

Are Black Girls Not Gifted? Race, Gender, and Resilience

Venus E. Evans-Winters

Illinois State University

Current research and theoretical models that address racial inequity or gender disparities in gifted education often overlook the underrepresentation of Black girls in gifted programs. Race-based conceptual frameworks and methodologies that focus on gifted education often fail to critically examine and interpret the multiple identities of Black female students thus, overlooking Black girls' underrepresentation in gifted programs as well as their potential to thrive academically in these programs. Similarly, policies and procedures often only consider gender disparities in gifted education from a White middle class female perspective. In this article, a call for theoretical and methodological models are put forth that place Black girls' gender and racial identities at the center of discussions on gifted education reform.

Keywords: gifted Black females, resilience, underrepresentation, Black feminism

The 2009 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) report revealed that 8.1% of girls participated in gifted education, compared to 7.4% of boys. This report also revealed that approximately 5.2% of Black girls were identified as gifted and talented, compared to 35% of White girls (CRDC, 2011).

The underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is a national inequity issue that is present in most school districts. Black students are and have been underrepresented in gifted programs by almost 50% in most years and in every CRDC report (Ford, 2013b). While Black males are most disproportionately underrepresented in gifted education (i.e., over 50%), this does not discount that Black females are underrepresented by approximately 40%.

Inadequate access to gifted education placement and programming for Black female students remains significant. Turning percentages to numbers, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) revealed that over 100,000 Black females were not identified as gifted (Ford, 2013b). Black girls not being identified may be due to race, class, and gender disparities in gifted education identification and placement. The story of access and opportunity is different for White females who are overrepresented in gifted education. White girls represent the majority of students in gifted education programs (CRDC, 2011).

A different picture is evident when considering race and gender. African American (Black) female students are more likely to report feeling unsafe and engaging in or being victims of violence at school than their White counterparts (NCES, 2010). Thus, it is apparent that although African American female students experience more risks than their peers, they are able to buffer adversity and persist in education. With this in mind, how we might utilize educational resilience

research on Black girls for gifted education reform and what models exist for framing how giftedness presents and manifests in Black girls?

Using Black feminism (Collins, 1998; King, 1988) as a theoretical lens and drawing upon school resilience literature, it is evident that school resilience alongside cultural frameworks in gifted education are viable tools for critically analyzing gender and culturally relevant gifted education initiatives (e.g., recruitment and retention). Whereas cultural frameworks in gifted education research brings attention to the lack of representation of students of color in gifted programs, which are generally due to racial and class discrimination in schools and society (Ford, 2013b), this discussion has implications for gifted education policy, urban education reform, gender studies, and educational policy and practice.

Resiliency Literature and Gifted Black Girls

As defined by Ashford, LeCroy, and Lortie (1997) and O'Connor (1997), resiliency is the ability to recover from or adjust to problems, adversity, and stressors in life. Terms that are synonymous with resiliency in urban education are positive coping, persistence, adaptation, and long-term success despite adverse circumstances (Winfield, 1991). Resilience as currently understood is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, and society) (American Psychological Association, 2008, p. 3).

Resilience is always defined in relation to risk factors, specifically the number and intensity of risks. For example, African American female students who live in low-income neighborhoods with high crime rates and low high school completion rates are considered to be a high-risk group because they are at a greater or increased risk of school dropout and other negative life outcomes (e.g., early pregnancy) than their counterparts (see <http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>). Moreover, due to the combination of sexism and racism, Black girls face a double whammy socially, educationally, and professionally. They share issues of racism with Black and other non-White males and issues of sexism with White and other females. For Black girls, this stress can be related to independent and interdependent combinations of racism, sexism, and/or classism in addition to the normal stressors that students contend with, such as peer pressures and social acceptance, gender identity, racial identity, and overall perception of self (self-esteem and self-concept development).

Resiliency studies with urban students have revealed that educators, families, and communities are able to strengthen the protective processes and promote resiliency when students are faced with external risk factors. This research has also shown that the presence of positive prevention and early intervention(s) by an individual, school, or organization at critical moments in a student's life can counteract risks and vulnerabilities (American Psychological Association, 2008; Masten, 2011; Search Institute, 2014; Winfield, 1991).

