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About the Author(s)

Shawn Anthony Robinson Ph.D. is an independent scholar and dyslexia consultant. His research focuses on the intersection of giftedness and dyslexia, and writes about gifted Black males with dyslexia. He brings a wealth of academic experience, training and knowledge about the psychological development of dyslexia. Dr. Robinson has written peer-review articles that discuss African American males with dyslexia, which is an understudied area of scholarship. Dr. Robinson attended an alternative school, graduated high school reading at an elementary level, and understands the hardship of not being properly identity, written off, and placed into special education without proper academic services. He created the Triple Identity Theory, which is a comprehensive model to understand gifted Black males with dyslexia. Dr. Robinson's research has been highlighted in NBC News in an article titled "This Man is Searching For a Link Between Illiteracy and Racial Bias."

Keywords

Black males, learning disability, special education, and twice-exceptional.

TRIPLE IDENTITY THEORY: CONCEPTUALIZING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF A GIFTED BLACK MALE WITH DYSLEXIA

Shawn Anthony Robinson, Independent Scholar

Abstract

Though overrepresented in special education, Black males are seldom given attention in scholarly literature addressing Twice-Exceptional (2e) students, and existing research has failed to systematically examine the intersectionality of race, dyslexia and giftedness. First, the article begins with definitions of key terms discussed throughout the paper. Second, the literature review synthesis relevant literature on the intersectionality that includes: race and misidentification, and my lived experience. Third, the article calls attention to a proposed cultural lens for understanding 2e Black males, its implications, and my interpretation. Finally, in the discussion section PreK-12 educators are presented with necessary information about the proper identification process, and classroom strategies. Overall, the article is based on a larger auto-ethnographic account that is based on the author's lived experiences as a gifted Black male with dyslexia.

Intellectually gifted individuals with specific learning disabilities are the most misjudged, misunderstood, and neglected segment of the student population and the community. Teachers, school counselors, and others often overlook the signs of intellectual giftedness and focus attention on such deficits as poor spelling, reading, and writing. (Whitmore & Maker, 1985, p. 204).

Introduction

Although Whitemore and Maker's statement on giftedness and learning disability is over 30 years old, it remains relevant today for Black males within the PreK-12 special education system who continue to be academically underestimated, and remain a misunderstood segment of the student population under-identified as Twice Exceptional (2e) (Davis & Robinson, in-press; Robinson, 2016a/2016b). Reis, Baum and Burke, (2014) emphasized students identified as 2e "often have educational journeys that are fraught with challenges, as they do not fit the traditional definitions of either exceptionality" (p. 217). The characteristics they exhibit generally group them as mediocre performers in the classroom, which limits them from reaching their full potential (Lohman, Gambrell, & Lakin, 2008).

The current body of literature addressing 2e Black males is limited in scope, which contributes to the failure of PreK-12 institutions offering their staff appropriate resources and training needed (Ford, Trenton, Blakeley, & Amos, 2014). Peterson-Besse, et al., (2014) asserted that more attention needs to be placed on subgroup differences among individuals who are 2e. Moreover, the research focusing on the intersection of race, giftedness, and dyslexia has neglected to examine how those areas are used to constitute one another, and how educational policies and cultural practices continue to marginalize Black males in special education (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; James & Wu, 2006).

Therefore, this article not only calls attention to a proposed theoretical model for understanding 2e Black males, but also provides PreK-12 educators with fundamental information about the proper identification process and characteristics these students can exhibit. First, the article covers definitions of key terms discussed throughout the paper followed by

relevant literature on the intersectionality of race, giftedness, dyslexia. Thereafter, a brief description of the theoretical framework titled the Triple Identity Theory will be highlighted. Next, implications of the theoretical model will be discussed followed by my interpretation. Finally, the article will end with a discussion and conclusion.

Definitions

Giftedness, Dyslexia, and Cultural Capital

The National Association for Gifted Children (2013) states that "giftedness may manifest in one or more domains such as; intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or in a specific academic field such as language arts, mathematics or science" (para. 1). Dyslexia is a learning disability that is "neurobiological in origin, and characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experiences that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge" (Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz, 2003; p. 2).

Finally, there are five identifiable areas of cultural capital that are essential for understanding how 2e Black males' identities are formed as they navigate the PreK-12 special education system (Yosso, 2005).

