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## Casting Minority Gifted Students: The Pedagogical Impact of Cinema on the Culture of Schooling

Deborah F. Burnette

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CASTING MINORITY GIFTED STUDENTS: THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT OF  
CINEMA ON THE CULTURE OF SCHOOLING

by

DEBORAH F. BURNETTE

(Under the Direction of John Weaver)

ABSTRACT

African American students are significantly underrepresented in gifted education programs. This dissertation creates a space where gifted education, African American students, media literacy, and teacher perceptions intersect in the field of curriculum studies. Media literacy will be utilized to critique popular films by gifted endorsement teacher-students and myself. Due to the low number of states that require pre-service teachers to study gifted characteristics of children it is left up to gifted teacher endorsement programs to train teachers. By using media literacy to examine films in gifted teacher endorsement programs, I assert that the under-representation of African American students in the referral process for gifted education programs can be positively impacted.

INDEX WORDS: Curriculum studies, Gifted Education, Media literacy, African American students, Teacher perceptions

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband Dean, and my parents, Jim and Emily Canter. My father, who inspired me to work hard, but always take time for laughter. My mother, who introduced a love of reading and its transformative value to my life. My husband who has shown love, support and patience throughout this journey.



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# **Casting Minority Gifted Students: The Pedagogical Impact of Cinema on the Culture of Schooling**

## **Introduction**

You can not address the other; speak to the other, without an act of faith, without testimony. What are you doing when you attest to something? You address the other and ask, 'believe me' (Caputo, 1997, p. 22).

Perception is reality. I have uttered this phrase countless times when talking to my coworkers about teacher or parent concerns. It doesn't matter what the truth is, if a person has a perception of a situation it is their reality. Over my 18 years working in public education I have witnessed how difficult it is to change a person's perceptions of a given belief or situation. Most of the individuals I have encountered hold fast to the comfort of their perceptions whether they are based on fact or fiction. Changing someone's perception of reality can take more than just presenting the facts; it can take shifting long held beliefs and mindsets. Changing human perceptions require building relationships, establishing credibility, and earning trust. All of these factors take time and effort.

As a graduate student, a number of my perceptions of reality changed based on my readings, lectures attended, and discussions. Never before had I considered the fact that along with being racially white came privilege and access in society. My perception of the "other" was based on misconceptions and my own skewed point of view. Egocentrically, I thought the culture I grew up under was the measuring stick for all

people's success or failure. I stumbled along a path of self discovery.

“Refocusing the lens with which I view my own reality was an exercise fraught with contradictions and questions (McIntyre, 1997, p. 29). As I was reconstructing my own meaning of whiteness I was dealing with feeling of guilt and powerlessness. These feelings are reflected in this dissertation. At times when I am reflecting on my past teaching experiences shades of guilt over my unexamined whiteness surface. The feelings I reference in my early teaching career are reflective of a majority of white teachers when they face, “their own complicity in maintaining a system from which they benefit and feel not only uncomfortable, but also deeply wounded in the process of exploring it” (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Chennault, 1998, p. 167). Reality has slowly cast its light as and my perceptions have been forever changed related to race and education. “One other significant idea white educators need to catch on to about ‘us’ is that not only have our psyches suffered negative effects because of our own race-centered socialization but also that we can move beyond that” (Kincheloe et al., 1998, p. 164).

My goal in this dissertation is to be honest with my own history of flawed thinking, be it racist or apologetic. I find too often in my reading of texts that individuals who have reconstructed their meaning of whiteness want to ignore or gloss-over their past thinking concerning race. My thinking was flawed in the past and I still has a few kinks that need worked out when it comes to whiteness and the “other”. Because of my emerging awakening I am focused on using my past misperceptions to assist other teachers with exploring the foundation of their perceptions related to African American students and gifted education. Since my primary work in education has been in the field of gifted education in urban majority minority schools, this is where my heart and interest

is. There are so many threads that could be unraveled in the tapestry of public education, but I am going to focus on what I know best: White teachers and gifted African American students.

Due to the sensitive personal nature of changing one's perceptions, all individual characters and conversations in this dissertation will be fictionalized. Composite characters will be used to parallel real events. Fictionalized narratives of coworkers and my lived experiences will be my testimony to white teacher perceptions of gifted African American students. Through the use of the popular media of films and selected readings I will show how perceptions changed in a teacher gifted endorsement program. Since these are my interpretations of the reactions and conversations I had with my teacher-students concerning African American gifted students and films, ironically, this is my perception of their reality.

The state of Georgia through the Professional Standards Commission offers teachers an add-on to their teaching certificate in the form of a gifted endorsement. To attain this endorsement, which labels a teacher trained in curriculum and strategies designed for identified gifted students, the teacher must attend and pass a series of courses related to gifted education. The gifted endorsement program that I coordinate is structured as a three course sequence that spans one school year, September thru June. Classes meet once per week on Monday evenings varying between an online and face to face format. The gifted endorsement program cohort for this purpose will be a compilation of several years of cohort participants' responses. Teachers' names will be fictionalized, but their narrative and perceptions will stay true to their reality.

This dissertation creates a space where gifted education, African American

students, media literacy, and teacher perceptions intersect in the field of curriculum studies. Media literacy will be utilized to critique popular films by gifted endorsement teacher-students and myself. “People make their own meaning from mass communication, but often not within hermeneutical context they select or control” (Sefa Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 2). This meaning or perception will be examined as it relates to gifted African American students. By using media literacy along with films in gifted teacher endorsement programs, I believe the underrepresentation of African American students in the referral process for gifted education programs can be positively impacted. I believe that teachers who understand the characteristics of African American gifted students are more likely to refer these same students for screening for gifted services. Nationally there is a problem with a lower number of African American students referred for gifted education services as compared to total school populations. This is especially evident in the south where I have worked with a majority minority population of students for the past 18 years.

I propose that the majority of white teachers are not deliberately holding back African American students from the academic acceleration offered through gifted services, but instead are ignorant of how their own racial and cultural biases guide their actions. Additionally, teachers are rarely taught to use media literacy or even to examine how popular culture influences their perceptions of the characteristics of a gifted student. The gifted endorsement program which I have worked with for a number of years includes a close reading of popular films as text in an effort to change white teacher perceptions of gifted African American students. My focus is on white teacher perceptions, but this dissertation will also include a smattering of narratives related to the

perceptions of my African American teacher –students. A subtext of the African American teachers’ perception of gifted African American students lends a differing perception of reality from their white counterparts.

This dissertation will be framed in five chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to the interconnectedness of the cast. An account of my historical perspective on gifted African American students will be explored through the use of fictionalized narratives. Here I will also address using fiction to inform my audience of truths as I know them. In chapter two the film *October Sky* will be used to give the reader a historical reference point to the circumstances which gave birth to gifted public education programs in the United States. *The Great Debaters* will be referenced as a film that depicts gifted African American students in a historical context. This will set the stage for understanding why teachers and parents may perceive gifted education as a majority white elitist program. Chapter three discusses the merging of curriculum studies and popular culture as they relate to how white teacher perceptions can influence African American students identified for gifted public education programs. A multitude of films such as *Finding Forester*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Starship Trooper*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Freedom Writers* will be exposed for their erroneous depiction (in my opinion) of students and teachers. Continuing with the use of film to point out misperceptions in gifted education, chapter four will focus on a close reading of *Little Man Tate* and *Akheela and the Bee*. Each film demonstrates the social issues and perceptions associated with being a gifted child. Teachers’ experiences viewing a variety of films related to gifted children will be examined under a hermeneutic lens. Finally, chapter five documents the fictionalized journey of several teachers as they struggle to face how their

perception may not be reality in relationship to gifted African American students and the schoolhouse.

## Chapter One: Awakening a Casting Call

### Hidden in Plain Sight

Understanding what we know about ourselves and others, and how we define others and how others define us, is a highly complex, problematic enterprise (Morris, 2001, p. 58).

As the news quietly played in the background, I prepared for bed. My head spun around when I heard a former student's name. A mug shot of now nineteen-year-old Malcolm Washington flashed on to the television screen as the news anchor explained that Malcolm had been arrested hours ago for allegedly bludgeoning a seventy year old man to death.

Malcolm was a student I had taught as a first year teacher. At the time he was being raised by his grandmother; mom was a drug addict and there was no dad to speak of in his life. When I first met Malcolm he was angry and he stayed angry for pretty much most of the year I taught him. As was typical with most fourth grade classes with thirty one students, occasionally conflicts arose in the classroom or on the playground. When that happened, Malcolm came out fists flying. I remember an older more experienced teacher telling me, "Girl, we all know where that boy is going to end up...dead or in jail!" Malcolm was ten years old at this time.

Under the surface of this very angry boy was a mathematical genius. Malcolm could solve mathematical equations years ahead of his fourth grade classmates. A slow smile eclipsed his face when he was set loose to complete complex mathematical equations. Yet, was he someone whom I would refer for gifted testing? Looking at his background, anger issues, and general lack of success in school, I made the choice not to



refer Malcolm to be tested for the gifted program. He did not fit my profile of a gifted student. I never really kept up with Malcolm after he left my class. I heard a few rumors that he was in and out of the juvenile detention center in high school. I can't say I was surprised. It never occurred to me that Malcolm may have flourished in the gifted program where he could have met like-minded students who loved mathematics, where focusing on his strengths might have built his self-esteem or exposed him to other bright students of color who made him feel accepted.

Chiquita Kelly was also in my first class of students. She lived with her parents, who both worked on the local military base. Chiquita was quiet, well dressed, polite and always had her homework done; a teacher pleaser. During the time Chiquita was in my fourth grade class she was a hard worker, but I really couldn't refer her for gifted testing. She just wasn't an independent worker and lacked the competitive spirit the other gifted identified students displayed. In fact, she was displaying an amazing interest in peer acceptance which I considered beyond her maturity level. I just hoped I didn't see her in the teen parenthood program in the next few years. Of course, her grades were high honor roll and she did score well on standardized tests, but in my opinion she was not gifted education material. When I next encountered Chiquita she was eighteen years old, working part-time at a local movie theater, going to college and taking care of her two-year-old son. A few years ago I saw Chiquita's mother and she told me Chiquita is now married, has two children, and is working as an accountant. I thought to myself, "At least the girl stayed in school and got an education!" As with Malcolm, I had no understanding of Chiquita's culture. Never did I consider that African Americans are not as competitive as Caucasians or that they work best collaboratively.

My response to both of these students, in my experience, is typical of a white teacher's responses to African American students. I am not offering this up as an excuse for my response to both of these students, but as an indication of a wide-spread problem of a lack of cultural understanding. This 'cultural blindness' has encouraged some teachers to ignore characteristics of giftedness displayed by cultures other than their own. Manifestations of giftedness are only judged within the limitations of the teacher's cultural experiences (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 133).

Both of these students were African American and both had the potential to qualify for the gifted education program in the county I taught in, if I had only been able to see beyond my own prejudice to refer them for testing. I thought I was one of the least biased people I knew, just looking after the best interest of my students. In my assessment I was open-minded because I was from up north, and had black friends. Back then my intolerant perception of others' cultural was my reality. I was exhibiting a form of aversive racism.

When I first started teaching I often liked to say, "I don't see color when I looked out at the students in my classroom, only students. Who cares how many are white or black as long as I support their academic achievement!" My color-blind philosophy was ignoring not only color, but culture. Many white teachers share this same philosophy, which is based on expectations for all students to conform to the white mainstream culture. "This philosophy was based on the erroneous assumption that to recognize race is to be a racist" (Ford & Harris, 1999, p. 207). I was the problem when it came to referring my students for gifted testing, not my students' neighborhoods, parents' jobs, culture, or knowledge of school rules. I was the problem! As I have termed it, I was

*teaching while white* and blind to my own limitations. I am not presumptuous enough to assert that my referring or not referring these two students for gifted testing would have changed the course of their lives. Damning or saving student lives is beyond my scope of influence, but I didn't even offer them the option to make a choice concerning an educational program, because they did not fit my idea of a gifted student.

I have worked in the area of gifted education for my entire teaching career; first as a classroom teacher with a gifted student population, then as a school gifted teacher specialist and now as a district gifted teacher specialist. I wish I could compartmentalize my years in gifted education as pre-awakening and post-awakening, but that is not the case. This journey has been long, littered with mistakes, biases, and attempts to make amends. I fear my awakening is, even now, not complete. Hopefully, by honestly sharing my own flaws and pitfalls, an awakening can begin among the teachers I work with in the gifted education program of my school district. As my father used to say, "It takes one to know one." To me this means that in order to understand and change white teacher perceptions of gifted African American students the best person to initiate change is another white teacher. I am one teacher speaking to one teacher at a time, spreading the views of one white teacher to another; *teaching while white*.

The main reason I pursued an administrative position in gifted education was to affect change in the identification of minority students in my local school system. The first step for a student receiving services in gifted education is typically a teacher recognizing gifted characteristics in that student and referring them for gifted screening (Ford, 2003, p. 289). While developing a study on the gifted identification of elementary students in the state of Georgia, McBee, of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development

Institute found that race still outranks socioeconomic status as an influence on referral and identification for gifted services (2006). A report delivered by the Georgia State Gifted Specialist, Linda Andrews, in the winter of 2010 indicated that only 15% of the total indentified gifted population in the state of Georgia is African American (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). This can be directly linked back to a low number of African American students being referred for gifted testing. Referral and identification of minority gifted students is primarily based on the professional opinions of white teachers. These teachers may not recognize the potential that minority students display that is different from the dominate culture of school (Pierce et al., 2007, p. 114). Teachers who have misconceptions or hold unexamined stereotypes about African American students do not refer these students for gifted testing. Often, characteristics that have traditionally been the norm of white “gifted” students are used as a comparison for African American students (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002, p. 55).

The majority of teachers, not only in my local district, but nationally, *teach while white*. This can and often does influence teacher perceptions of African American student as gifted. They are further influenced by the popular media’s representation of gifted students, especially in films. Changing teacher perceptions of the characteristics of gifted students as they relate to African American students hopefully will be the beginning of changing the face of gifted education in the United States. Along with the label *gifted* come opportunities, real and perceived, that are being missed by African American students. Gifted education is not and should not be perceived as only a means to save white middle-class students from general education. “Gifted education is about educational need, not about separatism, elitism or privilege” (Cash, 2007, p. 100).

I am a white female administrator of a public school system's gifted program in addition to the coordinator of a teacher gifted endorsement program. Over the past two years I have begun to incorporate the use of film into the teacher gifted endorsement program and have seen teachers hold their own beliefs concerning African American gifted students up to close inspection. Teachers have been more open to examining their own racial and cultural bias when using the familiar and comfortable media of movies. After all, films can be a shared experience that allows the teachers to have company on the journey of exploring their own actions (or lack thereof) as related to African American students and gifted education.

I strongly agree with Gary Howard (1999) who states that "white educational leaders should take the responsibility of undoing white ignorance instead of relying on people from other racial groups to carry the burden" (p. 77). As my testimony is woven throughout this dissertation I will not attempt to speak for the other, but will be speaking from personal and professional experience. Nationally, 75% of teachers are white females who are only fluent in English, 43 years old with more than 35% of teachers over 50 years of age (Horace Mann Companies, 2010). Due to my class, gender, and race I fit the profile of the average teacher in American today (middle class, female and white) teaching an increasingly minority student population. The 2010 Census supports this by reporting a national 36.3% minority population increase vs. a 5.7% non-Hispanic white alone population increase (United States Census Bureau, 2011). This disparity is further exacerbated by 83% of teachers in staff surveys indicating that they are white non-Hispanic. In Georgia, 75% of teachers indicate they are white non-Hispanic and 52% of the student population is minority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

*Teaching while white* is a national trend with long term ramifications on minority gifted student education. Not only is individual teacher racism an issue, but also institutional racism in African American identification for gifted education. It is critical for white teachers to “think institutionally” about racism. I have found that if they think of racism at all it is in terms of individual discrimination, ”not as a system of policies and practices that metastasize as they permeate the multiple dimensions of our society” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 87).

### **Reading Cinema as Text**

Both spectator and film are uniquely and particularly situated, each concretely enworlded not only in the different spaces they occupy but also on a bias, that is, with a unique perspective that gives particular meaning to the space that occupies them.(Sobchack, 1992, p. 260).

Films are interpretative by nature. The screenplay writers, directors, and actors all put their own spin or interpretation on their roles in the making of a film. Audiences, when confronted with the film as text, make assumptions and interpretations based on content and personal experiences. Viewing a film is not passive in nature, but influenced by each person’s situatedness in the world which influences what they see and interpret in films. Each person’s perception which is their reality is based on past and present experiences. Vision of films takes on a dual meaning as the person viewing sees both inside and outside themselves to inform perceptions. Just viewing a film tells only a segment of the story. “The visible is never the whole of vision” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 293). Layers of perception and interpretation by the viewer contribute to a whole vision

of a film. Vivian Sobchack explains that, “Today we see fewer ‘close reading’ of films and much more contextual analyses that may include but go well beyond the text itself” (Bukatman, 2009, p. 1). It is this contextual analysis of films that influence teacher perceptions and therefore their reality.

For the viewer their interpretation or perception of film is the reality. It has been over twenty years since I watched *Do the Right Thing* and *Boyz in the Hood* in the movie theater. At that time my perception or reality of black young males was a gangster-like culture in a ghetto neighborhood. I bought into the characters’ lifestyles because I had no other point of reference, but the images portrayed in the culture of media. Today when viewing these two films I see that they haven’t changed, but I have. Years working with parents and student in an inner city setting have changed my interpretation of the actions of the characters in these films. Life experiences color my perceptions and therefore my reality. Film viewing is not stagnate it is ever changing. Experiences are not fixed, but always changing to create new perspectives. I can not step outside of my own understanding or its influence on my reality.

Already at home with film as a medium, educators can be lead along the path of discovery. The benefit of educators understanding the value of film is reinforced by Giroux (2002) when he states, “It is useful for educators to comprehend the changing conditions of identity formation within a virtual economy of visual media...” (p. 49). The power of films as a pedagogical force is huge. Educators using a medium they are socially comfortable with ‘reading’ can be trained in the ability to analyze and dissect the culture to which they interact. They can examine their own culture juxtaposed again the “other.” Using critical literacy in relationship to films is a means to empower teachers as

they understand their own bias (Kellner, 1995, p. xiv-xv). The possibilities of teaching educators to view themselves and their students critically by reading film as text can have powerful consequences. Opening up an educator's mind to 'reading' film as text beyond simple cause and effect relationships will engage them in a dance of pedagogical understanding based on their own social constructs as well as those of their students.

Popular culture as film is a prime example of a text that is formed in a social context and that is shared among the masses of society. An individual's interpretation or perception of reality, be it their own world view, a film, or a student's life situation is hermeneutic in nature. Heidegger speaks of the *hermeneutic circle* in which there is reciprocity between the text and the individual forming a circle where self understanding leads to an understanding of the world (Heidegger, 1927). Teachers viewing films as a pedagogical study of gifted education create such a hermeneutic circle of understanding: teachers watch films to generate a greater understanding of themselves which brings about a greater understanding of how cultural bias influences their decisions related to their students, which leads to a greater understanding of the world cultural bias, which is ever changing. Gadamer (1975) in *Truth and Method* expanded hermeneutics to include the concept of our interpretation of the text never being outside of our traditions, but having the ability to help us understand ourselves and change. As I was viewing *Do the Right Thing* and *Boyz in the Hood*, I was ignorant to my own bias. I was leading an unexamined life that lacked self reflection or interpretation (Smith, 1991).

