

RESEARCH

Perception is Not Always Reality

Re-examining Our Views of Black Boys

by Iheoma U. Iruka

Many studies have focused only on the academic or social deficits of Black boys after entering kindergarten. My study on the transition of 700 African American boys from preschool to kindergarten looked at a full range of experiences and outcomes, focusing on family and child characteristics, as well as parenting practices. The findings from this study confirm at least two things that are of special relevance to early childhood administrators, educators, and professors:

1. There are many Black boys who show early academic promise and above average learning behavior — one out of five.
2. In some instances, Black boys who seemed to have an early giftedness show a decline when they enter formal schooling — a finding which should be of concern to all educators.

The narrative held about Black boys and men is often couched with negative and deficit language, using descriptions such as violent, oppositional, and disruptive. However, this narrative can't be true when we see many gifted and successful Black men who are educators, actors, athletes, musicians, artists, engineers, and lawyers, including the former president of the United States Barack Obama. These successful men probably displayed a potential for greatness that was fostered in the early years. Because of this, there is a need to provide empirical evidence of the giftedness of Black males and boys, especially in the early years, and to challenge the discourse that says many Black children, especially boys, are not academically inclined and are socially deficient.

The research I summarize in this article was originally published in 2014 in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. My colleagues and I conducted a study to investigate the unique challenges African American boys face when transitioning from preschool to kindergarten and to better understand the possible external factors that contribute to these challenges. The study measured children's cognitive and socio-emotional development through direct assessments and parental interviews and self-administered questionnaires. Child care providers and teachers completed self-administered questionnaires about children's socio-emotional development at preschool and kindergarten.

The study found that the Black boys fell into four groups after they transitioned from preschool to kindergarten:

Group 1 — Just over half the boys (51%) showed significant academic increases.

Group 2 — 19% consisted of lower achievers in preschool whose academic scores fell even further after transitioning.

Group 3 — 11% included early high achievers who declined academically and behaviorally in kindergarten.

Group 4 — 20% comprised a group of early achievers who remained high-performing academically and socially in kindergarten.

BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Black boys from high-income homes and households where mothers frequently engaged in literacy activities and intentional teaching — and other activities such as playing games and taking the child on errands — were likely to be gifted learners. However, attending an early care and education program did not result in Black boys being in the gifted groups.

The findings from this study confirm several things. As mentioned above, it is important to remember that one out of five Black boys show early academic promise and above average learning behaviors. The vast majority of Black boys complete preschool and kindergarten on track and continue developing as expected. However, there is another group of Black boys who show promise in the early years, but exhibit a steep academic decline and non-compliant behaviors as they transition into school. As is often the imagery of most Black boys (but in reality is only true of a small percentage) there are also Black boys who display less than optimal academic and social behaviors.

These findings are important to the field of education because they provide a different lens through which educators and society can view young Black boys. The study should help many educators begin to see the potential of all their children, especially Black boys (who are often met with a mixture of low expectations and even disdain). The findings show that schools and educators can have a powerful impact on children — negative and positive. The fact that Black boys who showed an early giftedness sometimes showed a decline when they entered formal schooling is troubling. This decline is potentially an early warning sign of future school disengagement (i.e., drop out). Thus, as a dropout prevention, educators and families must stay in tune with the needs of these boys to ensure that their schooling experiences, especially in the early years, are engaging and meaningful to their being, as well as aligned with their cognitive and social abilities.

Another important point is that the majority of Black boys show steady and appropriate growth — academically and socially — when they enter schooling. Thus, the need to ‘police’ Black boys, which is arguably one of the reasons for the disproportionality in suspension and expulsion rates for this group, is unnecessary. Educators can instead spend time developing strong relationships with their students, especially Black boys, to gain a better sense of how to ensure that their curricula and teachings incorporate boys’ interests.

“Parents matter” is a statement often articulated by educators. The findings in this study confirm this notion. Parents with more material resources and those who were more responsive were likely to have boys in the gifted groups. This finding is meaningful for all professionals who work with

children, since it emphasizes that children’s development and learning cannot be isolated from the family. Rather, educators and professionals can do their best job in ensuring children meet and surpass their potential by authentically working with families.

While this study has much to contribute to the field of education, many questions remain, such as:

- How does the relationship between educators, children, and families influence boys’ trajectory over time?
- What are the profiles and skill sets of educators who are likely to ensure that boys who are gifted remain so, or are able to better support Black boys who are struggling academically and socially?
- How can more Black boys be identified as gifted than is currently the case (~ 4–6%)?
- What role does educator bias play in Black boys not being identified as gifted when they enter formal schooling?
- What role does educator bias play in leading to the decline in Black boys’ academic ability and increase in their oppositional behavior?

Finally, how can the transition from early care and education programs — such as Head Start — to formal schooling be more seamless for young children, especially Black boys?

