

# Seven Students, One Voice: See Us, Understand Us, Teach Us, Challenge Us!

By Shelagh Gallagher, Mary Ruth Coleman, and Dibrelle Tournet

In a very moving session at a recent North Carolina Association for Gifted & Talented (NCAGT) conference, seven high school students faced a room full of educators and told them what it's like to be a gifted student of color and, in many cases, low-income as well.<sup>1</sup>

The students talked about being encouraged and discouraged, of opportunity and frustration. They described journeys comprised of determination, hard work, and sheer luck. We believe their messages deserve a larger forum, so we are sharing their words, edited for length, and organized to help parents and teachers understand that *Giftedness Knows No Boundaries*.<sup>2</sup>



Dr. Mary Ruth Coleman with panel participants, from left to right: Lindsay Watson, Yaw Yeborah, and Maya Moore (the Early College at Guilford); Nakyra Sykes (STEM Early College at NC A&T); Dayanara Leyva (GenOne; East Mecklenburg High School, Charlotte); Santiago Garcia-Rico (STEM Early College at NC A&T); and Tatyana Bowers (Northeast Guilford High School).

## See Me! I Am More Than My Circumstances

“I was always taught that if I wanted to be somewhere in life, if I wanted to be someone, I had to be focused in school and had to be the best of the best. It pushes you but when we talk about expectations, I think a lot of times teachers expect less of you when you are a minority, and you come from less, and you don't have what others have.”

“Sometimes gifted minority students can have [both more and less expected of them]...I remember when I was assigned ESL homework in elementary school, the teacher once wrote a note asking my mother to stop helping me with my homework. My mother had *me* write back a note for her saying that she didn't know English, [so she couldn't help me]!”

“In middle school, I was near the top of my class, but I never believed in [trying] to put a spotlight on myself until I got to about eighth grade. Nobody near me had ever been to an early college. In fact, *I* was the one that went and sought out STEM. There was no pressure from my family to go there, there was no pressure to be the top of my class, but I ended up getting some of the top scores in my entire grade by the end of the year. I remember I had this teacher—I always go back and think, “Thank you so much! You basically made me the student that I am”—she told me that she gave me the material just like she gave everyone else and it was actually *me* that was...doing everything. *I* was the one continuing to study every night...that *I* was the one putting in the hard hours, the work, and the determination, so anywhere that I got that year, and anywhere that I ever get in life, is because of *me*. It really took that teacher to make me understand I'm worth it.”

“I know myself and I know my strengths, and I know my weaknesses and I know what my capability is... [Somebody] actually [told] me I couldn't be what I wanted to be in elementary school, and she was African American like me. That hurt, but I think in the same sentence it pushed me to show them that I *could* be better, and I *will* be better. Teachers should understand more that they shouldn't put you down or expect less of you...because of where you come from or what you look like.”

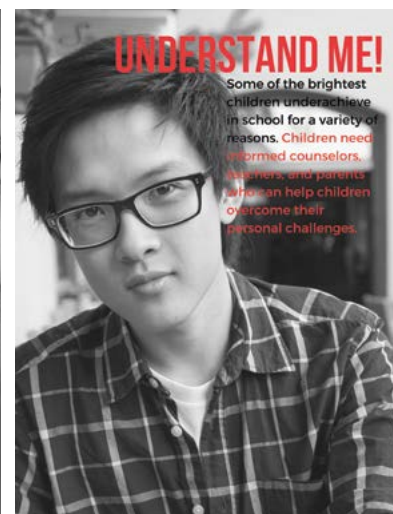
“Once I got into STEM it felt like I lost all my support outside of school. I wanted to celebrate and one of my friend's parents told me that the only reason I got into [the program] was because it was an HBCU and I was African American and I was like, “I got into [NC A&T] STEM because I worked hard, and I wish that you could see that.”

## Understand Me! I'm Gifted and Still Growing

“My mother always really supported me in my educational goals. She knew what I wanted out of life and she knew that what she wanted for me was always going to be more than what she could necessarily give me. But something she always really wanted me to learn, and something that I've been learning through GenOne, has been self-advocacy. There's going to be times when you're not going to be there to speak for us and so self-advocacy—that sense that we're no longer asking, we're demanding the same opportunities—we have to demand them for ourselves...or we're not going to be taken seriously.”

