Exploring social and psycho-social factors that might help explain the Afro-Caribbean boy underachievement in England

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A B S T R A C T

For over four decades, it has been documented that Afro-Caribbean boys in England underachieve compared to their female counterparts. Caribbean literature has pointed to social and psycho-social factors that might be important in explaining some of this difference. To examine the extent to which these factors are important even throughout the Caribbean diaspora, this quantitative study explored the role these social and psychosocial factors played in explaining the achievement gap between Afro-Caribbean boys and girls residing in England. Findings demonstrated that only a few of these factors identified in Caribbean literature were important for attenuating the gap.

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1.0. Boy underachievement

Boy underachievement has been a topic of concern since the 1990s in many industrialized countries. These countries include the United Kingdom (Epstein et al., 1998; Smith, 2003), Australia (Hodgetts and Lecouteur, 2010), New Zealand (Fergusson and Horwood, 1997; Gibb et al., 2008), the Netherlands (Driessen and van Langen, 2013), Canada (Martino and Kehler, 2006), Germany (Legewie and DiPrete, 2012) and the United States (Titus, 2004) among others. This study uses the term *underachievement* to refer to academic scores or participation rates (Jha and Kelleher, 2006). The focus on boy underachievement appears to have begun as an anti-feminist response to the attention girls received in the 1980s and 1990s (Driessen and van Langen, 2013; Epstein et al., 1998) and consequently has been fueled by pop psychology and the media. In corollary, academics have also explored boy under-achievement through various lenses including sex roles in society; changes in the economy and the workforce; gender equity in education; the effect of neoliberal education reform movements; and the backlash effect of girls (not boys) making gains in education (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). In general, boy underachievement has

been met with two opposing perspectives, one that criticizes it because it is perceived as an attempt to place males back in the advantage; or conversely, one that welcomes the well-deserved attention boys should have (Weaver-Hightower, 2003).

Scholars have employed discourse analysis to categorize arguments made by boy advocates as to why a gender gap exists (e.g. Epstein et al., 1998; Martino and Kehler, 2006; Smith, 2003). Epstein and colleagues identified three main arguments that have been used to explain boy underachievement; 'poor boys', 'boys will be boys', and 'failing schools'. They point out that the first two arguments are undergirded by biological determinism which in turn attributes boys' behaviors to innate developmental forces. The third argument calls for schools to reevaluate their pedagogies and classroom practices because they seemingly disposition boys to underachieve. Similarly, Smith (2003) identified three arguments which bore semblance to Epstein and colleagues' categories. They were "the conflict of masculinity in contemporary society, the curriculum and its assessment, and finally the every-day experience of students and teachers in the classroom" (p 286). Titus (2004) identified similar categories of arguments and called them frames. Titus also brought to light additional frames that included the 'fearsome race frame' that placed boys of color as the most troublesome students and the 'scientific authority frame' that undermined the authority

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of findings of feminists researchers because they typically employed qualitative methods.

Martino and Kehler (2006) called for a scrutiny of the rhetoric surrounding the media and pop psychology's representation of boy underachievement. They argued that the media and pop psychology provides overly simplistic views of why boys underachieve. These overly simplistic views employed *common sense truths* such as absentee fathers, lack of male role models, and innate differences between males and females in behavioral and learning orientations. Notably, Martino and colleagues pointed out that the media excluded other arguments such as the teaching profession being perceived as economically unattractive for males, the diverse demographic and psychosocial identities males have, and studies that have shown that students believe teacher pedagogical approach and personal characteristics have more of an influence on their learning than the sex of the teacher. On the whole, Martino and colleagues admonished society to begin addressing more complex societal issues such as femiphobia, misogyny, and homophobia that shape male teacher masculinities.

Although boy underachievement is a topic of concern among many industrialized countries, the perception of boy underachievement is not a consensus. White (2007) and Titus (2004) summarized the findings of various Canadian, UK, USA, and Australian authors who point out that not *all* boys underachieve, and further, ethnicity and social class are more important moderators of the achievement gap. Buchmann et al. (2008) pointed out that girls have achieved higher grades than boys for at least two decades in the United States prior to 2000 so there really hasn't been a shift in trend disfavoring boys. In a different vein, OECD (2009) informed that on standardized international assessments taken in year 2006, 15 year old girls clearly dominated in reading in every participating OECD country, 15 year old boys dominated in math in the majority of the countries, but sex differences in science were small. Further, for some countries such as Australia, Austria, and Belgium, the average socioeconomic status of the school moderated which sex had the advantage in science (OECD, 2009). Taken together, when considering boy underachievement, it is important to specify *which* boys and next to consider on which educational outcomes, e.g. GPA, standardized test scores, entrance to tertiary education, etcetera. Lastly, connections ought to be made between which boys, which educational outcomes, and the extent to which underachievement affects boys' viability in contexts beyond the K-12 experience.