Regardless of one’s gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic standing, everyone has biases. These biases help us to quickly process information to function in a continuously changing environment. While this study did not explicitly examine biases, it hopefully can have a counter effect by providing a different lens through which to view Black boys or children who are not the ‘norm.’ Black boys like other children are individuals who are diverse in their presentation, experiences, and skill sets and are likely affected by the resources and support in their home and school environments.

Reference

Iruka, I. U., Gardner-Neblett, N., Matthews, J. S., & Winn, D-M. C. (2014). Preschool to kindergarten transition patterns for African American boys. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29(2), 106-117.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.11.004>

PRACTICE

Re-examining Our Views of Black Boys to Enhance Our Practice

by Mary A. Sciaraffa

Individuals within Early Childhood Care and Education programs are active participants in the influence on young children's cultural identity. There are many positive steps ECCE programs can take toward providing a culturally relevant and responsive environment that acknowledges, respects, and welcomes a variety of cultural practices. In response to Iheoma Iruka's research, it is important for each of us to examine our own biases. This can be daunting, but together we can have supportive and helpful conversations and take specific action steps.

Following are suggestions for a number of action steps that teacher educators, administrators, teachers, and families might consider in supporting increased cultural sensitivity.

Teacher Educators

Teacher educators are aware of the importance of including diversity within their courses. Some higher education programs require a specific class on diversity, while others infuse this information throughout the curriculum. Regardless of the approach, teacher preparation programs should engage pre-service teachers in serious learning about being culturally responsive.

It is imperative that pre-service teachers be prepared to talk with children and families about race, ethnicity, and disabilities. In order to do this, pre-service teachers must gain knowledge in cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural competency skills. Here are some important action steps teacher educators can consider:

1. Teacher educators can provide discourse and activities within their courses that allow time for pre-service teachers' self-reflection and growth in cultural sensitivity.
2. Student practicums and internships need to include settings with diverse populations. This will allow pre-service teachers an opportunity to build interethnic and interracial relationships with young children over a sustained period of time.
3. Teacher educators should be aware of their own biases and stereotypes. They need to be willing to engage pre-service teachers in honest dialogue about cultural diversity that emphasizes deep understanding.

4. Teacher educators need to be willing to create situations for pre-service teachers to evaluate and re-evaluate their assumptions. Teacher educators can use role-playing situations and simulation activities to enhance pre-service teachers' understanding of stereotyped groups.
5. Lastly, teacher educators must remember their own influence as role models to pre-service teachers. They need to continually monitor their own verbal and nonverbal messages. Teacher educators need to question the expectations they have of pre-service teachers' achievement. For example, "Do I expect this student to do poorly because of his or her ethnicity? Or upbringing? Or child-rearing values?"

A textbook that focuses on cross-cultural competence, including different cultures' beliefs and values of children with disabilities is the Lynch and Hanson (2011) book entitled: *Developing Cross-cultural Competence: A Guide to Working with Children and Their Families*. This text provides cultural perspectives from nine different cultures and includes contrasting beliefs, values, practices, cultural courtesies and customs.

Teachers

While increasing cultural sensitivity can provide valuable information about others, ECCE teachers may become overwhelmed. A solution that could be implemented immediately is to focus on using a student-centered approach with all children. Here are some action steps for teachers to consider:

1. Dr. Iruka advises motivating all children by capitalizing on their interests. Children are engaged when content is meaningful to them. Iruka suggests aligning school experiences with a child's cognitive and social ability. For example, teachers can choose books that reflect the cultures of the children within the class and facilitate a discussion about the book character's situation.
2. Manning (2009) suggests, "The dramatic play areas are wonderful for acting out problem-solving situations about social injustice, such as birthday parties where some children are not invited or family activities that cost more money than a family can afford. Other discussion can include why some children do not celebrate some holidays and why some children do celebrate events that others do not" (p. 12).
3. Dr. Iruka recommends that teachers make a point to build relationships with children, in particular Black boys, instead of focusing on 'policing' children. Resiliency research suggests



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a connection with others decreases the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences. Teachers can work on developing specific, sensitive, and responsive relationships with each child, so the child can feel not just physically safe, but also emotionally safe.

4. Teachers can serve as role models by having respectful conversations with children throughout the day, and by helping children negotiate the day-to-day interactions with each other. Teachers can incorporate activities that allow children opportunities to practice social skills such as turn taking, helping each other with activities, and using words to express emotion.
5. Additionally, teachers should involve families in the goal setting and decision making of the child's early educational experiences. Teachers need to inform families of the curricula goals and objectives and ask families about their specific goals and objectives for their child. Through this relationship building with the families, teachers are able "to address family concerns that distract or limit families from focusing more fully on parenting or their child's development" (Hepburn, 2004, p. 16).
6. Teachers can link the experiences children obtain at the ECCE program with opportunities in the home. Teachers can assist families in strengthening children's knowledge and skills by providing simple, low-cost activities to do at home. Teachers can also provide 'activity kits' for families to check out. These activity kits can be around a specific theme or book or a curricula area. Keep in mind, the kit should contain everything the family needs to complete the activities.

