.05	4	4.3	18.2	10.75	0.5	1.08	44.8	68.82
Northside	8	4.8	3.5	5.18	62.3	45.36	0.3	0.25	36.2	44.39
Judson	27.9	18.11	2.7	5.41	45.8	34.42	0.3	0.43	23.3	41.63
Southside	1.6	0.29	0.7	0.86	84.2	79.14	0.1	0	13.5	19.71
Averages	9.39	6.11	1.69	2.06	58.29	49.32	0.23	0.33	24.81	35.93

\*\*Note: Data based on Texas Education. (2006-2007). Academic Excellence Indicator System Reports

than the percentage of the same population group in a gifted program, then the formula to calculate *percent underrepresentation* is:  $(1 - [\text{percentage of students in gifted programs} / \text{percentage of students of school district}] * 100)$ ;

or  
 If the percentage of a specific gifted student population group is greater than the percentage of the same student population group within a system, then the formula to calculate *percent overrepresentation* is:  $(1 - [\text{percentage of students of school district} / \text{percentage of students in gifted programs}] * 100)$ . (Michael-Chadwell, 2008, p. 5)

## DATA COLLECTION

The construct of this research study did not incorporate a random sampling of the population;

instead, the use of purposive and criteria-based snowball sampling helped identify qualified participants for the study. The criterion for participating in this study required that the student was:

- in a gifted and talented program;
- in an advanced placement (AP) course; or
- not identified for placement in a gifted and talented program.

Each participant and his parent/guardian received notification of (a) the purpose of the study, (b) the confidentiality associated with participation in the study; (c) the option to withdraw from the study without recourse; and (d) the process for safeguarding and storing the research materials after the completion of the study. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, each received a pseudonym of

**TABLE 3: Percent Underrepresentation or Overrepresentation African American Students in Gifted and Talented Programs (2006-2007)**

School Districts in San Antonio, Texas	% Total	% GT	% Underrepresented	% Overrepresented
Harlandale	0.6	0.59	1.7	
Southwest	3	2.6	13.3	
Randolph	20.8	15.46	25.7	
San Antonio	8.1	5.73	29.3	
Edgewood	1.4	0.92	34.3	
<i>Citywide Averages</i>	<i>9.39</i>	<i>6.11</i>	<i>34.9</i>	
Judson	27.9	18.11	35.1	
Somerset	1.4	0.87	37.9	
Northside	8	4.8	40.0	
East Central	11	6.29	42.8	
Fort Sam Houston	32.6	15.05	53.8	
North East	9.5	3.33	64.9	
Southside	1.6	0.29	81.9	
South San Antonio	1.5	0.23	84.7	
Alamo Heights	2.1	0.24	88.6	
Lackland	20.8	23.26		10.6

\*\*Note: Data based on Texas Education. (2006-2007). Academic Excellence Indicator System Reports

STU (student) with a corresponding number of 1-6. Participants in the study completed a demographic sheet that included information pertaining to their grade level, whether the school attended was a public or private high school, and if they:

- were in a gifted and talented program at my school;
- were in an advanced placement (AP) course at my school;
- applied to be in a gifted and talented program but not placed into such a program; and
- planned to go to college immediately after graduating from high school.

Responses to items 1-3 ensured the participants met the criteria for participating in the study. During the initial qualification process, 17 qualified students agreed to participate in the study; however, only six continued the interview process.

The six participants responded to a set of 10 open-ended questions developed by the research team linked to the research questions. The

preferred method of conducting the interviews was in a semi-structured format with the option of contacting the participants either by email or telephone to gain clarity on any response. Due to time constraints, many of the participants opted to respond initially to questions on the protocol by email. The participants understood that the knowledge gained from the study could be beneficial in improving academic and social policies thought to enhance the learning of other African Americans, especially males, on high school campuses where African Americans were the minority student population..

In order to minimize any possible effects of researcher bias, Law et al. (1998) asserted that data collected from qualitative studies required triangulation. Additionally Denzin (1978) provided four different types of triangulation: (a) data, (b) investigator, (c) theory, and (d) methodological. For the purpose of this study Denzin's description of data triangulation, in which he reports that time, place, and persons as the components of this approach, is utilized.

