

## **INTRA-RACIAL BULLYING: AN ISSUE OF MULTICULTURAL COUNSELING [647]**

Rose Merrell-James, Ph.D., School Counselor  
Rochester City School District, NY

### **Abstract**

Intra-racial bullying, a unique problem in the field of multicultural counseling, affects school-age children and adolescents within marginalized groups, such as the African American. Because their cultures and backgrounds fail to mirror mainstream American society, these diverse, marginalized students are innocent targets for bullies. Not only are they victimized by the bullies, but they are also abandoned to their own resources and fears by adults who ignore bullying as too commonplace to bother with or who dismiss intra-racial bullying as nonexistent.

By illuminating factors that stress African American students, research exposes the danger of such adult attitudes. These factors, or stressors, include the students' socioeconomic status, identity development (e.g., the need for frequent socialization in school), and physical characteristics (e.g., light skin/dark skin and “good hair”/“bad hair”). They also include school factors, such as pervasive attitudes of denial, justification, and avoidance that serve to prop up the bully and isolate the victim. Together these factors affect students' peer group affiliations through name-calling and ostracism and their self-esteem through verbal bullying—all of which perpetuate negative stereotypes, lower academic performance, and contribute to a climate of violence.

Best practices for addressing and putting an end to intra-racial bullying include professional development/training for students and staff, group and individual counseling, and zero tolerance policies for verbal and other forms of bullying in schools. Additional research is needed about intra-racial stressors that ensue from lower and middle class comparisons.

### **Introduction**

Future projections indicate that by the year 2020 a majority of school age children attending public schools will be children of color or children from diverse cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2004). The current racial/ethnic distribution among students in public schools in the United States is about 1.2 percent Native American, 4 percent Asian Pacific American, 15.6 percent Hispanic /Latino, 17.2 percent African American and 62.1 percent European/White American (National Center for Educational Statistics 2001). Along with this diversity are the increasing reports of bullying incidents among school-age children and adolescents on the basis of cultural, ethnic, gender, or linguistic differences. There are various definitions of bullying in the literature; however, a commonly cited definition for use in this paper is the repeated, aggressive, and physical, psychological, or sexual behavior a person directs towards another individual (Batsche and Knoff 1994; Olweus 1993).

Some statistics on bullying indicate that 60 percent of students report bullying on the basis of looks/body size, 57 percent on the basis of gender expression, 53 percent on ability, 52 percent on real or perceived sexual orientation, 40 percent on race/ethnicity, and 33 percent on religion or family income (Batsche and Knoff 1994; Gordon 2001 and Scott 2002). Moreover, reports indicate that 45 percent of all students express feeling unsafe at school because of some real or perceived personal characteristic, 9 percent of all students skipped a class in the past month because they felt unsafe at school, 7 percent reportedly skipped an entire day of class

in the past month, 29 percent of gay students skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe—four times greater than in the general population—and 60 percent of all students who have been harassed or assaulted did not report the incident to faculty or staff (Batsche and Knoff 1994; Gordon 2001, and Scott 2002).

Addressing diversity as a bullying issue is one of the challenges facing school counselors. Multicultural school counseling competencies are designed to promote culturally responsible school counseling practices. Lee (2001) and Gay (2000) suggest that culturally responsive counseling refers to the inclusion of diverse perspectives into the counseling process in a manner that validates and affirms children from marginalized groups and recognizes the contextual dimension of race, culture, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and geography. A marginalized group includes children and adolescents whose cultures and backgrounds do not necessarily mirror the cultural dictates of mainstream American society (Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2004). Culturally responsive counseling practices require an ethic of caring and understanding in an effort to build bridges between different ethnic groups (Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2004).

Although all forms of bullying relating to diversity are of significance when addressing the concerns of students in school, bullying among school-age children and adolescents *within* marginalized groups is the focus of this paper. “How do educators in general and counselors in particular address this form of bullying? This question addresses diversity-within-diversity among ethnic groups, or intra-racial bullying.

