

# Access to gifted education among African-American and Latino males

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Across the nation, African-American and Latino males have experienced limited access to placement in gifted education programs. This paper aims to pinpoint and describe the factors that frequently influence access to gifted education programming among African-American and Latino males.

**Design/methodology/approach** – African-American and Latino males are persistently underrepresented in gifted education for reasons such as teachers' narrow conceptions of giftedness, teachers' bias in the nomination process and teachers' inappropriate usage and interpretation of intelligence measures. When these students qualify for such services, they often experience feelings of isolation and loneliness due to scarce representation of other African-American and Latino male students. A review of extant literature was conducted to identify factors that influence access to gifted education programming among African-American and Latino males.

**Findings** – African-American and Latino males encounter roadblocks in being identified for gifted placement and many also experience implicit biases and stereotypical beliefs about their ability. The need for culturally competent professionals is critical to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of gifted African-American and Latino males.

**Practical implications** – Recommendations for school psychologists and school counselors are offered to support the needs of gifted African-American and Latino males, assist in increasing their identification and participation in gifted education, and promote academic success.

**Originality/value** – There is an urgent need for research on access and placement in gifted programming among African-American and Latino males. Moreover, the role of school psychologists and school counselors should be considered in facilitation of gifted identification and placement.

**Keywords** Gifted education, African-American males, Gifted identification and access, Latino males, School counselors, School psychologists

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Across the nation, African-American and Latino males have experienced limited access to placement in gifted education programs (Ford, 2011; Moore and Flowers, 2012; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Their reduced access often stems from narrow definitions of giftedness, teacher bias in the nomination process and the misuse and misrepresentation of intelligence measures (Ford, 2010; Ford and Moore, 2013; Ford and Whiting, 2010; Harradine *et al.*, 2013; McBee, 2006). Positive racial socialization by parents and high teacher expectations contribute to positive academic outcomes and the development of a scholastic identity among male students of color (Allen, 2015). Furthermore, participation in gifted and talented education increases the likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree (Rose, 2013).



Nonetheless, placement in gifted education may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness due to scant representation of other African-American and Latino male students; therefore, considerations of their social-emotional needs are vital. School psychologists and school counselors can also play a major role in increasing access to gifted education by analyzing school-level data to determine racial/ethnic and gender representation in gifted programs, evaluating gifted identification criteria, and developing alternative criteria for gifted identification. They are also equipped to provide small group and/or individual counseling to help students develop appropriate coping skills, as well as critical support systems (Henfield, 2013; Robinson, 2002).

This paper pinpoints and describes the factors that *frequently* influence access to gifted education programming among African-American and Latino males. It also describes the factors that often facilitate access to gifted placement. In addition, recommendations for school counselors and school psychologists are offered to increase the identification and placement of African-American and Latino males in gifted programming.

## Review of literature

### *Defining and identifying giftedness*

Various definitions of “gifted and talented” exist, and consequently, may create confusion about *who* is gifted and *how* to identify students as gifted. The federal definition, according to the [No Child Left Behind Act \(2002\)](#), stated:

The term “gifted and talented,” when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.

The definition, according to the [National Association of Gifted Children \(NAGC\) \(2018\)](#), indicates:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10 per cent or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

Although these definitions are similar, a federal mandate for gifted education does not exist. As a result, each state has developed its own definition of giftedness and established minimum standards for gifted education programming (Ford, 1998). A lack of consensus in defining giftedness still exists among state policymakers and the majority of states use intelligence and achievement tests to identify students (McClain and Pfeiffer, 2012). To this end, McClain and Pfeiffer (2012) found that approximately half of all states mandate gifted education policies for identifying students from underrepresented groups; however, the tests and procedures used were unclear.