Thus, the study entailed collecting data from the participants through the process of semi-structured interviews; comparing and contrasting emergent themes with the review of literature; and presenting final transcript data to the respective participants for their review and feedback.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Two methods of textual analysis were used during the study: computer-oriented using NVivo-8 and manual approaches. Including the written responses received from the participants as well as transcripts created verbatim from telephone or email verifications, the final transcript from each of the six participants yielded 10 pages of single-spaced transcripts, with an excess of 60 single-spaced typed pages total. The participants' responses were summarized based on emergent themes. The analysis is based on the students' understanding of their experiences and perceptions of behaviors needed to understand the various scenarios in their education journey as well as to be successful. None of the parents of the students were interviewed for alternative perspectives.

A modification of Moustakas' (1988) phenomenological research model provided a framework in reducing the data gained from the participants into meaningful context. Moustakas opined that the task of the researcher is to describe in a textual format the "relationship between the phenomenon and self, [whereby] the qualities of the experience become the focus; the filling or completion of experiences becomes the challenge" (p. 81). In the elimination or delimiting stage of the reduction process, all experiences receive equal value, while the researcher highlights and clusters relevant statements into emerging themes as well as eliminates those that are irrelevant to the topic. The outcome of this clustering provides textual description of the emerging themes. The third stage in phenomenological reduction, known as *imaginative variation*, allows the researcher to seek out all possible meanings through his or her own imagination (Jordan, 2001).

## RESULTS

The summary of the findings focuses on the most common responses for each question. The presentation of these findings is separated into two subsections per interview question: an overall summary of the participants' responses and a charting of highlights of individual student responses.

*Interview Question 1: You are identified as an academically gifted or successful student, how do you define academic giftedness or academic success?*

Although there are various in state governmental definitions of giftedness, each of the participants offered similar definitions of giftedness within the context of doing well in school. Table 5 highlights the participants' responses.

**TABLE 5: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 1**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	Academic giftedness is the ability in which a person learns. Some do better with text-books; others do better doing things.
STU 2	Getting all A's and B' without it being too hard. You can get to college and be exceptionally successful.
STU 3	A person doing very well in school or is very smart.
STU 4	I think I am smart!
STU 5	A person who makes good grades and is a well-rounded person.
STU 6	Academic success can be characterized as the accomplishment of one's goals, through hard work and dedication

*Interview Question 2: Do you believe your teachers recognize and/or encourage your gifts or talents? If yes, how? If not, why not?*

Four of the six participants continued to equate to the types of grades received in school. Two of the six indicated that their teachers acknowledge their academic talents with increases in workloads. About half of the participants made comments to the lack of recognition students received concerning students' gifts or talents. Table 6 highlights the participants' responses

**TABLE 6: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 2**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	I believe the faculty does a good job recognizing gifted students. Students in honors or AP courses are never without help from our teachers.
STU 2	Yes, all of my teachers do! In fact they get mad at me for getting low B's or C's.
STU 3	Somewhat; the teachers at the school recognize some of the students that have talents if they are shy. Some teachers do not recognize the talents in other students who show off too much.
STU 4	Not all of the time; I think teachers say the words gifted and talented all the time.
STU 5	I think they do; my teachers make me stand before the class all the time because of my speech talents.
STU 6	My teacher most assuredly recognized my talents and abilities. They increase my workload to continuously stimulate my brain and ability to handle a rigorous curriculum.

**TABLE 7: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 3**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	I don't feel the need to maintain my identity; my peers do not pressure me to act in a certain way to maintain my identity.
STU 2	I don't do it intentionally; but I think I might get an attitude on purpose if I suspect my teachers are letting me get away with mediocrity.
STU 3	I may talk about Black history. There is small amount of racism when compared to slavery.
STU 4	I do have any strategies to maintain identity.
STU 5	The strategies I use are hard work and doing what I need to maintain my grades.
STU 6	I definitely use my identity as an African American towards my writings. I will continue to employ this technique as I further my studies.

