by Ivory A. Toldson and Kimberly D. Charis

How Black Boys with Disabilities End Up in Honors Classes

While Others Without Disabilities End Up in Special Education

Efforts to close the achievement gap have focused on improving student outcomes without always taking a close look at some of the policies and practices that keep it open. Nowhere is the gap more acute than in the educational experiences of male black students. If black male ninth graders continue to perform at levels documented by the US Department of Education in 2009, about half will not graduate with their current ninth grade class,[1] and about 20 percent will reach the age of 25 without obtaining a high school diploma or GED.[2]

Two other distinctions in the experiences of black males in school deserve scrutiny: According to the Civil Rights Data Collection report for the 2011–12 school year, black boys are suspended almost four times more than white males. Moreover, they are more likely to be placed in special education than any other race or gender and more likely to face exclusionary discipline and school-based arrest.[3]

Black males are no more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than Hispanic or white males, yet they are more likely than any other race or gender to be suspended, repeat a grade, or be placed in special education.

Research suggests that black boys' transition to and through the ninth grade shapes their odds of graduating from high school.[4] Approximately 258,047 of the 4.1 million ninth graders in the United States are black males. Among this group of ninth-grade black boys, about 23,000 receive special education services, more than 37,000 are enrolled in honors classes, and for nearly 46,000, a health care professional or school official has told them that they have at least one disability. Black boys are the most likely group to receive special education services and the least likely to be enrolled in honors classes. Across black, white, and Hispanic males and females, 6.5 percent are receiving special education services, 9.7 percent have an individualized education plans (IEPs), and 25.6 percent are in honors classes. For black boys, 9.1 percent are receiving special education services, 14.7 percent have IEPs, and 14.5 percent are enrolled in honors classes (table 1).[5]

Having a specific disability increases the odds that any child will receive special education services. Among black male ninth graders who are currently receiving special education services, 84 percent have a disability and 15.5 percent have never been diagnosed. Among those not receiving special education services, 80 percent have never been indicated for a disability, and 20 percent have. That is to say, black males are no more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than white and Hispanic males (table 2).

Having a disability is related to other negative consequences, particularly for black males. Students of all races and genders with disabilities are at least three times more likely to drop out of school than their counterparts without disabilities. Students with disabilities are more likely to 1) repeat a grade, 2) be suspended or expelled from school, 3) have the school contact the parent about problem behavior, and 4) have the school contact the parent about poor performance. On a scale that includes these four risk factors and adding 5) special education and 6) having an IEP, black boys without disabilities were likely to indicate the presence of at least one factor, and those with disabilities claimed between three and four. Black males without disabilities indicated more risk factors than others without disabilities, and black males with disabilities indicated more risk factors than any other group of students (figure 1).

Nevertheless, the trajectory of black males with disabilities is not uniformly

Table 1. Percent of US black, Hispanic, and white male and female ninth-grade students with specific school experiences

	MALE			FEMALE			
Experience	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**White**	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**White**	**Total**
Honors course	14.5	18.1	27.1	22.4	20.5	33.3	**25.6**
Repeated a grade	17.9	13.7	8.1	13.7	7.4	5.6	**9.2**
Special education	9.1	6.9	8.8	3.3	3.8	5.3	**6.5**
Suspended or expelled	24.7	13.7	10.4	14.5	6.9	3.7	**9.8**
IEP	14.7	11.8	12.6	5.5	6.4	7.2	**9.7**
Problem behavior	34.0	29.0	19.0	23.0	16.0	9.0	**19.0**
Poor performance	26.0	25.0	22.0	17.0	14.0	12.0	**18.0**

Note: Uses the student base weight. Among questionnaire-capable students (n = 17,587)
Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 *(HSLS:09) Base Year.*

Table 2. Percent of US black, Hispanic, and white male and female ninth-grade students with diagnosed disabilities

	MALE			FEMALE			
Disability	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**White**	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**White**	**Total**
Learning disability	9.0	9.1	8.2	5.1	5.7	5.2	**6.9**
Developmental delay	5.3	4.0	4.0	3.2	2.1	2.3	**3.3**
Autism	0.9	0.7	1.4	0.9	0.4	0.3	**0.8**
Hearing/vision	0.7	2.5	2.5	0.8	2.4	1.5	**1.9**
Bone/joint/muscle	3.3	2.8	1.5	1.2	1.9	2.3	**2.1**
Intellectual disability	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.2	**0.3**
ADD or ADHD	9.1	5.9	13.0	3.6	2.0	5.4	**7.4**

Note: Uses the student base weight. Among questionnaire-capable students (n = 17, 587).
Question wording: Has a doctor, health care provider, teacher, or school official ever told you that [your 9th grader] has any of the following conditions?
Source: US Department of Education, Institute of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics. High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 *(HSLS:09) Base Year.*

dismal. Those in the ninth grade are more likely to be enrolled in honors classes than to receive special education services. Among the nearly 40,000 black male ninth graders enrolled in honors courses, 15 percent have been told they had a disability by a health professional or the school at least once. Three percent of black males in honors courses have been told they have a learning disability, 3 percent autism, and 6 percent ADD or ADHD.