When examining racial/ethnic and gender disparities in gifted education, it is imperative that educators take into account how states, districts and schools define giftedness. Identification criteria, such as the use of intellectual ability and achievement tests, may limit students from racially, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from being classified, due to inherent cultural loading and linguistic demand (Ford, 1998; Ford and Whiting, 2007; Ortiz and Ochoa, 2005). Nonetheless, most school districts widely use standardized tests to consider students for gifted and talented programs (Ford *et al.*, 2009; Romanoff *et al.*, 2009). Using intelligence tests as the criterion for giftedness ignores all other

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domains in the definitions of gifted and talented (e.g., creative, artistic and leadership ability), thereby restricting who can access gifted education. Teacher nomination is also a commonly used practice to identify gifted students (Moore and Flowers, 2012; Moore *et al.*, 2005); however, this method is subjective, and deficit views or implicit bias may prevent African-American and Latino boys from being referred for a gifted evaluation (McBee, 2006; Speirs Neumeister *et al.*, 2007). Speirs Neumeister *et al.* (2007) found that even after teachers received professional development training on identifying gifted students, their definitions of giftedness remained narrow.

Hargrove and Seay (2011) found that White teachers believed that the African-American community does not value intellectual giftedness. It is highly likely that this belief system is a barrier to participation in gifted education among African-American males. The authors also found that, compared to teachers of color, White teachers did not believe teachers' inability to recognize indicators of potential giftedness, acknowledge standardized test bias, recognize prejudicial teachers' attitudes, understand the negative impacts of narrow screening processes and recognize teachers' fears about "watering down" the gifted curriculum by including underrepresented children, served as barriers to participation in gifted programs among males of color. These findings demonstrate the lack of acknowledgment of the impact of teachers' bias and test unfairness, and deficit views often held by teachers. The absence of appropriate teacher training in cultural responsiveness and in identifying the characteristics of gifted students contributes to deficit thinking and the under-referral of African-American and Latino boys (Ford and Moore, 2004; Ford and Whiting, 2007).

#### *Opportunity gap among African-American and Latina/o students*

African-American and Latina/o students face significant challenges throughout the US public education system. Recent data, from the [US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights \(US DOE OCR\) \(2016\)](#), highlight the opportunity gaps between males of color and their White counterparts. School influences students' educational and career trajectories and inequitable opportunities track African-American and Latina/o students, particularly males, into stratified roles (Allen, 2015). Through the use of suspensions beginning at the preschool level, African-American and Latino males encounter messages that reinforce the notion of school being an unwelcoming place, which may subsequently adversely affect their academic performance (Allen, 2015). Although African-American boys represented 19 per cent of male preschool enrollment in the 2013-2014 school year, they still comprised 45 per cent of male preschool children receiving one or more out of school suspensions (US DOE OCR, 2016). This discrepancy was also present at the K-12 level, as African-American boys comprised 18 per cent of one or more out of school suspensions, compared to 6 per cent of all K-12 students (US DOE OCR, 2016).

For Latina/o students at the preschool level, in the 2010-2011 school year, they comprised 29 per cent of school enrollment and 20 per cent of students suspended out of school more than once. When compared to White preschool enrollment of 43 per cent, only 26 per cent of students were suspended out of school more than once. Suspension as a disciplinary method is ineffective and particularly, at the preschool level, is problematic for all students, as it is associated with adverse developmental, health and educational outcomes (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Latino males were also suspended at greater rates than White students were; 7 per cent versus 5 per cent (US DOE OCR, 2016). Thus, this process of exclusion starts early in these students' academic career and is associated with negative outcomes, such as dropping out, retention, involvement in the juvenile justice system, underemployment and incarceration (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008).