*Interview Question 3. Do you use strategies to maintain your identity as an African American male in gifted and talented or AP courses? If so, what are these strategies?*

Four of the students did not feel a need to

maintain an Afrocentric identity in gifted and talented or AP courses. Two of the students indicated intentionally integrating references of Black history in their writings or reverting to a stereotypic behavior when believing someone did not encourage him to do better. Table 7 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 4: Are there barriers at school preventing you from reaching your academic goals? If so, describe these barriers and what do you do to overcome them.*

None of the students experienced barriers in their schools preventing them from achieving their goals. Two students acknowledged any pressure received in schools creating barriers in their academic success was linked to peer pressure. Table 8 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 5: African American males are often not identified for gifted and talented programs, why do you think this is happening?*

Many of the students attributed the lack of identification and placement of gifted African American males into such programs as: (a) students not wanting to challenge themselves to handle the rigors of such programs, or (b) the effects of stereotyping the abilities of African Americans, especially males. Table 9 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 6: How would you define the term "spirituality?" Does spirituality influence how you handle experiences at school?*

Except for one participant, the remaining five students rely on their spirituality to handle difficult situations at school. Two of the students also admitted that this reliance transcends the school into others areas in their lives. Table 10 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 7: What programs do you believe high schools should have to help more African Americans succeed in academically rigorous programs like GT and AP?*

Five of the students indicated that they were not sure as to how to improve African Americans' opportunities to enter academically rigorous programs. Two suggested increasing tutoring programs. Two suggested finding ways to motivate African Americans to stay in these courses. Table 11 highlights the participants'

responses.

*Interview Question 8: Do your parents play a role in your academic success? If so, explain.*

**TABLE 8: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 4**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	There are no barriers preventing me from reaching my goals.
STU 2	No, I don't think there are any barriers; Most of my peers and teachers are surprised that I do so well in class.
STU 3	For me personally, I don't think so. But for many African Americans or students in general, there are messages telling them to not do well in school.
STU 4	There are no barriers
STU 5	There are some barriers such as peer pressure.
STU 6	There are no prevalent barriers preventing me from achieving my goals.

**TABLE 9: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 5**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	I am the only Black male in three of my five AP classes. There are friends of mine that have the ability to be in these classes, but they lack the drive; they lack the motivation at home that I have always had.
STU 2	I think that this is happening because a lot of our youth don't focus on being that great in school. We, as an African American culture, are not trying to keep our youth involved in things that involve our youths' education.
STU 3	It is because people stereotype most African American males. we have to prove it to them that many of our African Americans have hidden talents that they feel can be used in those programs but are afraid of what may happen
STU 4	They only think we are good at sports
STU 5	African American students are expected to fail their classes.
STU 6	I think that without knowing it, the world is still taking actions in various forms, such as not identifying African-American males for gifted and talented programs. Not on purpose, is it happening, but it is, in my opinion.

**TABLE 10: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 6**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	After giving my life to God, I often nag myself into doing the right thing when faced with difficult choices at school or elsewhere.
STU 2	Spirituality helps me determine the difference things that will have a negative effect and sometimes what will have a positive effect.
STU 3	Yes, when I use it at school when having a hard time and feel like I can't make it, I pray.
STU 4	My spirituality influences how I handle things at school. It helps me make it during the school day and other places.
STU 5	Spirituality really doesn't influence my experiences at school because when I'm at school sometimes God is not on my mind.
STU 6	If I am having a bad day, or find myself in a situation where it would be easy for me to lose my composure, I find myself calling on Jesus to help me calm down or rectify the situation.

**TABLE 11: Reduction and Elimination  
Interview Question 7**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	I am not sure what can be done to help African Americans succeed in gifted and talented or AP programs. The biggest challenge I see is getting them in those classes and keeping them motivated.
STU 2	I really don't think there is anything the school system can do. It is solely up to the person. I believe most of the students would not step up to the challenge and fall under pressure.
STU 3	Increase tutoring classes.
STU 4	I don't know.
STU 5	Well, I don't think it should be just for African Americans but for all of the students. But I think there needs to be more tutoring classes.
STU 6	I don't think there is a need for any more programs.

Four of the six students acknowledged their parents' involvement in their learning journey. They elaborated on how well they have done in

**TABLE 12: Reduction and Elimination Interview Question 8**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	My parents are the very root of my academic success. My brother and I were taught at a young age to always put school first. When we got home from school, the first thing we had to do was always our homework. They stayed involved in our school projects and have encouraged us through it all
STU 2	Yes, my mother plays a huge role. She encourages me to make sure I do all my work to the best of my ability. She also makes sure that by the end of the six weeks, I have turned in all of my work.
STU 3	Of course they do! Confidence in your parents calms you down and you can focus on school instead of drama.
STU 4	No I do it myself
STU 5	My mother really helps me a lot with my grades and she always on my case when my grades are slipping.
STU 6	My parents do not play a role in my academic success. I am an independent scholar, and like to stay relatively secluded from my parents, with regard to my schoolwork.

