As the protests and riots reached apex levels after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, I felt despair as I thought about the overall condition and the inherited “second-class citizenship” of Black people in America no matter their status, position, and/or contribution to American society. I have to admit that I had mixed feelings when my collegiate football teammates reached out to check on me, to see if I was okay. I appreciated the concern that affirmed our team’s brotherhood that transcended race solidified through football. I was also encouraged by an “epiphany” moment for some of my White teammates that were finally “woke.”

However, my natural reaction was, “This ain’t nothing new; Black men have been victims of police brutality for decades. So, yeah, I’m okay; I have no choice but to be okay.” And, after that, came anger. I was angry that there was a nationwide debate questioning if George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks’ deaths were justified and/or police rendered an unnecessary use of deadly force. Still trying to come to grips with the deadly effects of COVID-19 and my senior year of college being cut short with no graduation ceremony to recognize a long, hard journey at a highly selective, prestigious private college, I also felt defeated. And then I felt motivated to act. I felt concerned about my 14-year-old brother living more than 300 miles away from where I was currently at college. But when asked, I would simply reply, “I’m okay.” But I’m not okay. It’s not okay. I wondered, why would anyone be okay, even if they are not Black?

In retrospect, as a consequence of a larger issue, I found myself trying to make meaning of the continued killing of Black people at the hands of police who took an oath to protect and serve. From several dialogues that I had with my parents, friends, and peers from the online community, I came to understand that my need to talk through an ebb and flow of deep emotions, a search for truth, and yearning for real change was, in addition to my lived experiences as a Black male, a consequence of triggered overexcitabilities. Having been identified twice exceptional (2e), much time was invested by my parents during my secondary education years to help me understand characteristics of my “exceptionalities” that impacted the way I think, feel, and behave. This made me even more concerned for my brother because, this time, it was all over social media. He, too, had been identified gifted and often exhibited traits of intensely tuned perceptions and heightened emotions and sensitivities. Not sure what to say or how to start the conversation about what was happening, I sent a text to my dad:

“Y’all talk about the George Floyd killing at home? The protest and things? With Tim (pseudonym) I mean.”

(Continues on p. 4)
Black families in the United States share a unique burden that never even enters the minds of most White families: the burden of “the talk” they are compelled to pass on as if it were a family heirloom.1 What is the content of this talk? Anti-Black racism in America. The complicated process to make meaning2 of the continued, senseless deaths of unarmed Black people at the hands, guns, and knees of White police. The broader topics of institutionalized and systemic barriers in the educational system. And the list continues. In the article on the facing page, Tony, my son, shared his experience grappling with “the talk” and his desire to explain his understanding with his younger brother. As a mother, I see how it offers an analytical example of making meaning of lived experiences as well as personal development. As an educator, I see numerous implications it has on the educational experience of all gifted students, especially Black gifted students.

If institutionalized racism and oppression start in school, what can be done to change it? Racism is a socially learned construct. Parents and teachers must acknowledge how students are introduced to racism and are immersed into a racist culture. As such, conversations about race, racism, and privilege cannot be colorblind, general discussions.

There is no minimum age that is most appropriate to address racism in America. When a child mimics or experiences racism and/or expresses concerns about it, implicitly or explicitly, that is the appropriate time to talk about it. And, if possible, address it with all persons involved—including those that may have been witnesses, or bystanders, of the act. It is important to have that discussion from the racial perspective of the students who actively carried out acts of racism (i.e. what they did exactly) as well as the students who experienced racism (i.e. what happened to them exactly). This ensures that the discussion does not take on a passive, generalized and disconnected tone. Also, when discussing complex and controversial topics such as racism, other considerations such as overexcitabilities (OEs), multiple exceptionalities (See sidebar on page 7), and cognitive processing abilities must be made in addition to the student’s background and experience with racism.