Moreover, in the area of college and career readiness, similar data indicated that African-American and Latina/o students received less access to high-level mathematics and science courses. For instance, 33 per cent of high schools with enrollment of over 75 per cent African-American and Latina/o students offer calculus classes compared to 56 per cent of high schools with enrollment of less than 25 per cent Black and Latino students (US DOE OCR, 2016). Access to gifted and talented programs and Advanced Placement (AP) courses has also been shown to be limited. African-American and Latina/o students make up 42 per cent of student enrollment in schools that offered gifted programming, but only 28 per cent are enrolled. Similarly, representation of African-American and Latina/o students in schools that offer AP courses was 38 per cent per cent, yet 29 per cent of these students enrolled in at least one AP course (US DOE OCR, 2016). Access and enrollment in programs, such as gifted and talented education and AP courses, show positive correlations with college readiness and success (Rose, 2013). Mattern *et al.* (2009) found that higher AP performance was related to higher first-year college grade point average, higher retention rates in the second year of college, and attendance at highly selective institutions. More importantly, these findings echo the importance of providing equitable access to *all* students, so they have the opportunity to become college and career ready.

Furthermore, the quality of teachers varies significantly, as it relates to student demographics. The OCR data (2016) suggest that 11 per cent of Black students and 9 per cent of Latina/o students attended schools where more than 20 per cent of teachers were in their first year of teaching compared to 5 per cent of white students. Reduced access to a school counselor was also found; Latina/o and African-American students were, respectively, 1.4 times and 1.2 times as likely to attend a school with a school resource officer but not with a school counselor, compared to White students. These disparities create negative consequences for Latina/o and African-American students. Therefore, the role of teachers and school counselors cannot be underestimated in preparing African-American and Latina/o students for college.

#### *Gifted African-American males*

It is well documented that African-American males tend to encounter educational experiences that may lead to dismal outcomes. The national graduation rate for African-American males, in the 2012-2013 school year, is strikingly low at 59 per cent compared to 80 per cent of White males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). These graduation trends provide evidence of the impact of the obstacles these students face. Giftedness is an area where African-American males have been historically underrepresented and the implications of being left out of gifted education and, in turn, missing out on opportunities to reach their full academic potential (Ford and King, 2014). Nonetheless, many African-American gifted males experience success and demonstrate resilience in the face of hindrances.

Winsler *et al.* (2013) found that African-American boys who started kindergarten with greater cognitive, language, fine motor and behavioral readiness skills were more likely to be identified for gifted programming. Thus, attending public school prekindergarten programs increased the chances of being identified as gifted compared to attendance at community-based preschool programs. These findings have implications for preschool enrollment and the type and quality of preschool program in which African-American boys enroll. It is important that these students enroll in preschool; furthermore, a rigorous preschool curriculum should be used to provide African-American boys with essential school readiness skills. School context may also influence long-term outcomes, such as college enrollment and degree attainment. Attending an urban school decreases the

likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree, whereas attendance at a private school has the most influence on bachelor's degree attainment among gifted African-American males (Rose, 2013). This educational outcome is not surprising, when considering the state of urban public schools. Such school systems tend to have less qualified teachers and low access to high-level math and science courses, gifted programs and AP courses (Moore and Lewis, 2012, 2014; US DOE OCR, 2016).

Students who enter gifted programs early in their academic career may remain in these programs and reap increased benefits as they advance each grade. Grantham (2004) found that an African-American male who entered gifted classes in first grade benefited from positive relationships with his peers and teachers. The accelerated curriculum also exposed him to unique educational experiences that his non-gifted peers did not have, including field trips to learn more about certain subjects and taking advanced courses, such as completing eighth-grade mathematics as a seventh grader.

An earlier study by Graham and Anderson (2008) found that the gifted African-American males were high-achieving students that possessed the ability to do well in the future. Their parents emphasized the relevance of school as it related to racial identity development by discussing common barriers African-American males face in society and how education may provide increased opportunities for success. In addition, the African-American male participants' teachers believed in their capability and developed strong connections with them. Similarly, African-American males, in Allen's (2015) study, viewed school as a means for moving toward upward mobility and success. The parents of the participants engaged in racial socialization practices, which provided positive messages of racial pride and an understanding of potential barriers in society associated with race and racism. The parents frequently discussed how people look down on others because of the color of their skin and encouraged them to use such beliefs as a motivator to work harder. The Black male participants also appreciated teachers that held high expectations for them, provided rigorous academic instruction and felt it would prepare them for the demands of college.