**TABLE 13: Reduction and Elimination Interview Question 9**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	The majority of my peers are encouraging when it comes to my academic success. Even though most of them do not share any gifted classes with me, I feel as if they often lift me up.
STU 2	Not really, they can do whatever they want. But, if they're not doing so well, then I'll try to help them
STU 3	Yes they do. Your friends are the people who are usually the people you talk to after you talk to your parents, if it is not super personal.
STU 4	I do not depend on my peers in order to be successful. I do things by myself.
STU 5	Not too often; but when I don't understand my work, some help me in a good way.
STU 6	My peers definitely play a major role in my academic success, mainly because they (as bad as it sounds) often distract me, forcing me to resort to my "good study habits", avoiding distractions and discipline. I believe that it only makes me a better person and student overall, sharpening my self-discipline.

schools. Two of the participants indicated their parents influenced their study habits at home as well as involved in projects needing completion at home. Two of the participants were adamant that their parents were not involved in their education. Table 12 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 9: Do your peers play a role in your academic success? If so, explain.*

Three of the participants acknowledged the positive effects of peers towards an their academic success. In comparison, three of the participants did not perceive their peers as positive influences in their academic success. Two of the participants elaborated on the effects of peer relationships by describing how such arrangements inspire them emotionally as well as factors in improving self-discipline. Table 13 highlights the participants' responses.

*Interview Question 10: You have indicated that you plan to go to college immediately after attending high school. Are your school experiences encouraging you to major in science,*

*technological, engineering, or math disciplines? If so, how? If not, why not?*

Four of the participants who are considering majoring in STEM related disciplines are graduating from high school. One participant admitted his learning experiences favor STEM disciplines; however, his primary interest is in music. Another student stated his interest was in sports. Table 14 highlights the participants' responses.

**DISCUSSION**

During the interview process, comments offered by the participants could have been based on events that recently occurred or over earlier periods of time. In addition, the basis of this research study was contingent on the willingness of the participants to respond honestly, candidly, and genuinely without input from their parents. Hence, their reasons for participating in this study might have been: (a) to offer suggestions to

**TABLE 14: Reduction and Elimination Interview Question 10**

Stu- dent	Response
STU 1	I have considered the possibility of majoring in some math or engineering discipline as the result of being accepted into my school's Mu Alpha Theta program, which is for students who have maintained a high GPA in their respective math classes.
STU 2	Well, I wasn't really thinking about any of them. The field of engineering is interesting me more and more. I've heard they make a good amount of money, and colleges offer quite a bit of good scholarships that help engineers.
STU 3	My school experiences are encouraging me to major in one of those subjects, yes. However, I'm not trying to major in any of those. Personally, I'm planning to major in music because music is my life, and if that major doesn't work yes I will go into one of those subjects but until that happens , I'm majoring in music.
STU 4	No, because I want to go for sports n to be a coach if I don't get far with basketball.
STU 5	My planned major is either going to be something in science or engineering.
STU 6	My high school career, combined with my passion for reptiles, has led me to want to pursue a college education with a major in biology. I somewhat enjoyed my biology class in my sophomore year, but really found that I needed biology during my visit to the University of Arkansas, when I met the head of Herpetology.

improve future processes related to the gifted or talented program; (b) improve future opportunities for African American high school males; or (c) to add a voice on issues related to their schooling and introduce issues of spirituality into the conversation.