When examining films as a piece of popular culture it is necessary to view the historical as well as present day influences on this interpretation of meaning. By coupling the historical social/racial context of teachers' lives with the meaning of the



present day text (film) as it relates to the identification of African American students for gifted education, I will traverse a ground that I am not aware has been explored before. I have encountered no research that has focused on this particular topic within the field of curriculum studies. I will dance

the hermeneutic dance of part and whole, where the new tale is not simply additive to the whole but restorative and thereby transformative of it and where because of the generous arrival of the new case 'the whole' is never a given that could be simply described. (Jardine,2003, p. 57)

By examining the "other" against a back drop of embedded whiteness, my understanding and interpretation of *currere* will emerge. I will approach the "other" from a life-learned perspective and interpretation of that perspective.

My interpretation of the "other" will embody the text: stories, popular culture, and language which people speak and live. Maxine Greene (1995) gives insight into such a process when she states, "I wanted to see through as many eyes and from as many angles as possible...to begin to feel those 'multiple realities' or 'provinces of meaning' that mark lived experience in the world" (p. 94). Hermeneutics will function as a lens to negotiate individual and collective experiences and to bring meaning. Teachers will examine the twin questions of "What was meant by this film?" and "What does it mean to me?" Changing a person's perceptions aka reality begins with reflecting on where they are situated in the world.

Popular culture represented by film has become the epitome of modernity and is subject to many interpretations. Influences of popular culture permeate all aspects of society (Fiske, 1991). Discrete viral messages spread by popular culture frame social

discourse. Popular culture is riddled with undertones that reinforce cultural misconceptions and stereotypes. Race is one layer embedded in popular culture. Where society might balk at blatant racism they do not appear to have problems with racism woven into the subtext of music videos, films, commercials, etc. Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us that,

[P]opular culture commoditized and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all as we sometimes think of it, the arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience. It is an arena that is profoundly mythic.(p.474)

This mythic arena is where hermeneutics comes into play. Interpretation is the key. My reality may not be and probably is not the reader's reality. Yet, perception often supersedes reality. The meaning or interpretation of the text is a "social articulation of the web of connotations and codes into which it is inserted" (Grossburg, 1996, p. 157). Inserted are teacher interpretations of films and their personal reflections on student behaviors and African American students in gifted education. We can watch all day long, but meaning comes from our interpretation of events.

Each week reports come out of the top earning movies at the box office. The National Association of Theatre Owners (2011) reported that in 2010, U.S and Canada movie box offices grossed over ten billion dollars, with tickets being sold to over one billion movie goers. Teens and adults flock to popular films after having been barraged by sneak previews at the movie theater, TV commercials touting an academy award winning performance, and print ads promising the film would be coming soon to a theater near them. Fast food chains capitalize on anticipated films with shrink wrapped trinkets

for children. Can we question that cinema as a form of popular culture influences our lives? Vivian Sobchack (1992) embraces a phenomenological view of film in acknowledging that, “more than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience” (p. 3). The influences of popular culture are not checked at the door of the schoolhouse, but open for interpretation by its participants. William Reynolds (2003) states that, “in the struggle over the symbolic order which characterizes our times, popular culture, developed by name brands, and various forms of media including the Hollywood film industry, is crucial in creating the identities and representations our youth embrace”(p. 102).

A hermeneutic view of how teachers use films to form perceptions about whether or not African American students could be gifted will be embedded in this dissertation. “Meaning resides in the space between the text and the reader where the images evoked by the first become inextricably linked to the context provided by the second (Dalton, 2007, p. 4). For my purposes the text is seen interchangeable with film. I intend to go further into the site of popular culture in the form of films, race as it relates to white teachers, African American students, and the school house’s institutional interests as they relate to my understanding of curriculum studies. This study will add a new perspective and hopefully a new tool to the arsenal of pedagogical concepts being examined at by teachers who influence the identification and support of gifted African American students in public education. A tool to be utilized when teachers talk to other teachers who are *teaching while white*.

## Overlaying Fiction and Film

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth... (Foucault, 1980, p. 193).

Oral storytelling, printed words, and film represent the evolution of narrative text that has fed a human need for reflection and understanding. At times this desire was fed by true life accounts, but often the most effective stories were told through fiction. Life lessons were taught through the fictional experience of others such as the characters in Aesop's Fables. Gough (1998) asserts that

[F]iction clearly is useful to us as a means of posing options and alternatives and for connecting present reality with past and/or future possibilities in curriculum inquiry and indeed, that our purpose often may be better served by (re) presenting the texts we produce as deliberate fictions rather than as 'factual' narratives reflecting all without distortions.(p.93)

Fictional narratives will be sprinkled throughout this dissertation to focus the reader and to allow for a reading that will not be stifled by real identities.

"Fiction, like painting, intrinsically deals with the nature of perception. And fiction intrinsically deals with the world" (Dillard, 1982, p. 57). Even though I do not mind exposing my flawed thinking and bias concerning my early teaching experience, I cannot assume the same for the teachers I have worked along side of

or taught in gifted endorsement classes. Fiction will be used to distort the familiar, yet will stay true to the intent of the speaker. The fictionalization of a narrative should not diminish its truth. “Telling stories privileges our experience, reawakens and recovers our capacity to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (He, 2003, p. 115). As I tell the stories of myself and others who are *teaching while white* and the impact such a position has on the referral of African American students for gifted testing, a priority will be placed on relationships. Mary Doll (1995) asks, “what can be more important than encouraging a real understanding of the relationships we form in life: relating to the self relating to the other, relating to the divine and relating to the natural world?!”(p. 30). Indeed, what can be more important than understanding ourselves as teachers and the students we teach? This understanding, this changing of perceptions can only be revealed in a relationship based on trust. Over a year-long period teaching the gifted endorsement course, I gained the trust of my teacher-students. We built relationships which allowed for a dialogue of change; a change in their perception of gifted African American students through viewing and discussing films.

Pinar (2004) explains that narrative texts are now read in an attempt to recognize the true identity of the learner and the teachers. This is an identity that is not merely associated with a name or position in life, but with the very essence of their being. This critical storytelling will permeate my text as I explore the connections between the cultural identity of white teachers, and gifted African American students where they meet at the schoolhouse. Dillard (1982) explains that fiction “traffics in understanding” (p.161). This is exactly why I have used the fiction of film in my work with teachers and

why I have chosen to use fictional narrative in this paper. Changing people's perceptions is all about building understandings. My interpretation of events and conversations, be they real or fiction, when examining matters of race, culture, and education requires interpretations of motive, history, attitudes, and place that are only limited by my state of being and understanding.

As I write this chapter it is February: Black History Month. My granddaughter is in the second grade. She has brought home the assignment to create a poster on a famous African American athlete. Not a famous African American business person, doctor, scientist, or author, but an athlete. My indignation is magnified by the fact that this is the second year in a row she has been asked to create a project for Black History month centered on the life of a famous black athlete. As I read the assignment I wondered to myself if any other parents are insulted by the stereotyping this public school is conveying to elementary students? Whether I like it or not, my granddaughter's teachers are influencing her identity formation and how she views other. A white teacher with a multicultural class of students is focusing on strictly black history related to African American accomplishments in athletics. Identity formation as it relates to the teacher, my granddaughter and her sixteen second grade classmates, some of whom are African American, is being shaped by this Black History Month assignment. These early patterns of perception will follow her for years. As Marla Morris (2001) states, "Unconscious transference may maintain rigid patterns of perception" (p.63). A little exposure to the wrong message can last a lifetime. Institutional racism advanced by ignorant teachers who are perpetuating whiteness as the norm and African American academic achievements as limited is alive and well in the schoolhouse.

Unfortunately, in my experience, my granddaughter's teachers are the norm and not the expectation to someone *teaching while white* in the classroom. These are the same teachers upon whom gifted education programs rely to refer minority students for gifted testing: teachers who see black achievement as limited to athletic.

Through the blending of fact and fiction in this dissertation and in the cinema it discusses, I anticipate that "fiction will produce potential discursive space within which new knowledge and understanding can be produced" (Gough, 1998, p. 107). The films discussed in this dissertation encompass a genre of Hollywood cinema related to school and stories told through a fictional context. *October Sky* will lead us into the beginning stages of gifted education in the United States; *The Great Debaters* brings into play a historical view of African American gifted students; *Stand and Deliver* and *Music of the Heart* point to the use of deficit thinking in terms of minority gifted students; *Freedom Writers* addresses the white teacher savior complex; *Finding Forrester* shows just how a gifted identified African American student can be marginalized; *Little Man Tate* and *Akeelah and the Bee* show the stark contrast found in society's view of African American and Caucasian gifted children. Each of these films relate directly back to how teachers go about interpreting popular culture through the medium of film and how those interpretations cast African American students in gifted education programs. "A resistance to critiquing whiteness distances white teachers from thinking that we are implicated in the kind of educational system that continues to privilege white students. We remain blind to our own positionalities within the institutions we inhabit and create" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 120). Each time a film is considered it must be examined for the influences of personal and institutional racism it perpetuates.

Film is “a theater of popular desires, an identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time” (Hall, 1996, p. p. 474). Self knowledge and an understanding of our complexities are worked out in the flickering of the light as characters grapple on screen with problems we seek to ignore. There is a rescue possible in the literary representation of the world in the lived text (Eppert, 2002). I intend to do my part in throwing a life line to the teachers I work with and teach in gifted education.



## **Chapter Two: Perspectives on the Challenges of Gifted Education**

### **Changing With The Times**

Like a phantom moving through the schools over the years, gifted education has taken shape, albeit a gelatinous one, with no clear definition of its borders or concepts (Cross & Cross, 2005, p. 26).

One step forward, two steps back seems to be an appropriate description of the historical journey of gifted education in the United States. It is necessary to study the history of gifted education to know how we have arrived where we are today. Reflecting on the history of gifted education is where all teachers enrolled in the gifted endorsement program begin their course work. Prior to the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957 the United States had shown little interest in the identification or provision of public educational services to academically gifted students. Isolated pockets of interest in educating gifted students had sprung up earlier around the country in such places as Worcester, Massachusetts, where the first private school for gifted children opened in 1901 or when in 1922, when the special opportunities class opened at New York City P.S.165 (A brief history of gifted education, 2010).

As has often been the case, politics, provoked by the USSR's space program, would influence the education of America's youth. The rush was on to identify and educate America's most academically capable youth in the sciences and engineering to close the gap in the race to space. Thus began America's bi-polar relationship with gifted education; one decade the academic achievements of very talented students are sought

and revered then the next decade gifted students are viewed as elitist and antidemocratic (Ford&Harris,1999, p.19).

In 1958 Dwight D. Eisenhower championed the creation of the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) along with the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA). NASA was an attempt at government control of science and engineering under the auspices of civilian research and world benevolence. Bright students were encouraged to join the race to the moon there by down playing our national competition with Russia. NASA was the public twin with DARPA who was often the hidden twin in our nation's attempts at technological world dominance. The Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) had a goal of keeping our military technology more sophisticated than any of the United States' potential enemies (Kramer, 2009)(Newell Jr., 2010). Both of these agencies were behind the drive for schools to locate, label, and educate advanced students for academic achievement in physical sciences.

Bruner (1996) claims that "culture shapes minds, in that it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of ourselves and our powers" (p. x). Films such as *October Sky* clearly depict the impact the launch of sputnik had on the culture of schooling and the tools we provided for students to succeed. Events shown in *October Sky* reflect an educational community that was caught up in a pedagogical shift which included a physical education movement to train strong American boys to be dominant physical specimens, capable of war. This was in direct conflict with the shift towards academic excellence in public education. A prime

example of this conflict is depicted when Homer Hickman's brother's physical skills are being honed in football. Homer's brother Jim depicts the strong white dominate male who is rewarded with a college scholarship compared to Homer's superior intellect which had no outlet or respect from his community. Jim is the type of physical specimen that could subdue the USSR threat. The tension displayed between traditional physical superiority and intellectual strength is reflected in the characters that lived in Coalwood, West Virginia. "Our job is to give these students an education, not false hope!" is the mantra of the Big Creek High School principal. Students were encouraged to accept the role they were cast in life. The future of the United States' dominance in math and science, a concept missed by the principal, is being threatened. Highly gifted Quinton is ridiculed by his peers and viewed as a misfit. His genius is not recognized in the schoolhouse or the community.

Even the often volatile relationship between Homer and his father reflects a county struggling to move away from the status quo. Homer's father exemplified the tradition of anti-intellectualism where a hard day's physical labor is shown a higher level of respect than academic pursuits. A shift was about to take place in the United States' educational system. Homer's aspiration to win the National Science Fair is met with skepticism, ridicule, or disinterest. Sputnik served as the catalyst that accelerated the United States to a race for the best and brightest academically, not just physically fit, students. Students were being shoved toward science education as a means to beat other nations to world dominance. Academic achievement was finally being encouraged and rewarded even if the motivation was politically driven. No longer would a lack of family

support, closed minds and socio-economic barriers influence student achievement in public education. The United States would win the race to space. Homer Hickman epitomizes the goal of the passage of the National Science Foundation Act when he won the National Science Fair and went on to become an engineer working for NASA. Homer gained respect for his intellect just as gifted students in this time period were revered as the leaders of tomorrow. Suddenly, it was cool to be smart!

Fast forward to 1997 when two films are released that depicted the value of being smart: *Good Will Hunting* and *Starship Troopers*. The central characters in both films are viewed by society as holding value based on their intellect. Will Hunting is a brilliant janitor who solves physics problems in his free time. He is a “throw away kid” with a history of foster care and juvenile offenses until his gifted intellectual abilities are discovered. A Harvard physics professor encourages Will to not waste his intellectual gift, but to contribute to society, to serve the greater good and change the world (Lawrence Bender Production, 1997). Johnny Rico in *Starship Trooper* has the flipside of Will’s problem: he is not intellectually as capable as his peers. Johnny, with only a 35% on a math competency test, is forced to become a mobile infantry soldier in the Federal Service. He is resigned to fighting on the ground while his classmates who scored higher on “the test” work out of labs and cockpits. *Starship Trooper* reflects everyone fighting for the common good of society; just some are seen as only capable of using their muscles while others contribute with their brains (Davison & Marshall, 1997). In *October Sky*, Homer’s father felt the best way Homer could contribute to society was by working in the coal mines. He saw no value in Homer’s intellectual fascination with

rocketry until Homer won the National Science Fair and a college scholarship. All three movies depict intellect as being the answer to escaping from a negative situation. It is cool to be smart when it serves society's purpose.

The National Defense Education Act of 1958, though not specifically adopted to address the needs of gifted learners, served as the primary stimulus for developing gifted education programs. Gifted students became prime targets of the curricular reforms designed to promote achievement among America's most capable students (Wickstrom, 2004, p. 268). Society was looking for a few good "intellectually superior" men to defend our country. As the war shifted from being one fought on foreign soil to the war for civil rights, educational reformers moved to issues associated with desegregation. There is no evidence for the consideration, at this point in history, of an overlap between educating highly capable students and African American students. The focus had shifted to a segregated fair equal education for all races in public education. A few bright shining African American students were acceptable to the dominate culture.

Historical representations of intellectually gifted African American students have been safely approached by Hollywood in films such as *The Great Debaters*. In the film, Doctor James Farmer, a professor at Wiley College, preaches education as the only way out of ignorance and darkness into the glorious light for African Americans (Winfrey, 2007). Wiley College in Marshall, Texas is depicted as a utopia of African American intellectual studies. The year is 1935 and students are being schooled in the African American tradition of oral rhetoric. Accomplished African American college students who excel at debate are raised up as heroes. James Farmer Jr., only 14 years old,

is a college student and on the debate team. He is an example of a highly gifted student. In historical context the anomaly of a gifted African American student is allowable and believable to the movie audience. Due to the broad influences of the Harlem Renaissance, white audiences can be convinced that African American intellectualism was possible at this point in history. Contributions by Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Bois, and other members of the Harlem Renaissance are credited with molding African American intellectuals. In a dark movie theater, in 2007, it is possible for white movie fans to cheer for the Wiley debate team as they one up their white Harvard opponents. Historical African American intellectuals who overcame social odds seem easier to visualize than their 21<sup>st</sup> century counterparts. In a post movie interview, director, Denzel Washington expressed the opinion that, “The Great Debaters depicted a time when intellectual African Americans were invisible to the mainstream white public” (Winfrey, 2007). My contention is that this invisibility still exists today. Gifted African American students can be viewed today as fictional characters, but not as reality. In a lecture on slavery, Dr. Farmer points out how slaves felt whites could, “keep the body, but they couldn’t take the mind of a black man” (Winfrey,2007). Could this be reversed today as teachers are willing to keep the student’s minds, but not consider the world of the body?

Educational institutions want to capture student intellectual potential and hold it hostage to standardized tests and core curriculum standards with the low expectation of all students meeting one standard of learning, while ignoring the unique physical, economic, and cultural backgrounds that combine to create the whole student. The idea appears to be to divorce the mind from the body and life experiences in the classroom.

African American culture is unrecognized at the schoolhouse in an effort to maintain the status quo. Poor performance on standardized tests confirmed the “inferiority” of students. Use of IQ measures did not allow for a separation of people from their historical circumstances or social group (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson III, 1996). Intelligence tests were being used as a means to influencing cultural capital and closing doors to the undesirables.

After the strife of war and the civil rights movement were behind the United States, gifted education again came to the forefront. It was in the 1970’s that the cause of gifted education was again taken up and brought to the attention of the educational community. On October 6, 1972 then Commissioner of Education, Sidney Marland, submitted his assessment of American education to Congress. In this report, it was suggested that Congress provide ongoing support to program development and maintenance for gifted students. The Marland report brought with it the first attempts at a paradigm shift in gifted education away from general intelligence to a domain-specific approach (Matthews, D. J. & Foster, J. F., 2006). No longer was a single psychometric measure being touted as the lone path to gifted identification. Value was now being placed in specific talent domains such as subject specific academic aptitudes, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts (Subotnik, R. F., Olszewski-Kubillus, P., & Worrell, F. C. 2011). This shift reflected a value shift in society during this time period. What is considered giftedness has always mirrored what is valued by society. While there have been individuals in society that were “Renaissance” men and women, the vast majority of individuals have been recognized for outstanding

achievement in a specific field or domain. As a paradigm shift began to take place in gifted education circles, many educators had the unique experience of having a foot on both sides of the shift (Kuhn, 1962). They craved the comfort of a narrow selection process for gifted educational placement derived from IQ scores, which provided a homogenized group of white upper class intellectuals. Yet, the need for a broader definition of giftedness that took into consideration creativity, motivation, nonverbal talents, and put less emphasis on an isolated IQ score was becoming increasingly popular. This would mean moving away from white intellectualism and opening the doors to a more diverse student base who displayed gifts and talents not always in keeping with the dominate culture of academia.

In an attempt to ensure the development of gifted students, an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1974 was created, which called for the creation of an Office of Gifted and Talented within the US Office of Education. Funding was mandated through this amendment, but it was quickly eliminated in the 1980's in an effort to reduce government spending. In its place was the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Student Education Act of 1988. The Javits Act was created to direct funds towards the development of talent a.k.a. gifted potential, among students from minority and low socio-economic groups. A down side to the Javits Act has been the occasions when it has perpetuated a concentration on the alleged deficiencies and lack of achievement among minority students. A positive aspect of the grant focused funds toward groups who are willing to build positive self-esteem, motivation, equitable testing and healthy role models among high academically achieving minority students (Frazier &



Pasow, 1994, p. xi). Every year since its inception, the Javits Act is on the Congressional cutting block with funding being reduced. Funding for the Javits Act along with the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented was eliminated from the US Department of Education budget in 2010.