The experience of gifted Black males is not always positive as McGee (2013) encountered in her study. The males reported being subjected to stereotypical views from their peers and teachers and responded by ignoring them and working to prove others wrong. However, these experiences came with psychological and emotional costs as the African-American males experienced self-doubt about their ability and anxiety from constantly working to prove stereotypes wrong. These same students also experienced limited access to advanced coursework because their school only offered one AP class. Despite these negative experiences, the students persevered in school and maintained academic success.

#### *Gifted Latino males*

The national graduation rate for Latino males, in the 2012-2013 school year, was 65 per cent compared to 80 per cent of White males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). In the scientific literature, minimal research has examined the experiences of gifted Latino males; to date, two empirical studies have specifically explored this population (Carrillo, 2013; Hébert, 1996). Thus, in this section, we focus on extant research on high-achieving Latino males in particular and Latino males in general. Similar to African-American males, Latino males are highly represented in urban public schools comprised with unqualified teachers and limited access to advanced academics (Clark *et al.*, 2013; US DOE OCR, 2016).

In Hébert's (1996) study of gifted Latino males, he identified numerous factors that contributed to the resilience of these young men. More specifically, the Latino males

discussed the support they received from their family and how it motivated them to be successful. They also shared how they watched their parents struggle and make sacrifices so that they could have access to educational opportunities. School personnel, including athletic coaches and school counselors, were also seen as supportive and role models. The Latino males also aspired to graduate college and have a professional career, which motivated them to continue to work hard.

In a retrospective qualitative study by [Carrillo \(2013\)](#), the Latino males reflected on their educational experiences. One participant, David, indicated that he was an honors student but did not meet the requirements to get into a state university and ended up attending a community college. In addition, Carlos, another participant, was nurtured at a gifted elementary school but felt marginalized as he transitioned to secondary school because his intelligence was not recognized and affirmed. He recalled the implicit bias he experienced by his teachers, resulting in him spending endless hours in the library to develop his intelligence. Furthermore, these Latino males challenged how their schools celebrated giftedness, which conflicted with how others perceived them as inadequate. To this end, they demonstrated resilience in attaining academic success while staying true to their social and cultural identities as Latino males.

Generally speaking, high-achieving Latino males attribute their academic success to multiple factors, including involvement with church and other extracurricular activities, a strong ethnic identity and support from family ([Garrett et al., 2010](#)). [Garrett et al. \(2010\)](#) found that church and extracurricular participation served as protective factors for these males as they gained social capital through the networks they built with others, and these activities occupied their time, preventing them from indulging in non-productive, problematic endeavors. In addition, the Latino males expressed pride and held a strong ethnic identity, which they used to dispel stereotypes about them and other people of color. Comparable to the experiences of African-American males discussed earlier, the Latino males witnessed the sacrifices and struggles of their families, which inspired them to work hard and achieve more. Unfortunately, they did not experience the level of support they desired from their teachers. They wanted caring and meaningful relationships from their teachers; however, they did not feel that their teachers demonstrated interest in being mentors or role models.

### **The role of school counselors and school psychologists**

School psychologists and school counselors have the potential to play a significant role in students' academic journeys, including African-American and Latino males. Advocacy is needed to increase the representation of African-American and Latino males in gifted education. School counselors and school psychologists should work with their administrators to examine school policies for identifying giftedness and participation in advanced academics. The examination of existing data that indicate the number of gifted students being served by race/ethnicity and gender can help to identify disproportionate representation ([King et al., 2009](#)). This process can serve as a starting point in understanding why certain groups are under- and over-represented in gifted programs and working toward closing such gaps. Both school professionals can work toward developing alternative criteria for gifted identification that is more inclusive of the skills and talents of diverse populations.