For practitioners considering Black girls' potential for success in gifted programs, it is important to take into consideration the supports of these girls or those who can intervene during stressful circumstances related to in-school or out-of-school factors. Taylor's (1994) early yet still timely

examination of research conducted with Black students and their families showed the following patterns that promote school resiliency:

1. Parents who are involved in their adolescent's schooling, emphasize its importance, and inform students of racial discrimination tend to produce more competent students;
2. In poorer families, support from extended kin reduces parental psychological distress, in turn benefiting adolescent competence and adjustment; and
3. Intellectual skills are protective factors that help form strategies for sustaining academic performance.

Similar findings were reported by Clark (1983) in his seminal studies on Black families with children who were low versus high achievers. Taylor's research also revealed that Black students learn to define for themselves rules of adaptation pertinent to survival in an unjust society.

Resilient African American girls are more likely to be engaged in community organizations such as a religious institution or afterschool programs, and they are more apt to adopt culturally relevant values, attitudes, and behaviors to help guide decision-making. Research on school resiliency and African American girls has focused on the role of family, community, and school in promoting resilience (see Adams, 2010; Cauce et al., 1996; Ford, 2011; Girl Scouts, 2011; Ianni, 1996; McCubbin et al., 1998; Sullivan, 1996; Ward, 1996). Although the research on educationally resilient Black girls reveals that at least one adult female caregiver or role model (e.g., an older sibling, aunt, grandmother, etc.) in the immediate or extended family supports academic efforts, it also reveals that resilient Black girls can identify with at least one positive adult female in the school environment that encourages academic excellence.

While the race of the female adult at school has some bearing on the resiliency of Black girls, this adult must also be culturally responsive and aware of their needs based on race *and* gender, with attention to income/class (Evans-Winters, 2011). Thus, one can surmise that the concept of resilience in education can be used to better understand the academic motivation and persistence of students in schools. Discipline and rigor in classroom practices are essential for fostering educational resilience for both gifted and high-achieving Black female students.

The question emanating from this discussion is: How can resilience be used to identify the academic strengths of Black girls to lead to a better understanding of their potential for achievement in gifted education? Research on educational resilience must ask: What are the available resources that these girls, who are at a higher risk of school failure, can rely upon to support educational success? With Black girls at the center of the discussion, one might ask: What resources are available to gifted Black girls that might prevent underachievement and promote high academic achievement? Although failure and traditional Eurocentric-Westernized ideas of "achievement" dominate most of the literature in this area, more studies are looking beyond the notion of students as simply passive agents of schooling (see Rigsby, 1994; Evans-Winters, 2011). Fortunately, scholars are exploring resiliency-fostering factors that help buffer negative school outcomes, yet too little of this work addresses and hones in on the needs of this specific group of students.

Self-Esteem and Resiliency of Black Girls

During the school years, academic achievement is a significant contributor to self-esteem development. Self-esteem is the evaluative dimension of the self that includes feelings of worthiness, pride, and discouragement. The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 1992) found that African American girls, in spite of lower academic achievement, possesses higher levels of self-esteem than their White female counterparts. The work of Buckley and Carter (2005) and Girl Scouts of America (2011) reported similar findings. A longitudinal study of school-aged girls found that some Black girls reject high academic achievement out of a sense of self-esteem, while others developed a bicultural identity (one that embraces White and Black culture) so that they could comply with the “White demands of the educational system” (Orenstein, 1994, p. 60).

The self-esteem of resilient Black girls is retained through close contact and interactions within the Black community. Although the Black community has traditionally served as an important resource to African American families and their children, a “community” mentality has been most critical to the development of Black females’ multiple identities. Through a strong identification with their cultural communities, Black girls learn strategies for coping with stressors and are better equipped to achieve their educational goals. Several researchers attribute the high self-esteem of young Black women to a dual consciousness. For example, Martinez and Dukes (1991) studied a group of 7th through 12th grade African American and Chicano students. They found that while some African American and Chicano students had lower levels of self-esteem than Whites in the public domain, they had higher levels of self-esteem in the private domain. More recently, Adams (2010) noted that African American adolescent females possess higher self-esteem than any other racial or ethnic adolescent female group. Her study revealed a significant race by social support interaction; even in low support situations, Black adolescent females reported less self-deprecation than White females. These studies and others (see Evans-Winters, 2011 and Leadbeater & Way, 1996) indicate that many Black girls possess a ‘private’ self that is portrayed in the community and a ‘public’ self that presents itself in their interactions with the larger society, including the school environment.