Incredibly, the goals of the Javits Act were not moved forward by the *A Nation at Risk* report. The *A Nation at Risk* (1983) report indicated that American students, especially students of color, were lagging behind their international counterparts in all academic areas. Thus began equity in education movements that had a pronouncedly negative impact on gifted education programs. In order to address decades of failure at improving academic outcomes of minority “at risk” students, practices such as grouping and special programs for the gifted were eliminated. However, all that came out of the *Nation at Risk* report was not negative for gifted education. As the focus shifted to opening access to all public education programs, including existing gifted education programs, the question with student identification for gifted education moved from “who” to “why” we identify the need for specialized programs. The “why” of gifted education was based on two inclusive premises: provide students with opportunities to grow superior potential (leading to self-fulfillment), and increase society’s pool of individuals capable of solving society’s problems (Renzulli, J. S. *Thing Called Giftedness*, 1999). The difference here from earlier paradigms related to gifted education is that the “why” includes more than white dominant society. Equality in education movements were prying a crack in the often locked door of gifted education with a need for self-efficacy in all racial groups.

The 1990's brought the US Department of Education's report, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent*. The premise of the report was that there is a lack of challenge provided for gifted students through public education (Jackson & Snow, 2004, p. 192). Within this report the national education department's definition of gifted was established:

Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment.(USDE, 1993)

Due to the fact that this definition of giftedness includes children across cultural and socio-economic groups, states began to look at multiple criteria for placing students into domain specific gifted programs. "Giftedness was being reconceptualized and redefined to encompass a broad range of cognitive and affective traits that are dynamically displayed as potential to be nurtured and developed" (Frazier & Pasow, 1994, p. xviii). No longer were static tests seen as the only construct of giftedness. Multifaceted attributes of giftedness were viewed differently in various contexts. A premium was placed on original ideas, products, artistic expression, and real world problem applications. Academic giftedness was viewed as one of many multiple paths to gifted identification. Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences was embraced by the gifted community and used to reinforce efforts to identify students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Gardner (1993) indicated that gifted children advance rapidly through a domain due to strengths in intelligence or environmental opportunities. He

goes on to state that different cultures emphasize different domains so that giftedness can be manifested in various ways. Therefore, a purely psychometric approach to identifying students for gifted programming did not take into consideration specific domain strengths or cultural influences.

Students' socio-cultural background was being forged into the new paradigm of indentifying giftedness. An example of this shift is the development of the Frasier Traits, Aptitudes, and Behaviors (TAB) checklists which takes into account the cultural background of students. This checklist is used by many school systems around the country as part of their gifted identification process (Frazier & Pasow, 1994). While working as the administrator of a district gifted program, I have developed an expanded version of the Frazier TAB to include current cultural indicators. Additionally, I have worked with a team of teachers to create a Kindergarten Planned Experience (KPE) to allow for the early nomination of minority gifted students who have not yet learned how to be "teacher pleasers" and "play school." These instruments have allowed for an 11% increase in minority identification for gifted program in the school district I work for over the state's level of placement into gifted programs.

As the twenty first century began, historically gifted education programs have been composed primarily of upper or middle class Caucasian students who were placed solely on the basis of their intelligence quota. As a disenfranchised group, gifted African American growth is stagnant. The paradigm shift that began back with the Marland Report had finally happened in gifted education: the move away from using gifted abilities as a segregation tool in public education. The sole use of a psychometric method

to identify gifted students was quickly vanishing. Georgia was one of the first states to adopt a multiple criteria approach to identifying gifted students for placement in specialized educational programs. African American parents knew little of the new reform and white parents saw it as reinforcement for the decision to put their child into private schools. Gifted programs were opening access to minority students even though white parents and educators were trying to keep it a secret. No longer were gifted programs a safe harbor for white segregation in a desegregated public school system.

Susan Winebrenner (2006, Sunny), an author and national consultant for gifted education, raises the concerns that addendums attached to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) were indeed leaving gifted students significantly behind in their potential as learners. Schools continue to focus on maintaining mediocrity as a means to meeting Adequately Yearly Progress. Teachers are much more likely to attend to struggling students than advanced students. Low achieving students receive 37% more attention than high achieving students (Thomas B Fordham Institute, 2008, p. 4). Political pressure to pay more attention to students who score below proficiency level on federally mandated tests has all but eliminated gifted programs in some states. The Center for Evaluation & Education Policy (2008) published a report entitled, *Mind the (Other) Gap!* This report focuses on the growing gap in the achievement of our highest learners in the United States and its impact on future economic losses. Just as attention is given to reverse poor achievement among low income students, attention should be given to promoting achievement among high achieving low income students. Using national testing data, students in the eighth grade who are scoring in the 90% or above achievement levels are

falling behind at a rate of 1.88% per year. This data was collected across racial groups from 2003 to 2007. Projections are that if the trend was stopped right now it would take 32 years for students in the advanced academic groups to make up these years of decline (The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises, 2007). So while No Child Left Behind struggles to hold its political footing, gifted students' academic growth has hit bottom. As so aptly stated by Russell Jacoby (1999), "in the long run intellectual history cannot be divorced from political and social history" (p. 41).

If what is often thought of as traditionally "gifted" students: those who are white, affluent, well behaved, and high achieving are losing ground educationally in public schools, then what about the "other": minority gifted students? Educators, politicians and the public assume that gifted students can fend for themselves. This has never been true and is especially detrimental to low-income high achieving minority students. They are prone to fall into what has become known as the "achievement trap," an area where bright talented gifted students sit as their brains atrophy (The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation and Civic Enterprises, 2007; Thomas B Fordham Institute, 2008). If gifted African American students avoid the "achievement trap" then the dreaded "achievement gap" is waiting to snare them. A propensity for underachievement by African American students is seen as creating this so called 'achievement gap.' The gaps which are evident in the general population between race, and social classes are reproduced by schools to create academic gaps that are nearly impossible to close (Perry, Steele, & Hillard III, 2003, p. 6) (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 3). Where we go from here with gifted education is difficult to envision; funding is down dramatically as states wrestle with high

budget deficits, and are involved in Race to the Top Grants which are putting increased pressure on test scores. Additionally, confidence in public education to train our brightest students is low. On a national level there is no big push for gifted education, and the future is grim for advancing our intellectually driven students, especially minority students. The top three concerns listed in the National Association for Gifted Children 2010-2011 *State of the Nation Gifted Education Report* are lack of accountability for the academic achievement among gifted students, limited financial support for high achieving students, and teachers who are unprepared to meet high achieving student academic needs. Since all federal funding and support for gifted education has dried up, addressing these concerns lies with individual states.

Fortunately for me, I reside in the state of Georgia. Georgia is one of only six states in the United States that has a mandated and funded gifted education program. Financial support for gifted education in the school year 2010-2011 sat at close to \$200 million dollars. Georgia funds gifted education at four times the level of other states in the nation. Funding is not the issue, but classroom teachers being ill-prepared to identify and serve gifted students are a problem. The majority of teachers have no pre or post college training in the area of gifted education. Even though Georgia has historically been a frontrunner in its attempts to reach and identify students for gifted education programs with the likes of Mary Frazier, Julian Stanley, and Paul E. Torrance blazing the trail, minority enrollment in gifted education programs was low. In 1997 Georgia adopted the definition of gifted created by the United States Department of Education, which lead to the use of a multiple criteria approach to identify students for gifted

services. In the school year 2010-2011 the number of gifted identified students as a percentage of the total student population (K-12) was at twelve percent (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010).

Students in Georgia must qualify in three of four areas to be served in a gifted program: achievement, ability, creativity, and motivation. This eliminates a sole reliance on psychometric data and includes specific domains related to individual student strengths. From the years 2005 to 2012 the number of students identified as gifted in Georgia has grown twenty five percent. For this same time period identification of African American students identified as gifted increased by seventeen percent (Georgia Department of Education, 2010). It is my contention that these increases can be tied to the multiple criteria used for gifted identification in Georgia. The purpose of testing students for gifted education can be related to a wide range of beliefs, but my hope is that educators are seeking to provide the best possible education for all students, including gifted students (Cross & Cross, 2005). Gifted Education is about educational need, not elitism, separatism, or privilege. It is a legal educational placement that is intended to ensure a rigorous effective education for highly capable students from all cultural and economic backgrounds.

I concede up front that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find testing instruments that are not culturally biased, and that putting a label on intelligence is dangerous. As a professional who is mandated to test students for gifted identification I make conscious efforts to educate teachers about test bias related to minority students. Tests in our district are screened for content validity bias. Content bias is evident in a

testing instrument which assumes that all children must have had some type of experience or common knowledge. Several examples come to mind from a testing instrument our district discontinued using for content bias. One test question asked the students to indicate items found in a restaurant. Another asked students to identify which month they were most likely to go sled riding. Both of these test items presume a background that is not common to all students. Predictability bias has prompted us to move from an ability test that is read orally to a nonverbal test that does not eliminate success by students with low verbal skills. The ability test is intended to predict future performance, not isolated verbal listening skills. Not only is my goal to educate teachers about possible test bias, but also to help them see that viewing student test results without looking for possible bias in the testing instrument may serve to advance bias in their view of a student. In other words a student may score low on a test that has predictability bias and the teacher, not knowing this, assumes in the future the student will have low performance on classroom assignments. The limitations of testing instruments need to be acknowledged up front. As stated by Jerome E. Morris (2002),

[W]ho gets selected for gifted education programs is rooted in enduring perceptions, whether conscious or unconscious, that African American people might be intellectually inferior to white people. One cannot ignore this possibility considering the historic perceptions of and attacks on African Americans' intelligence.(p. 59)

To rebel against the injustices perpetuated by gifted assessments and labeling is not a luxury I can afford. As an employee of a public school system these are concerns which I



feel powerless to change, but hope to expose through my work with teachers preparing to work with gifted learners in a gifted endorsement program.

My primary concern is for the step that must be taken prior to testing: referral. A referral can be generated from a given score on a system- wide achievement test, but more often than not students are referred to be tested for gifted services by their classroom teacher. Oakland and Rossen (2005) explain that the process of referral has a strong impact on the disproportionate number of minority to majority students in gifted education programs. Teachers are relied upon heavily in the referral process for their first hand knowledge of a student's academic abilities, and typically can provide extensive information about student performance, motivation, and leadership capabilities. Problems arrive when teachers are poorly trained or function in a 'deficit paradigm' (Swanson, 2006, p. 12). I have heard a litany of excuses based on deficit thinking in relationship to gifted education. Lead Gifted teachers at school sites who are responsible for nominating and testing students for gifted education programs in low socio-economic/high minority schools have said to me: *How can you expect me to find any gifted students at this school when you look at the neighborhood they live in? I have tested every student at this school that could read on grade level, and trust me that isn't many. Gifted education will only supply them with the tools they need to be successful as drug dealers and hookers. Half the kids in this neighborhood are licking lead paint off the walls or inhaling second hand crack smoke, and you expect me to come up with students to test for gifted?* Teachers functioning in a deficit paradigm cannot see the characteristics of giftedness that minority, low socio-economic students display. They see the neighborhood and the environment instead of the student's potential (Ford, 2007, p.

38). *Teaching while white* has many disadvantages in public education unless the teacher is willing to look at and beyond a student's situatedness and raise their expectations for all students.

### **What Public School Teachers Look Like**

For a large part of America's history whiteness has been something that defines the 'other', but is not itself subject to others definitions (Pearce, 2003, p. 274).

The number of white teachers is steadily climbing proportionally to the increase in the number of nonwhite students in public education (USDE, 2000). As teaching ranks swell with white teachers, minority students fill the majority of the desks in public elementary schools. "Eighty-three percent of all elementary school teachers are white females" (Kunjufu, 2002, p. ix).

Future teacher projections that tell of an increasing gap between white graduates and minority graduates entering the teaching field only serve to raise my apprehension that the gap will widen in the coming years. My personal experience tells me that the presence of southern white administrators who adhere to age old prejudices do not make it easy for African American teachers. I can not express how appalled I was when visiting a school this year to have an elementary principal asks me, "Did you meet my gorilla?" For a minute I was clueless as to what or whom she was referring with the question. Then it hit me that the gorilla reference was to one of the second grade teachers on the school staff. Here I was seeking the identification of African American students

for gifted education programs, when the school administrator could not even respect her own teaching staff. This was the same administrator who had asked me to stop by because she is stymied by how few minority students are in the school's gifted program.

As the current census holds a mirror up to our nation's population, I am anticipating an even wider gap in the demographic spread between the ethnographic background of students and teachers. White is a race. I checked it on my census form. *Teaching while white* does affect the teacher and the student. McIntyre (1997) clearly explains this when he states, "For white educators, in particular, this invisibility to one's own racial being has implications in one's teaching practice" (p. 14). If you can't recognize yourself then how can you recognize someone else? "Progressive white people who are anti-racist might be able to understand the way in which their cultural practice re-inscribes white supremacy without promoting paralyzing guilt or denial" (hooks, 1993, p. 177). "Might" is the key term in this quote for me. *Teaching while white* has a multitude of layers that must be overcome when teaching in the public school house.

The white middle class female teacher must come face to face with the influences and ramifications that the world they exist within imposes on their educational decisions. Maxine Greene in *Teacher as Stranger*, (1973, p. 73) says it best when she states, "Ordinary perception has to be suspended for questions to be posed. The individual has to be shocked into awareness of his or her own perceptions, into recognition that one has constituted one's own life world." This is where white teachers who are enrolled in gifted endorsement programs need to be guided to seeing with "new eyes" that they are part of a race and how that impacts how they view African American gifted students. As a member of the historically dominant white class in the United States, it is difficult to

muster up rage at racism. Being white is normal, standard, and expresses the idealism of being an American. Over time blacks were not treated fairly, but what does that have to do with me? The fear, guilt and anger about treatments of blacks are in the past. Songs like Billy Joel's *We Didn't Start the Fire* reflect white attitudes about history and let us off the hook for past actions. "We didn't start the fire, it was always burning, since the world's been turning, we didn't start the fire, no we didn't light it, but we tried to fight it" (Joel, 1989). *Why should I, a white middle class woman, be held responsible for perpetuating a stereotype that I didn't start? I am trying to make a difference by working with low poverty minority students.* Middle class teacher experiences traditionally have been seen as interchangeable with American experiences. They are *teaching while white* in a multicolored world and cannot recognize themselves when looking in a mirror unless they become educated about their own ignorance. Waking up a white teacher to their current ambiguity and contradictions related to racial injustice in the schoolhouse is frightening. It is frightening to the person shining the spotlight as well as to the person in the spotlight. "As white people, we are being asked to critically examine and confront our own lived experiences, which may lead many of us to run for cover" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 136). Using film to educate teachers in the myopic areas of African American gifted education referrals will by no means reconstruct personal or institutional racism. It may lead a small group of white teachers to view themselves and their students through a new lens, and to view their interpretation of the "other" with self-awareness that did not previously exist.

David Smith (1991, p. 203) explains that, "Our singular identities will always and only be a part of the story," he cautions, "unless we can reinterpret the presence of the

other, a presence that is always a part of the story of our shared future.” The challenge is to juxtapose teachers’ experiences against the background of others and their personal situatedness. Everything has relevance. Teachers should consider developing “thoughtful awareness of the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken for granted” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8). *Teaching while white* in a majority minority schoolhouse makes this essential.

What perspective does prevail in the teacher’s mind, that of cultural deficit or cultural difference? If the answer is cultural deficit perspective, then teachers tend to view students who are different from themselves through a lens of culture deprivation and disadvantage. The depiction of minority students in popular culture only reinforces the cultural deficit perspective. Minority students are shown to live in substandard housing, in gang-inhabited neighborhoods where store fronts are adorned with boards, and gun shots are common. If there is a caring parent present, he or she is too busy keeping food on the table to attend to school matters. Neglect is rampant. On one hand there is white dominant culture, and on the other hand there is minority existence shown to the worse possible disadvantage. Films form a slurry of personal identity, culture, and interpretation

As a young classroom teacher I was fond of proudly saying that I was colorblind in my classroom. When asked the number of black or white students in my classroom my answer was always the same: “I don’t see race, just children!” I thought I was, “being fair-minded and generous by claiming not to see what one already thinks about in pejorative ways” (Sefa Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 43). My ignorance was allowing me to avoid the angst that comes from examining my sense of entitlement. By sharing my

white “colorblind” teaching journey riddled with mistakes, and my lack of cultural understanding, through an interpretation of films depicting African American gifted students, I intend to soften the sharp edges of racism in *teaching while white*.

### **Invisible Spaces in Gifted Education**

I run the gauntlet between two worlds, and I am cursed and blessed by both. I travel, observe, and take part in both; I can also be used by both. I am a rope in a tug of war (McClain, 1983, p. C4).

I was just beginning my position as an administrator over gifted education at the district level in 2005. It was a year that ushered 705,074 students into Georgia’s public elementary schools. Of this number 354,364 students received free or reduced lunch. This is a measure used by most school systems to generate poverty statistics. Out of the pool of students receiving free or reduced lunch in Georgia, only 1.95% were referred by their teacher for gifted testing. By comparison, 6.01% of students not on free or reduced lunch were referred by their teachers for gifted testing. Comparing teacher referral by race shows an even larger disparity among racial populations. Teachers referred 14.65% of white students for gifted testing. Only 4.58% of black students and 3.34% of Hispanic students were referred by teachers for testing (McBee, 2006, January).

Looking at this data, a disparity is indicated among identification of gifted students. Based on Georgia whole-state data it is evident that part of the problem lies with minority students not begin referred for testing. Too often when African American students are discussed, they are not in the category of “gifted”, but as “urban”, “poor”,

and “below grade level”(Perry et al., 2003, p. 99).

Fine and Weiss (2003) reinforce this point when they note that, “schools reproduce social inequalities- assuring that the ‘gaps’ between racial, ethnic, and social class groups remain or even intensify” (p. 3). This is particularly evident when viewing the gaping statistical difference in the number of students referred and tested for gifted educational services from African American and Caucasian populations. “A deficit perspective exists whereby students of color who are culturally different from their white counterparts are viewed as culturally deprived or disadvantaged” (Ford, 2003, p. 52). Improvement of the referral rate of African American students for gifted educational programs “might begin by first questioning and examining the racial assumptions upon which the field of gifted education operates” (Morris, 2002, p. 60). This will be supported by changes in teacher perspectives on the identification of gifted students, as will be stated in later chapters.

Malcolm Washington, my former student, had a problem with aggression. As a teacher “uneducated” in the characteristics of a gifted minority students, I had no point of reference for minority gifted students. Malcolm’s anger could have been generated from his limited choices, a lack of control over his circumstances, feelings of isolation created by not fitting in intellectually with peers, family, and friends, and fear of acceptance at home and school (Castellano, 2007). I depended singularly on my own background concerning the type of students who should be referred for gifted testing. Coming out of college, I was inadequately prepared in multicultural understanding, gifted education, and learning styles. These holes in my educational background were not filled when I later completed my gifted endorsement that supposedly prepared me to work with, identify,

and assess gifted students. Nowhere did I learn that African American students tend to be “more concrete learners, social learners, field dependant learners, and learners who value constructive responses” (Ford et al., 2002, p. 55).