The use of multiple and alternative procedures is encouraged compared to the reliance on intelligence tests that have been deemed invalid for use with diverse populations ([McClain and Pfeiffer, 2012](#)). The identification of gifted students is an area where school psychologists can take on a viable school leadership role ([Robertson et al., 2011](#)). Due to their

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extensive training with intelligence and achievement assessments, they can determine which tests are most appropriate in identifying African-American and Latino males for gifted programs. Additional considerations are needed for Latino males who are also English Language Learners, as measures with high verbal demands and cultural loading may deflate the ability of these students (Ortiz and Ochoa, 2005). Thus, factors such as language proficiency in native language and English and length of time in home country and the USA need to be examined when assessing students for gifted and talented programs (Moore and Flowers, 2012; Vega and Moore, 2016).

To increase awareness of the limited access to gifted programs for African-American and Latino boys, both school counselors and school psychologists may consider providing professional development training to their school staff (Henfield *et al.*, 2014). These trainings may offer a space to understand the needs of these groups, explore inaccurate stereotypes and help teachers better identify, and work with gifted African-American and Latino males. For example, school psychologists can use their consultation knowledge to work with teachers to identify and accommodate gifted students (Robertson *et al.*, 2011). As mentioned earlier, African-American and Latino males often go unnoticed and under-referred for gifted assessment (Moore and Flowers, 2012); therefore, school psychologists can help teachers better understand the broad range of giftedness that exists (Robertson *et al.*, 2011; Robinson, 2002). School psychologists may also serve as liaisons between the gifted teacher and classroom teacher and assist them in addressing students' academic and/or social-emotional needs in the classroom (Robinson, 2002).

Similar to teachers, mental health professionals should be culturally competent and be aware of the unique challenges these males encounter and understand how to connect and build relationships with them (Henfield *et al.*, 2014). School psychologists and school counselors are well equipped to address the social-emotional needs of African-American and Latino gifted males through the provision of small group and/or individual counseling to help these students develop effective coping skills, support systems and long-term educational goals (Henfield, 2013; Robinson, 2002). The support of school psychologists and school counselors may be imperative, as African-American and Latino males in gifted programs may experience isolation, low expectations from their teachers and peers, anxiety and pressure to succeed, which can take a toll on their emotional well-being (Belleza, 2012; Carrillo, 2013; Ford and Grantham, 2003; Ford and Moore, 2013; McGee, 2013). School counselors also play an important role in college and career readiness so they can identify supplemental out-of-school programs (e.g. summer college preparatory programs and bridge programs) to help gifted African-American and Latino males access supports that will expose them to advanced curricula (Henfield *et al.*, 2014).

The development of family-school partnerships is needed to educate parents about gifted programs and to enable them to advocate for their child's placement in these programs (Brulles *et al.*, 2010). School counselors and school psychologists can both engage in building and maintaining partnerships with families by serving as liaisons to support communication across the home-school environments (Moore and Flowers, 2012; Moore *et al.*, 2005).

### Discussion and implications

Based on this review of the literature, it is evident that African-American and Latino male students encounter barriers unrelated to their ability or potential that prevent them from participating in gifted programming (Allen, 2015; Moore and Flowers, 2012). Rather, other factors such as *how* giftedness is narrowly interpreted, teacher bias, and the procedures and instruments used for gifted identification contribute to under representation in gifted

education (Ford, 2010; Ford and Moore, 2013; Ford and Whiting, 2010; Harradine *et al.*, 2013; McBee, 2006). Research also finds positive educational outcomes when African-American and Latina/o students are afforded the opportunity to participate in gifted education and advanced curricula (Card and Giuliano, 2014; Mattern *et al.*, 2009; Rose, 2013; Winsler *et al.*, 2013). However, these students often have negative school experiences replete with disproportionate suspension rates beginning in preschool (US DOE OCR, 2016). Exclusion from gifted education and education in general through disciplinary methods such as repeated suspension has consequences for the college and career readiness skills of African-American and Latino male students. Low graduation rates also underscore the detrimental consequence of exclusion from an equitable educational experience.