(Continues on p. 5)
At the same time, I wondered if many White people really felt like their whole race was being attacked as America tries to make amends for the injustices that have been allowed to go on for far too long. I would imagine that White people that do not consider themselves as racist want to disconnect from the historical wrongs and oppression that were implemented at the hands of White people. However, I feel as if a disconnect is what compels a need to categorize people and behavior—good cop, bad cop; good people, bad people; enemies and allies. However, just as Blacks of today have to understand and live accordingly based on the generational consequences of oppression, so do Whites as inheritors of privilege. Within each culture, there are values, interests, and beliefs that are passed down as a way of life that create biases when it comes to others outside of their own culture.

So, it’s not about good people and bad people, but acknowledging and understanding that it is the implicit biases toward others that lead to microaggressions, institutionalized anti-Black racism, systematic oppression, and a culture that marginalizes Black lives. Interactions for Blacks with White police can be a matter of life or death, but it is the culture of anti-Black racism that is embedded so deep into the belief system of many Whites, that allows non-life threatening acts of racism to go unchecked and that contribute to the oppression of Black people in America. And most times, for Black kids, the experiences of institutionalized racism and oppression start in the educational system.

Enough is enough. I have decided that I no longer want to be positioned as a victim. I no longer want to live in constant fear—even in my own home—of police that do not value my life as they would my White counterparts. I no longer want to feel that my future and life are being held hostage to a system that sees me as a threat to a false sense of civility. I am not okay. I will be okay when actions for change against anti-Black racism match statements of solidarity. I will be okay when the educational system adequately acknowledges and addresses the racism that serves as hurdles for students like me. I will be okay when my peer group maintains “a representative seat at the table” for policy, for education, within organizations, and so on so that our voices—in first person—are heard.

As such, I submit this as a call to action for young adults (ages 20–26), and especially gifted young adults, to continue the conversations until our voices are heard. *

**Author’s Note**

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**Endnote**

1 Oppression is used as a general term for the interrelated system of ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized oppression along with internalized privilege; www.coloradoinclusivefunders.org
This is especially important with gifted students. As parents, we can share this information with our children's teachers; if you homeschool, the information is critical.

**Overexcitabilities and Trauma of Racism**

Research supports claims that gifted students may experience heightened psychological and neurological sensations as they interact with their environments. Pioneered by Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, overexcitabilities, or OEs, refer to intense reactions to environments that manifest in the body (e.g., pacing), the senses (e.g., a strong reaction to tags in clothing), the emotions (e.g., empathy for others), the imagination (e.g., constant daydreaming), or the intellect (e.g., the need to question everything).3

An example of this may be a deep concern about racial or social injustices that students witness or hear about happening to others, with a desire to act. For younger Black students, more often than White students, these conversations may be heard around them as older Black people discuss their experiences with racism within the home, church, or community.

**Multiple Exceptionalities and Perspective**

The term twice exceptional (or 2e) typically refers to more than one disability that is present alongside high learning potential. In the broader sense, the term **multiple exceptionalities** includes complex intersection of traits of giftedness in concert with two or more exceptionalities.4 These additional exceptionalities include, but are not limited to, formally identified disabilities, membership within an underrepresented subgroup, and/or any other uncommon traits exhibited by the student. Multiple exceptionalities impact lived experiences of students as they navigate through school with personal and social challenges, including how they are treated and how they experience their environment. For example, a gifted Black student with a disability already occupies a space in gifted education where others may find it hard to understand their perspective experiences, and may have to combat racial microaggression from peers, teachers, and so on, who maintain stereotypes about their disability and racial identity.

**Cognitively Processing Anti-Black Racism**

Bibliotherapy is the practice of reading books to connect students to others with similar challenges, interests, and/or experiences.3 This strategy offers a non-threatening approach to difficult, and sometimes controversial, topics such as anti-Black racism. Intended for a younger audience, children's books offer a way to explore concepts that are easy to understand and can be ideal for exploring complex and more controversial topics for all grade levels, K–12. (See Resources on page 13 in this issue.)