How Black Boys with Disabilities End Up in Honors Classes

Having a broad understanding of the nature of disabilities paints a better understanding of how black boys with disabilities end up in honors classes. A disability does not have to be debilitating. For instance, a learning disorder may be more aptly described as an alternative learning style. For some students, an alternative learning style gives them a competitive edge over more conventional learners. For instance, a visual learner may encode lessons in their memory using pictures or use "concept mapping" to invigorate mundane text.

Every disability has a negative and positive offprint. In some instances, children with autism can leverage their repetitive behaviors and extraordinary attention to random objects into the development of mathematic and artistic abilities. While some easy-to-bore ADHD students have an irresistible impulse to create the havoc necessary to stimulate their insatiable nervous systems, others may channel this energy by interjecting humor and anecdotes into their lessons or push their teachers to create analogies. And while they process volumes of dense text with difficulty, they may be the best at applying discrete concepts to novel situations. Many studies suggest that,

beyond school, people with symptoms of ADHD often excel in professional roles.

How Black Boys without Disabilities End Up in Special Education

Students do not fall neatly into two rigid categories of having or not having a disability. Most if not all people have some characteristics of one or more disabilities—varying attention spans, levels of anxiety, distractibility, social acuity—that are driven by past and present circumstances and biochemical makeup, but they will never be diagnosed as having a disability.

Yet many black boys in special education do not have a disability. Rather, they are put in special education for what their schools deem to be negative behaviors.[6] Why is this the case? Students can be divided into four categories when it comes to diagnosing disability: 1) a true negative—children who do not have a disability and have never been diagnosed; 2) a true positive—children who have a disability and have been accurately diagnosed; 3) a false negative—children who have a disability but have never been diagnosed; or 4) a false positive—children who do not have a disability but have been diagnosed with one or have a specific disability and are diagnosed with the wrong one.

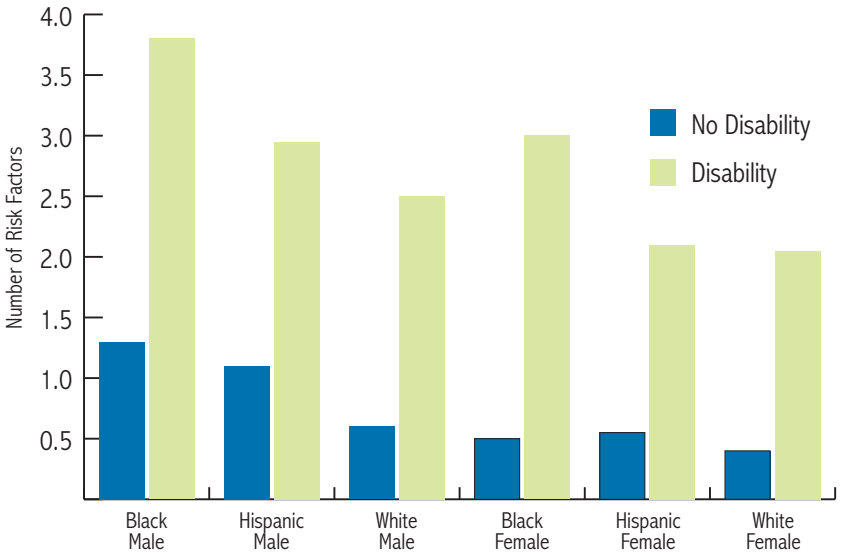
False negative and false positive diagnoses create many problems. A child with an undiagnosed disability might experience less compassion than he otherwise would and lack accommodations for learning or behavioral challenges he faces. A child with a genuine learning disorder might be expected to keep up with other students or be suspended for resisting a learning process incompatible to his own. False positive children may be relegated to learning environments that neither stimulate nor challenge them, which increases the likelihood of disengagement and poor behavior. Black males are more likely than other groups to experience both false negative and false positive diagnoses, due to culturally biased assessments, unique styles of expression, and environmental stressors.[7] Acknowledging this disparity in no way denigrates the schools and teachers who provide quality special education services designed to remediate educational challenges and help students reintegrate and fully participate in mainstream classes. Rather, it should focus an appropriate response to the overrepresentation of black males as recipients of those services.

Policy Implications

Policymakers have struggled repeatedly to address the fact that the American education system often fails to meet the needs of its most vulnerable students. Getting to the heart of the obstacles these students face requires grappling with the related conundrum: that students of color are at the same time over- and underidentified as having disabilities.[8]

Black males with and without disabilities can excel in schools that have adequate opportunities for diverse learners and a structure that supports personal and emotional growth and development. Contrarily, schools that view disability and emotional adjustment difficulties as enduring

Figure 1. Mean number of risk factors for ninth-grade students with and without disabilities across race and gender



pathologies that require permanent segregation from "normal" students will stunt academic growth and development for an important segment of their student population. The nearly 5,600 black male ninth graders with a history of disability who are currently enrolled in honors classes likely benefited from patient, diligent parents who instilled a sense of agency within them and a compassionate school that accommodates a diversity of learners. They are also likely to have some protection from adverse environmental conditions, such as community violence, which can compound a disability's symptoms.