School personnel must examine their definitions of giftedness, perceptions of what giftedness “looks like” and the identification procedures used to assess for giftedness. Particularly, as it relates to interpretations of giftedness, schools must go beyond narrow conceptions that only include intellectual and academic giftedness. The definitions of giftedness provided by NCLB (2002) and NAGC (2018) are broader than these two areas (e.g., creativity, leadership and artistic skills), so schools must do the same. In addition, African-American and Latino boys do demonstrate intellectual and academic giftedness; however, teacher bias (Hargrove and Seay, 2011) is pervasive and the instruments/tests used (e.g., IQ tests and state achievement tests) may not be most appropriate in demonstrating these characteristics. School administrators must make culturally responsive instruction a priority and hold their teachers and school staff accountable and to the highest standard in providing their students with equitable educational opportunities.

Furthermore, recurring professional development in identifying gifted African-American and Latino boys is critical to the development and advancement of the cultural competence and responsiveness of educators. Wright *et al.* (2017) recommended professional development cover topics such as deficit views, the role of culture in testing and teacher–student relationships, and included hands-on experiences (e.g., community event participation and visits with families) to fully grasp the exceptionality of students of color. Many schools have implemented universal screening methods to identify students with low academic performance. Therefore, a final recommendation is that these data be used to determine which students show above-average academic performance, thereby aimed at reducing teacher bias and under-referral for gifted placement (Grissom and Redding, 2016). Research has found the use of universal screenings is associated with increases in gifted identification rates of non-White students (Card and Giuliano, 2015).

### **Limitations and future research directions**

There is an urgent need for research on gifted African-American and Latino males. Although they are underrepresented in gifted education and other advanced academic programs, the experiences of those students who are placed and succeed in gifted programming should be examined. This can contribute significantly to the literature and assist in increasing the identification of these students. Moreover, the definition of “gifted and talent” varies tremendously from the federal to state to local level; in addition, it is often unclear how it is identified in the extant scientific and theoretical literature. Consistency in defining giftedness in the literature is needed to gain a clear understanding of the needs and challenges faced by this population. There is especially a dearth of scientific literature concerning gifted Latino males. In addition to research examining this group in general, there is also a need to evaluate similarities and differences based on countries of origin (e.g., Mexico, Puerto Rico and Guatemala), due to the heterogeneity of this population.



Robertson *et al.* (2011) found that school psychologists lacked pre-service preparation in gifted assessment and identification, as well as in-service professional development training. Half of the school psychologists in their sample received training in testing gifted students, and 37 per cent had received no training in gifted assessment, characteristics, social-emotional needs, and/or theories. Moreover, 94 per cent reportedly received either little or no training in screening or identification of gifted students. In addition, over 66 per cent of the sample never or rarely conducted gifted assessments even though the most important factor in determining giftedness was intelligence test score according to over 80 per cent of the sample. It is evident that there is a significant need for graduate training programs to prepare school psychologists in this area, as they are often the experts in assessment as a result of their extensive graduate training. Their broad range of skills (e.g., consultation, counseling and advocacy) is also helpful in addressing the needs of gifted populations; therefore, school psychology training programs should emphasize working with these students. School counseling programs should also include more training in the curriculum for pre-service school counselors. School counselors have a unique responsibility to provide counseling services to all students, regardless of their academic ability. They also have specialized training in counseling, collaboration, coordination, and consultation that can help ensure that the African-American and Latino males are identified, placed, and supported in gifted education and other advanced academic programs.

## Conclusion

The underrepresentation of African-American and Latino males in gifted programs should be as much of a concern as the overrepresentation of specific groups in special education. The development of the academic potential of these groups is crucial to their ability to be contributing members to the advancement of society. Therefore, as students of color become the majority population in schools, an investment in these students is necessary. African-American and Latino males encounter roadblocks in being identified for gifted placement and many also experience implicit biases and stereotypical beliefs about their ability. The need for culturally competent professionals is critical to meet the academic and social emotional needs of gifted African-American and Latino males.

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