However, addressing racism is not enough: We want students to process the concepts and issues on a high level. American psychologist Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues developed a classification or taxonomy that offers a continuum of cognitive complexity.6 James Banks, a leading scholar in multicultural education, developed four approaches to curriculum reform for depth and complexity to foster meaning-making for students.7 Together, these two frameworks make up Ford and Harris' Bloom-Banks Matrix that supports a teaching and learning strategy to cognitively process the construct of anti-Black racism, and a curriculum framework for depth and rigor8 that guides gifted Black students in understanding their emotions and making meaning of their experience when exposed to racism.

Table 1 (See page 6) outlines an example framework for discussing racism using the Bloom-Banks Matrix to guide exploration of topics presented in a recently published children's book in conjunction with recent events.9 M. J. Mouton's *Garrett's Store* (2020) is inspired by the real life of Garrett A. Morgan (1877–1963), a Black scientist, inventor, and entrepreneur who was considered a mechanical
Table 1. Addressing Racism and Privilege Using Mouton’s Garrett’s Store

This framework, based on the Bloom-Banks Matrix, offers educators and parents a way to differentiate discussions about racism. It can be used in its entirety for school-wide discussions, or tailored to specific levels by using the four quadrant approach. Start with Quadrant 1 for younger students, progressing up through Quadrant 4 as students age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution Approach (Unpacking information)</th>
<th>Additive Approach (Unpacking cultural themes)</th>
<th>Transformation Approach (Integrating perspective)</th>
<th>Social Action Approach (Integrating social action and service-learning)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remember (Know) Identify these concepts and provide examples from Garrett’s Store: race, ethnicity, colorism, racial microaggression, racism, privilege.</td>
<td>Select something that you enjoy doing. Describe the culture within it.</td>
<td>Identify and provide current demographic information about Garrett Morgan’s racial makeup.</td>
<td>Contrasting the rights and position of Blacks in 1920 and in 2020, recreate a children’s story of a fictitious modern-day Garrett, as an entrepreneur owning and operating a store to sell his own inventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand (Comprehension) Using descriptions and pictures from Garrett’s Store only, identify and describe the major characters, including race.</td>
<td>Identify pages that highlight Hitch the dog. What message does the personification of him as a dog relay in each example? Explain.</td>
<td>Identifying Garrett Morgan’s racial background, explain how it played a role in his career.</td>
<td>Explore organizations such as NAACP in which Garrett was a member. Identify organizations for students at different levels, and create a brochure to highlight membership opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply (Do) Identify the benefits and risks of Garrett disguising himself as Big Chief Mason. As the White male clerk.</td>
<td>Similar to the fireman in Garrett’s Store, recommend ways that firemen, police, and other positions of service could develop a better relationship with the Black community. Give examples.</td>
<td>Using a shared understanding of culture,* compare and contrast identified racial groups in Garrett’s Store. Support your answers.</td>
<td>Based on the knowledge of Garrett’s inventions, write a letter to the Nobel Prize committee, recommending him, posthumously, for one of the most appropriate science-based Nobel Prizes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze (&amp; Synthesize) Explain how young Garrett felt when people would not buy from his store. What tells the reader he felt that way?</td>
<td>Explain the ways that young Garrett, Big Chief Mason, and the clerk dealt with racism and privilege. Cite examples.</td>
<td>What do you think Garrett experienced in real life to influence him to use chemicals that treat woolen fabric on his own hair?</td>
<td>Examine and make recommendations for more equitable standards for a publicly available employee manual related to dress code and appearance. Be sure to maintain safety considerations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate Create your own booklet with important terms (using definitions, graphics, and sentences) from Garrett’s Store.</td>
<td>Interview a White person that has worked and/or lived as a minority in a community. Ask questions and summarize that person’s feeling of safety, comfort, engagement, and participation level within that culture.</td>
<td>Explain why and how natural hair of Blacks became a civil rights issue in America.</td>
<td>Reflect on a situation where you experienced racism. Write a letter to the person to let them know how it made you feel and to educate them on a different perspective of their current views. (You don’t have to give it to them.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create (Products) Create a marketing flier for Garrett’s hair straightening products, as it might have been promoted in 1916.</td>
<td>Create a marketing flier for Garrett’s Store products, as it might have been promoted in 1916.</td>
<td>Propose additional dialog or a different storyline that includes Garrett explicitly calling attention to the racism he experienced.</td>
<td>Join, develop, and/or lead a service-learning initiative to educate and support Black students who deal with experiences of racism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Culture is a self-identified group of people with shared beliefs, customs, values, language, knowledge, roles, technology, and history. Cultural tools are developed by people within the culture over time to address and maintain key principles of the culture.