If Malcolm or Chiquita had come from affluent families, their parent might have taken them to a psychologist for private testing in order to get them into a gifted program. They would have been attending a school where information about the gifted program was promoted by other parents in the community as a positive option for students. They would have had parents who were proactive and referred their own children for gifted testing despite me as the teacher not recommending their children (Frazier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995, p. ix). There are differences in cultural background that come into play at the schoolhouse.



## Chapter 3: Popular Culture Voyeurism in the Classroom

### Film As A Mirror

Mass media, especially popular culture, is where the pedagogy and learning take place for most young people, and as the primary pedagogical medium cannot be ignored (Giroux, 2002, p. 49).

It hasn't been all that long ago that the field of curriculum studies was reconceptualized as shifting from a primary interest in *developing* curriculum to *understanding* curriculum (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 187). Scholars of curriculum studies grapple with the influences of race, gender, and class as they wade through layers of political, social, and historical perspectives to gain an understanding of curriculum. In the contradictory space of the schoolhouse, student and teacher perspectives have been known to collide. Marla Morris (2009) reminds us that, "the schoolhouse- which is a scandal – has long been known to be troublesome" (p. 205). The schoolhouse represents a contested space. It is a space where the historical and political influences of the day are perversely played out while society watches in feigned helplessness. This is evident in the referral and placement of African American students in gifted public education programs.

William Pinar (2006) argues that cultural studies should be integrated with curriculum studies. The two disciplines cross each other's borders as they contextualize the marginalized through popular culture and schools. They engage the ways in which knowledge is acquired through a study of the curriculum (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). Modernity has brought about the evolution of cultural studies. "Cultural studies merges

into cultural histories which reconnect us to the world in ways that cannot be taken for granted...questions as to relations between social differences, life practices, and cultural expression” (During, 1993, p. 22). Cultural studies examine the relationship between the discourse and the reality it represents. How life is lived as compared to experienced is articulated by scholars of cultural studies. We do not live outside of popular culture. “Yet it is not reality that is represented and constructed; it is rather our relation to it, the ways we live and experience reality” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 159).

Film, as a creation of popular culture, can be leveraged to gently shift teachers’ understanding of themselves and others. Film is a familiar acquaintance to all. Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us that, “popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasure, the memoires, and the traditions of the people” (p.469). White teachers view students who look and act like themselves, portrayed as gifted in popular films. “Furthermore, because of their powerful pedagogical potential to shape race, sex, and class discourse, we can ill-afford to view movies as mere vehicles for entertainment” (hooks 1996, p. 236). Audiences have a plethora of viewing options via theaters, movie rentals, cable channels and computer options. Viewing movies is an element of popular culture. Instructing teachers enrolled in gifted endorsement classes in the use of media literacy to critically examine film characters and consider how the experience influences their perception of the other is a step toward increasing the referral rate of African American students to gifted education programs. “Popular culture is made in relationship to structures of dominance” (Fiske, 1991, p. 2). Whether it is the dominant culture or other ethnicities, we all carry stereotypes which filter how we view each other in reality or fiction. A mind that is educated and malleable to new ideas is also a little more likely

to consider referring students from a situatedness other than their own for gifted testing.

Popular culture can be a window into examining the multiplicities of crossing that take place between curriculum studies and cultural studies. “Cultural study enables us to discern complex and shifting interrelationships. As such, cultural studies not only complicate curriculum studies, they intensify them, drenching them in mass culture, subjective experience, and political struggle” (Pinar, 2006, p. 8). Film as a form of popular culture is a mechanism that traffics in maintaining and building cultural stereotypes. Using a medium that is built on the perpetuation of white dominant and stereotypes to overcome white teacher typecasting of gifted minority students is a paradox. It is a paradox that works in this case because it allows teachers to see themselves and their students as being caste as one dimensional characters. Film allows teachers to analyze *teaching while white* and discuss schoolhouse shortcoming. Hopefully, teachers can reflect and apply what they learn from film characters to their own teaching experiences and decisions.

Pedagogy of film studies, as it is tied to the problematic space of the school house and the influence its hidden curriculum has on teachers and students, is a place to begin addressing a lack of referral of African American students for gifted programs. The concept of a hidden curriculum is taken for granted by scholars of curriculum studies (Apple, 1982). It is the hidden curriculum that is lived by African American and Caucasian teachers that is brought into sharp focus in the documentation of the process and influence of popular culture on schooling. Hidden curriculum is the reason behind the reason those who play school act as they do. It is the “Eurocentric construct that naturalizes whiteness as the unspoken cultural norm against which success is measured”

(Howell, 1998, p. 286). Power and privilege enjoyed by white teachers and students are hidden by neutralizing them as the norm for all students. The inequity between races is kept vibrantly alive behind a façade of fairness and equity for all. Yet, there is no fairness and equity for the “other.” Society’s status quo is maintained by public schools. A denial of this hidden curriculum comes from whites seeing themselves as the norm. “Complicity through white privilege remains invisible and deniable, thereby maintaining the status quo” (Rains, 1998, p. 88). My goal is to project films on the walls of the school house and engage white teachers in a dialogue that leaves no curriculum hidden. This is important to my study because until white teachers see how power and privilege influence their choice of which students they refer for gifted testing nothing is likely to change.

For far too long within popular culture, the entertainment industry has played its part in perpetuating these narratives, taking liberties with race and other forms of oppression”(Sefa Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 15). As the drama of hidden curriculum in public schools evolves, each individual involved brings with them an individual and collective consciousness. Popular culture seeps into every aspect of the curriculum. This belief is noted by Cameron McCarthy (1998) when he states” it is increasingly television and film, more so than the school curriculum, that educate American youth about race”(p. 138). McCarthy pointed out the influence of race on students in 1998; the students he was talking about are now the teachers of today’s students. Their perceptions of race were formed by popular culture. Popular culture in the form of film has had a powerful influence on society. “The impact of popular culture images is more profound than the written word and more influential in shaping what people accept as the truth” (Weaver,

2009, p. 116). As I strive to help change teacher perceptions about African American students in gifted education programs, the powerful influence of film will be harnessed.

Currere is what propels us across the contested landscape. Currere “focuses on the educational experience of the individual, as reported by the individual” (Pinar et al., p. 414). Yet, David Smith cautions that, “our singular identities will always and only be a part of the story unless we can reinterpret the presence of the ‘other’, a presence that is always a part of the story of our shared future” (Smith, 1991, p. 203). These authors remind me to be vigilant in exploring the perspective of the “other” which often lies below the surface. “It sets free what is hidden from view by layers of tradition, prejudice, and even conscious evasion” (Slattery, 2006, p. 130). Teachers, whether they realize it or not, come preprogrammed with bias. “It is quite clear that the presence of Black cultural formations in the context of school causes teachers to make judgments about a child’s intellectual competence” (Perry et al., 2003, p. 85).

One of the primary areas of my job is to instruct teachers who are participating in our district’s gifted endorsement program. The courses are taught by personnel in our local school system. The teachers’ gifted endorsement is then granted by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Professional Standards Commission is the teacher licensing bureau in the state of Georgia. Our school district’s gifted endorsement program consists of three courses; Foundations of Gifted Characteristics, Pedagogy of Gifted Education and Assessment of Gifted Learners. Foundations of Gifted Characteristics is the first course of the three course sequence.

As I work with teachers who are participating in an endorsement program in gifted education, one of my first activities with them relates to diversity. This activity is

on the juvenile side, but having used it with a variety of teachers I have found it to be an engaging activity where everyone is forced to think about looking at individual characteristics from varying points of view. Each person is given a slip of paper with an animal on it. They then must locate others that are the same animal with nonverbal clues. Once groups form I ask them to identify themselves: cats, dogs, cows, sheep, pigs, turkeys, chickens and ducks. Typically, the fowls are all intermixed or confused in their grouping because their demonstrated characteristic too closely resembled each other. In a playful manner we discuss the positives and negatives characteristics such of each animal group. For example the sheep group would list positive characteristics such the fact that clothes can be made from their wool or that they are tasty to eat. Negative characteristic might be their smell, loud Ba, Ba sounds and the fact that they will blindly follow anyone who wants to lead them. At this point I then ask teachers to reflect upon how this might transfer to the positive and negative stereotypes that are formed related to human behavior especially their students. An activity this simple and disarming begins our journey into looking at teacher bias. “I believe the most important factor impacting the academic achievement of African American children is not the race or gender of the teacher but the teacher’s expectations” (Kunjufu, 2002, p. 17). It is essential that teachers understand that the characteristics of giftedness vary in cultural context.

From there we move into examining how these biases are produced and perpetuated through popular culture in the form of films. Some of their perceptions and interpretations of who gifted students are have been influenced by popular culture, especially films. Glimpses into movies loaded with racial assumptions that include white teacher’s hidden agenda of “saving” minority students is a starting point. Recognition of

cultural bias begins to dawn as teachers process that “movies seem to naturally exist in a state in which it’s highest and its most ordinary instances attract the same audience” (Cavell, 1979, p. 5). Movies are products of a homogenized culture with mainstream white American as its audience. They are “social commentary providing a bigger than life script through which people may interpret how they should think, act, and verbalize all the relationships in their lives” (Brennan, 2008, p. 166). This homogenized culture standardizes Americans to be a mix of people with an intermingling of cultures which leaves no real unique identify to its people except that of dominant white society: Movies made for white Americans depicting white America setting the standard for what is right.

### **When Screen Images Influence Perceptions**

How an ethnic group is ‘cast’ can deeply affect the attitudes of program viewer and can influence the ethnic group’s perception of itself (Gay,2000, p.128).

Movies are one of my favorite forms of popular culture. “It is a theater of popular desires, an identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time”(Hall, 1996, p. p. 474). For me movies serve as an intersection point between the lines of flight found in curriculum studies, cultural studies, and popular culture (Deleuz, 1986). Once, they were purely an escape for me, but now I see movie plots as a complex web of lines that blend together to influence people’s perceptions of reality. Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us that, “popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasure, the memoires, and the traditions of the people” (p.469).

In the Hollywood formula schoolhouse films, student self-concept is shaped by a “racism that does not exist anymore and that conditions of social equality are solidly in place that would enable any black person who works hard to achieve economic self-sufficiency” (hooks, 1993, p. 237). This is the great American dream: Anyone can make it if they work hard in America. Yet, reality is that everyone cannot make it and that African American students have a number of societal barriers to success. “A variable that is related to the issue of academic identity is how a student’s self-efficacy is affected by the view society conveys to students of their own competence” (Worrell, 2007, p. 48). Students are portrayed as just needing to suck it up and do the hard work of school. Kunjufu (2002) states, that “African American students, teachers, and everyone must understand the significance of ability, effort, luck, and the nature of the task. They need to realize that both success and failure should be attributed to their ability and effort” (p. 116).

The mindset of a student is being credited in the psychological research of Dr. Carol Dweck with influencing student educational outcomes. Dr Dweck (2008) discusses the possible negative impact the label “gifted” can have on decreasing student motivation and zest for learning. Told that they are gifted, students can potentially attribute their achievements to an intellectual force beyond their control. They may become lazy and complacent when confronted with a challenge because they have not developed the skills to solve problems. Students, who wear the gifted label, without realizing that success is only possible through their intellectual efforts and stamina, are at risk of academic failure. CamRon Wright, an African American ten year old boy, was one of my students in 1998. As was standard operating procedure at my school, I met with each parent for a



face to face conference at least twice during the school year. At one of these conferences while discussing CamRon's ability to comprehend just about any text put before him, his grandmother commented, "That boy be blessed. When he be born a lady in the neighborhood, she put a spell over him that made him be smart." Another parent told me concerning her child that, "Brains don't run in the family. God is working a miracle in that boy." When magical powers or luck are seen as the force behind a child's abilities, the child often does not build on or advance academically due to their giftedness.

Academic risk is also evident when students are labeled as gifted and the teacher feels that he or she has no influence over a student's intellectual ability. The stereotypical attitude that a gifted student can "get it" with no assistance can be as dangerous, as having low expectations for students from low socio-economic urban neighborhoods. I have had many conversations with colleagues about gifted identified students in their classrooms. The injustices done to gifted students comes across loud and clear when the teacher says, "You know, I can't say that I taught Johnny anything he didn't already know while he was in my class this year." When you combine a gifted student from a low socio-economic environment with low self expectations and uninformed teachers, the results can be disastrous. In a meeting with a group of teachers who were learning to work with gifted students, the subject of the academic under-performance of a particular student was the topic of discussion. A teacher in the class yelled out that the student was GMA. When I asked what the acronym meant she said, "Gifted my ass!" Perception was reality to the speaker of this statement.

This is certainly not the case on the big screen when minority students are shown in *Stand and Deliver* (Menendez/Musca & Olmos, 1988) as being prodded by their

teacher to attain a high Advanced Placement Score in calculus. *Stand and Deliver* spotlights the cultural deficit thinking that plagues so many white teachers. Today, as in the past, overcoming the achievement gap is directed at minority achievement and remains a barrier to minority students gaining entrance into gifted education programs (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard III, 2003,). *Stand and Deliver* is a testament to low expectations for minority students. Escalante, high school Advanced Placement calculus teacher, addresses barriers his student will face when he explains to them that, “There are people in this world who will assume you know less than you do because of your name and your complexion” (Menendez/Musca & Olmos, 1988). Perception is reality. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) conducts an investigation into how the group of Hispanic students could possibly make passing AP scores without cheating on the exam. This can be viewed as mirroring society’s view, which is portrayed as holding low expectations for minority student academic achievement. In my experience minority students are being encouraged to take AP exams with the understanding that with increased minority access to advanced courses that test scores will naturally decrease. Minority students can make the grade, as show in *Stand and Deliver* however it is hard to comprehend their achievement when held up to white teacher ideology.

Edward James Olmos portrays Jaime Escalante, a computer scientist who decides to make a career change in an effort to impact society by altering the course of Latino student lives. Escalante has elements of a teacher savior, but is able to escape some of the implications of this role by being Latino himself. In this true story, Escalante coaches a group of students whom “the system” has given up on, to score the highest number of passing calculus Advanced Placement exam scores in Los Angeles.

Angel, a Latino gang member, is the stereotypical gifted kid who doesn't want to be noticed. He is bright and capable at playing school, a talent that is not admired by his gang peers. So what does he do? Hide the truth. Keep multiple copies of his text books so he never has to be seen carrying a book. Sneak out to study sessions and play down his intellect. To be noticed as gifted is dangerous!

The camera exposes the under belly of ghetto living with all the trappings that violence and low socio-economic conditions bring with it. Escalante is depicted as "seeing" the students because he is one of their own kind, maybe not socio-economically, but racially. He gets it. He has a common ground and some basis of understanding.

My own experience has taught me that this common racial ground is not always so common. While I was teaching at a "Needs Improvement" School that was 98% minority, free and reduced lunch, a new African American fourth grade teacher joined our staff. An English major turned alternative preparation program teacher, Georgette was seen as a crown jewel. She was intelligent, well spoken, and black! Yet, her difficulties began immediately. As her assigned mentor, I talked with her at length about the difficulty she was having adapting to the school culture. Georgette was raised in a home of privilege; she attended an all-girls' boarding high school and had never been exposed to the likes of our students and parents. As one outspoken parent was fond of saying, "She sure is too white to be black." Economic status trumped race. Relationships were never forged and Georgette applied for a transfer to a suburban school as soon as possible. These were not her people to change, but strangers she had only seen in movies and on television.

In *Freedom Writers* (Morales, Durning, Swank, & Lavine, 2007) students are

only able to reach into the dark corners of their minds to overcome social and political obstacles as a result of their teacher's savior complex. African American intellectual inferiority is forced upon us in this type of film. Bulman (2005) summarizes the portrayal of public urban school problems as that of the individual attitudes of the students toward authority and academia. Hollywood depicts a culture of poverty that is a manifestation of the wrong values and attitude toward education not a result of inner-city race and class discrimination. The white teacher is allowed to manipulate the "other" but not see this "otherness" as a white tool of exploitation. "Whiteness does not exist outside of culture but constitutes the prevailing social texts in which social norms are made and remade" (McLaren, 1995 p. 107). This is demonstrated when Erin Gruwell shows up for her first teaching job, reflecting the majority of teachers in America: white, female, middleclass. Whiteness reflects a stark contrast to "otherness." Our heroine shows up on her first day of work in pearls and heels, a stark contrast to the baggy jeans and bold bling worn by her students. The border between white middle class America and the ghetto is clearly outlined by the heroine's dress, mannerisms, and conduct. Ms. Gruwell's character at one point in the film tells her father that her reason for teaching at Wilson High School, in the heart of the Watts area of Los Angeles, is to invest time in students now rather than see them go to prison. Prison or following the white savior teacher appears to be the only options.

Credit can be given to the attempt of director, Denzel Washington, makes to portrays tolerance. In an off screen interview Mr. Washington explains that the crux of the movie is tolerance. Yet, Ms. Gruwell dominates the film with her white value system that is used to bring her students out of the darkness and into the light. She is *teaching*

*while white* in an educational system that “warehouses students until it is time for them to disappear” (Winfrey, 2007). I will concede that individuals entering the teaching profession for the first time typically are filled with the hope of affecting change in the lives of their students. A strong motivator for becoming a teacher is to positively influence students’ lives. Without that motivation I wonder if or how long anyone would remain in the teaching profession. The rub comes when that enthusiasm is brokered into the savior belief that one lone teacher can overcome the social, economic and racial issues that impact student lives. The implication being that “the only limitation facing the students is the limitation within themselves” (Bulman, 2005, p. 59). Viewing a movie character dealing with students who live in a world riddled with problems that are solved by the end of the film takes the heat off the real teacher to address real world problems. This tendency to solve issue with simple solutions in 120 minutes or less becomes more natural than reality (Cavell, 1979, p. 102).

*Freedom Writers* gives the big screen audience a shocking window into ghetto life in Los Angeles complete with gang wars, drugs, convenience store shootings, abusive families, and jailed family members. The film is set in the shadows of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots of Rodney King fame. How can we be expected to “see” a student who would qualify for gifted services when he or she is depicted as just struggling to survive? The closest the film comes to casting a highly intellectual minority student is when Ms. Gruwell speaks to an African American student, Andre. She says, “I can see you! I know who you are” (Winfrey, 2007). The subtext being that Ms. Gruwell “sees” him as a bright student despite the trapping of his surrounding. She “sees” his value.

Take one good-hearted white teacher, add minority students with mammoth

obstacles to overcome, and you have a box office success. Capitalize on the idealistic goals of new white teachers; perpetuate stereotypes, and you have a broken educational system that does not identify minority students as educationally advanced.

Alone in the dark flickering lights, the viewer watches a film “that is unaware of our existence and which is part of the universe. There is nothing to prevent us from identifying ourselves in imagination with the moving world before us, which becomes the world” (Bazin, 1958-1965/1967, p. 102). The white teacher is not just a savior with a message to other white teachers to come forward to make a change, but also to the parents of black students. Black parents have been known to kneel at the altar of public education and ask for a white teacher savior to come rescue their children. In my second year teaching, the African American paraprofessional who was assigned to me explained why so many parents were requesting their children be placed in my class. She bluntly stated, “You are new and have a lot to learn, but that doesn’t matter to dem black parents. Some of dem dumb ass black folk still think a white lady knows more about teaching than a black lady. ‘She must, since she drives a nice car, wears nice clothes, and goes home to a nice house every night.’ Black parents want what you have for their children.” This was the first of many lessons I would receive on how a race perpetuates their own stereotypes.

