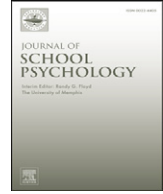




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A call for scientifically-rigorous, community-based “actionable intelligence” to promote the academic achievement of African American Boys: An introduction to Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012) and commentaries

Christine M. McWayne*

Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155, USA

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ABSTRACT

This introduction briefly summarizes the featured article and commentaries making up this commissioned set of papers on the topic of the Black-White achievement gap and, more specifically, risk and protective factors for young African American boys' school success. Each paper highlights important considerations for advancing scholarship, practice, and policy aimed at promoting equity in education. A case is made that in order to advance scientific knowledge of this issue and its application, dialogue across disciplines, methodological traditions, and contexts is needed.

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Science is a dialog. For social scientists, this dialog is informed by the people and processes we engage to understand (and co-construct) the truth of our individual and collective lived experiences. For action-oriented social scientists, in the best of cases, this dialog, then, informs efforts to improve those lived experiences. Relevant to the commissioned article and set of commentaries featured here, scientific dialog aimed at promoting equity in education involves people bringing the best science, their best selves, and, to be sure, incomplete perspectives together to explore, grapple with, and further scrutinize unsettled questions. This collective dialog is the very heart of the progress of scientific inquiry.

The focal topic of this collection of papers is that of the Black-White achievement gap, perhaps the most vexing educational concern of our time. In their innovative study, [Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen \(2012\)](#) provide a scientifically rigorous examination of important facets of this problem and lay out a number of hypotheses and questions for future inquiry on this topic. Using city-wide administrative data

* Tel.: +1 212 998 5576.

E-mail address: christine.mcwayne@tufts.edu.

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at the population level for school district students in a large urban center, the authors document not only a gap in achievement but also a concurrent gap in risks between African American and White students. In their initial effort to identify protective factors for African American boys in this locale the researchers find academic engagement at both the student and family levels to mediate the relations between risks and eventual achievement outcomes. Because the data of this study reside within a collaborative of municipal agencies, this work can immediately inform local policy action. Indeed, the authors make a strong call for studies that “foster conjoint inquiry, which opens up the possibility for shared responsibility and evidence-based integrated services,” using the achievement gap as a compelling example.

The timeliness and relevance of this study for school psychologists is, perhaps, obvious. The challenges faced by low-income African American youth, and boys within this group in particular, is a pressing national concern highlighted recently by major national reports, such as from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(2009\)](#), [The Council of the Great City Schools \(2010\)](#), and the [Schott Foundation for Public Education \(2010\)](#), as well as by major national campaigns such as the Children’s Defense Fund Cradle to Prison Pipeline Campaign. As stated by renowned advocate, President and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone, Geoffrey Canada, the dire situation for many African American boys has both economic as well as moral implications ([Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010](#)). Therefore, the paper featured here by [Fantuzzo et al. \(2012\)](#) addresses an incredibly timely national topic for scientific investigation – African American boys’ academic achievement, the risks that hinder that achievement, and hypothesized protective factors for attaining a successful education and life. Using a developmental ecological model, Fantuzzo et al. bring to bear administrative data on these questions. Building on over two decades of partnership, this cross-sector collaborative effort illustrates the incredible value and potential that routinely collected information, residing in the databases of schools and other municipal agencies, has for informing local policy-making ([Hillier & Culhane, 2005](#)). The partnership-based research featured here serves as a living and breathing model for local and national groups interested in impacting real-time problems with “actionable intelligence,” as Fantuzzo et al. have coined in their paper. Through their thoughtful study, they have advanced the discussion about the achievement gap for a vulnerable group of students in their locale, while informing an enduring national concern.

The three exceptional Commentaries that follow provide further texture to the intense, on-going dialog. Professor Barbara Bowman is the former chief early childhood education officer for the Chicago Public Schools, a former consultant to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and, currently, Irving B. Harris Professor of Child Development at Erikson Institute in Chicago. Professor Bowman brings to this dialog a deep knowledge of the field of early education and the experience that comes with working at the intersection of practice, policy, and research. She highlights that what is particularly useful about the work of Fantuzzo et al. is that they are “applying data from a number of sources to an ecological model of development that includes family, community, and school ... [to] provide insight into school achievement trends in a community.” She outlines a number of policy relevant issues for further consideration and acknowledges the power of community-based collaborations, such as the one illustrated in the featured paper, acknowledging that “together, these public services are the first line of defense against school failure.” In her commentary, Professor Bowman argues for the need to make the distinction between developmental learning and cultural learning in accounting for school achievement, stating that “it makes a difference whether the attack is on development itself or on the way development is shaped.” Indeed, Professor Bowman has written and spoken frequently about the importance and difficulty of distinguishing between typically developing children who have not had the opportunity to learn school-related skills and knowledge and children with significant developmental delays (e.g., [Bowman & Ray, 2012](#)). She asserts that while both conditions make school learning more problematic, treatments may be quite different, and this has implications for educational and fiscal policies.

Dr. Angela Taylor, a developmental psychologist and Associate Professor and Division Chair of Family Studies and Human Development at the University of Arizona, conducts research focused on children’s socialization in the context of school with an emphasis on ethnic and gender disparities in children’s classroom relationships and early school adjustment. Specifically, in recent work, Dr. Taylor has examined ethnic and gender disparities in teacher–child relationship quality (e.g., [Ewing & Taylor, 2009](#); [Taylor, Ewing, & Toomey, 2012](#)) and the role of family relationships in young children’s early school adaptation (e.g., [Modry-Mandell, Gamble, & Taylor, 2007](#)). Her commentary provides a cogent argument for the

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