- Aspirational capital is viewed as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams of college for the future, even in the face of real perceived barriers." (p. 77)
- Navigational capital refers to "skills of maneuvering through institutions." (p. 80)
- Resistant capital is "knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior(s) that challenges inequality." (p. 80)
- Familial capital refers to "those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition." (p. 79)
- Social Capital is viewed as understanding the "...networks of people and community resources." (p. 79)

Furthermore, it is critical to note two facts: (1) the largest subcategory of 2e students are those who are gifted and have dyslexia, and (2) in many cases, Black male's academic talents go unnoticed as teachers' attention centers only on their disruptive classroom behaviors (Robinson, 2016a/e).

Literature Review

Race and Misidentification: Deliberate or not?

Contemporary scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates contends that little has changed regarding the status of Blacks, particularly in their quest for an equal education. First, during the 20th century, race was a factor in how students were educated, with Blacks often being excluded from opportunities compared to their White peers (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). In the early 1900s, education for Blacks was not considered a priority, which affected generation of the family structure. Second, in the 21st century, while the public educational school system has changed to reflect a diverse student body, prejudice continues to be embedded within the structure of the educational policies and procedures, which leaves this population not receiving effective identification and interventions (Albrecht, Skiba, Losen, Chung, & Middelberg, 2011; Gilman et al. 2016).

Teachers overlooking the strong academic potential that Black males demonstrate in the classroom will most likely have lower standards for them, and not acknowledge their lived

experiences or the different forms of cultural capital they bring in school (Dixon-Román, 2012). Because of the lack of proper identification and intervention, the academic disparities of Black males are not a new occurrence (Blanchett, 2010; Children Defense Fund, 2014). The Children's Defense Fund acknowledged that if Black students fall behind early in their education, it is extremely difficult for them to catch up. For instance,

> Reading problems, in turn, are at the core of the Black-White achievement gap. Reading is the motor of all education—the basic skill that leads to all other academic skills. Disadvantaged kids who can't read adequately by fourth grade aren't as likely to understand math problems, science and social studies texts, computer manuals, or much else. They're almost doomed to falling further and further behind in their later school years. At that point, remediation is probably too late. (Sol Stern, 2008)

Therefore, without learning to read, Black students, especially males, are dead on arrival in America's economy (A. Hoyles & M. Hoyles, 2010; Robinson, 2013; Thompson & Shamberger, 2015). Moreover, the Children Defense Fund noted that Black students: (1) arrive in kindergarten with lower levels of school readiness than White children, and (2) more than 80 percent of fourth and eighth grade Black public school students cannot read or compute at grade level compared to less than 57 percent of White students.

Second, in terms of gifted identification, Black students have less access to rigorous curriculum, and have unequal access to accelerated courses or programs to enhance their creativity (Ford, 2013). For instance, Black students represent 42% of student enrollment in schools offering gifted and talented education (GATE) programs, yet 28% of them are enrolled in GATE programs, while White students are 49% of all students in schools offering GATE programs but represent 57% of students in GATE programs (Civil Rights Data Collection; CRDC, 2016).

More horrifying is that students with disabilities served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are 12% of all students in schools offering GATE programs, but represent fewer than 3% of GATE students nationwide (CRDC, 2016). Nevertheless, given the volume of literature and statistics addressing the experiences of Black males, it is important to examine how race, giftedness and dyslexia influences students' development and identities.

The Intersection of Race, Giftedness, and Dyslexia: Conceptualizing My Lebenswelt