Meet Elijah McClain

With George Floyd’s death and “Black Lives Matter” as the framework for discussion, many organizations, including those in gifted education, have put forth solidarity statements\(^1\) and have begun the process to navigate the complex translation of symbolic support into real action. Additional cases have been brought to the surface.\(^2\)

Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old unarmed Black man from Aurora, Colorado, reportedly had a heart attack on the way to the hospital, and died days later after he was declared brain dead. This occurred after he was confronted by the local police who reported responding to a 911 call of a “suspicious person.” Although he had not committed any crime, collected reports, footage, and recordings revealed that police put him in a carotid hold and called first responders, who then injected him with ketamine.\(^3\) McClain’s last words, as he begged for mercy, to police included statements such as, “…I’m an introvert. I’m just different. That’s all. I’m so sorry…Forgive me. All I was trying to do was become better. I will do it. I will do anything. Sacrifice my identity, I’ll do it…”\(^4\)

Further investigation revealed that McClain worked as a massage therapist, and taught himself to play the piano, guitar, cello, and violin. He often spent his lunch breaks at local animal shelters, putting on concerts for cats and dogs because he believed music would help soothe their anxiety. One of his massage clients, in speaking with a reporter from the Sentinel, described McClain as “gentle…child-like spirit…lived in his own little world. He was never into, like fitting in. He just was who he was.”\(^5\) McClain’s mother noted that she had homeschooled him, and she recognized early on that he was intellectually gifted.

Elijah’s story of institutionalized victimization as a multi-exceptional (3e) student that contributed to his death began long before the encounters with the police. It is this crisis, and underlying issues, why gifted stakeholders must address educational institutions’ role, and specifically gifted and talented education (GATE) programming, in creating environments that foster this phenomenon.

Multi-exceptionality, as in the case of Elijah McClain, represents the intersection of giftedness, with two or more exceptionalities. Multiple exceptionalities impact lived experiences of students as they navigate through school with personal and social challenges they may endure, including how they are treated and how they experience their environment.

Endnotes


genius. Mouton tells the fictional story of a younger Garrett, who opens a store to sell his inventions, but faces challenges of racism within his community.10

In addition to discussing topics such as racism and privilege, this curriculum framework is ideal for exploring the consequences of historical progression of racism. Educators and parents teaching this book may choose to differentiate in a single grade by assigning students different tasks based on their ability to process the book. Others may choose to use the same book schoolwide or across multiple grade levels by dividing the matrix into quadrants.11

By combining the Ford and Harris’ Bloom-Banks Matrix and children’s literature focused on racism, discussions (and understanding) go much deeper than surface level. This is just one strategy that educators and parents can use to promote anti-Black racism.

Final Thoughts

It is time to answer the call to action for the dominant culture and those in positions of power to denounce unjust acts of violence and anti-Black racism in America as a first step to confronting the structural barriers, inequitable policies, and unwritten practices that negatively impact the lived experiences of Black people in America. This also includes the institutional racism and systemic barriers that negatively impact the educational experiences of gifted Black students. Change begins with a conversation that acknowledges the wrongs. Use of children’s books for discussion points, guided by a multicultural curriculum, offers a framework for these conversations. 

Author’s Note

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Endnotes

1 Black is used to be inclusive of multigenerational born African Americans only connected through the history of U.S. chattel slavery.
10 www.biography.com/inventor/garrett-morgan