Economic inequity is the enemy in *Music of the Heart* (Craven Maddelena Films, 1999), where inner-city students find themselves enraptured by the study of the violin. The metaphorical savage beast is soothed by music. Despite their circumstances, unmanageable student energy is channeled away from waste and into the production of music. In this film, Roberta Guaspari played by Meryl Streep, develops a violin program

in an East Harlem public school through sheer will and determination. Roberta is reduced to working in East Harlem due to a divorce: a need, not a desire. These are not her people, nor her preferred environment.

Near the beginning of the film an angry parent shouts, "I have seen this before, you white women coming up here to rescue the poor inner city kids who don't need rescuing"(Craven Maddelena Films, 1999). Race and classism are issues; they are always issues that can not be ignored. The well meaning white folk along with Roberta make simple work of barriers and soon all is well in the world of the violin program. Survival is the real issue at stake for the students, not an education, or cultural respect. It takes a nice white lady to pull the students out of their despair and into the light. As in *Stand and Deliver*, *Music of the Heart* treats dedicated intelligent students of color as an anomaly.

These glances into a deficit African American culture do not advance the self – efficacy of the student, and they give the white teacher even more social obstacles to battle. A negative view of a culture as deprivation is educationally harmful (Ford, Grantham, & Milner, 2004). Ford and Harris (2002) implore teachers to pay close attention to the role they play in the lives of their students. Due to the pervasive nature of media and especially film, teacher/student relationships are exploited to a damaging level.

Given a lack of knowledge, exposure and understanding, teachers may rely on stereotypical conceptions and beliefs as applied to African American student. Perceptions they may extract from television programming, media coverage, or even family biases still prevail in

teachers' thinking about diverse groups.(Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002, p. 16)

Further exploration into the elusive African American intellectually gifted students is found in *Finding Forrester*. Jamal Wallace is a student like many whom I have encountered in public education; African American, intellectually gifted, and hiding in plain sight. It is dangerous for peer acceptance to be too smart and stand out. It is dangerous to be noticed. The movie opens with a teacher asking who has read *The Raven* in the class. She asks, "Jamal have you read it?" With his head down Jamal responds, "nope, not me" (Mark, Connery, & Tollefson, 2000). Yet, somehow the audience knows that he has read the book and that his teacher knows it as well. Even with a "C" average Jamal cannot hide his giftedness from a standardized assessment in his public school district. He is tagged due to his high test scores as someone with potential.

His secret is safe until he encounters "the window", behind which is an urban legend that turns out to be a famous recluse author. Sean Connery as William Forrester takes Jamal under his wing to act as a mentor. As the plot thickens so does the level of misconception about the intelligence level of an African American male. First, Jamal encounters a white guy who weekly delivers groceries to William Forrester, and who questions Jamal about having even a basic understanding of a BMW automobile. How could a kid from the ghetto know about high performance vehicles? Second, Forrester himself insults Jamal when he says, "Your writing is amazing! How old are you 16? And you're black!"(Mark, Connery, & Tollefson, 2000).

Jamal's high standardized test scores bring him to the attention of school officials, but it is his basketball playing that seals the deal by getting him a scholarship to the



prestigious Mailor Prep School. The greatest insult comes at the hands of Mailor Professor Robert Crawford, who accuses Jamal of plagiarism. “Considering his background, how else could he succeed?” poses Professor Crawford (Mark et al., 2000). Or more accurately, how could an African American student from the ghetto perform to high standards? After all, he was recruited to play basketball for Mailor. Stereotyping, prejudice, ignorance; call it what you may, it is explained by William Forrester as a by product of fear. “Most people, being afraid of what they do not understand, turn to their assumptions” (Mark et al., 2000).

Jamal does not fit in anywhere. It is not comfortable in the Bronx where crime and poverty rule, nor is the world of Mailor a fit. During a scrimmage on the Mailer basketball court the only other student of color at Mailor says, “You might think we are alike, but we are not” (Mark et al., 2000). Classism trumps race. *Finding Forrester* gives the audience the possibility of a present day gifted African American that saves himself and his mentor. Jamal, an African American inner city high school student is the savior; a rarity in cinema. Jamal is cast as an intellectually gifted African American student, an even rarer commodity in cinema.

### **Invisible Intellectual Spaces**

Potential is not a guarantee of success, rather a promise of hope(Coleman, 2006, p.1).

Mainstream white America still wants to sit in a dark theater and be entertained. Even rising box office prices don't keep patrons home. As a society, we do not spend billions on tickets to avant-garde films or documentaries that intellectualize racism and

classism. We go see Hollywood blockbusters. We want a happy ending, a sugar coated pill that makes us feel good. Films focusing on social ills surprisingly may disturb, but ultimately give comfort as resolution is found and the situation is mastered (Hollows, Hutchings, & Jancovich, 2000, p. 211). Yet, we don't know the real issues influencing those around us, we all hold misconceptions, preconceptions, and prejudices about the people we do and do not interact with on a daily basis. "Moving like the speed of light we are bound to collide with each other" (Haggis et al., 2004). When this collision is at the schoolhouse the outcome can change the world.

A starting point for me in moving intellectually gifted African American students from invisible to the highly visible contradictory space where they reside is to acknowledge their existence. Enabling teachers to see their role in knowingly and unknowingly advancing the idea of intellectually gifted African American students is a starting point. To be noticed as an intellectually advanced African American student can be dangerous. African American students are battling deficit thinking, questioning of their own abilities, sabotaging achievement through interaction with negative peer pressure, and equating achievement in public school with acting white. "The ultimate challenge is to create paradigms that take culture and context into account to enhance possibilities for diverse students" (Ford et al., 2002, p. 56). Films rarely reflect an African American student who is academically successful (gifted) without the influence of a white teacher savior. These students live on the fringes, invisible in popular culture. "No longer belonging to anyone place or location, youth increasingly inhabit shifting cultural and social spheres marked by plurality of languages and cultures"(Giroux, 2002, p. 59). Consider how hard it would be for a teacher to identify a classification of student

that they have rarely heard about and never seen depicted as part of schoolhouse in popular culture.

“Race, minority status, socioeconomic status, and other variables are not factors that predict what students can learn. More likely than not, they predict how schools will treat children” (Hillard III, 1995, p. xiv). In the book *And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner City Students* a story unfolds of gifted African American students who attended Crenshaw High School in the south central region of Los Angeles. The pictures painted of the struggle of students and teachers with culture, politics and economics are clear. The author, Corwin (1997) writes that,

[I]n the ghetto, where teenage machismo is venerated in rap songs and music video, where athletes and gangbangers get the most attention in school hallways, an affinity for academics is something to camouflage, not celebrate. The serious student is often regarded as effete, as a sellout, as someone who has disdained his culture. (p.36)

Corwin goes on to state how the media would never come into the school if something good was happening, but if there is a shooting the media is all over it. “The media has tremendous influence, so that’s what white America sees. That’s their image of African American students” (Corwin, 1997, p. 93). The extensive space where gifted African Americans lurk in the shadows of public education needs to be exposed.

Patricia Dunck (1996) in *Hallucinating Foucault* said, “There is a loneliness of seeing a different world from that of the people around you. Their lives remain remote from yours. You can see the gulf and they can’t. You live among them” (p. 110). This is my interpretation of the life of a number of gifted African American students taught in

the public school house.

## Chapter 4: Pedagogy of Representation Caught on Film

### Masking Reality

Closing themselves into ‘circles of certainty’ from which they cannot escape, these individuals ‘make their own truth’ (Freire, 1994, p. 20.).

Adrenaline pumping, I look forward and at the same time dread the point in the gifted endorsement course where we begin to discuss race, bias, and inequity in relationship to teacher perceptions of gifted characteristics in students. Teaching about whiteness can be treacherous territory. Emotions have at times run high as white teachers struggle with guilt, anger, and defensiveness. Discussing race or our feeling about race is just something that is not done in polite southern company. In a class of Caucasian and African American teachers it is the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about. No one wants to sound like a racist. Conversations are polite, politically correct and stilted. It is difficult to facilitate a dialogue of changing attitudes without meaningful conversations. This is something I struggled with during my first couple of years teaching the gifted endorsement courses. How can I get my students to examine their own bias practices without making them uncomfortable in front of their peers? One of the goals of the gifted endorsement program is to prepare teachers to work with and refer students for the gifted program in our county. Research has shown that, “Teachers unprepared to work with gifted students may retain stereotypes and misperceptions that undermine their ability to recognize strengths in students who behave differently from their expectations” (Ford et al., 2002, p. 55). Because of the importance of teachers gaining an understanding of their own personal, cultural, and racial bias I had to find a

way to get through to my students. The identification of African American students for our district's gifted education program rested with teachers being cognizant of their own stereotypes (Powell & Siegle, 2000).

Typically the topic of racism and classism in relationship to identifying gifted students comes up around week six of the course. By this time I have had the opportunity to gain the trust and respect of majority of the students. I have also been slowly infusing comments about the bias that exists in gifted teacher referrals of African American students for gifted testing into the discussions for weeks prior to broaching the subject head-on with the class. As I launch into discussions about my students (Malcolm, Chiquita) and my personal bias I can see the black teachers' heads shaking up and down in solid agreement that I was acting in a racist manner. It is as though the African American teachers find it refreshing to hear someone white speak openly about the injustices doled out to black students. White teachers often give me questioning looks. At first they seem to be on the same page as I am but, when it comes time for me to tell how my white privileged background influenced my decisions, I lose them. After several years of haphazardly attempting to discuss the influence of a teacher's perception versus reality in the referral process for gifted identification and failing miserably, I knew I had to find a better way to tackle this topic. I was starting from scratch since most college teacher programs do not include course work related to gifted education and few teachers in my experience come out of pre-service educational courses with much cultural diversity training (Peterson, Cross, Johnson, & Howell, 2000)(National Association for Gifted Children, 2010).

The gifted endorsement classes I have taught are a mix of veteran and new

teachers. To enter the program a teacher must have three year's teaching experience. Usually the classes are a balanced mix of veteran and novice teachers with the minimum three year's experience. When I reflect on the racial composition of the gifted endorsement classes it mirrors the racial mix found in most student gifted programs; majority white. Seeking insight into why there were not more African American teachers taking the endorsement class, one night after class I sought out Shawnda. As an African American teacher of twelve year's experience, Shawnda explained to me that in her view black teachers just don't see themselves in the gifted programs, they can't relate. Gifted education is not where the black kids typically land in school. African American teachers want to work where they can make an impact on their community. Shawnda said, "After twelve years I am just now realizing that I was selling my own race short by closing the door on African Americans being included in the district's gifted program. I am ashamed that I have not given my own people the credit they deserve." Gay (2000) notes that, "how an ethnic group is 'cast' can deeply affect the attitudes of program viewers and can influence the ethnic group's perception of itself" (p.128). It was not just the white teachers that were showing a bias toward African American gifted students.

In an effort to combat the documented influence of teacher bias on referring students for gifted education programs, along with my students' difficulties verbalizing any discussion on racism and classism in relationship to themselves, I had to begin research on how I could change my teaching practices. Only then could I accomplish the goal of awakening my students to how their perceptions of race and gifted education influenced their decision making processes. I researched the works of Peterson, Cross, Johnson and Howell (2000) who had identified the use of film as the most affective

instructional method to change teachers' attitudes on student diversity. Another study conducted by Robin Redmon Wright and Jennifer A. Sandlin (2009) concluded that to push people to move past just watching films for pleasure and into a critical analysis of the film, it takes an instructor facilitating discussions. They suggest that the facilitator provide guided questions that probe the film's content, symbolism, and misperceptions to assist the students in developing critical skills to read media. Films would capture my students' interest, promote connections with the characters and provide lines of discussion (Harper & Rogers, 1999). Right then I made the decision to explore the use of film with my gifted endorsement classes.

Films have become a text that can teach us who we are and reflect what society values. In the imagination, cinema is seen as a complete representation of reality (Reynolds, 2006). Watching a film contributes to our collective cultural memories. "The collective process helps to bond members of society together, and to reinforces our collective understanding of the world we share"(Bulman, 2002, p. 2). To me watching a film is like reading a book; we have a vehicle that allows us to visit a world we do not know. Media literacy through the use of film was what I had decided to use to introduce my teacher-students to a world where there were no barriers to identifying with a world that has contributed to our perceptions (Bazin, 1967).

Since I wanted the class to watch and critique a few films together before they were set loose to watch movies on their own, I needed to locate a film to kick off our cinema experience. *Freedom Writer*, *Dangerous Minds*, and *Stand and Deliver*, were discarded as the first movie we would view together, since they all marginalized students who seek redemption through the magnanimous works of a savior teacher. The



implication in those films is that without this particular teacher the students would never have achieved any measure of success. As a class we did watch these movies at a later time to discuss concepts and criticism related to the identification of gifted students, as has already been stated in this paper. Then I thought about movies that portrayed child prodigies: *Little Man Tate*, *Billy Elliot*, and *Finding Bobby Fischer*. All of the main characters in these movies were white. I continued to rack my brain for movies with gifted children or teenagers and came up with: *Dead Poets Society*, *October Sky*, *Good Will Hunting*, *Real Genius*, *Spellbound*, and *Rushmore*. Again, I was faced with movie characters that were white. If I really wanted to stretch for movie characters with gifted characteristics I could include animated movies: *Sky High*, and *The Incredibles*.

Unfortunately, once again these characters were created to represent white teenagers. Of course, my repertoire of movies is not exhaustive and I am sure a movie critic could challenge me with other movies to consider on my quest for representations of minority gifted students in cinema. I do consider myself in step with the movies “Joe Public” views. So if I was struggling, then maybe there were indeed few movies that depicted black gifted students in a positive light. After considering several movies I settled on showing *Akeelah and the Bee* as the first movie the class would view and discuss.

Viewing films together would help us participate in a shared experience that was familiar to everyone in the class. It would be a comfortable experience where reality, “which awakens as much as enfolds us” was presented through a nonthreatening platform (Cavell, 1979, p. 17). If my students were not talking openly about their own biased perceptions then film was going to be the chosen vehicle to get them talking. Bulman (2005) reminded me that, “the enjoyment of popular culture such as movies is a

collective experience” (p.2). Part of the pleasure of the viewing experience is the collective process of experiencing a bonding social communion that binds the viewers together. The ease of watching films with peers or family allowed the teachers mentioned in this dissertation to experience an autobiographical journey as well as a spectator’s event. The goal was to have the teachers experience “...meaning gathering as significant...there is a certain equivalence of presence and perceptual activity between film and the spectator as they convene in the privileged space of the theater” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 217). The playing field would be leveled when we watched films as a class. As a group we would be able to address the film characters’ flaws and bias instead of pointing a finger at each other or exposing our own flaws.

Film like theater, provides a partial illusion. Up to a certain degree it gives the impression of real life. The components is all the stronger since in contrast to theater the film can actually portray real- that is not simulated- life in real surroundings. (Arnheim, 1957, p. 26)

I needed to sell my students on the validity of watching films as a means of exploring their own misperceptions related to gifted students. I also wanted them be conscious of the fact that if they even had diversity training it could be rooted in a deficit perspective (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

To keep the lines of conversation in the gifted endorsement class clear for this dissertation, I have chosen to use four composite characters to represent the class participants. Each reflects a primary group of teachers in the class. Emily is a white teacher who is in her early twenties, she has just completed three years of teaching, was born, raised and attended college in south Georgia. She has a Bachelor’s Degree in Early

Childhood Education. Emily tends to be naively literal in her comments. In her written work she refers to African American students as colored. White as a race has never been a concept she has been exposed to in her life. It is just the norm. Emily works at an elementary school that has a majority white student population in the suburbs.

Approximately 40% of the students attending the school where Emily teaches have been identified as gifted according the Georgia Department of Education Gifted Education Policy.

Emily also has commented that she never has had an occasion to refer a student of color for gifted testing. She looks at the African American students at her school as coming from a deficit background since they are bused from other neighborhoods and not actually part of the community where the school is located.

Sophie is a white teacher pushing fifty years old with over twenty years experience in the teaching profession. She has an Education Specialist Degree in Curriculum Development. Sophie is originally from Ohio, but has taught in Georgia for over ten years. Sophie is divorced. Her two high school age children attend a private high school. Sophie is counting her years until retirement. Her work displays a jaded outlook and her strong opinions tend to create a bullying atmosphere when she speaks in class. Sophie works at a high poverty, majority African American urban elementary school. In fact, Sophie has worked at high poverty inner-city schools her entire teaching career in Georgia. She believes all public education is substandard due to the background of the children who attend, but she keeps her teaching position due to the salary and benefits it affords her. It doesn't matter what race a child is if they are attending her school, they are from parents who are lacking in the education and funds to properly raise

their children to a standard which Sophie holds for her biological children. Sophie has never referred any student for gifted testing because she believes the state criteria for gifted identification is watered down, therefore accepting students who are just bright learners rather than truly academically gifted. The school Sophie teaches in has 12% of the students identified as gifted which mirrors the state average.

Gail is an African American teacher entering her 15<sup>th</sup> year teaching within the same elementary school. She was raised and educated in New York State, but moved south when she married. Her age is somewhere between 50-60 years old. Gail has her doctoral degree and insists that everyone in the gifted cohort address her as Dr. Jackson. Everyone else in the class including myself as the instructor is addressed by their first name. Dr. Jackson is only taking the gifted endorsement course because it is a requirement of teaching at her school, since the school became a magnet academy for gifted and talented students last year. With the change from a neighborhood school to a magnet school, Dr. Jackson's school has transitioned from majority low income African American clientele to majority white upper and middle income students. She resented the fact that the population of her school changed and that she was forced to participate in the gifted endorsement program. She feels that her real work is in being an example for struggling African American students. Dr. Jackson is also struggling with the parents of privileged children questioning her authority and teaching practices. The school where she teaches now has a private school atmosphere in a very public school system. Dr. Jackson appears to be angry with the school system, the parents and students she is working with this year, and with the requirement that she participate in the gifted endorsement program when she already has a doctorate in educational leadership. Dr.

Jackson's struggles and anger make it hard for me to understand where she truly stands on issues of race and cultural difference. She has told me when her school was just an inner-city neighborhood school she never referred a student for gifted testing. She was always focused on the students in her class who were struggling, and not the students in her class who just "got it." This year with her school turning into a magnet academy, she has had her hands too full with placating parents to even think about referring anyone for gifted testing. Dr. Jackson works at a school where 60% of the students are identified as gifted.

The fact that Sophie and Dr. Jackson work at schools with a high percentage of identified gifted students gives testimony to a hidden curriculum. This is the curriculum of students and parents who know how to navigate the culture of schooling. They are practiced at the rules of how to succeed academically and behaviorally in school. A superior knowledge of how to "play" school is a huge advantage in the referral, nomination and placement of a student in gifted education programs.

Sunny, is a Caucasian teacher with five years experience, she is in her late twenties or early thirties and expecting a baby in 4 months. Her mother was a paraprofessional and she grew up wanting to become a teacher. Sunny was born, raised and educated in the same southern town she now teaches public school students in Georgia. In fact, Sunny teaches at the same school she attended as an elementary student and in which her mother still works as a paraprofessional. Her school is an 80% African American neighborhood school that the district is considering closing due to the cost to repair the buildings' aging structure. The community surrounding the school used to be composed of single family dwellings owned by the working class. Today, the majority of

the area has been converted to section eight housing. When the district began talks of closing the school parents protested students being bused to another school and won a reprieve for at least another couple of years. Sunny just completed her masters' degree in elementary education last year. She is well connected in the local white community. In fact, she is admired as a local daughter made good by attending Emory University on a full scholarship, majoring in business and returning to her home town to teach. Sunny entered teaching through an alternative preparation program for individuals who held a degree in a field other than education. It is evident in her comments that she is passionate about teaching. She presently holds the title of Teacher of the Year for her school. In her application for district Teacher of the Year competition Sunny expounded on her views that all children are the same and that color should not be a factor in providing a quality education. Even with her educational background and community connectedness she holds fast to a color blind stance where education is concerned (Lindsey et al., 2003, p. 387). She appears to lean more toward equal than equitable in her beliefs.