The interconnection of my inquiry focuses on three interdependent areas of race, dyslexia, and giftedness. It is recognized that this field of inquiry is limited in quantitative, qualitative, and mix-method approaches. Moreover, this field is one that needs further investigation (Robinson, 2015a; 2017a). Further, the three interdependent areas are necessary in knowing how student's identities are shaped (DeCurir-Gunby, 2009; Peterson, 1997). Reflecting on my lived experiences as a 2e Black male, I think about the quote from James Weldon Johnson "*You are young, gifted, and Black. We must begin to tell our young, there's a world waiting for you, yours is the quest that's just begun*" (Stewart, 2015). Thus, I contextualize my lived experiences through the lens of both James Weldon Johnson, a civil rights activist and educator who was raised without a sense of restrictions - sky is the limit – within a society that focused on ghettoizing Blacks, and contemporary scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates.
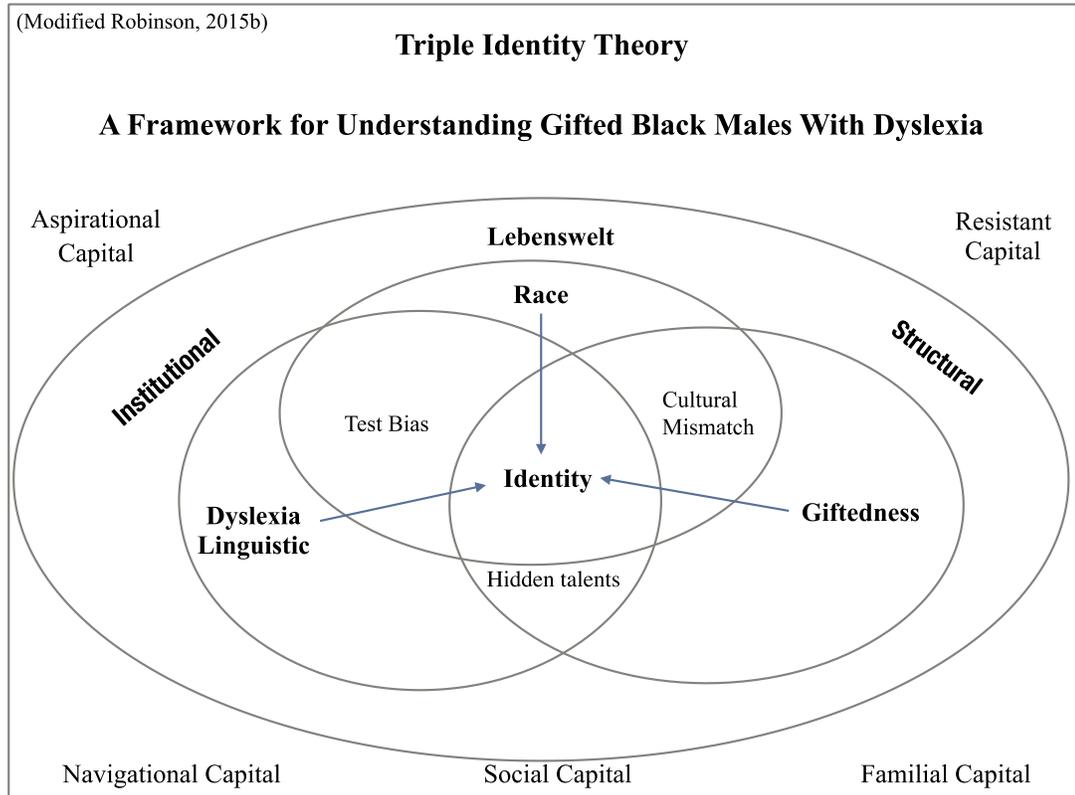
From a historical perspective, Johnson was dissatisfied with the cultural stereotypes that prevailed in the 1900s. Unfortunately, in 2017 certain stereotypes remain towards Blacks in special education. Coates's book *Between the World and Me* (2015) is a framework for understanding America's rich culture and history, our current educational calamity, and the social

inequality that Black students experience within the educational system (Davis, 2016). Further, to counter the false narratives written about Black males in special education, many social scientists in the 20th and 21st centuries have had a desire to examine appropriate methodologies to portray the reality and identity of Blacks (Connor, 2008, 2006). For instance, Coates asserted that his writings have been a result of his lebenswelt (world of lived experiences).

Like the literature from Johnson and Coates on identity and culture, I also found myself becoming conscious about how my lived experiences were connected around race, giftedness and dyslexia, as well as learning about how my identity was shaped (Robinson 2017b). Moreover, my experiences were the driving force behind me constructing a theoretical model that may fill a needed gap in the literature on the intersection of race, giftedness, and dyslexia. The development of the Triple Identity Theory (Figure 1) was based on feeling invisible as a 2e Black male in special education.

Triple Identity Theory: A Cultural Lens

Mayes and Moore (2016) claimed that within the body of research on 2e there are limited cultural lenses that assess: What does it mean to be Black who is gifted and in need of special services (that is, who has a disability yet is in need of gifted education services)? (p. 10). Robinson (2016d) argued that a cultural lens exists which answers their question, and serves as a framework for understanding 2e Black males who feel like the "other" in school contexts. The components of the Triple Identity Theory can be used to investigate the educational experiences of 2e Black males throughout the Pk-20 academic pipeline. Further, the lens may serve to help teachers understand how students who feel a sense of "otherness" are navigating multiple factors as they develop their identities (Ferri & Connor, 2005). The Triple Identity Theory may also offer a distinctive perspective about how my identity was formed through my giftedness and dyslexia (Robinson, in-press).