Black Girls’ Academic Achievement and Gifted Education

Academic Achievement. Ford (2013a) highlighted the psychological, socio-emotional, academic, and cultural characteristics essential to academic excellence for Black girls. However, it is the psychological components (i.e., resilience and high self-efficacy) along with racial and gender pride that are the most important aspects of academic excellence.

In the aforementioned discussion, it was revealed that Black girls as a group possess high levels of school resilience (i.e., the ability to persist and achieve academically, despite risks and vulnerabilities). It was also pointed out that research in psychological studies have reported that Black girls possess high levels of self-esteem compared to their White counterparts. While most resilient Black girls face racial and gender oppression, they still maintain a high level of gender and racial pride. In her F²AME Model (Female Achievement Model for Excellence), Ford (2013a) indicated that Black girls are more likely to be academically successful when they make social sacrifices, are independent, and self-sufficient.

Black girls are more likely to achieve academic excellence when they adopt a bicultural identity alongside cultural pride. Interestingly, in their research with Black female adolescents, Robinson and Ward (1991) described a mentality of *resistance for liberation* whereby Black girls learn their struggle is not individual but collective; and girls are encouraged by their community and schools to work toward social change. Therefore, resilience should be fostered through interdependence between the young woman and her local community; and in the assessment of giftedness, evaluators may want to consider level of community engagement and involvement (e.g., religious services, community organization involvement, volunteering). In a democratic society, interdependence is certainly valued.

Research by Evans-Winters (2011) found that educationally resilient Black girls were able to distinguish between the positive attributes and negative choices of their family members. Specifically, these girls would consciously reject negative attributes of family members (e.g., early pregnancy or drug abuse), draw upon positive attributes (e.g., help with homework or religious beliefs) that contribute to their personal and academic growth, and willingly make decisions not to “hang out” or date boys, because they believed that people in their high crime neighborhoods were not good role models and they wanted to focus on their schooling and not boys (Evans-Winters, 2005). This study and the previously mentioned studies illustrate that Black girls must be nurtured to be independent in thought, which promotes their positive academic growth.

Another component of Ford’s (2013a) F²AME Model that is relevant to this discussion is academic identity. The longitudinal ethnographic study by Evans-Winters (2005) discovered that the most resilient Black female students have a strong academic personality. In fact, Evans-Winters was concerned that the students were overly focus on their grades, student identity, and relationships with teachers. A point that was emphasized is that many Black girls’ who are overly concerned with academic excellence may cause unnecessary stress for themselves, which prevents them from having the opportunity to fully enjoy childhood/girlhood/adolescence. Nevertheless, it appears that Black female students possess most of the characteristics associated with academic excellence put forth by resiliency and gifted scholars, like Ford (2013a).

Gifted Education. Gifted education models lack an appreciation of the abilities of Black girls to navigate different cultural environments -- the White dominated school environment, the male dominated society, and their own cultural communities (see Figure 1). Figure 1 represents the multiple realities of many Black girls who are high achievers and who are able to persist in school not only as girls of African ancestry but also as academically gifted students. However, more research is needed on how Black girls are able to be resilient in the face of adversity and how to design culturally relevant assessment that considers the intersections of race, class, and gender. Ford and Whiting’s (2010) research on culturally relevant gifted education reminds us that achievement continues to be conceptualized and measured from a Eurocentric middle class model of intelligence and achievement. Therefore, as previously mentioned, the conceptualization of giftedness should be expanded to include educational resilience.