Intra-racial bullying is a unique problem in the field of multicultural counseling. This form of bullying occurs between people of the same ethnic or racial group. Making it unique are the racial, social, political, and educational factors that this form of bullying embodies. The bully selects certain characteristics or attributes common to the ethnic group that become the target for abuse. These characteristics include hair type, skin color, intellectual ability, economic background or material items, and physical characteristics.

The researcher begins the discussion by describing factors that impact intra-racial bullying. The discussion then moves to the type of intra-racial bullying students experience in school. For this paper, the author focuses on intra-racial bullying among African American school age children and adolescents presenting examples of intra-racial bullying and the consequences of the behavior. Next, the researcher describes best practices to work with intra-racial bullying issues. The author concludes with a discussion of best practices to work with intra-racial bullying issues..

## **Factors Influencing Intra-Racial Bullying**

Various factors contribute to diversity within the African American culture, including socioeconomic status, identity development, physical characteristics, and school factors. There is also the construct called raceless persona, or deracination, which is a combination of socioeconomic status and identity development. Although this is not an exhaustive list of factors, the writer presents them as suggestions on how children and adolescents form friendships and relationships that, in some cases, can lead to problems characteristic of bullying.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

A review of the literature indicates that diversity exists within African American families due to various economic opportunities (Day-Vines, Patton, and Baytops 2003). This diversity presents itself as various opportunities existing in housing, schools, communities, and social experiences that are available to families and youth within the African American ethnic group. This diversity can present itself as a factor of intra-racial bullying in schools.

Common in schools are the physical comparisons that youth make toward each other concerning fashion labels, hairstyles, electronic devices (e.g., mobile phones, computers, and music devices) and modes of transportation. Also, common in the literature are numerous studies that cite the concerns of African American youngsters who experience social distress, academic failure, poverty, despair, and violence because of socioeconomic diversity (Day-Vines, Patton, and Baytops 2003). However, receiving little attention in the literature are the social and emotional stressors that youth experience from this socio economic diversity. In particular, some researchers question the intra-racial stressors that result from comparisons of middle or upper class families to families of lower socioeconomic status.

A sizeable portion of African Americans are in the middle class category, according to the 2000 United States census (United States Census Bureau 2000). (United States Census Bureau 2000). According to this census record, the guidelines for the poverty threshold are \$13,738 for a family of three and \$17,603 for a family of four (Day-Vines et al. 2003). In addition, Sue and Sue (2003) conclude that more than one third of the African American population can be classified as middle class. With middle class status, African American families have increased opportunities for variability in employment, lifestyle, and material possession. However, according to some researchers, middle-class status can serve as protective mechanism against poverty, dilapidated housing, inferior education, and malnutrition, yet it does not shield young people from the manacles of racism and discrimination (Hooks 2000).

Day-Vines et al. (2003) and Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas (2001) suggest that multicultural counselors recognize that social class standing can benefit youngsters by helping them with economic well-being but, at the same time, can harm them by exacerbating feelings of guilt related to middle class status, feelings of isolation and alienation from other African Americans, and experiences with racism. Furthermore, the researchers suggest that attention to African American middle class students helps to address the various forms of racial oppression, in particular, inter- and intra-racial stressors that these youngsters might face in schools.

## Identity Development

Another diversity factor for African American youth and families relates to identity development. Lack of ethnic identity development presents problems as a child goes from childhood to adulthood. According to Erikson (1968), the primary developmental task of the adolescent years is identity formation. For African American adolescents, this can be a difficult task. Phinney (1990) and Marcia (1966) propose a model of ethnic identity which is determined by the presence or absence of exploration and commitment. Elaborating further, Phinney 1990, p. 503 proposes four identity stages, as follows:

