

AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF FAMILY ON THE ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN GIFTED LEARNERS ORIGINATING FROM LOW-INCOME ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine what, if any, impact families have on the academic achievement of African American gifted learners from low-income environments. This grounded theory study was designed to explore family and student perceptions of a complex set of variables related to families and home environments. The variables explored were based on a conceptual framework developed from previous research related to social capital and its uses within families with limited economic resources. Study participants were junior and senior level high school students and their parents.

Instruments included a demographic questionnaire with open-ended questions, a researcher-developed interview protocol and the Moos Family Environment Scale. Based on the findings, certain 'social capital' resources were revealed: family cohesion; strong relationships with mothers; family to student discussions related to education and positive achievement; the role of the extended family (particularly aunts and cousins); emphasis on religious identity development; and the role of fathers are noted as having impact on school achievement. Another notable source of capital revealed was the intrinsic motivation and resilience of each of the students based on parent and student responses to interview questions.

The most pronounced findings were the role of the mother as nurturer and encourager; the flexible role of extended family members who provide additional support; the emphasis within the households on positive achievement orientation, and certain family traditions which taken together form a cohesive, supportive family environment, even in the midst of challenging life circumstances. In addition to the social capital provided by families, this study also revealed other sources of positive impact including special school-based programs and internal traits. Implications for future research include the design of a controlled study of African American families of gifted students utilizing the Moos & Moos Family Environment Scale (FES), a study of the support structure provided by mothers of gifted learners across a variety of cultural contexts, and a study of the intrinsic motivation and resilience of at-risk African American gifted learners. Implications for educational practice include improving professional development for educators, family and parent education programs, and enhancing guidance and counseling programs for African American and other culturally diverse gifted learners.