

# Are high-achieving black students invisible?

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Credit: University of Virginia

Since 1966, when a now-famous and often replicated study known as "The Coleman Report" was published, the phrase "achievement gap" has referred to one thing: the differences in academic success between the average black student and the average white student in America.

Daniel Duke, a professor in the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, wants to challenge that framework.

"All African-American students are not low-achievers," Duke wrote in a recent article, "Can Within-Race Achievement Comparisons Help Narrow Between-Race Achievement Gaps?," a literature review published in December in the Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk.

"Always dwelling on average African-American [achievement](#) can distract researchers and policymakers from trying to understand why some African-American students are more successful in school than other African-American students," Duke said in the article. "It seemed to me that the high-performing students had become invisible."

Duke, who has built a career as an organizational historian studying how educational leaders confront challenging situations, said today's leaders have a lot to learn from high-achieving minority students.

"Obviously, between-race differences are extremely important," he said. "But we need an additional set of questions to understand within the given setting – whether it's a classroom, a school, a state or a region – why there are higher-achieving African-American students. What's producing these differences?"

Duke's article examines five different ways to reframe the question of African-American [student](#) achievement: variations between schools, differences across school districts, variations between public and charter schools, differences across states, and variations between African-American boys and girls.

"There is a lot of mythology about minority students," Duke said, referring to John Ogbu's 2003 book, "Black Students in an Affluent

Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement," in which Ogbu noted the negativity of African-American peer groups who say that academic achievement is "acting white."

"We have to be careful of these broad generalizations," Duke said. "Some of our generalizations are inappropriate. There are also white students who don't work very hard. Trying to understand individual differences is what we as educators should be all about."

Two of the more noteworthy findings to come out of Duke's article include the differences in achievement between African-American students in different states and the differences between African-American boys and girls. Hawaii, for example, had the most African-American students passing AP exams, while Mississippi had the least. Texas graduates 84 percent of its African-American students, while Nevada only graduates 57 percent.

In addition, several studies show African-American girls achieve a higher level of academic success than boys. On the California High School Exit Exam in grade 10, the first-time passing rate for African-American girls in English was 15 percentage points higher than for African-American boys, and four points higher in math. Similar numbers were found in Washington State.

Framing the problem of African-American student achievement with different criteria leads to different questions than when comparing white students to black students. New questions arise. What are the [differences](#) in how states fund struggling minority schools? Does state funding of social services and early childhood education make a difference? And would higher levels of achievement be associated with single-gender classes and schools?

Reframing the [achievement gap](#) question this way also highlights the

successes of students of color.

Joanna Williams, an associate professor at the Curry School, researches the social contexts of race and ethnicity for positive youth development.

"This reframing of the achievement gap question creates an important opportunity for us to push back against the inaccurate narrative that all students of color are struggling," she said. "Many youth of color are excelling in schools and are active change agents in their communities.

"It is critical that we identify ways that large numbers of students of color are falling behind. But we have to do that while also amplifying the true story, that many students of color are high-achievers."

At the same time, Williams cautioned that high-achievement outcomes are never the result of individual student effort alone and agrees that experts need to continue thinking about how structures in schools create advantages for some and disadvantages for others.

"Successful student exemplars can help us better understand the dynamics between what individuals bring to the table and how the [school](#) environment meets their needs," she said.

Duke's work is doing exactly this, Williams concluded.

Provided by University of Virginia

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