1.1. Boy underachievement and immigrant status

Another factor that appears to influence the boy underachievement trend is immigrant status. Immigrant adolescent boys tend to lag behind their female counterparts in academic achievement in the United States (Crosnoe and Turley, 2011; Feliciano, 2012; Plunket and Bámaca-Gómez, 2003; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010); Canada (Abada and Tenkorang, 2009) and France (Brinbaum and Kieffer, 2009). Conversely, the opposite occurs among secondary immigrant girls in Spain (Vaquera and Kao, 2012). Vaquera and Kao found an achievement gap between 1st and 2nd generation girls and between 1st and 3rd generation girls; however, this gap was not present amongst immigrant boys. These researchers noted that immigrant groups in Spain typically come from regions where females have lower social and economic statuses than males, and speculated that this was perhaps why the gender effect was present amongst first generation youth, but generally attenuated by the second and third generations. These findings suggest that when studying academic achievement among adolescents, it is important to know the immigrant-generation status of boys and girls in receiving countries.

1.2. Boy underachievement within the Afro-Caribbean diaspora

The remainder of this paper explores boy underachievement within one particular ethnic group, and that is the Afro-Caribbean adolescents residing in England. Similar to the United States, England has a long history of black ethnic groups underachieving compared to their white counterparts (Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Strand, 2007). While ethnic gaps between white students and other ethnic minority groups can be partly or fully accounted for when considering certain demographic variables, the gap between white and Afro-Caribbean students does not experience as much attenuation (Strand, 2011). Further, Afro-Caribbean boys sit at the bottom of the academic hierarchy (Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Strand, 2007; Strand, 2011) demonstrating those in England underachieve compared to their female counterparts as well.

Sewell (1997) oriented us to the lineage of studies examining gender, race, and education in Britain from the late 1980s to the time of his thesis. His work informed that even from the 1970s black boys systematically underachieved and were overrepresented in suspensions and in special need schools. His ethnographic thesis magnified the role teachers' perceptions and pop culture played in influencing boys to conform to black masculine stereotypes. The findings of Apena (2007) and Youdell (2003) using critical race theory and institutionalized racism, respectively, supported Sewell's findings regarding societal mechanisms that encourage Afro-Caribbean youth to endorse negative social identities. The dissertation work of Gosai (2009) about one decade later after Sewell demonstrated these challenges within Britain's schools had not abated. For example, Afro-Caribbean adolescent boys perceived that their teachers encouraged them in sports, drama, art and music rather than in other academic subjects like English, math and science (Gosai, 2009). Boys were also disciplined for speaking their creole language in schools and perceived that teachers tended to ignore their requests for assistance (Gosai, 2009). More recent statistics demonstrate that Afro-Caribbean boys continue to experience higher rates of suspensions and expulsions (OFSTED, 2008); continue to be over-identified with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Cooper et al., 1991; Department for Education, 2012); and continue to experience low teacher expectations (Crozier, 2005; Haynes et al., 2006; Rhamie, 2012; Strand, 2012). Perplexingly, low teacher expectations appear to hold true even across socioeconomic lines (Gillborn et al., 2012).

One of the criticisms of theoretical studies analyzing boy underachievement is that these studies mostly postulate meso and macro-level explanations of the phenomenon but fail to examine data at the individual level (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Examples of studies that did use individual level data were the qualitative works of Sewell (1997), Wright et al. (1998), Youdell (2003), Apena (2007), Gosai (2009) among others. In line with these scholars, this study was designed to bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical literature and use individual level data to pinpoint social and psychosocial factors that might help explain Afro-Caribbean boy underachievement compared to his female counterpart. In particular, this study provided a quantitative perspective to understanding Afro-Caribbean boy underachievement. To gain further insight into Afro-Caribbean boy underachievement to aid analysis, this study turned to the literature base from the English-speaking Caribbean to identify social and psychosocial factors that might contribute to the gap. The overall goal of this study was to determine the extent to which factors identified in Caribbean literature had a carry-over effect on Afro-Caribbean boys living outside of the region.