1. Diffuse, a state in which there has been little exploration or active consideration of ethnicity and no psychological commitment to any ethnic group
2. Foreclosed, a state in which a commitment has been made to a particular ethnic group's beliefs, values, and/or customs, without actively searching or exploring one's ethnic heritage or ethnicity
3. Moratorium, a state of active exploration of one's ethnicity in which no commitment had yet been made
4. Achieved, a state of strong personal commitment to a particular ethnic identity following a period of high exploration or crisis

Researchers agree that an individual needs a period of ethnic exploration in order to secure an achieved ethnic identity (Day-Vines et al. 2003; Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2001). Additionally, studies indicate that the experience of ethnic exploration causes African American students to socialize frequently in school, thus forming the basis of their self-definition, self-esteem, ethnic socialization, and selection of friends.

## Raceless Persona or Deracination

Researchers often discuss socioeconomic status and ethnic identity together when referencing problems or concerns of African American youth in schools and society (Day-Vines et al. 2003; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1993). According to these researchers, deracination, the extent to which African Americans feel alienated from their African heritage as well as from other African Americans is important in the consideration of identity development. Russell et al. (1993) elaborate on the color gap in power and privilege between African Americans. The gap is described as pertaining to predominately light-skinned African Americans who usually live in White neighborhoods, attend predominately White schools, and work in predominately White businesses. Some deracinated African Americans with light skin and keen enough features have abandoned their heritage altogether, pretending to be White.

Elaborating on this theme further, Day-Vines et al. (2003) discuss the concept of a “raceless persona,” in which African American youngsters ignore and minimize any vestiges of an African American racial identity to obtain the accouterments of success. For example, geographic mobility enables large numbers of African American families to move from mostly African American urban communities to suburban White communities. These new residential settings have separated many African Americans from African American social life, outlets, and extended family life. Day-Vines et al. (2003) indicate that the consequences of this change of geographic location means that, in some cases, adolescents are often the only African Americans in a class activity, lacking an African American peer group, and being isolated from the African American community that had served as an important socializing agent for many of their parents. A raceless persona results in adolescents being ill prepared for the often inevitable experiences they encounter when confronted with racism and discrimination, particularly when they reach puberty and their peer relationships change with the onset of the dating process (Day-Vines et al. 2003)

## Physical Characteristics

Hair and skin color have been intra-racial issues since slavery and the practice of miscegenation, when slave masters accorded preferential treatment and status to their biracial offspring who usually had lighter skin and straighter hair textures (Russell et al. 1993; Golden 2004; Day-Vines et al. 2003; Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2001; and hooks 1996). Today, many African Americans continue to assign greater value to individuals who approximate a White European aesthetic (Day-Vine et al. 2003; Russell et al. 1993).

### *Skin Color*

According to Russell and colleagues (1993), by the time African American children become teenagers, they have well defined stereotypes about skin color. In an early study, Charles H. Parrish (1946) discovered that junior high students used as many as 145 different terms to describe skin color, including “half white,” “yaller,” “high yellow,” “fair,” “bright,” “light,” “red bone,” “light brown,” “medium brown,” “brown,” “brown skinned,” “dark brown,” “chocolate,” “dark,” “black,” “ink spot,” “blue black,” and “tar baby.” Parrish further comments that each skin tone was associated with a certain personality type: in general, light to medium skin tones were linked to intelligence and refinement, while dark tones suggested toughness, meanness, and physical strength. Similar stereotypes exist today, with many people believing that light skin is feminine and dark skin is masculine.

Researchers suggest that African American women suffer more than males because of skin color (Golden 2004; Russell et al. 1993). Russell and colleagues (1993) cite a study involving 80 people who were requested to look at photographs of 12 African American females and characterize their impressions of each. The results of the study indicate that the dark-skinned women were less successful, less happy in love, less popular, less physically attractive, less physically and emotionally healthy, and less intelligent than their light-skinned counterparts. These comments were made regardless of the ratings the women received on attractiveness

(prejudged to be high or low). The study further indicates that the dark-skinned women were rated high only on having a good sense of humor. This phenomenon was labeled the “Whoopi Goldberg effect.”