(Modified Robinson, 2015b)

Triple Identity Theory

A Framework for Understanding Gifted Black Males With Dyslexia

Aspirational Capital

Lebenswelt

Resistant Capital

Institutional

Race

Structural

Test Bias

Cultural Mismatch

Identity

Dyslexia Linguistic

Giftedness

Hidden talents

Navigational Capital   Social Capital   Familial Capital

The interconnectivity around race, dyslexia and giftedness are the foundation of my theory. These areas shaped my identity through social exchanges and everyday lived experiences that included different types of biases, cultural mismatches, and teachers' deficit perspectives about my talents (McDonald, Keys, & Balcazar, 2007; Robinson, 2015b). Moreover, not only does there need to be more research which includes a cultural lens that discusses the intersectionality and identity development, but also examines the intersection of multiple factors (i.e., capitals) which may require bringing numerous cultural and theoretical viewpoints together. This would serve the particular purpose of reviewing institutional and structural policies which have hindered the academic success of 2e Black males across gifted education and special education programs (Grantham, Ford, & Henfield, 2011; Wright, 2013).

Implications of the Theory

My breakdown of the Triple Identity Theory synthesized the writings of different scholars (Adams, 1990; Renzulli, 2012; Yosso, 2005). Their literature assisted my understanding not only of my experiences and the characteristics I exhibited, but also how my identity was shaped.

Characteristics. After analyzing Adam's (1990) and the work of other scholars about the process of learning to read, I became conscious about my experiences as a former student in special education who lacked the necessary skills to read, which included phonemic awareness and decoding. Ultimately, my auditory processing difficulties caused me to respond slowly to traditional reading curriculum as I needed an unorthodox method. As a student with dyslexia, I had a difficult time reading and spelling regular words. It was not until college that I received reading instruction based on an Orton Gillingham approach (i.e., Pure and Complete Phonics). This specific reading methodology taught me how to spell and read words by their left-to-right

sequential order, to appreciate the sound structure of the American English language, and use the dictionary's diacritical marks.

For example, the word *wysiwyg* in the Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (M-WCD) 11th edition (2009) on page 1448 is written out twice, in both bold and regular print. The latter identifies the phonetic assignment of a given letter.

Bold Print   Regular Print
WYS•I•WYG   wi-ze-wig

/wi/ /z/ /e/ /wi/
ʹWy - s   i - ,wy g

Each letter/letter team has a diacritical mark placed above it to illustrate the way the graphemes are identified by sound. The letters *Wy* make the sound of /wĭ/ as in the word will, and the first syllable is an open syllable (O.S.) because it does not have a consonant to the right of an isolated vowel within the syllable. The third letter *s* makes the sound of /z/ as in the word zoo, and the fourth letter *i* makes the sound of the long /e/ as in the word he. The second syllable, is also an O.S. The letters *wy* again make the sound /wĭ/, and the letter *g* has no mark needed and makes the sound as in the word go. The last syllable is a closed syllable because is contains an isolated vowel (or vowel representation) followed by one or more [voiced/nonvoiced] consonants in the syllable.

When pronuncing the word wysiwyg, the high-set mark is before the letters wy in the first syllable, which indicates the strongest stress or accent. The low-set mark is before the letters wyg, which indicates secondary stress or accent. Thus, the above example demonstrates how the phonetic assignments of a given letter are identified and how the three-syllable word is to be pronounced from left to right. Once students have mastered the sound structure of the American English language and no longer require explicit instruction, they can focus on content and meaning of words stored in their lexicon (Wolf, 2007). And, wysiwyg is described as a "display generated by word-processing or desktop-publishing software that exactly reflects the appearance of the printed document [as it would appear in its finished product] (M-WCD, 2009). For example, after receiving the reviewer's comments, I spent weeks revising a multipage wysiwyg-edited document before it was acceptable for the final version.

Next, in terms of my giftedness, my talents were hidden because I had displayed aggressive behaviors to express my feelings due to my inability to keep up academically, which lead me to withdraw from learning. Some adults focused more on my aggressive behaviors rather than taking the time to understand the root causes of my frustration. Furthermore, being in the special education system, I was an outsider and experienced cultural mismatches with some (not all) of my White teachers. Yet, there were a group of specific teachers that saw past my aggressive behaviors and had me participate as a peer-mentor and coach for our high school's Special Olympic program where my leadership skills were fostered (Robinson, 2016c).

In addition, in terms of my giftedness and dyslexia, even with a third-grade reading level I was accepted into a college program with a cohort of roughly 50 students with dyslexia. The instruction was not only an unorthodox approach to teaching, but also included an enrichment triad model that was constructivist-based (i.e., group learning) (Renzulli, 2012). This type of instruction tapped into my above average abilities and creativity, and motivated me to reach a high level of achievement regardless of my "dyslexia" or "slow learner" status. This is where

professors brought about my transformation from a failing student to a scholar in the making as they focused on my strengths and remediated my cognitive/affective difficulties.