### **The Elusive African American Gifted Student in Films**

Visual pedagogy recognizes that we live in a virtual world in which images bombard our minds everyday (Weaver, 2005, p. 51).

It is impossible to interact with a text on race and not realize that there is no uncontested consensus regarding race matters. "Any notions of 'the real black community' and 'positive images' are value laden, socially loaded and ideologically charged" (West, 1993, p. 263). For this reason I chose to show *Akeelah and the Bee* as the first film the class viewed as a group. Gadamer (1975) explains that we cannot

separate ourselves from the meaning of the text. Interpreting a text is to understand, and understanding is always specific to an application. It is in the textual context of the cinema that the phantom lives of African American gifted students and their teachers will be examined. The silence concerning race matters in America has been deafeningly volatile. I ask my students to reflect on a question as we began exploring the issues of race and classism as they related to gifted education: Does a student's race and does the referring teacher's race matter in relationship to a student being referred for gifted testing? The entire class was adamant that the race of the student or teacher has no influence on a student being referred for gifted testing. With this thought in mind we began our exploration of gifted students depicted in films.

*Akeelah and the Bee* begins with eleven year old Akeelah Anderson explaining the social and emotional distance between herself and her peers, "You know that feeling that no matter where you go you don't fit in?" (Atchson, 2006). Akeelah Anderson attends Crenshaw Middle School, an under-performing school located in South Central Los Angeles. She feels estranged and alienated from her peers, yet she does her best to attempt to "fit in" by skipping classes and not completing assignments. She hides her academic talents from girls who call her "freak" and "brainiac." Her initial resistance to participating in the school spelling bee is based on the fear of not fitting in with her peers. Typically, gifted students are more vulnerable to negative peer pressure than other students. Decreased academic achievement and motivation are employed to help them fit in with their peers (Ford, 2007, p. 39). Akeelah chooses to adapt and adjust to the social pressures of her peers instead of opting out of their society (Hill, 2000, p. 208). Being smart in school was seen as "acting white" which is a very real issue facing gifted black

children. Akeelah used “ghetto talk” to fit in with her friends even though she is familiar and versed in a more standard registry of English.

Typical of mainstream films, Akeelah’s home life is shown in a disparaging light. She is being raised by a single mother after her father was gunned down while walking home from work. Her teenage sister is raising a child out of wedlock, and her teenage brother is working to impress local gang leaders. Akeelah’s gangster brother summarizes the cultural reflection of where she is coming from when he states, “Going up against a bunch of white kids, they g’na tear your black ass up” (Atchison, 2006). This statement reminded me of my time as a teacher in a predominately black urban school where I took eight of my gifted African American students to an Odyssey of the Mind competition held in middle Georgia. I remember hearing my students mumble under their breath about how ghetto they looked and how they would never win against all “those white teams.” Just like Akeelah found out at the spelling bee, the Odyssey of the Mind competitors were primarily white, the majority of the audience was white, and the judges were white. They had to attempt to compete in a cultural atmosphere that was foreign to them. These are the un-sugar coated realities that smart urban minority students must face.

In the movie *Akeelah and the Bee*, Akeelah’s mother is depicted as loving her family, but putting in long hours to keep the household running. Mom pretty much ignores Akeelah for most of the movie. Near the end of the movie, Akeelah’s mom confesses that due to her lack of self-confidence when faced with life in college she had dropped out. She could not “see” herself surviving in an alien culture and that she wanted to spare Akeelah that same rejection.



Like most adolescent films, *Akeelah and the Bee* expects its characters to “transcend the limitations of their communities, the narrow-mindedness of their families, the expectations of their parents, the conformity of their peers, the ineffectiveness of their schools, their poverty and the insidious effects of racism...”(Bulman, 2005, p. 19). Not only are African Americans not safe from stereotyping in *Akeelah and the Bee*, but Asians and Hispanics are targeted as well. Javier Mendz, another spelling bee contestant, is portrayed as a happy-go-lucky friendly student. Dylan Chu and his family are represented as academically goal driven, hard working Asian individuals who must win at all costs. Even though *Akeelah* makes it to the National Spelling Bee, Dylan a gifted student himself, comments, “No way am I going to let a little black girl beat me!”

The white principal personifying the dominant culture convinces *Akeelah* to compete in each level of spelling bee competitions. Crenshaw Middle School needs some good press to overcome the image of a failing school. I imagine the principal needed these wins to keep his job in the face of not making “adequate yearly progress” as measured by No Child Left Behind. Even though the white principal drives *Akeelah* to competitions, promises her new outfits, dismisses her from summer school, and cheers her to success, the audience should never lose sight of his personal motivation of saving face and his job at Crenshaw Middle School. “There is a kind of nothing ever changes, the system always wins attitude” that is hard to escape (Hall, 1996, p. 468). When the film flickered to an end and the lights came up we discussed the movie. I asked the class to tell me what if any gifted characteristics they saw *Akeelah* display.

Emily, white teacher with three year’s experience, explained, “That *Akeelah* kept lists of words, read the dictionary, and played online Scrabble so this showed a strong

passion for something beyond the norm which often happens with gifted kids.” Sophie, a fiftyish white teacher commented, “Akeelah displayed a high level of empathy for her competition when she tried to throw the Bee and let Dylan win. Empathy is a gifted characteristic! Although, I think the only truly gifted student in this film was the Chinese kid. He is motivated to learn and driven to succeed.” Dr. Jackson, a middle-age African American teacher, jumped into the conversation, stating that,

Akeelah and the Hispanic kid did not have a problem working to support each other where as that Chinese kid, Dylan, was all about looking out for number one until the end of the movie. This is where I see a cultural difference. People need to understand the children they teach especially the needs of African American students to work together.

Finally, Sunny, a white teachers with five years experience pronounces, “If I remember my schooling on Howard Gardner correctly, then Akeelah is a kinesthetic learner because she spells best while jumping rope or moving her fingers to a beat.” Our discussion moved on to exploring any cultural or racial bias they saw in the movie. Sunny, young white teacher chimes in that, “Akeelah wants to fit in with her peers and not act white.” Dr. Jackson, older black teacher, immediately begins shaking her head and says, “I hate that expression ‘acting white.’ I prefer to call it ‘acting educated.’ After all isn’t that really the issue. It is just some blacks associate having an education with being white.” Sophie, older white teacher, contributed, “Race is not a factor, and all kids are the same just plain lazy!” Emily, not to be left out of the discussion says, Well, I have several African American students in my class that seem extremely bright, you can’t expect them to do well considering the neighborhood they come from.” At this point all

the responses were about what I expected in light of my original assessment of where my students were at on the Cultural Proficiency Continuum. To wrap up the class that night I ask the students take a few minutes to write a brief reflection of their thoughts after viewing of *Akeelah and the Bee*. I wanted them to start thinking about diversity without making them uncomfortable.

Sophie wrote,

I believe after viewing this movie I have a broader view of the characteristics of a gifted learner. To most people Akeelah is a second class citizen. Teachers tend to over look these students. She will probably end up just like her parents. This is just reality. As I see it there is no bias in gifted education, in fact we have been lowering the bar for years to allow more black children into gifted programs.

Sophie's comment on the bar being lowered for African American children concerned me. Was she actually saying that only by lowering admission standards could African American student be admitted to a gifted education program? My interpretation of this comment was that in Sophie's mind, low academic achievement equaled being African American. Talking about lowering standards was just a defense mechanism she used in an attempt to keep the status quo.

Emily stated, "This was an inspirational movie to me. This movie has allowed me to be more aware of colored students' individual gifts and finding ways to foster and nurture creativity. I never went to school with colored kids so I just don't get them."

Dr. Jackson commented, "*Akeelah and the Bee* was a wonderful movie.

Unfortunately, there was some profanity at the beginning of the movie. I liked how this

movie encouraged students to become better spellers. This film shows students that it is okay to be an educated African American student who can succeed.”

Sunny explained how, “This movie encouraged me to look closely at each student, identify what their strong points are and nurture them in anyway possible. It has reminded me that no matter what a child’s background they can succeed.”

After reflecting upon the class discussion and submitted written responses on *Akeelah and the Bee*, it was painfully clear to me that Sophie and Emily did not even acknowledge that white is a race or a determinate of how the “other” is defined (Howard, 1999). As white teachers they wanted to see themselves as fair, impartial and not racist. Yet, history is working against them. As stated by Stuart Hall (1996) “It is a theatre of popular desires, an identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented” and reaffirmed as a white dominated society (p. 475). These white teachers who had watched a film displaying struggling black students, these white teachers are the pool of individuals who go to college to help save “those” poor students, these white teachers are who create the historical rules of the public school house. Dr. Jackson seemed to disregard most of the class discussion and just focus on Akeelah representing an African American girl who makes good.

## **Akeelah vs. Fred**

Popular film, rich in meanings both fluid and diverse, offers an intersection for the theoretical and the everyday (Dalton, 2007, p. 7).

The following night of class we watched the movie *Little Man Tate*. I wanted to give the class a film to contrast with *Akeelah and the Bee*. *Little Man Tate* focuses on Fred Tate, a child prodigy. There is a sharp contrast in how Akeelah and Fred Tate are treated as gifted students by their parents and the educational community. Yet, a close reading also displays similar negative impacts pushed on gifted Akeelah and Fred at the hands of white public school culture. We began the evening with a discussion on media literacy and its impact on the formation of cultural bias as it would relate to films. Media images shape our views of the world and our deepest values. “Media stories provide the symbols and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture” (Kellner, 1995, p. xv). *Little Man Tate* was compared to *Akeelah and the Bee* showing a sharp contrast in the treatment of these gifted students by society. The dilemma of achievement and the social implications that are displayed in these movies play up the cultural inferiority of African Americans that is irresponsible (Perry et al., 2003). These two movies were presented as vehicles for conveying the notions of “racial differences...rooted in the structures of exploitation, power and privilege, which have had dire social, political, economic and educational consequences for different groups” (Marble, 1990, p. 90).

In the first few minutes of *Little Man Tate* the main character Fred Tate speaks to the same lack of place that Akeelah felt when he explains,

By first grade it was pretty obvious I was not like everyone else.

My first grade teacher, Miss Nimvel, told Dede that I never paid attention. That I was probably retarded, and that I had a very limited future as a citizen of the United States. Then a week later, she said I should probably skip second grade, maybe even skip elementary school altogether. (Orion Pictures, 1991)

Fred Tate is a genius versed in painting, composition, poetry, mathematics, and physics. He could be a poster child for a gifted student with asynchronous development. He can complete college level work yet, just wants to be a normal kid with someone to eat lunch with and play with at recess. Like Akeelah, Fred wants to fit in with his peers. When his music teacher asks Fred to play a few bars on the piano he plays a rudimentary tune even though he creates his own compositions at home. Fred and Akeelah are also both being raised by single mothers who are struggling to get by and provide for their children. Both families are presented as existing in a low socio-economic class. This is where the similarity between the two characters ends.

Fred is a white second grade student who comes to the attention of Jane Grierson who runs a center for child prodigies in New York City. Ms. Grierson is interested in affording Fred the opportunities a child with his potential deserves. She wants to administer tests to attain Fred's true intellectual potential and to give him the opportunity to spend time with his academic equals.

Dr. Grierson in *Little Man Tate* demonstrated the school of thought that intelligence and potential are fixed. In contrast, Dr. Carol Dweck (2008) in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* presents a body of research that

contradicts this and indicated human intelligence is malleable and potential is limitless. Assigning a fixed intelligence to humans creates a very limiting society. It is the unlimited intelligence inside each person that makes it possible to develop potential in a multitude of ways. In real life students are much more multi-dimensional than given credit for in films. In addition, the single dimensionality of movie characters tends to feed into stereotypes already created by the search for “true” potential. “True” potential is often code for meeting white standards of achievement. Jane Grierson was searching for Fred’s “true” potential.

Fred’s mom, Dede, is skeptical at first, but yields and decides to allow Fred to join the Grierson Institute when she realizes Fred has no peers in his neighborhood or at his school. In contrast to Akeelah’s African American mother, Dede is shown as a struggling white mother who is still very involved with her son’s education. Akeelah struggles along in the same neighborhood with her mentor, Dr. Laramie while Fred is lifted out of his neighborhood to attend the Grierson Institute run by his mentor. Fred is given the opportunity to transcend his urban roots. Akeelah and Fred symbolize “The evolution of two parallel curricula, one for urban and one for the suburban schools as it relates to what is felt to be appropriate to different kinds of children from distinct communities”(Kozol, 1991, p. 75).

When we as a class begin to dissect *Little Man Tate* Sophie immediately voices her opinion: “Fred is being used. He is trotted out to perform on television shows, academic competitions, and used as the focus of a book being written by his mentor. His value is what he can contribute to helping his mentor, Jane, get

ahead.” I explained that this dehumanization of gifted individuals as humans who have emotions is common in films. Fred is viewed as a prize to be sold to the highest bidder. Fred’s highest bidder, Grierson Institute, is a place that is depicted as the pinnacle of Euro-American academic cannons. The wealth of Grierson affords Fred incredible opportunities. Yet, ultimately what Fred really needs is the emotional connection offered by his mother. Emily, naive twenty something teacher, comments, “Poor little Fred is so nervous he has an ulcer. People just need to let him be!”

“Why didn’t we talk about the issue of dehumanization when we watched *Akeelah and the Bee*?” uttered Sunny, late twenties white teacher. She continued,

After all Akeelah’s bid for acceptance keeps her in ‘the neighborhood’ where she has to rely on a burned out professor as a mentor, gang members and community members as her role models. Her exceptional abilities after winning the Script’s National Spelling Bee only allow her to return to Crenshaw Middle School and take up where she left off. Even returning to Crenshaw dehumanizes Akeelah as she is used to showcase her school as a success and save the principal’s job.

“Wait just a minute,” says Sophie, fiftyish white teacher, “Fred is way more, as you said, ‘dehumanized’ than Akeelah. Everyone takes advantage of Fred. He is a victim of circumstances.”

“How can you say Fred is more a victim than Akeelah? She lived in the ghetto, had a sorry ass school, didn’t fit in anywhere and won a national



competition without the help of some swanky school,” alleged Sunny. Not giving anyone else a chance to speak Dr. Jackson immediately jumped on topic and said, “Whites have more historical practice taking advantage of people. Maybe these movies just show how culturally whites and blacks treat their own differently.” Even though I was happy to see the group having a frank honest discussion, time was slipping away and it was necessary to end class for the night. I ask the class to take a few minutes to write their thoughts on the bias shown in *Little Man Tate* as it related to their race and culture. This was their exit pass out of the class for the evening.

Emily wrote that she did not see any cultural or racial bias in *Little Man Tate*. She saw this as an accurate portrayal of a gifted child. “I am not sure how to discuss racism when Fred is white. Racism only happens to coloreds.” Sunny wrote that she felt Fred was typical of a gifted student. As far as racism goes there was no racism where Fred was concerned. Everyone in the movie was white.

I think Akeelah was a better representation of racism. Classism was evident with the financial differences between Fred’s mom Dede and Jane Grierson and what they could provide for Fred. If Akeelah would have been in Fred’s place she would have been treated the same. Race was not an issue.

Dr. Jackson, wrote that she found,

Many of my classmates are ignorant of the feeling of minority students. They just don’t get it, that African Americans are always

fighting a battle to get ahead. Fred is just one more example of how being white has advantages. How can you compare Fred going to college with Akeelah getting tutored by thugs?

Sophie's response indicated her lack of interest in dealing with classism and racism, "Fred Tate was a little boy who was isolated at school because he was so much smarter than his classmates. He just wanted someone to eat lunch with."

After viewing *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Little Man Tate* with my students I realized that they still did not grasp the influence their race or culture had on referring students for gifted identification. I took comfort in the fact that at least we were beginning a dialogue that included race and that they were beginning to see the value in media literacy where films were concerned. Two comments made by students confirmed this for me; "It is wonderful to be able to watch movies as a tool to understanding bias" and "I will never view movies the same. I will always be digging deeper for the real story behind the story."

As a class we continued to watch films and discuss the bias and gifted characteristics displayed the film stars. The impact of cinema on the school house was examined in *Music of the Heart*, *Finding Forester*, *Stand and Deliver*, and *Freedom Writers* with discussions based on the insights mentioned earlier in this paper.

To continue their exploration of race and culture as it relates to gifted student referrals, the teachers were given the assignment to watch at least two movies outside of class with an eye on finding racial and cultural bias in relationship to gifted students. They watched a multitude of films, some self-

selected and some from a list I provided. All this was in an attempt to lead them to analyze how their identities and those of their students have been constructed by popular culture. The value of using popular culture texts, as in film, is touted by Weaver and Daspit (2000) as “inspiring models of the types of teachers they wish to become. Moreover, these texts present more concrete insight into problems and issues teachers face today” (p. xxii). My students’ insights gained by watching films were documented in film critiques completed through an online course platform.

Left to their own devices the majority of the students watched the same handful of films: *Good Will Hunting*, *Matilda*, *Freedom Writers*, *21*, *August Rush*, *Breakfast Club* and *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. After the students turned in their first movie critiques I realized even my African American students had chosen movies with white gifted characters. This was very telling to me. The class was still immersed in cultural incapacity or not being able to look outside themselves to recognize other cultural characteristics. They would not be able to refer African American students for gifted testing if they were not even willing to push themselves to watch films with gifted African American lead characters. My next step was to push them to view a movie with a central character that was of a different race than the first movie they watched. They were once again given the option to select a movie from the list I supplied or select a movie of their own choosing.

Dr. Jackson’s second movie critique was on *The Marva Collins Story*. Marva Collins was a disillusioned teacher in the Chicago area that began her own school on the

second story of her home. She worked with students that were outcasts of the public school system for academic or behavioral failings. Marva was a black female of a middle class background. Dr. Jackson expressed that she felt,

This movie shows a strong black woman central character assisting her community. Ms. Marva Collins is working with the students most folks believe African American students are. They are poor, coming from a deficit background in schooling and behavior.

She went on to write, “I guess I am also one of the people who think ghetto kids can’t be gifted. I hate to admit that I never really gave it much thought. I see gifted characteristics in my black professional friends’ kids, but not the project kids I teach.” As far as identifying African American gifted students in the movie Dr. Jackson’s connection is centered on a quote from the movie: “There is a brilliant child locked in every student” (Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions, 1981). Even though, she missed the point of exploring gifted African American students in movies as instructed, she is thinking about her bias concerning identify students for gifted services, which was my goal for this assignment. Her recognition of cultural bias based on economic status as one of her stumbling block to referring African American students for gifted education testing. This is a start in expanding her cultural awareness.

Emily wrote, “*Coach Carter* was the movie I picked to view because it shows a strong black man who strove to make a difference with talented basketball students.” *Coach Carter* is based on the true story of business man who decided to become a coach at his former high school. Richmond High School develops a winning basketball team as Coach Carter instills discipline, team work, and sacrifice. “I believe Coach Carter saw

potential in these students and gave them what they needed to succeed,” was Emily’s observation. She continues by saying, “The coach showed concern about their academics which just doesn’t happen in the black community.” Emily’s movie critique added to my concern about her lack of awareness concerning race and belief in African American stereotypes.