Administrators

Administrators who want to embark on the journey to make their program more culturally relevant and responsive may be met with dissonance and conflict by faculty and staff. When shifting the culture of a program, leaders need a broad vision that focuses on details such as relationships and teaching practices. Administrators can obtain a conceptual framework, strategies, and practical tools and activities from the book *Leading Anti-bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change* by Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, and John Nimmo. This is a great resource for an ECCE administrator to become a leader who can foster faculty/staff knowledge and skills in creating positive relationships and partnerships with the families and children enrolled in the program.

Action steps that administrators might consider:

1. Include photographs of children from different racial groups within the environment. Intentionally provide signs, resource materials, and books in languages spoken by families enrolled in the program.
2. When working with families, foster authentic partnerships that are built on a foundation of shared goals between the family and the ECCE program. For example, family members can be on an advisory board that helps develop policies for the program.
3. Include family members in the hiring of faculty/staff. This can be done in a variety of ways; family members can serve on the

hiring committee, provide questions to committee members, or be included in a 'meet the candidate' event.

4. Administrators can engage families in leadership roles. Hepburn (2004) explained, "Preparation for parent involvement in leadership roles can include training, parent-to-parent support, and other strategies to build partnership, decision-making, and advocacy skills" (p. 4).
5. Home visits can be a useful tool when trying to get to know children and their families. If the ECCE program is not currently conducting home visits, the administrator should thoroughly explore this option before implementing it within the program. A resource for more information on implementing and conducting home visits is *Families as Primary Partners in Their Child's Development and School Readiness*.
6. Administrators and teachers can provide support and resources for parents who need them. Through parent education, whether formal or informal, administrators and teachers can "foster or improve the overall development of the child by strengthening parent knowledge about child development; building parenting knowledge and skills; strengthening relationships between parent and child; and promoting age appropriate care and activities that can promote a child's health, development, and social and emotional skills" (Hepburn, 2004, p. 13). Administrators should be aware of community resources and services to provide families with information as needed.

Families

Families can use a proactive focus when supporting young children as they navigate through the preschool experience and move into kindergarten. Families can recognize the importance of knowledge and skills obtained in the early childhood years. Families can build a relationship with the administrator and faculty/staff at the ECCE program. Families can be involved in the ECCE program, as their schedule allows. Families can ask teachers and administrators about curricula goals and their decision-making processes. Families can ask teachers and administrators about assessments and child outcomes as they relate to school readiness. They can also provide information about their cultural values surrounding child rearing, child development, parenting practices, and school-readiness. Lastly, families can provide feedback to administrators to assist the administrator in program evaluation and future planning.

General Resources

Being Black is not a Risk Factor: A Strengths-based Look at the State of Black Children. National Black Child Development Institute: www.nbcdi.org/sites/default/files/resource-files/Being%20Black%20Is%20Not%20a%20Risk%20Factor_0.pdf

Derman-Sparks, L., Ramsey, P. G., Edwards, J. O., & Brunson-Day, C. (2011). *What if all the kids are white?: Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families* (Early Childhood Education Series). New York: Teachers College Press.

Manning, G. (2009). *Supporting conversations about race and culture in early childhood settings: Literature Review*. Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality.

National Black Child Development Institute:
www.nbcdi.org/

National Association for Multicultural Education:
<http://nameorg.org/>

Resources for Administrators

Chang, H. (1999). *Are we supporting diversity? A tool for reflection and dialogue*. Work/Family Directions, Inc. and California Tomorrow.

Derman-Sparks, L., LeeKeenan, D., & Nimmo, J. (2015). *Leading anti-bias early childhood programs: A guide for change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Hepburn, K. (2004). *Families as primary partners in their child's development and school readiness*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

NAEYC Pathways to Cultural Competence Project Program Guide — Program Checklist:
http://qualitystarsny.org/resources/FE/FIS/NAEYC_Pathways-to-Cultural-Competence_Checklist_NYS-version.pdf

Resources for Teachers

Delpit, L. (2006). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

NAEYC Pathways to Cultural Competence Project — Program Guide:
www.pakeys.org/uploadedcontent/docs/Early%20Learning%20Programs/Other%20Programs/PCCP%20Program%20Guide.pdf

NAEYC Pathways to Cultural Competence Project Program Guide — Program Checklist:
http://qualitystarsny.org/resources/FE/FIS/NAEYC_Pathways-to-Cultural-Competence_Checklist_NYS-version.pdf

Paley, V. G. (2000). *White teacher*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Resources for Teacher Educators

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000, May/June). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach African American students. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 206–214. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Starting Small, Southern Poverty Law Center:
www.tolerance.org/kit/starting-small

Children's Literature

Cole, H., & Vogl, N. (2005). *Am I a color too?* Bellevue, WA: Illumination Arts.

Hamanaka, S. (1994). *All the colors of the Earth*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Herrera, J. F. (2000). *The upside down boy*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

Choi, Y. (2001). *The name jar*. New York: Dragonfly Books.

Kissinger, K. (1994). *All the colors we are*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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