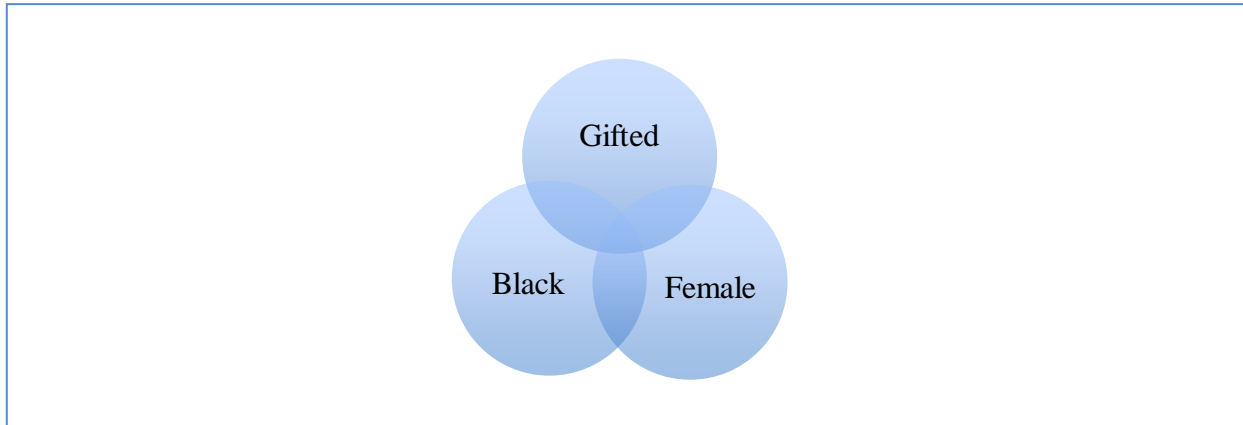


Figure 1. *The overlapping identities of gifted Black female students. Represented are Black girls' experiences in school settings as gifted, Black, and female.*

Compared to Black Males, Black girls are educationally resilient. They persist through schooling, achieve academically, and strive to change their circumstances and the political, economic, and social circumstances of those around them (Evans-Winters, 2011). With this in mind, educators should begin their recruitment of Black girls for gifted education by identifying girls who are able to: (a) recognize and name support systems; (b) adapt to middle class schooling (e.g., bicultural student identity; (c) actively resist and challenge racial, gender, and class oppression; (d) and has the potential of transforming herself, community, and society through education and self-empowerment.

There should also be a more inclusive gender and cultural-specific examination of gifted education placement that utilizes a framework of school resilience that incorporates assessment and evaluation procedures that are more gender and cultural-specific. When using school resilience, race, and gender as the unit of analyses in gifted education reform, gender and culturally relevant practices might be developed. This intersectional approach not only simultaneously benefit girls, it also benefits boys and other racial/ethnic minorities.

While very little attention has been given to the underrepresentation of Black girls in gifted education programs across the nation, it is obvious that “giftedness” like “resilience” is contextually bound in time, place, and culture. Coping with multiple identities and multiple oppressions require one to draw upon unique cultural and gender-specific systems of support to achieve academically. As such, gender and culturally relevant gifted paradigms have the potential to facilitate progress in gifted education reform initiatives. Are Black girls gifted? Yes, Black girls are gifted, but their intellectual gifts remain invisible to the gender and culturally blind paradigms and mindsets.

Conclusion

Research and theoretical models that address racial inequities or gender disparities in gifted education often overlook the importance of the intersections of race, class, and gender on students' school experiences. And, most gifted educators and advocates are not aware of the available literature on Black girls and women, such as literature in sociology, psychology, and

women and gender studies. This literature informs what little is currently known about Black girls' schooling experiences. Consequently, Black girls' are systematically overlooked in gifted education research and theoretical models and are underrepresented in gifted education. Because race-based and gender-focused conceptual frameworks and methodologies fail to critically examine and interpret the multiple identities of Black female students, researchers and practitioners have little knowledge of best practices for recruiting and retaining girls of African ancestry in gifted education programs. With new and emerging research on the developmental needs and schooling experiences of Black girls, gifted advocates must consider culturally relevant theoretical and methodological models that place Black girls' gender and racial identities at the center of discussions of gifted education reform. Lastly, more research is needed on the most effective strategies for retaining Black female students in advanced placement and gifted education programs. Researchers and practitioners interested in gifted education needs to move beyond race and gender to the identification, recruitment, and retention of Black girls in gifted education. Instead, there needs to be a move toward intersectional frameworks to achieve gender and racial equity in gifted education.

AUTHOR NOTES

Venus E. Evans-Winters, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Administration & Foundations at Illinois State University. She currently teaches in the areas of social foundations of education, educational policy, and qualitative research methods. Her recent book is *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classrooms* (2011). Her research interests are: school resilience, urban children and adolescents, the schooling of Black girls across the African Diaspora, critical race theory, and feminism(s).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Dr. Venus E. Evans-Winters, Associate Professor of Education, Educational Administration & Foundations, Illinois State University, Normal, IL; (309) 438-2045; e-mail: vevansw@ilstu.edu.