Sophie selected *The Great Debaters* as her second movie to critique. She called it a “historical gifted black student competition film.” She explained that,

While watching the *Great Debaters* I realized that it is easier to view African American students as gifted when looking at them in a historical context. It is almost as though we stopped caring about gifted African American students after the Civil Rights Movement ended or maybe it is just that they look and sound so different from us today.

Sophie went on to tell how watching *The Great Debaters* reminded her of another movie starring Denzel Washington, *Remember the Titans*. Again, this movie shows strong African American young men who are principled, smart and ethical striving to fit in white football culture. “I ask again, why are the young black boys in today’s films shown as thugs? The black community works hard to come up with strong role models in real world, yet this never comes across in television or movies,” wrote Sophie. Sophie appears to be using critical media literacy to examine films. Unfortunately, she indicates only an interest in critiquing the film and not herself. I am not sure where Sophie’s thoughts are at this point with modern African American students in her school and the possibility of them being referred for gifted testing. She appears to still be showing an incapacity for cultural differences at this point in the course.

Finally, Sunny selected *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story* to view and critique. “Almost as soon as the movie started I noticed that all the kids in Ben’s fourth grade classmates at school are white. He is the only black student and making poor grades” explained Sunny. “Ben and his brother are watching *Father Knows Best* and *F-Troop* on television. These are white shows which remind me of watching primarily white television characters as I was growing up,” wrote Sunny. In the eighth grade Ben wins an award for the highest grade point average in his school. As Ben accepts the award his teacher chastises this classmates saying, “You all should be ashamed of yourselves letting Ben, a boy with no father, a boy of color with tremendous disadvantages beat you out for this award” (Sony Pictures Television, 2009). Sunny commented on the white teacher’s insensitivity and stereotyping. “My hope is that no teacher thinks like this in today’s world, but maybe it is wishful thinking on my part. If they do think it no one would dare voice those thoughts about a student,” wrote Sunny. She commented about the racism that Ben felt at the hands of his own race when he attended an affluent black high school where the students made fun of his poor economic status. Despite Ben’s obvious brilliance, the racism continues right up to the point where he is an intern at John Hopkins in neurosurgery. “Racism is just something African Americans have to learn to overcome. Most white people don’t understand the racism. I wish white teachers could walk in the shoes of a young black boy for a few days to realize what it is like to be young black bright and invisible,” commented Sunny. Sunny is my first glimmer of hope that a student may be crossing a cultural chasm from being color blinded to recognizing difference.

Spring-boarding from the movie critiques posted on line I asked the students to

give me one sentence that would summarize their movie-viewing experience. The following are a representation of those responses: *The characters were people of struggle. I will now view all movies differently. I didn't see any cultural bias. No bias- both my characters were young white boys. African American students hunger for learning like white students. Giftedness is displayed in many ways. Are there any positive gifted movies that are not bias? It is important to look at the whole student and their culture before making a judgment. I guess I need to adjust my thinking about the kids I teach. Maybe being color blind isn't in my best interest.*

I felt that the students were making inroads into developing a deeper and more caring understanding of how their own bias toward African American student might be influencing the nomination of student for gifted testing. Yet, in my estimation they still have some ground to cover before I would feel comfortable with moving on to another topic. In fact, cultural bias would act as a through line for the entire year-long program. Building self-awareness in reference to understanding how personal bias and assumptions influence their nomination of students for the gifted program and their teaching was critical (Ford & Harris, 1999; Gay, 2000).

## Chapter 5: Scripted Teacher Discourse

### Now Showing

It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web...  
(Hall, 1996, p. 470)

Since there was still much work to be done with assisting my students in understanding how their own perceptions of race influence the reality of their referrals of students to the gifted program, I included several other assignments related to self-assessing racial bias. The first was an assignment to read *Understanding Unconscious Bias and Unintentional Racism* by Jean Moule. The article centers on the difficulty of facing our own personal bias (Moule, 2009). Woven into the article is a reference to a website run by the Southern Poverty Law Center about teaching tolerance: <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/test-yourself-hidden-bias>. Students were instructed to read the article, *Testing Your Hidden Bias* which introduces Project Implicit developed in collaboration between psychologist at Harvard, the University of West Virginia and the University of Washington. Project Implicit is a series of electronic tests that subjects can take to measure their level of bias in a number of areas. Within the Project Implicit website subjects can work on the demonstration test modules or chose to participate in true research studies. The purpose of Project Implicit was listed as propitiating the belief that, “when a person has a conscious commitment to change, the very act of discovering one's hidden biases can propel one to act to correct for it. It may not be possible to avoid the automatic stereotype or prejudice, but it is certainly possible to consciously rectify it” (Project Implicit, 2011). I asked my students to participate in the demonstration test



called Race Implicit Association Test for Race (Black-White). This Implicit Association Test (IAS) is designed to demonstrate bias when confronted with black and white individuals and the subject's perceptions of race. The IAS would be conducted by students on a computer outside of class time. My goal was to have students look at their own bias in a private setting, where they would be less likely to lie and more likely to get a real picture of their bias related to race.

I also asked my students to make time in their schedules to participate in a Poverty Simulation run by Step Up Savannah. Step Up Savannah is a nonprofit organization dedicated to working collaboratively between government agencies and businesses to reduce poverty in Savannah. The poverty simulation is designed to help participants gain an understanding of the obstacles the "working poor" have to overcome in a typical month. The website for Step Up Savannah states, "It is a simulation, not a game" (Step Up Savannah, p.3). When we debriefed after the class participated in the simulation, Sophie confessed that she had never considered how hard it was for low income families just to survive. In fact, she found herself tempted to cross several legal and moral lines in the simulation just to survive. Emily explained she just felt so sorry for those people and can see why they think it is okay to steal. Dr. Jackson and Sunny both told of knowing friends and family living under the conditions represented in the simulation. Dr. Jackson confessed that the simulation really wasn't much of a reach from how she had been raised.

To continue in my effort to help the teachers move toward making cultural competent decisions in response to their students, I asked them to read *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* by Annette Lareau. This text compares the

difference in how children are raised and educated, using Lareau's definition of middle class, working class, and poor. Novellas are sprinkled throughout the text to draw attention to social stratification and concerted cultivation between social classes. Links were clearly established between social position of students' families and "the implication or life experiences and life outcomes" (Lareau, 2003).

My goal was for the teachers to read this text and to reflect on their own professional practices in relationship to identifying gifted students from various social classes and to gain a respect for their peers' and students' cultures. "The truth is that acceptance is related to sharing power and working from a perspective of equality" (Castellano & Frazier, 2011, p. 385). Class discussions after the students had completed reading the text showed just how difficult it is to make changes in a person's cultural paradigm.

Emily was eager to begin the class discussions. She appears very confident, stating that after reading the text she can't see where middle class people come from a position of privilege or entitlement. Her parents worked hard to give her opportunities to play sports and have dance lessons. This is what caring parents do for their children; make sacrifices of time and money. Emily continued,

As I was thinking about our reading my mind was all over the board with thoughts of children I have taught and their varying backgrounds and family types. With this new school year I have children with many different types of family situations. It is hard to pick out one or two specific students; however I do see a common thread with those who I would consider middle-class. These children wear clean neat clothes on a daily

basis. Their daily folders are checked every night by a parent and all needed papers/homework are completed and returned immediately. The parents ask what they can do to help or provide assistance for the class.

Emily was judging her students by the standards her family used to raise her as a child. Her evaluative comments on her students indicate that she feels parents have a responsibility to cultivate their children's interest in outside activities and to monitor school experiences (Lareau, 2003). Emily continued,

I also have some children who come to school with shoes untied and not clean. Some of them are returning all needed assignment, but most do not. I guess some of the parents might be working late and don't have time to help or check their children's work. I feel a child's economic background is a strong influence over their academic success. I can see why poor kids don't get referred by teacher for the gifted program. They are just not as prepared to come to school physically and academically.

While Emily was talking a few heads were huddled together whispering. As soon as Emily stopped talking Dr. Jackson began to express her opinions,

Hold on a minute! You can't just make those kinds of blanket statements about people. Growing up, my family was what you would call poor and believe me we came to school clean every day. Our clothes might have been hand me downs, but they were clean. The parents of my students work hard to keep their family fed. They care, but sometimes have to make a choice between checking homework and getting to work on time. That is why I put very little value on the homework I assign. I assign it because

my administrator dictates we give homework, but I don't put much stock in it getting done and returned to school. Practice has to happen in my classroom where I can control the situation. My students are street smart and I would challenge you to survive in their world. They are gifted, it is just a matter of finding a way to measure it.

Dr. Jackson is alluding to the research which explains working class and poverty class parents often view education as the job of the teacher. They perceive the school as primarily responsible for educating their children. Showing her dissatisfaction with her job this school year, Dr. Jackson continues

Of course, now my school has become a gifted magnet school and is attracting the attention of the parents of private school children. I would rather deal with the child and parents of a poor child than some of these elitist rich folks who thinks their shit don't stink.

Emily, looking a little red in the face blurted out, "Look I wasn't intending to offend anyone, I just see kids that need basic care in my class on a daily basis, and it frustrates me! I am sorry I made the generalization that poor and neglect go hand-in-hand." It was obvious that Dr. Jackson had warmed to this topic and had more to say. With a dismissive glance at Emily, Dr. Jackson was off and talking again. She explained,

I would trade my low income babies any day for kids with helicopter parents. Let me give you an example of what I am dealing with these days. I used to teach kids like Tiberious and loved every minute of it. Tiberious is being raised by a single mom in an apartment which is over a nightclub in a rough section of town. He is a good student who tries his best on every

project given. His mother, although rarely able to attend school functions communicates with me through notes when necessary. There is really no phone that is working on a regular basis. I can tell he is well loved and cared for by his mother. I referred him for gifted testing at the end of last school year, but with my school changing to a magnet he can no longer attend my school. I worry that his new teacher will not take the time to follow up on my recommendation for gifted testing. I know as much as his mother loves him she is not going to come up to the school, which is now miles from her house, to request gifted testing.

I stopped Dr. Jackson for a minute to suggest that this is a great example of what Annette Lareau (2003) refers to in our text related to parents with insufficient resources and what level of involvement they are cable of having on their children's school lives. Interaction with the school is not able caring, but often related to a parents monetary and time resources. Heads shook in agreement to my comments. Seconds later Dr. Jackson continued

In contrast, these days I work with parents who are all up in my face about accelerating their children and recognizing how smart they are. I have this little white girl named Merilyn who wants to talk to me like she is grown. Like is usually the case, when I met her parents it all made sense.

Merilyn's father is from Sweden and the family frequently travels to Europe. Mom explained to me that they will be taking Merilyn out of school often for trips, 'because they feel discovery learning is so valuable to a child's growth.' Mom also told me, 'Merilyn is very mature and has a

hard time tolerating slower students. She works best in natural light, with proper hydration and frequent protein rich snacks.’ This parent is going to drive me crazy this year. Oh, she also informed me that she would be dropping by often since she is not working to check on Merilyn’s daily progress. What I have seen of Merilyn so far is a timid, twitchy neurotic nine year old who thinks she is grown and has no friends.

Again, I interrupted Dr. Jackson to point out the relationship of your comments to our text. This sense of entitlement is characteristic of middle class parents. “They act as though they have a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings (Lareau, 2003, p. 6). In contrast working class or poverty parents such as Tiberious’ take a constrained approach to dealing with institutions such as schools. On the note Dr. Jackson made on final comment,

I would take ten of Tiberious’ parents over this lady any day. So, yes I agree socio- economic class does make a difference, but don’t start thinking it is consistent predictor of academic success. Treat people the way you want to be treated. More people need the Bible read to them in school and we wouldn’t have the problems we have today.

It is almost like a prayer meeting in the room as teachers nod in agreement and murmur their version of an amen. Sophie chimes in,

I can think of no middle class child in my class, but I do recall a school I worked at up north where all or most all the students were at least middle class. I did not enjoy the ‘upity’ atmosphere of the school and only stayed

there a few years. There was certainly an entitlement attitude on the part of parents and teachers. I recall a mom coming to pick up her son early to find him missing a Fun Friday activity of a movie and popcorn. He was working on an assignment due to his poor behavior during the week. Her response was ‘Come on baby momma will rent you your own movie at home.’ I explained that she would be devaluing my authority in the classroom by rewarding him, but she just didn’t care. She told me in front of her child that I was just not fit to teach children.

Now Sophie works at a Title 1 school with all low income students. The teachers are a close group working together to make sure these students have the materials as well as the emotional support they need. Most of the students come from hard working; live month to month families who chug right along. Sophie expressed the wish that parents realized teachers love their children and only have their best interests at heart. She went on to congratulate Emily on being brave enough to say what others won’t; that social class does make a difference in school expectations. Sophie expanded on Emily’s thoughts and said that she thinks it is more in the teachers’ expectations in many cases and not the parent expectations that influence how teachers view students and whether we refer them for gifted testing.

Emily gives a nervous nod and smile in Sophie’s direction prior to starting to defend her point of view. She states,

Look, maybe my experiences have just been different from you all. In my years of teaching (three) I have seen class as more a factor than race in student success in school and this is what influences who I refer for gifted

testing. Let me give you an example: Brie is from a middle class family. Her parents are strong supporters of education. At least one of her parents walked Brie into my kindergarten class every day of school. If there was a homework assignment or class work returned home that had one correction mark on it one of the parents wants to know what she did wrong and how they can help her not make that mistake again. Brie's parents always want to know what I will be teaching in the up coming weeks. Brie is involved in Girl Scouts and is very active at her family church. Brie's parents show up for every parent conference, PTA, and school event. When Brie entered my class she had a strong vocabulary and was advanced for her age. I referred her for gifted testing and she scored almost perfect in each category tested.

Another of my students, Jaden is from a working –class family. Jaden's parents work a lot to just make ends meet. When Jaden first started kindergarten his parents were not able to buy his school supplies. Jaden's parents often responded positively to requests for conferences, but never made it to one conference during the school year. I don't even know what either of his parents look like after having him in my class for one year. Jaden did not know all of his letters when he arrived in my kindergarten class. Often the para-professional who works in my classroom has to pull him a side to help him complete homework that was supposed to be done the night before at home.

Both of these students were white. It wasn't a race issue that I



referred Brie for gifted testing and not Jaden. I think it is just an unfortunate reality that more of the black children in our school are in a lower economic situation than our white children which makes it look racial when it has nothing to do with race. It has everything to do with not having a normal upbringing.

Emily in my opinion was not progressing much in her thinking concerning cultures outside white dominant society. Her comments served to reinforce my concerns about her lack of cultural competency.

Glancing over I could see Dr. Jackson just bursting to speak. “Normal? What looks like abuse in one family may be normal in another. What is normal and by whose standard? Middle class is not necessarily normal and acting educated is not normal in my upbringing! I think too many people associate normal with acting like white middle class folks.” As a voice of calm, Sunny chimed in,

I think understanding what is normal for any group of people builds tolerance and respect. If going home to take care of three siblings after school is normal then wouldn't that child be showing leadership? Wouldn't they also be showing leadership when they organize pick up games on the play ground? Leadership is something we look for as a gifted characteristic. What about the child who has few resources, but completes their school cloud project with used Brillo pads. To me this is real creativity, another gifted characteristic. We need to see our students with new eyes. We need to be impressed that they learn to code switch for school and try so hard to meet our very foreign expectations. I think it is

interesting how people associate lower socio-economics as a synonym for black students as if they are one and the same. I really think we need to look at students as individuals not a sum of their class and race. Yes, they both have an influence, but they do not necessarily predict the future of the student.

A subtext to my asking teachers to watch movies, read texts and participate in the poverty simulation was the discussion these experiences would generate. Active listening would contribute to self understanding. Dialogue generated in class discussions might serve as a means of reflection. As Merleau- Ponty states, “I never become aware of my own existence until I have already made contact with others; my reflection always brings me back to myself” (Merleau-Ponty,2004, p. 86). Listening to Emily, Dr. Jackson, Sophie and Sunny dialogue I had mixed emotions about how successful this process was evolving in the class.

Sunny continued,

Many of the minority students I teach have not been given opportunities to develop the talents they may have. The primary thought at my school is that these students lack basic skills and therefore do not have the ability to think at high levels. Consequently, these students are not exposed to teaching strategies or activities that promote higher learning and creativity. This makes it highly unlikely that gifted characteristics will be recognized. I think the blame lays with us, the teachers, who hold back students through not providing them with opportunities where they can shine.

At this point I brought up an article I had just read, *Toward a New Paradigm for Identifying Talent Potential*. The authors, Frazier and Pasow (1994) pointed out that, gifted behaviors appear in many different forms in every cultural group and that they may be manifested differently within cultural context. The gifted potential of some of our students may require us to think outside the box when it comes to finding ways to identify gifted characteristics. Isn't it better to refer a student for gifted testing and find out they do not qualify than to not refer them and cause them to miss an opportunity to really enhance their gifts?

### **Producing Change**

Educational transformation requires that we bring a critical gaze to the marriage of popular culture and media with politics and education within contemporary realities (Sefa Dei & Howard, 2008, p. 3).

After viewing a variety of movies related to the characteristics of gifted students, discussing the influence of race depicted in movies with gifted main characters, taking an online personal bias survey, participating in a poverty simulation, reading and responding to a text on schooling and classism the class was going to watch one last movie; *Crash*. When I announced that we were going to watch *Crash* as a class, I was frankly astounded that the majority of my students had not seen this movie. It was an Academy Award winning film from 2004. I felt it was an appropriate pedagogical tool to wrap up our discussion on racism and classism (Sefa Dei & Howard, 2008). Popcorn in hand we settled into our seats in the school media center to watch two hours of interwoven stories of racial ignorance and misconceptions that takes place over two days

time in Los Angeles, California. Perception is their reality. The victims of racism in *Crash* showed how a victim can offend then turn around and be the person inflicting the racism in some form on another person. The film focuses on how each of us are both victims and aggressors in the war on racism: A male African American police detective in a relationship with a female Latino police is attempting to help his addict mother and his juvenile delinquent younger brother. The camera turns to two college age African American males who are lamenting white women stereotyping them as thieves because they are black yet they end up justifying that stereotype by stealing a white couples' car. The white male district attorney and his pampered wife, who are the victims of the car thieves, continue the circle of bias by assuming the Hispanic male fixing their door lock is some kind of gang banger when in fact he is a caring family man. A racist white veteran cop, who is the caregiver for his aging father tosses out racial slur at a weary African American government worker. This same worker holds his father's health care benefits in her hands. This same white cop disgusts his more idealistic younger partner when they stop a successful black Hollywood director and his wife, who must deal with the racist cop. A Persian-immigrant father buys a gun to protect his convenience store against the wishes of his daughter the doctor. When his shop is robbed he blames shoddy workmanship on the Hispanic locksmith who is just working for a better life for his daughter. The cycle of bias and misunderstanding continues throughout the movie as each character's prejudice is shown to be interwoven with another person's culture.

When the lights came on I expected pointed comments from my groups. Instead I got silence. To my surprise Emily finally said, "Well, that was just depressing! We are just one messed up society!" Sunny, commented, "I loved it! What an inspiration, we

can all overcome our bias given the right circumstances. We are all biased it is just a matter of recognizing it in ourselves and then bringing about a change. I found the movie a message of hope.” Sophie contributes,

I hate to admit it, but I am beginning to realize that as a member of the white race my folks have some ‘splaining to do.’ Even today we are still oppressing people. I don’t want to see myself in the group of oppressors, but I guess under the right circumstances it could happen.