Identification. Regardless of 2e status, struggles, or characteristics, Black males in special education are confronted with stigmas such as 'at-risk', and often misdiagnosed for behavioral disorder rather than placed into programs that tap into their creativity (Gardner & Hsin, 2008). As a result, students may not receive appropriate interventions, and become isolated from standard academic programs despite having the capability of achieving at high levels if given appropriate accommodations (Trail, 2011). One barrier for getting 2e Black males accepted into GATE programs is low academic test scores.

Yet, to avoid test biases and a cultural mismatch, the identification process should include teachers using multiple data sources for gifted programming identification (i.e., formal and informal measurements, student and parent's interviews, and/or portfolios) and culturally sensitive assessment procedures. Additionally, teachers should collect data about the students learning needs (i.e., 504 plan, Individual Education Plan, etc.) or other body of verification that are based on their cultural capital, which may show their levels of school engagement (Lovett & Sparks, 2011).

My Interpretation

My experiences examined through scholarly literature helped me to develop a proposed model that examines my academic journey as a 2e Black male, but also a cultural lens that has the potential to be applicable to others in special education who share similar experiences. The model may serve as a phenomenological approach to help recognize: (1) how identity formation may impact students' academic and social experiences, and (2) how students who feel a sense of "otherness" navigate multiple factors as they develop their identities. Researchers might want to consider: how 2e Black males self-identify. This is an important question to examine in understanding more about an underserved and neglected population across gifted education and special education.

Discussion

Few scholars have fully considered the intersectionality of race, dyslexia and giftedness, and my search spurred me to: (1) read across an array of academic disciplines and literature to develop a cultural lens based on my lived experiences, and (2) to advocate for comprehensive approaches that address effective identification and interventions for 2e Black males in special education. My studies led me to conclude that researchers may want to improve cultural models for broadening educators' knowledge about engaging 2e Black males academically (Mayes, Hines, & Harris, 2014). Learning that I exhibited some of the 2e characteristics discussed by Adams (1990), Renzulli (2012) and Yosso (2005) gave me a sense of validation, which also suggested unorthodox ways to reach and teach, and understand 2e Black males' academic and social experiences (Robinson, 2016e).

Classroom Strategies (Solutions)

PreK-12 educators working with 2e Black males may need to consider: accommodating academic strengths/gifts, their weaknesses/disabilities, providing direct instruction to support classroom success, and addressing the root causes of students "behavioral issues". For instance, 2e Black males should participate in enrichment programs (i.e., seminars on dyslexia) to become aware the challenges and strengths associated with dyslexia. Teachers should provide direct, explicit, and multi-sensory instruction that promotes an understanding of the sound structure of the American English language (i.e., phonemic awareness). Moreover, 2e males should be offered opportunities to explore their interest that allows them to visualize a positive future as

well as to participate in an environment that sets limits and has high expectations. Teachers should also consider ways in which 2e Black males cultural capital can be beneficial in their identification and in delivering appropriate educational services (Bonner, 2014).

In summary, the lack of theories that have fully integrated a cohesive body of literature which focuses on 2e Black males led me to raise awareness of an understudy population. The model has implications for not only changing the ways the learning of 2e Black males is viewed, but also for how PreK-12 educators take ownership of their classroom practices (VanTassel-Baska et al. 2009). Employing a cultural framework could advance new knowledge about the following questions: (1) what does it mean to be a 2e Black male in need of both gifted education and special education; as well as (2) how do the areas of cultural capital construct 2e Black males identity while navigating the academic systems? However, studies should be conducted in to examine the practical applications of the Triple Identity Theory.

Conclusion

Given the state of educational affairs, 2e Black males in the academy continue to be neglected, and overlooked and written off, and it is not surprising that they continue to face both racial and disability problems (Robinson, 2017a/b). The purpose of this article was not only to call attention to a proposed theoretical model for understanding 2e Black males, but to also provide PreK-12 educators with fundamental information about proper identification process and the characteristics students exhibit. The literature on 2e is starting to gain more attention; however, more research is needed in effort towards eliminating both structural and institutional policies and practices that add to academic disparities for 2e Black males (Davis & Robinson, in-press; Robinson, 2015a). Overall, my hope is that this article provides the framework for more research on 2e Black males and sparks a needed conversation about not only proper identification, but also appropriately serving this population in special education who "…are the most misjudged, misunderstood, and neglected segment of the student population… (Whitmore & Maker, 1985, p. 204)

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