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Commentary

Academic achievement of African American boys: Bringing African American girls into the picture☆

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1. Introduction

The Black–White achievement gap continues to be one of the most serious and intractable challenges to educational research, practice, and policy in the United States. Although this achievement disparity has been the focus of years of research scrutiny, intervention/prevention efforts, and educational policy debate, explanations for its persistence and efforts to address it have fallen short. The implications of the Black–White achievement gap for the lives and futures of African American males are particularly disturbing. Barbarin (2010) described the situation aptly when he stated that "The situation for African American boys has all the elements of a classic tragedy." Against this backdrop, the current study by Fantuzzo et al. (2012) is particularly timely and important. These researchers are to be commended for their commitment to conducting the kind of locally relevant community-based research that can generate "actionable intelligence" on this critical topic. In so doing, they are holding themselves (and by implication, fellow researchers) directly accountable for uncovering "what's behind being behind" for African American boys and using this knowledge to inform "collective civic action."

☆ Commentary on Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, and Chen (2012).

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An overarching theme of the Fantuzzo et al. (2012) paper is that race, gender, and place matter and should be made visible in inquiry addressed to the achievement gap. The researchers operationalize this intersection of race, gender, and place by studying a subpopulation of African American and White third-grade boys situated within a large, urban public school system in the city of Philadelphia. The findings replicate and extend prior work in demonstrating substantial achievement gaps favoring White boys in reading and mathematics achievement that are accompanied by a "Black–White risk gap" of similar magnitude. More importantly, the researchers move beyond this race-comparative focus on deficits to conduct within-group analyses of both risk and protective factors in the lives of these African American boys. In this way, the researchers are able to illuminate unique ways in which African American boys experience "disconnects" as well as "connects" that account for variation in their educational outcomes and that are amenable to direct action on the part of educators and public service providers.

This commentary will make a case for adding the intentional study of African American girls to this important line of research. Specifically, I will argue that by conducting studies that can uncover similarities and differences in the educational outcomes and experiences of African American boys and girls, we can gain a more complete picture of possible factors underlying the Black–White achievement gap as well as future directions for ameliorative action. The supporting literature review is selective and intended mainly to direct attention to gender-related research questions that might guide future work in this area.

2. The Black–White achievement gap: is there a female advantage?

One rationale for targeting African American boys in research addressed to the Black–White achievement gap is that this subgroup is at heightened risk for poor academic outcomes relative to White children and African American females. Although there are numerous studies of the Black–White achievement gap using large, nationally representative data sets (see Magnussen & Duncan, 2006 for a review), very few such studies address race and gender in combination, despite ample sample sizes to do so. Fantuzzo et al. (2012) point to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which reports test-score breakdowns by both race and gender for fourth-grade reading and mathematics. The NAEP 2009 data reveals a sizeable test-score gap (of 28 points) in both reading and mathematics for African American boys as compared to White boys, and the Black–White achievement gap for boys exceeds that for African American girls relative to White girls. Nevertheless, the race-gap for girls is still quite large; African American girls score 24 points lower in mathematics and 25 points lower in reading than White girls. Thus, the race gap in academic achievement remains a serious educational concern for African American children of both genders.

The 2009 NAEP findings are in line with results of other research addressing race and gender differences in early academic achievement. In one of only a few studies to directly test for race-by-gender interactions, Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, and Cortina (2010) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) to examine the racial and gender gap in literacy skills of African American and White children in kindergarten through fifth grade. With respect to the within-race findings, results indicated that there was a significant literacy gap favoring African American females as compared to African American males. This gap was evident beginning in kindergarten and continued at each time of assessment through fifth grade. However, there was no significant race-by-gender interaction, indicating that the race gap in literacy did not differ by gender.

With respect to mathematics achievement, research examining possible gender gaps has been driven largely by evidence from studies of older students, which suggests that there is a male advantage in mathematics. Here too, there are few studies examining race in conjunction with gender with respect to achievement; there are also few studies addressing this issue with children in the early elementary grades. McGraw, Lubienski, and Strutchens (2006) analyzed trends in the NAEP data from 1990 to 2003 at grades 4, 8, and 12 to determine whether the expected male advantage in mathematics would be evident across race/ethnicity and SES groups. Results showed that "the gender gaps favoring males … tended to be concentrated at the upper end of the score distribution, and were most consistent for White, high-SES students and non-existent for Black students" (McGraw et al., 2006, p. 129). This pattern parallels findings from a more recent study by Penner and Paret (2008) using the 1998 ECLS-K data for kindergarten through fifth grade. These researchers found that for both Black and White kindergarten children, there was a male advantage at the top of the score distribution; this was offset by a female advantage at the bottom of the distribution that disappeared by third grade. When SES was taken into account, it became