References

- Adams, P. (2010). Understanding the different realities, experience, and use of self-esteem between Black and White adolescent girls. *Journal of Black Psychology, 36*, 255-276.
- American Psychological Association. (2008). Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents. *Resilience in African American children and adolescents: A vision for optimal development*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/task-force/resilience-af-am.aspx>
- American Association of University Women. (1992). *Shortchanging girls, shortchanging America*. Washington, DC: American Association of University Women.
- Ashford, J. B., LeCroy, C. W., & Lortie, K. L. (1997). *Human behavior in the social environment: A multidimensional perspective*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Buckley, T. R. & Carter, R. T. (2005). Black adolescent girls: Do gender role and racial identity impact their self-esteem? *Sex Roles, 53*(9/10), 647-661.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

- Cauce, A. M., Y. Hiraga, D. Graves, N. Gonzales, K. Ryan-Finn, & K. Grove. (1996). African American mothers and their adolescent daughters: Closeness, conflict, and control. In B. J. R. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 100-116). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Clark, R. M. (1983). *Family life and school achievement: Why poor Black children succeed or fail*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2011). *Teaching Black girls: Resiliency in urban classrooms* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2013). Critical race theory and African womanism: Theorizing Black girls education at the local and global levels. In E. M. Zamani-Gallaher & V. C. Polite (Eds.), *African American females: Addressing challenges and nurturing the future* (pp. 235-256). Dearborn, MI: Michigan State University.
- Evans-Winters, V. E. (2005). *Teaching Black girls: Resiliency in urban education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Ford, D. Y. (2011). *Reversing underachievement among gifted Black students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Ford, D. Y. (2013a). *Ford female achievement model of excellence (F²AME)*. Retrieved from <http://www.drdonnayford.com/#!/black-females/c1zop>
- Ford, D. Y. (2013b). *Recruiting and retaining culturally different gifted students in gifted education*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Girl Scouts of America. (2011). *The resilience factor: A key to leadership in African American and Hispanic girls*. New York, NY: Girl Scouts of the USA.
- Ianni, F. (1992). *Meeting youth needs with community programs*. New York, NY: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.
- King, D. (1988). Multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness: The context of Black feminist ideology. *Signs, 14* (1), 42-72.
- Leadbeater, B. J. & Way, N. (1996). *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities*. New York, NY: New York University.
- Martinez, R., & Dukes, R. L. (1991). Ethnic and gender differences in self-esteem. *Youth and Society, 22*(3), 313-338.
- Masten, A. S. (1994). Resilience in individual development: Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. In Margaret C. Wang & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospectus* (pp. 43-72). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Masten, A. S. (2011). Resilience in children threatened by extreme adversity: Framework for research, practice, and translational synergy. *Development and Psychopathology, 23*, 493-506, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0954579411000198>
- McCubbin, H.I. (1998). Resiliency in African American families: Military families in foreign environments. In H. I. McCubbin (Ed.), *Resilience in African American families* (pp. 67-98). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2010). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015/indicator6_24.asp.
- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2012a). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/2010015/tables/table_26_1.asp

- National Center for Educational Statistics. (2012b). *Trends in high school dropout and completion rates*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012006.pdf>.
- O'Connor, C. (1997). Dispositions toward (collective) struggle and educational resilience in the inner-city: A case analysis of six African American high school students. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(4), 593-629.
- Orenstein, P. (1994). *School Girls: Young women, self-esteem, and the confidence gap*. New York, NY: American Association of University Women.
- Rigsby, L. C. (1994). The Americanization of resilience: Deconstructing research practice. In M. C. W. & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 85-96). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Robinson, T. L., & Ward, J. V. (1991). Cultivating resistance among African American adolescents: A model for empowerment. *Women & Therapy*, 11, 3-4.
- Search Institute. *40 developmental assets for adolescents*. Retrieved from <http://www.search-institute.org/content/40-developmental-assets-adolescents-ages-12-18>
- Sullivan, A. M. (1996). From mentor to muse: Recasting the role of women in relationship with urban adolescent girls. In B. J. R. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.) *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 226-254). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Taylor, R. (1994) Risk and resilience: Contextual influences on the development of African American adolescents. In M. C. W. & E. W. Gordon (Eds.) *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 119-130). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1994). Educational resilience in inner cities. In E. W. Gordon & M. C. Wang (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America* (pp. 45-72). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ward, J. V. (1996). Raising resisters: The role of truth telling in the psychological development of African American girls. In B. J. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 85-99). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Winfield, L. F. (1991). Resilience, schooling, and development in African-American youth: A conceptual framework. *Education and Urban Society*, 24(1), 5-14.