“When you're given the Academically Gifted (AG) label, it's almost like a stereotype that you're supposed to be smart and know how to do stuff. Also, being a minority, people expect *more* from you but also expect *less*. There were certain times with certain teachers...if I would get a really high grade they would say, “Good job...but did you cheat?” But if I didn't do as well, they would say, “You're an AG student, you're smart, so you should do better [than this].” I feel like training teachers to realize that just because someone's AG [doesn't mean they're] perfect, they still have more things to learn, [would help].”

“I refused to believe that I was allowed to have any type of flaw in my character because I felt that if I had a flaw it was going to be shown to everyone, everyone would see that I wasn't actually deserving of where I was, and they were going to take that from me.”



Giftedness Knows No Boundaries posters like these may be downloaded for free from NAGC at [bit.ly/gifted\\_posters](http://bit.ly/gifted_posters).

## Takeaways for Teachers and Parents of Low-Income or Minority Gifted Students

- **Teaching self-advocacy is critical.** “There will be times when you’re not here to speak for us; we need to speak for ourselves and demand for ourselves.”
- **Understand that these students constantly navigate conflicting assumptions.** “The mixed messages we get [is that we] are supposed to be *more* because we’re gifted, or *less* because we’re minority students.”
- **Celebrate their accomplishments.** Their success is the result of ability and persistence, not cheating.
- **Offer experiences, ideas, and activities to push them forward.** They seek education, and they aren’t done learning. “We need you to support us in our growth.”
- **Gather a peer group of similar ability and background.** “It helps to be surrounded by other people that have the same goals as you.”
- **Be an adult who changes a life.** “We have teachers we want to go back and thank; we had teachers that made a difference.”
- **Seek out, advocate for, and establish programs in your state that foster acceleration for minority gifted students.** Potential partners and/or resources include universities, non-profit organizations, and businesses to help fund programs.

## Teach Me! I Want to Know More

“I consider myself to be a pretty well-rounded student and a lot of times it would get misunderstood to mean that I wasn’t an academic student. I think people misunderstood me and they didn’t take the time to get to know me and understand that I’m not *just* a social butterfly; I’m actually a real advocate for education. I think that more one-on-one experiences—those AG classes were *the best*—helped me understand the importance of education.”

“When I was a kid I [had] a lot of people bringing me down not at school but out of school. I would work a lot with my dad in painting. Not too long ago, I was talking to the contractors that my dad works for and so I was asking them, “What do you recommend for me to become a contractor? What should I study?” A lot of them would say, “Don’t even go to college,” “Just forget about school.” I feel like they were the ones that weren’t advocating for me. And then in middle school I had one teacher, Mr. X. I remember that he would always tell me that I should try my best in math. I listened to him and I talked to my counselor...and I applied. He actually emailed me the other day to find out how the early college program was going for me because he was the one advocating for me to go to the early college. [Now] I know I want to go to college and I know that I want to be an engineer, and I feel like if it wasn’t for that middle school teacher telling me to try hard, and if it wasn’t for me pushing against those standards put on me by other parts of society, I wouldn’t be where I’m at right now.”

“[When I was young] I would always feel like there was a disconnect between what I was being taught and what I felt [I could do] because I always loved education. My mom always promoted it, she always told me that it was important...but I didn’t feel that importance from my teacher. That persisted up until third grade, when there was a new math group with a volunteer from outside of the school—she would pull maybe five or six students. I looked forward to that every week, just going to this little room for 20 minutes and doing things that were harder than they were teaching us in class. I really valued that time—more one-on-one and individualized—because I wasn’t receiving that in the classroom.”

“They didn’t really focus on science much when I was [in] elementary school. Now that I’m taking physics at NCA&T, it honestly has changed my mind, because physics is kind of my passion now. It’s a really hard class and it changed my career path. I feel like if they had focused more on science when I was a younger student, I would have known what I had wanted to do way long before this year. I feel like if you could make more AG programs for science classes, that would probably be a lot better for a lot of students.”