Since Dr. Jackson had not spoke up I turned and asked, “Dr. Jackson, no comments tonight? Did anything in particular in this movie resonate with you?” Dr. Jackson smirked, and shook her head no, then paused as though rethinking. She explained,

I just want to go back to watching movies for fun. You are ruining my entertainment by asking me to think, think, think! Honestly, watching the characters in *Crash* made me uncomfortable. I am much more comfortable blaming racism on someone else than thinking I could be a part of the problem. I have spent my entire life thinking being black makes me a victim of racism, yet this movie makes me think that at times I could also be racist.

The final assignment for the evening was to briefly explain in writing if in any way their attitudes or beliefs about gifted students had changed since they began this course ten weeks ago.

Sunny wrote,

Teachers must fight to see the potential in every student not just ones who have parents that are always advocating for their children. We have to

remember that each student has a unique culture that influences them. We also have to be aware that as a teacher we have a culture that influences our decisions. I appreciated our class discussions and the fact that we could be honest and nonjudgmental with each other. I am stepping into a new comfort zone (that I am not too comfortable with). This course has taught me that to understand my students I must first understand myself. Plus, how fun to be able to watch movies as part of a course!

When Sunny began the gifted endorsement, in my interpretation, she was culturally colorblind. This was someplace I could relate to since the majority of my years teaching were in the same colorblind category. At this point in the course I feel that she has moved along to a level of cultural competency. She is showing signs of cultural competency when she comments on differences and adapts her thoughts and behaviors to these differences in her attitudes and interactions (Lindsey et al., 2003, p. 387).

Sophie wrote,

To sum up, after taking this course and completing the assignments I have a different perspective on gifted students and the gifted identification process. I now see the big picture and I understand the need to serve gifted and minority students is just as important as it is to serve special education students. I also know that as an educator, I play an important role in changing the traditional stereotypes of minorities not being gifted enough to participate in gifted education programs. My role is to ensure that students get a level playing field regardless of race, and ensure those students get the opportunity to be recommended for their talents and gifts.

I am also going to work with my colleagues to help me see gifted characteristics in students that I might be missing due to my own bias.

When we started the gifted endorsement class Sophie appeared to single mindedly believe in her own culture as superior. Now my interpretation of her responses would indicate she is leaning more toward a colorblind attitude where her students are concerned. I would have liked to have seen her have a greater paradigm shift in her thinking, but maybe ten weeks is just too little time to expect someone with fifty years build of biases to make huge gains in understanding their own cultural bias.

Dr. Jackson wrote,

I believe that gifted education can provide a proactive intervention for minority students. Being African American and smart needs to be the 'in thing' at school. Whether a veteran teacher or a new teacher, it is imperative to recognize stereotypes and misperceptions in one's classroom. Only by becoming more culturally sensitive can teachers eliminate the stereotypes that inhibit their ability to discern the strengths and gifted characteristics of their African American students. In closing, learning how to apply the process for understanding bias in reference to the identity of African American students is not only profoundly vital to gifted education, but also to the teachers referring the students for gifted endorsement.

Emily wrote,

My impression of the gifted and talented program has been broadened. Race does not influence if a student can be a creative thinker, focuses on

higher order thinking skills, or is academically advanced. I know that I need to keep an open mind and try to understand the home life and culture that my students come from. I will plan on consulting with the lead gifted teacher at my school more frequently. I will look past student's home lives and not focus on where they are now, but what direction they can head towards. I will also not allow my feeling about lack of parental support to affect my judgment. In retrospect, I realize that in three years I have only referred one student for gifted testing. This is really not acceptable, but I now feel like I am more informed to take action. I previously had only considered academic achievement when considering my students as potential gifted students. After being in this course and being exposed to the readings, movies and conversations I am more aware of my own prejudices and want to make amends. I want now to be more aware of my students' culture in relationship to my own expectations and upbringing. I am going to judge students by what they can do not by what they cannot do.

Emily and Dr. Jackson were both held strong opinions during the ten weeks of the Gifted Foundations class. Emily was coming at the class from a white southern upbringing and teaching at a majority white suburban school. Dr. Jackson was angry for the first five weeks of the course. She too did not see beyond the color of her students. In the case of Emily and Dr. Jackson race mattered, but from opposing points of view. Now, both teachers appear to be engaged in dialogue that indicated they are shifting their



thinking concerning race.

Emily, Sunny and Sophie represent the majority of teachers who are *teaching while white*. They are imperfect individuals with skewed points of view who are working at educating the children they are handed in the public school house. They entered the gifted endorsement cohort ignorant of their own racial and cultural bias. After a close reading of film as text they are no longer living unexamined lives. Weeks of watching films, writing, and dialoguing with colleagues in the gifted endorsement course has brought them far on their journey of awareness. “Becoming a self-reflective practitioner is a journey. We have setbacks, we face roadblocks, but when we reach our destination, we find that it was worth the trip” (Milner & Ford, 2005, p. 36). Was it worth the trip in my student’s eyes?

When we began our journey I asked my students to reflect on a question: Does a student’s race and does the referring teacher’s race matter in relationship to a student being referred for gifted testing? At that time the entire class agreed that race would not influence the student or teacher doing the referral for gifted testing. Since Emily, Sophie and Sunny were *teaching while white* I was especially interested to hear their thought on this question after spending time experiencing the conflicts and dilemmas caught on film related to African American gifted students.

I met with Emily at a local Starbucks to talk about how the course thus far had influenced her and asked if there were any changes she thought I needed to make to my delivery of the materials related to racial and cultural bias. Emily was frazzled after a day of teaching kindergarten and just happy to sit down in a quiet spot for a few minutes. She explained to me that in the beginning of the course, no offense intended, she thought

my ideas were a little out in left field. After three years of working at a very successful elementary school where the majority of the students at least met the state standards she only saw failure in the minority students she taught. The minority students just did not seem to come to school as prepared as the white students. Teaching kindergarten, she felt as if she was on the front lines of getting all students ready for school. Never had it occurred to her that she came from a dominant culture or that her ideals may not be everyone's values. Emily stated, "It was really eye opening to sit in our classes and hear the comments of the black teachers in relationship to the films we watched and students." Right now, the lead gifted teacher at her school was asking classroom teachers for the names of students to refer for gifted testing. She had four students she was going to refer for gifted testing and one of the students was African American. Emily explained,

I never would have even considered this little boy for gifted testing until now. He is tardy every day, his white uniform shirts are slightly yellowed and he doesn't have large motor skill control. On the other hand he is a born leader at recess, already knows his addition math facts, and talks a blue streak. I am willing to take a chance and refer him for testing when in the past I would have just passed him over.

When I again ask her if she thought the race of the student or referring teacher mattered when it came to gifted testing she said,

Yes, probably for both student and teacher. I think my perspective is changing when it comes to African American students and gifted education. Although I have to tell you that I still think all students need to be treated equal no matter what their race. I don't ever want to begin to see

the pendulum swing to where we are just placing blacks into gifted to say we are doing so. Everyone should have the same chance.

Emily's response served to remind me that changing someone's perception of reality can take more than just presenting the facts; it can take shifting long held beliefs and mindsets. Changing human perceptions require building relationships, establishing credibility, and earning trust. All of these factors take time and effort.

As Emily was leaving, Sunny was ordering a latte at the counter and came to take the empty seat beside me. I asked how she was doing these days and if she was referring any student for gifted testing. Sunny sipped her latte and responded, "Well, Mrs. Burnette, I have been run ragged this year with new baby at home and a class of strong-willed first graders. I never have time to sit down, but I am referring five of my students for gifted testing next month." I expressed my pleasure with the number of students she was referring for testing. Sunny continued,

After taking the gifted endorsement classes I feel like I am better prepared to students to refer for testing. I am looking at the whole student and where they are coming from in the community. I mean that in a positive way! Almost all the students in my class this year are African American. I have one little boy in my class who is dyslexic. His middle school age sister stops by my class each afternoon to help him with his homework. As I watch and listen to her working with her brother I can tell she is smart, but when they leave the building she pulls her jacket hood up over her head and goes out on the street and ignore her brother. I think she is trying to fit in and ignore her gifts. I don't know if it will help, but I would like to get

in touch with the middle school where she attends and see if she has ever been tested for gifted services. I probably would have just passed her off as a punk kid prior to our classes.

I ask Sunny if she remembered back to when I ask the class if they thought the race of the student or teacher made a difference in a student being referred for gifted testing? She nodded and smiled. “Yes, I remember and at that time I thought all students should be treated the same. Now I realize that no matter what the race or family’s economics status, students don’t come from the same backgrounds. I can’t just let my own life experiences influence how I think of others.”

A few days later I was able to catch up with Sophie in her room afterschool ended. She was straightening desks and preparing for the next day’s lessons. We sat down at a couple of student desks to talk. Again I asked about how the course thus far had influenced her and any changes she thought I needed to make to my delivery of the materials related to racial and cultural bias. Sophie pondered my question prior to replying. She said,

Seriously, I didn’t think there was much I could learn at this point in my teaching career. Kids are kids and they are all pretty much the same. As a teacher you take them where they are at and try to bring them to a point where they are able to pass the darn state test at the end of the year. I teach third grade this year and that is a high stakes grade level where students who don’t pass “the test” don’t pass the grade. Personally, I hate to see the gifted kids leave my class to get their gifted service. With the new state curriculum there is just not enough time to cover all that is expected in the

third grade.

It was obvious that Sophie was feeling overwhelmed. I directed her back to my question about if a student's race or the referring teacher's race matters in relationship to a student being referred for gifted testing? Sophie took a deep breath then said,

Well, like I said earlier I never thought at this point I would learn something new, but I have. Who would think that watching a bunch of movies and talking about them could get a person thinking about cultural bias. I am a little embarrassed to say that some of our discussions really hit home with me. I would like to think that I have always been open-minded in my dealings with students, but maybe I have been wrong. Race does seem to matter.

Reflecting on the responses of my students, my thought turned to the fact that “popular film, rich in meaning both fluid and diverse, offers an intersection for the theoretical and the everyday” (Dalton, 2007, p. 7). Exposing white teachers and teachers in general to the influence their personal cultural bias has on the referral of gifted students held value. Using film to cast African American students as gifted was one tool in making positive changes to teacher perceptions and therefore reality.

## Review of Film Use

Bringing-forth brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment. Bringing-forth come to pass only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing (Heidegger, 1977, p. 11).

I began this dissertation by stating that by using media literacy along with films in gifted teacher endorsement programs, I believed the underrepresentation of African American students in the referral process for gifted education programs could be positively impacted. I also indicated that teachers who understood the characteristics of African American gifted students are more likely to refer these same students for screening for gifted services. The fact that the majority of the referring teachers are white is a primary issue related to African American students being referred for gifted testing.

Critical media literacy was used to, “help students experience the pleasures of popular culture while simultaneously uncovering the codes and practices that work to silence or disempower them as readers, viewers and learners in general”(Alverman & Hagood, 2000, p. 194). Introducing this topic via films allowed teachers to enter a critical discourse from a space of neutrality. The Gifted Endorsement Program students spent hours viewing and talking about movies. Gifted education program history was introduced to the class through the film *October Sky*. Media literacy discussions were conducted concerning deficit thinking personified in *Freedom Writers*, *Music of the Heart* and *Stand and Deliver*. Teachers were asked strategic questions related to their viewing of *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Little Man Tate*. A relationship was developed between the viewer and the film that was capable of changing the teacher’s reality. Sobchack (2004) suggests that, “We ourselves, are subjective matter: our lived bodies

sensually relate to ‘things’ that ‘matter’ on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized”(Sobchack, 2004, p. 65). Using a film world made it easier to view their world. I believe this also made it easier for the dialogue to flow later in the course when teachers discussed their text. Each time the group met the class members seemed to get more comfortable discussing their perspectives on class and race related to gifted education.

Just viewing a film tells only a segment of the story. “The visible is never the whole of vision” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 293). Layers of perception and interpretation by the viewer contribute to a whole vision of a film. The viewing of the film was not enough to allow the teachers to “see” the whole picture. The dissection and discussion of the film is a key component of critical media literacy.

Thompson (2007) explains popular culture as an avenue leading people to reconstruct their own identities and to understand “how others with different positionalities have constructed different identities” (p. 87). Teachers were taught during the endorsement program formally, indirectly, from their own life experiences, and as a result of hearing classmates’ perspectives. Media literacy discussions forced self-reflection. While critiquing *The Great Debaters*, *The Ben Carson Story*, *Marva Collins* and *Coach Carter* teachers inched closer to becoming more culturally responsive. Media literacy changed their perception of reality as it related to gifted African American students. It facilitated, “the movement from our lived and un-reflected-upon experience of phenomena...to our reflection on both the phenomena and our mode of experiencing it” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 36). Through films teachers were exposed to a diverse population

of gifted students “that may not be readily evident or identified in the local community” (Nugent & Shaunessy, 2003, p. 128).

The fictionalized composite characters in this dissertation served to show that changes in teacher perceptions are possible. Manifestations of giftedness are only judged within the limitations of the teacher’s cultural experiences (Briggs, Reis, & Sullivan, 2008, p. 133). At the beginning of this course teacher may not have recognized the potential that minority students display that is different from the dominate culture of school (Pierce et al., 2007, p. 114). Teachers who have misconceptions or hold unexamined stereotypes about African American students do not refer these students for gifted testing. Often, characteristics that have traditionally been the norm of white “gifted” students are used as a comparison for African American students (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002, p. 55).

Media literacy served to expand the teachers’ cultural experiences. They can examine their own culture juxtaposed again the “other.” Using critical literacy in relationship to films is a means to empower teachers as they understand their own bias (Kellner, 1995, p. xiv-xv). The possibilities of teaching educators to view themselves and their students critically by reading film as text can have powerful consequences. Opening up an educator’s mind to ‘reading’ film as text beyond simple cause and effect relationships will engage them in a dance of pedagogical understanding based on their own social constructs as well as those of their students. This journey at times was long and arduous. Change does not happen in a vacuum nor does it come quickly. My interpretation of the shifts in these teachers’ realities indicates a need for further research in the area of films being used to change white teacher perceptions.



Presently, gifted education is not incorporated into many pre-service teaching programs. Only five states require any pre-serve training in gifted and talented education. General education classroom teachers in 36 states are not required to have any specialized training to teach identified gifted students (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). As a result most identified gifted students spend the majority of their school time being taught by teacher with no specialized training in gifted education curriculum. Nationally, teachers are not being prepared to refer or teach students who are identified as gifted.

Special Education is a required course in teacher education programs. Understanding the characteristics of and how to serve special education students is mandatory in Georgia. Recognizing gifted characteristics and strategies for educating high achieving students is negligible in pre-serve teaching programs. Georgia requires anyone seeking a teaching certificate to complete one course in special education. Within this course gifted education, if mentioned at all, is glossed over. Gifted education is rarely taught in pre-serve teacher education programs. Typically, if a teacher does engage in a study of gifted education it is completed through a state Gifted Endorsement program. In fact, the field of opportunity is even further narrowed when endorsement programs require teachers to complete three years of teaching prior to registering for classes. The logic is that novice teachers have a steep learning curve on just basic teaching strategies. The advanced strategies taught in gifted education programs would cause them to overload. Of course, this gate keeping practice only serves to allow veteran teachers the opportunity to grab the advanced students. Lack of access to courses and barriers to admittance contribute to white teachers lacking the skills necessary to recognize gifted

characteristics in children, especially children of color. Powell and Siegle (2000) in a study of classroom teacher as identifiers of gifted students, found teachers need training to become cognizant of their own biases related to referring student for gifted programs. Viewing films using critical media literacy is significant, “because of their powerful pedagogical potential to shape race, sex, and class discourse, we can ill-afford to view movies as mere vehicles for entertainment” (hooks 1996, p. 236).

It is my hope that other Gifted Endorsement programs throughout the state of Georgia will see the value of using film to inform perceptions of those who are *teaching while white*. I believe my work can be used to increase the referral of African American students by white teachers for gifted education programs. A starting point for me in moving intellectually gifted African American students from invisible to the highly visible contradictory space where they reside is to acknowledge their existence. Enabling teachers to see their role in knowingly and unknowingly advancing the idea of intellectually gifted African American students is the beginning of change.

## Epilogue

Every classroom in this land has, in a sense, its own panel of speakers ready to identify themselves, joining a communal search for new definitions of fairness and justice. The task is never complete, and we must be certain that we are all listening (Paley, 1979, p. xvi).

Perception is reality. As I have explored colloques' and my personal perceptions of African American students depicted in films and the school house I have come to a number of conclusions: Individual perceptions are grounded in history, experiences, hopes, and dreams. We each have a different perception of reality because we carry unique experiences and characteristics. Uncertainty must be created related to our perceptions to allow for change. This is often a difficult struggle. Perceptions are informed by individual experiences and our interpretation of those experiences. Reality is not always what it appears to be.

Nationally, there are more white female middle class teachers working with majority minority populations of students than at any other point in United States history. This has created problems when it comes to referring African American students for gifted education programs. White teachers are just not referring African American students for gifted education programs. My perception is that this is not due to willful misconduct, but due to ignorance of their own bias attitudes. Few, if any, institutes of higher learning require pre-service teachers to participate in courses related to gifted student characteristics or teaching strategies. Furthermore, the majority of teachers over the age of 35 years old have never had any training in multicultural education. In the south where I work, folks are referred to as "pulling the race card" when they bring up

differences in race and culture. “Race card” being used only as a reference to African Americans since, in my perception, in the south white is not seen as a race. It is the norm. Because white has not been recognized as a race in the school district I teach it has been a struggle to lead white teachers to examine their bias in referring African American students for gifted programs. My platform to address how African American students are cast in gifted education has been through coordinating a teacher gifted endorsement program. I was frustrated with a lack of progress in teachers “seeing” themselves as part of the problem until the idea to use films was brought to my attention.

Hollywood blockbuster movies served as a vehicle to guide readers through the individual and institutional racism that abounds when it comes to white teachers referring African American students for gifted programs. *Stand and Deliver* and *Music of the Heart* spoke to the pattern of deficit thinking that is prevalent in schools concerning minority students. *Good Will Hunting* and *Starship Trooper* exposed the dehumanization that society imposed on its people solely for the value of their intellect and what they can contribute to the common good. *Freedom Writers* exposed the unrealistic thinking behind white teacher as savior movies. Sharp contrasts between how society and the school house treat white and African American students was brought into focus in the viewing of *Akeelah and the Bee* and *Little Man Tate*.

Due to the use of fiction as film in the gifted endorsement classes teachers appeared to be more comfortable discussing race. Over the past few years I have tried a variety of strategies to get the teachers I instruct to be more open to discussions and self-reflections on individual and institutional racism. Finally, with movies I hit upon a winning theme to get teachers thinking, talking, and listening to each other concerning race. I

have been very pleased with the overall affect using media literacy to critique films has had in changing teacher perceptions of African American students being gifted learners. If you remember when this dissertation began, the four composite teacher characters all thought that the race of the teacher and students had no influence on a student being referred for gifted testing. By the end of the teachers' time in the gifted endorsement program viewing and discussing films they all exhibited a change of heart. This change solidified my decision to continue to use films to guide teachers on a journey of self-discovery and change related to how they dealt with their own understanding of racism in the school house. We do not stand outside racism looking in, but must be forced to look inward for change to happen.

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