Along with issues of skin color, researchers indicate that being “light skinned” or biracial causes problems for males and females (Golden 2004; Russell et al. 1993). An example in the literature emphasizes this concern. One light-skinned, green-eyed woman remembers that her younger brother was always getting beaten up because of his fair skin color. The other children would yell, “Your momma was messing around with a White man. There’s no way you could be your daddy’s child.” The singer Lena Horne recalls in her autobiography that when she moved to Florida as a small girl, the children in her new neighborhood would shout, “Yaller! Yaller! Got a White daddy! Shame! Shame! Shame!” Another example indicates the length that children and adolescents will have to go for acceptance by other African Americans. In this case, a light-skinned adolescent was careful to know all the music and African American athletes and to wear clothing characteristic of the Black culture.

A light-skinned teenager could not afford to get caught slipping when it came to the required black behavior [and] if you did you were likely to get stoned with the hardest rock in a black teenager’s rhetorical arsenal: Someone might call you a white boy (Russell et al. 1993, p.67)

Russell et al. (1993) emphasize that childhood friends who have quite different skin colors may find it increasingly difficult to maintain their closeness as they become teenagers. Additionally, the researchers indicate that light-skinned adolescents may discover that their popularity is rising and perhaps will conclude that friendships with dark-skinned friends might cost them socially. They conclude that in no other developmental phase is skin color so closely linked to attractiveness, popularity, and self-worth. This is especially true for African American girls, who through junior high and high school learn to compete over looks. For example, one African American girl stated:

The most popular girls in the school are nearly always light skinned. If a dark skinned girl is allowed to “hang with them” it is either because she has a car or is from a wealthy family. Otherwise, she isn’t going to cut it (Russell et al. 1993, p. 102).

On the other hand, boys are more likely to learn to compete on the playing field and in the classroom, resulting in issues of athletic ability out weighing issues of color.

Russell et al. (1993) state that taunts about color may seem the same as calling a child with glasses “four eyes” or a fat child “tubby”—part of the inevitable cruelties of childhood. Yet children can never outgrow skin color as they do other childhood traits, cannot change it by going on a diet or getting contact lenses, and may be less likely to find reassurance at home.

### *Hair Types*

Straight hair and European hairstyles have significant meanings in the African American community. “Good hair” has been associated with the light-skinned middle class; “bad hair” with the dark-skinned black African Americans who are less fortunate (Day-Vines et al. 2003, Golden 2004; Russell et al. 1993). How an African American chooses to wear his or her hair says everything there is to say about the individual.

Throughout the literature, the emphasis on type of hair was more significant for a woman than a man (hooks 1996; Golden 2004; Russell et al. 1993). Boys usually wear their hair cropped and short. From the early ages, especially for those girls with short hair, fuzzy edges, and nappy kitchens (the hairline on the back of the neck), girls are taught to “fix” their hair—as if it were broken. Short hair is unfeminine but, for many, long hair is unmanageable. Still the hair of Black girls is braided and yanked, rubber banded and barretted, into a presentable hair style, as seen in this example from Russell and colleagues, (1993):

I had it doubly hard when I was in grade school. Not only was I dark-skinned but I also had short beady hair. I always was teased by the boys and laughed at by the girls because my hair was so nappy and always stuck up in the air. I hated my hair and cried many nights. I was so glad when I got my hair straightened. It changed my whole life (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1993, p.84).

In discussing African American skin and hair types, Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas (2001) state that physical attractiveness has been a source of great stress for African American females many of whom have been deeply scarred by negative reactions to African physical features and female attractiveness. They go on further to comment that even more damaging is—

An African-American father who openly wishes his young daughter had lighter skin or an African American teacher who favors lighter-skinned African American adolescent females with naturally “straight” hair (Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2001, p.3).

They conclude by stating that these are instances in which negative perceptions of physical features can have a long-lasting effect on the self-concept of young African American females.