*Delimitations*

Researcher controlled delimitations as well as the nature of qualitative research limit the generalizability of the research results; therefore, we talk in terms of the transferability and inherent limitations with this process. Three delimitations were associated with this study. First, the transferability of the study was limited due to the

sample size of six African American public high school males. Hence, the sample size might not be representative of the experiences of other African American high school males who (a) is enrolled in a gifted and talented program, (b) is enrolled in an Advance Placement program, or (c) applied for testing and placement into a gifted and talented program but not identified. Second, the location of the study was conducted only in San Antonio, Texas. Hence, the findings might not take into account the experiences of African American high school males in other locations. The location as well as the purposive and criteria-based sampling of the participants might decrease the transferability of the findings.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS**

*Research Question 1: How do African American high school males define giftedness or academic success?*

Many of the responses from the participants regarding their definition of giftedness and academic success aligned with those from Michael-Chadwell's (2008) study involving 11 African American parents living in San Antonio, Texas, regarding the underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted programs. Data collected from the participants in the current study concerning definitions of giftedness and academic success indicated that one's ability to demonstrate efforts of hard work and maintaining grades such as As and Bs were indicators of giftedness or academic success.

Bonner (2005), Ford and Moore (2005), and Huff et al. (2005) asserted gifted African American students remain underrepresented in the public education system because of nomination, assessment, and identification procedures. Furthermore, Crammond (2004), Ngara (2006), and Sternberg (2007) contended that the identification of students for giftedness tends to be a reflection of a single cultural group's conceptualization of giftedness. The findings from this study suggest African American high school males were aware of disparities in the public education system that were potentially negatively influencing decisions regarding the placement of African Americans in gifted and

talented programs. A theme emerging from their responses was the need for African Americans to take ownership of their own education.

For many of the participants, they acknowledged the effects their parents, peers, and teachers behaviors had on their academic success. Factors such as parents being involved in their school, teachers encouraging and challenging their academic abilities, and their peer group encouraging their learning aligned with Suldo et al.'s (2009) and Leverett's (2003) research on students' perception of his or her subjective well-being and academic success. Their ability to maintain a well-grounded subjective outlook supports the assertion that they possess the abilities to develop the necessary behaviors to become professionally successful (Brockman & Russell, 2009)

*Research Question 2: What barriers, if any, do African American high school males perceive as factors in their achieving academic success in school and after graduation?*

The participants were asked to respond to the three different questions related to possible barriers in their abilities to achieve academic success in high school and after graduation. When asked if their teachers recognized their gifts and talents, four of the six participants perceived their teachers as supportive and challenging their academic abilities. The remaining two participants did not see their teachers as supportive of their academic needs.

Another question asked the participants to discern the need to maintain their African American identity in academically rigorous classes. The question was asked based on Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) discussion of the effects of discrimination in the U.S. on African American youth and the resultant impact of the perception of *acting White*. In this study, the participants' responses raise question as to whether a paradigm shift has occurred among African American youth regarding acting white in order to achieve academic success. Their views highlighted the more contemporary research (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006) reflecting the lack of attribution of Black success to white oriented value structures. Said differently, being African American and smart does not mean that an

individual is acting White.

The participants' responses aligned with another question pertaining to the existence of barriers in schools that inhibited them from reaching their goals. None of the participants acknowledged having to overcome barriers. Each of the participants acknowledged wanting to continue on to college, with four wanting to pursue degrees in STEM fields. However, some participants agreed that stereotypes and lower teacher expectations did affect many African Americans students.

*Research Question 3: What is the role, if any, of spirituality among African American high school males?*

The responses from the participants concerning the effects of spirituality on their daily interactions at school align with research involving African American males in college (Herndon, 2003; Riggins et al., 2008). Similar to Riggins et al.'s study, the participants in the current study remained active members within minority student-populations on their respective campuses. Except for one of the six participants, spirituality was an important factor for the remaining five participants in their ability to cope, self-regulate, and advance academically.

## CONCLUSION

For African American males who are academically successful and academically gifted, their stories remain untold or for lack of a better term "under-told". However, if we are to counter the on-going cycles of underrepresentation of this cohort in academically rigorous as well as gifted and talented programming, it will become increasingly important for educators, parents, policy-makers, and researchers to seek ways to better understand how this population is experiencing U.S. schooling. Also, it will be important to seek opportunities in which we are provided with opportunities to hear their authentic voices on how they negotiate their identities in enclaves that are at best tepid and at worst chilly in their perceptions of them. By taking an asset approach and by focusing on those students who are academically talented, future progress can be made to provide others who too are academically successful with key information to continue their

trajectory towards achievement; but, by also focusing on this cohort it will be possible to isolate those strategies that they use to assist those who occupy the academic margins to become successful. Academically successful as well as gifted and talented African American males have much to tell us about their experiences....the question becomes, "Are we ready to listen?"

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