Black males are no more likely to be diagnosed with a disability than Hispanic or white males, yet they are more likely than any other race or gender to be suspended, repeat a grade, or be placed in special education. Having a disability increases these dropout risk factors for all students. However, the tenuous status of black males in schools nationally appears to extend beyond issues of ability.

One important caveat: Some studies suggest that some dropout risk factors do not predict dropout for black males with the precision that it does for white males. For instance, frequency of suspensions has a much stronger association with dropping out and delinquency for white males than it does for black males.[9] The larger implication is unsettling: While suspensions are reserved for only the most deviant white male students, they appear to be interwoven into the normal fabric of black males' school experiences.

Black males tend to bring a cultural experience to the classroom different from that of their white peers. Many see the world through a lens colored not only by self-perception but by how society depicts them. Those who daily experience violence and poverty bring another layer of complexity to their learning experiences.

State and local policymakers can help to close the achievement gap by adopting and supporting policies that foster an education as diverse as the ideas and experiences that each student brings to the classroom. These policies should promote positive school climates, deeper learning, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. All students need safe, nurturing learning environments that emphasize academic and emotional development coupled with high-quality instruction designed to expand their skill sets and interests. Schools that invest resources into these practices prepare not only black males but all students for college, careers, and civic life.

In addition, state boards, state departments of education, and local school districts should review on a regular basis their special education systems to ensure that the students who need special education receive the right services and that all other students are appropriately classified. Finally, cultural competency standards should be an integral part of teacher and administrator preparation and training. School personnel that have access to these types of professional development opportunities can increase their cultural knowledge and help ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

By gaining an understanding of those with the greatest distance to go to bridge the achievement gap, US educators and policymakers can devise better ways to ensure that all students are engaged in the classroom and prepared for postsecondary success. Exploring how black boys with disabilities end up in honors classes while others without disabilities end up in special education may help us gain a better understanding of an enduring achievement gap problem, as well as reveal hidden solutions for improving educational attainment among school-aged black males. ■

[1]J. H. Jackson, *Yes We Can: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (Cambridge, MA: The Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010).
[2]S. Ruggles et al., Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 4.0 [machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2009).
[3]D. Osher et al., "Schools Make a Difference: The Overrepresentation of African American Youth in Special Education and the Juvenile Justice System," in D.J. Losen and G. Orfield, eds., *Racial Inequity in Special Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2002).
[4]R. Cooper and D. D. Liou, "The Structure and Culture of Information Pathways: Rethinking Opportunity to Learn in Urban High Schools during the Ninth Grade Transition," *High School Journal* 91, no. 1 (2007): 43–56.
[5]For the data presented here, the author analyzed 17,587 black, Hispanic, and white male and female students (black male N = 1,149) who completed the *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009*. See S. J. Ingels et al., High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09), Base-Year Data File Documentation (NCES 2011-328), (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).
[6]Jamila Codrington and Halford H. Fairchild, "Special Education and the Miseducation of African American Children: A Call to Action," Position Paper (Fort Washington, MD: Association of Black Psychologists, revised February 13, 2012), http://www.abpsi.org/pdf/specialedpositionpaper021312.pdf.
[7]I. A. Toldson and C.W. Lewis, *Challenge the Status Quo: Academic Success among School-Age African American Males* (Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, 2012).
[8]Osher et al., "Schools Make a Difference."
[9]T. Lee et al., "High Suspension Schools and Dropout Rates for Black and White Students," *Education and Treatment of Children* 34, no. 2 (May 2011): 167–92; I. A. Toldson, *Breaking Barriers 2: Plotting the Path away from Juvenile Detention and toward Academic Success for School-Age African American Males* (Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation Inc., 2011).

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Resource disparities have figured prominently in discussions about closing achievement gaps. If a state such as Pennsylvania, whose disparities in per-pupil spending have been the subject of recent news reports, gets serious about funding schools equitably and adequately, will it see the hoped-for results? Its history of changing education budget formulas provides a case in point.

by Rand Quinn and Matthew P. Steinberg

Can State Policy Deliver Equitable and Adequate Funding?

Sooner or later, talk of closing achievement gaps turns to education finance—specifically, fixing widespread disparities in school funding within individual states. After all, if districts don't have enough money, and if states don't distribute it fairly across districts, it hardly seems likely that this deep laceration in the flesh of the nation—one that tends to follow racial and socioeconomic lines—will ever be stitched together.

In policyspeak, committing sufficient resources to educate all students to desired academic levels is referred to as *adequacy*. The fair distribution of those resources is called *equity*. More specifically, *vertical equity* occurs when resources are distributed in a way that accounts for the

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