### *Physical Features*

In addition to skin color and hair type, the nose shape and eye color are also issues. According to Russell et al., cosmetic surgery for nose and eye changes in African American people has become an option for addressing “undesirable” physical features. Other methods include applying make-up to de-emphasize a board nose or using a clothespin at night to reshape the nose.

To address eye color, African American men and women have used contact lenses to change the color of their eyes to a “more desirable” shade. Russell et al. (2003) note that most print and television advertisements for tinted-eye contact lenses make no mention of contributing to the wearer’s vision but instead promise to “improve eye color.” They state further that the message here is that brown eyes are unacceptable and blue or green eyes are better.

### School Factors

Characteristic of all bullying are the attitudes of school officials, teachers, parents, and students (Batsche and Knoff 1994; Johnstone, Munn and Edwards 1992; Olweus 1993; and Remboldt 1998). These attitudes include denial, minimization, rationalization, justification, blame and avoidance. Remboldt (1998) suggests that taking on these attitudes enables and perpetuates the incidence of bullying in school. Specific attitudes associated with intra-racial bullying include the following:

- Denial
  - Our school doesn’t have a problem with racial bullying, but the other school does.
  - Everybody gets along.
  - We celebrate diversity in our school.
- Minimization
  - Name-calling and teasing are just normal behavior for kids.
  - They’re just having fun.
  - It’s okay for African American kids to use the “N” word. A Caucasian student cannot call another person the “N” word, but it is okay if another African American student uses the “N” word. That’s the way they talk.
- Rationalization
  - Kids have to learn to fight, to stand up for themselves.
- Justification

- If we had a lower student-teacher ratio, we could do something about the violence.
- It’s okay if African American kids call each other names; it’s not racism because they do it to each other.
- That’s the way things are nowadays.
- You can’t say anything to kids anymore.”
- Blame
  - The parents are not taking responsibility for their children’s behavior.
  - They live in poor neighborhoods and that’s the way everybody acts.
- Avoidance
  - I don’t need to stop the behavior.
  - If I don’t say anything there won’t be a problem.

One major problem with these attitudes is that the teacher and the student body remain insensitive to the issues tied to intra-racial bullying and the behavior is perpetuated in school. Without training to the type of factors associated with intra-racial bullying, the consequences of the bullying, and measures to address the problem, teachers, administrators, and students will allow this hurtful behavior to continue in school.

### **Consequences of Intra-Racial Bullying**

Bullying in general has long range consequences for the bully, victim, and bystander. The findings in Scandinavian countries suggest a strong correlation between bullying other students during the school year and experiencing legal and criminal troubles as adults. In one study, 60 percent of those characterized as bullies in secondary school had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus 1993). Bullying behavior leads to other forms of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, skipping and dropping out of school, fighting, expulsion from school, and the use of drugs and alcohol.

The long-range effect of bullying for a victim is that many often fear going to school and consider school to be an unsafe and unhappy place. Victims tend to refuse to go to school. The act of being bullied tends to increase some students’ isolation because their peers do not want to lose status by associating with them or because they do not want to increase the risks of being bullied themselves. Almost one in five students reported having no friends or one or two friends at school, indicating that many victims have few peer-level resources for either problem solving or support (Batsche and Knoff 1994). Being bullied tends to lead to depression and low self-esteem, problems that can carry into adulthood. Some victims of bullying are so distressed that they commit, or attempt to commit suicide (Banks 1997; Batsche and Knoff 1994; Olweus 1993; Sudermann, Jaffe, and Schiek 1996). Even when bullying does not lead to suicide, victims experience significant psychological harm that interferes with their social, academic, and emotional development. Olweus (1993) reports that the sooner bullying stops, the better the outcome for victims.

A victim’s academic record suffers from being bullied. Hoover et al. (1992) report that 90 percent of students who were bullied stated that they experienced a drop in school grades.