## Challenge Me! Don't Worry...I Can Handle It

“Up until high school I never really questioned or felt stressed by being AG. I just always felt like it was what was expected of me, so I just did what was expected of me. So up until now, I never realized that...I'm different.”

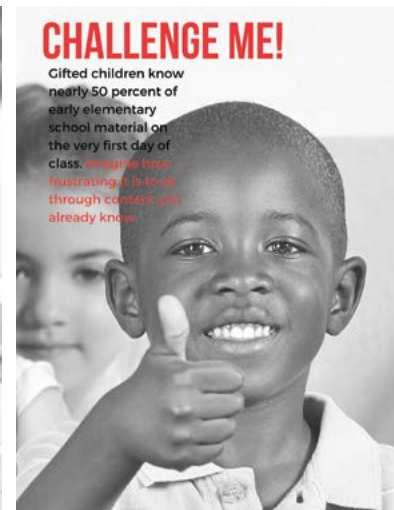
“I feel like I put a lot of the stress on *myself* because I try to be a perfectionist sometimes. So my stress comes from always feeling like you have to be the best, you have to be ahead of other people especially when you're a minority. [I feel] I have to show them I can do [what is expected] *and more.*”

“It also helps to be surrounded by other people that have the same goals as you because if you're constantly around people that want to succeed—wanting to get high grades, high scores, and to learn—then you're driven to be that way as well. You can lean on each other to manage the stress. Also the staff (like my lovely guidance counselor) have really been really instrumental in helping me manage the stress. A lot of it is kind of in your own head.”

“In my freshman year at orientation they gave us this wonderful lecture called, *You Are Going to Fail*. It was fantastic, because all of us students were always at the top of our class, never really failing ourselves. We were told you're going to fail, you're going to get an F, you're going to get a C, you're going to get something that's below what you always expected for yourself. It's going to happen but the only thing that you can do is learn from it. My chemistry/biology teacher told us that it's going to *feel* like you're a failure but you're not. You're just being challenged more than you really would [at other schools].”

## We Are Lucky: But Fulfilling Potential Shouldn't Depend on Luck

“*We're lucky that we got noticed.* We worked for it, but so do a lot of other students and they don't get noticed. How many [others] do you think want the opportunities that we're getting, [and] how many of them are going to get noticed? We're fighting for an opportunity to speak up, we want the chance to show that we know just as much as any other [gifted] person, we just need to be given the opportunity. I think we have to be aware that we aren't the only ones. We're lucky to be here but there are [many] who aren't lucky.”



## Authors' Note

**Shelagh Gallagher, Ph.D.**, is the director of *Engaged Education*, where she focuses on research, curriculum, professional development, and policy in gifted education. She recently co-authored the national report *Americans Agree* and initiated the North Carolina initiative *Talent Delayed/Talent Denied*. She is a board member of NAGC, NCAAGT, and a WCGC delegate.

**Mary Ruth Coleman, Ph.D.**, is Senior Scientist Emeritus, FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, where she directs Project U-STAR-PLUS that uses science, talents, and abilities to recognize underrepresented students. She has served on the boards of both NAGC and the Council for Exceptional Children. In 2017, she was inducted into the “Hall of Fame for Leaders in Twice-Exceptional Learning.”

**Dibrelle Touret** is Director for Academically Gifted for the Guilford County Schools in North Carolina, where she focuses on gifted services K–12, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and college readiness. She also serves as an AIG regional lead for the NC Department of Instruction, co-chairs the *Talent Delayed/Talent Denied* Advisory Committee, and is the current president of NCAAGT.

## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Students represented three different types of programs dedicated to supporting gifted students of color: Early College (STEM Early College at North Carolina A&T State University and The Early College at Guilford), Non-Profit Advocacy Organizations (GenOne), and Accelerated High Schools (Northeast Guilford High School).
- <sup>2</sup> For more information about the NAGC *Giftedness Knows No Boundaries* campaign, go to [www.nagc.org/giftedness-knows-no-boundaries](http://www.nagc.org/giftedness-knows-no-boundaries)