Being a victim of bullying can have severe consequences for the victim and our entire society when students bring weapons to school to protect themselves or to retaliate against the bully. Bowman (2001) cites results from the Secret Service Agency report on school violence. The report states that in about two-thirds of the school shootings, the attackers had felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked, or injured by others. The agency found that a number of the teenagers had suffered persistent, severe bullying and harassment.

The long-term consequences for the bystander are very similar to those of the victim. Bystanders usually experience the school as an unsafe and unhappy environment. Some bystanders react to bullying situations by not feeling comfortable in attending school or completing assignments. Therefore, they suffer lower grades,

which can lead to academic failure. Many bystanders feel that they should do something in a bullying situation, but many do not. Hazler (1996) notes that the discrepancy between what children say and what they actually do; that is, when children face a bullying situation, they experience internal conflicts that have as serious implications for their emotional well-being as for the more active participants. Hazler goes on to say that the conflict that bystanders experience results in their feeling powerless, very similar to the powerlessness that victims feel. Suderman et al. (1996) report that adolescents who observe violent behavior (bully attacks) and see that it has no negative consequences for the bully, will be more likely to use aggression in the future.

Intra-racial bullying also has long-range effects on victims. In the following section, the writer elaborates on the unique consequences of intra-racial bullying on African American youth and adolescent behavior. Examples are taken from excerpts of case studies in the literature.

### Thwarted Peer Group Affiliation

The maintenance of positive peer relationships is important during high school. The hallway, cafeteria, bus stop, and classroom are the social arenas where students seek out peers with similar clothing, hairstyles, expressions, and interests (e.g., sports, choir, and video games). In particular, these interests help youth and adolescents establish group identity and a sense of belonging. These relationships can become thwarted due to intra-racial bullying. One instance of how peer group affiliations can be affected is name-calling.

#### Name-calling

*Acting White or Oreo cookie.* These are common names directed at someone because of his or her speech, behavior, mannerisms, or interests. The terms “acting White” or “Oreo cookie” refer to characteristics of a person from the White ethnic groups. The victim is usually referred to as being Black or African American on the outside but White on the inside. The following example indicates the impact that this name has on people:

I was constantly harassed because of my black-black skin by a boy who was even darker than I was. Other times, aside from “Oreo” (due to the way I spoke), I was called just plain ugly. And I wasn’t too young to notice that the women revered on television, in movie, in videos, magazines, and every other media tended to lean to the light skinned side (Golden 2004, p. 123).

Another example further stresses the emotional effects of intra-racial name-calling on the victim.

Tiffany wept as she explained to the counselor that her African American peers teased her for working hard to obtain good grades, speaking Standard English, participating on the gymnastics team, and living in an affluent community. She was accused of “acting white.” Additionally, her peers limited their contact with her only to express interest in her friendship when they could receive answers for homework assignments and speaking to her outside of class as long as no other Caucasians were present. They also jokingly queried whether her parents sold drugs to afford their lifestyle, and her teacher intimated that her term paper was so well written that it may have been plagiarized (Day-Vines et al. 2003, p. 4)

*Black nerd.* Finally, the name “Black nerd” provides an example of how difficult it is to form peer relationships when a student’s speech and behavior are considered by some in the African American community as different from or not characteristic of their ethnicity. Wilson (2003) writes this:

Cadence, tone, diction, vocabulary—all white sounding. McClain got clowned because she talks white. I remember some kids an aisle over heard me and my mom, recalls the 26 year old teacher. They made their way over and just looked at us talking and cracked up laughing. It was this mixed

feeling of anger, maybe a little embarrassment and separateness. These kids were my age. I would have loved to have kicked it with them, instead they were clowning me (p. 1).

Wilson (2003) comments on the ageless implication that if a Black person studies hard, is bookish, speaks well, and ultimately test-drives a nontraditional aesthetic and profession, there must be racial fence jumping, an aspiration to whiteness.

### Isolation

Another consequence of intra-racial bullying is loneliness. Because of low peer group acceptance and not fitting into other ethnic groups, as one example describes, victims of intra-racial bullying can become lonely.

*Outsider within.* Membership in a particular group does not guarantee belonging and connection to others. The example of Tiffany and the “Black nerd” are cases in the literature where some African American youngsters do not fully develop close relationships with peers. For example, Tiffany is also a student in Advanced Placement (AP) classes in school. She has few classes with African American youngsters her age and, in most cases, is the “only one” (only African American in the classroom). Day-Vines et al. (2003) indicate that Tiffany and other middle-class youngsters often find themselves belonging to several different communities at once—the neighborhood community, school community, African American peer group, and church group—yet never realizing a sense of belonging in any setting. Elaborating further, the authors suppose that Tiffany feels a sense of personal isolation from her White peers with whom she seems to share only academic and athletic interests.

Finally, Wilson (2003) recounts this from a Black nerd:

I’ve been ridiculed because of my glasses, plus I was not good in sports... I wasn’t athletic. I was taller and they expected me to be able to play basketball. And, sadly, because I just carried books I was ridiculed because I was smart.

*Lower academic classes/standards or lack of participation in extra curricular activities.* In some cases, intra-racial bullying results in youngsters requesting to be removed from AP classes or refusing to try out for certain sports (e.g., golf, skiing, and gymnastics) because he or she receives ridicule from others. Numerous examples exist in school counseling practices as well as the literature about students opting out of higher level classes. For example, Tiffany initially expressed to her counselor that she wanted to be dropped from AP classes. Through further investigation by her counselor, it was discovered that the AP classes were not the problem but the loneliness and ridicule that she received as a result of intra-racial bullying.

In addition to opting out of higher level classes or sports considered “non-traditional” for the African American ethnic group, some students suffering from intra-racial bullying do not come to school. One youngster reports, “I was afraid to come to school because they (other African American children) used to pick on me.”

Ford (1995) suggests that educators and school counselors must have an awareness and understanding of the many issues that hinder gifted African American students’ psychological, social, and emotional well being. This includes helping gifted students build positive social and peer relations in school.

### Verbal Bullying

Bullying involves an imbalance of power that can be physical, verbal, emotional, or social in nature. For instance, a physical imbalance of power includes such characteristics as a bully being taller or bigger or appearing stronger than the victim. The bully attempts to use power to gain control over another person. A

verbal imbalance of power could mean that someone has a “sharper” tongue with a better command of language, argument, or invective than another. A common form of verbal interaction that occurs within some African American social circles is “playin’ the dozens.”

### *Playin’ the dozens*

One definition of the dozens is found in the detailed online entry on Wikipedia (The dozens, 2006):

The dozens is an African American oral tradition in which two acquaintances go head to head in a contest of often good-natured ribald “trash talk.” They take turns insulting; “cracking,” “ranking,” “sparking,” “janking,” “snapping,” “checking,” or “riding”—on one another, their adversary’s mother, or other family members until one of them has no comeback (Introductory section, para. 1).

The term the dozens is believed to refer to the devaluing on the auction block of slaves who were past prime, deformed, aged, or no longer capable of hard labor after years of back-breaking toil. These slaves were often sold by the dozen (History and Practice section, para. 2).

In some cases, playin’ the dozens leads to fights and prolonged animosity between participants. Usually playin’ the dozens is done with a group of onlookers. Those observing the exchange usually laugh and encourage one person over another to continue with the exchange until someone loses. Some bystanders observing the exchange of verbal put downs are fearful that they will be the next victims. Feelings expressed by youth and adolescents during this verbal exchange include anger, embarrassment, hurt, and shame.

### *The “N” Word*

Using the “N” word is controversial. For African American people, it can be a word used to show affection, discipline, friendship, and/or togetherness. Regardless of its use, the word has negative connotations historically. These connotations include referring to an African American person as illiterate, lazy, unintelligent, shifty, and/or unattractive. Frequently used in name-calling during interactions between youth and adolescents including during bullying incidents, it has become one of the most hurtful attacks of one African American against another.

### *Low Self-esteem*

Numerous examples exist in the literature regarding the impact of intra-racial bullying. One feeling in particular is that this form of bullying contributes to feelings of low self-esteem. One researcher comments that African American youngsters endure teasing and ridicule because of their appearance, especially individuals who lie at either extreme along the skin color and hair texture continuum. These experiences can erode one’s feelings of self-worth and sense of personal adequacy (Holcomb-McCoy and Moor-Thomas 2001).

### *Perpetuation of Negative Stereotypes*

Intra-racial bullying includes the use of historical stereotypes that negatively impact African American youth and adolescents in school. The form of bullying consists of the diversity in skin color, good hair and bad hair, choice of words or communication, what subjects one takes in school, one’s involvement in extracurricular activities, a family’s economic mobility, and one’s ability to compete during verbal exchanges. Students participate in this form of bullying on a daily basis in school. Although prevalent in schools, strategies for prevention and intervention are not well defined. In the next section the author suggests strategies to address intra-racial bullying in schools.

## Suggested Best Practice to Address Intra-Racial Bullying

The following list contains suggested strategies that educators and multicultural counselors can use in schools to address intra-racial bullying.

- Recognize that intra-racial bullying occurs in school.
- Be aware of the various forms of intra-racial bullying.
- Develop a zero tolerance for verbal bullying in school.
- Be prepared to host professional development workshops for parents, students, and staff on the issue of intra-racial bullying. The workshops will focus on defining the problem and working on suggestions for addressing the behavior in each individual school.
- Include intra-racial bullying intervention strategies in work plans against bullying and violence in school.
- Authorize multicultural counselors to encourage students to research their ethnic heritage by reading selected literature, attending cultural events, and interacting with experts on African American history and culture.
- Form groups for African American youngsters also have been suggested to address the ethnic identity exploration and development of youth (Holcomb-McCoy and Moore-Thomas 2001).
- Help students manage the impact of others’ negative perceptions. Coping with others’ faulty perceptions based on stereotypes is an ongoing and difficult task that will likely impact the adolescents’ lives (Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas 2001).
- Use case scenarios depicting problems involving racism, gender, and/or classism as catalysts for discussion. During these discussions, it is important for school counselors to take a nonexpert role so that the adolescents feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Counselors may ask questions that provide adolescents with an opportunity not only to articulate their feelings about racism but also to brainstorm new ways of challenging and managing racist encounters.
- Empower school counselors and educators to encourage the development of self-acceptance by reminding youth of their inner as well as outer beauty and the significant aspects of their African American heritage.
- Consult African American agencies, such as the National Urban League and community center, to assist in answering questions pertaining to African American racial identity and development.
- Develop a list of African American professions to contact for assistance as you address diversity issues in school.

The author’s final suggestion is for multicultural counselors and educators to help teach and coach African American children the same way that Golden (2004) and Russell et al. (1993) suggest in the literature:

[W]hile the parents of African American children often prepare them for the possibility that White children may call them “nigger,” few parents seem to warn them about the hateful name-calling from their “own people.” Black parents should teach their children not to tease or judge their peers on the basis of color, emphasizing that skin color has nothing to do with either beauty or African American identity. Parents also need to coach children who are especially light or dark on how to handle taunts about their color or features (Russell et al. 1993, p. 101).

## Conclusion

The increase of children of color in school draws our attention to the type of peer and adult relationships that youngsters and adolescents can form. Of concern in this paper is the issue of intra-racial bullying. The author presented factors that contribute to this form of bullying and the consequences resulting from bullying relationships. Suggestions for best practices emphasized increased awareness of the issue, professional

development for staff and students, group and individual counseling, and developing a zero tolerance for verbal as well as other forms of bullying in school.

Finally, continued research and awareness of intra-racial bullying with an emphasis on coaching and helping youngsters deal with intra-racial bullying will help to mediate it.