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AUTHOR	Saunders, Jeanne; Davis, Larry; Williams, Trina; Cribbs, Julie Miller
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ABSTRACT

There is increasing divergence in the academic outcomes of African American males and females. By most accounts, males are falling behind their female peers educationally as African American females are graduating from high schools at higher rates and are going on to college and graduate school in greater numbers. Some have suggested that school completion and performance are associated with how students feel about themselves. The purpose of this study is to explore gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions and two academic outcomes among a sample of 243 African American high school sophomores. The results suggest that, overall, females are more favorably oriented toward high school completion. Both male and female students with more positive self-perceptions have stronger intentions to complete the current year of high school. Higher grade point averages were more strongly associated with greater self-efficacy for females than for males. Given these findings, increased attention to educational programming, societal messages, and future research is warranted. (Contains 38 references.) (Author/SM)

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Gender Differences in Self-Perceptions and Academic Outcomes: A Study of African American High School Students

Jeanne Saunders[1]
University of Iowa

Larry Davis[2]
University of Pittsburgh

Trina Williams[3]
James Herbert Williams[4]
George Warren Brown School of Social Work
Washington University

Julie Miller Cribbs[5]
University of South Carolina - Columbia

Working Paper No. 02-10

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[1] Jeanne Saunders, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Iowa School of Social Work. Her areas of interest include social problems of youth, especially at-risk adolescents in educational settings and teen pregnancy.
[2] Larry Davis, Ph.D. Dean and the Donald M. Henderson Professor , School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh. His areas of interest include race relations, African American family formation and stability, small groups and social problems of youth.
[3] Trina Williams, MSW, M Phil, Doctoral Candidate, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University.. Her interests are in the relationship between assets and children's well-being, public policy for families and the social and economic needs of inner city communities.
[4] James Herbert Williams, Ph.D., Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and E. Desmond Lee Professor of Racial and Ethnic Diversity, George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University. His interests are in African American youth, particularly violence and delinquency.
[5] Julie Miller Cribbs, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of South Carolina - Columbia, School of Social Work. Her areas of interest include kin networks, rural poverty, welfare reform, and information technology and social work.

ABSTRACT

There is increasing divergence in the academic outcomes of African American males and females. By most accounts, males are falling behind their female peers educationally as African American females are graduating from high schools at higher rates and are going on to college and graduate school in greater numbers. Some have suggested that school completion and performance is associated with how students feel about themselves. The purpose of this study was to explore gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions and two academic outcomes among a sample of 243 African American high school sophomores. The results suggest that, overall; females are more favorably oriented toward high school completion. Both male and female students with more positive self-perceptions have stronger intentions to complete the current year of high school. Higher grade point averages were more strongly associated with greater self-efficacy for females than for males. Given these findings, increased attention to educational programming, societal messages and future research is warranted.

Key Terms: academic achievement, self esteem, racial self esteem, academic self efficacy, gender, African American youth

Despite significant gains in the rates of high school completion for African American youth during the past thirty years, there is increasing divergence in the academic outcomes of African American males and females (Belluck, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Specifically, males are losing out to their female peers educationally. African American females are graduating from high schools at higher rates than males (56% vs. 43% by age 19) and are going on to college and graduate schools in greater numbers (16% of females vs. 12% of males) (Carter & Wilson, 1993; Hawkins, 1996; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1998; Wilds, 2000). A disparity in educational achievement between males and females has been a persistent trend over the last two decades in all racial and ethnic groups in this country. However, the difference between the percentage of African American males and females completing high school by age 19 (a difference of 13%, currently) continues to be about twice as large as that found in other racial and ethnic groups (7%, currently) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001, Wilds, 2000).

The exact reason why African American males and females are experiencing such differential educational outcomes is unclear and undoubtedly complex. Patterns of school completion among these youth as a whole, especially as they compare to white youth, have been fairly well described, but specific within group differences, between males and females, for example, are less well understood. Increasing our understanding of these differences would enable us to better meet the unique needs of each gender.

Some have suggested that school completion and academic performance is associated with how students feel about themselves. Results from some studies have suggested that there is a positive relationship between self-perceptions and academic outcomes (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998; Ward, 1990), and others have reported a negative relationship between the two (Fordham & Ogbu, 1988).

The purpose of this study was to explore gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions in four domains (self esteem, racial self esteem, academic self efficacy and importance of school completion to self) and two academic outcomes (intentions to complete the school year and grade point average). At the time this data was collected, the survey participants were all sophomores in high school attending a predominantly African American high school in the Midwest.

Following a review of the literature that summarizes the research related to self-perceptions and academic achievement, this paper details the study method, describes each of the variables in turn, and presents the results of the data analysis. It concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggests areas for practice interventions and future research.

Importance of Academic Achievement

The importance of educational achievement, primarily high school completion, cannot be minimized. Obviously, a high school diploma or its equivalent is the first requirement for entrance into higher education programs. For both males and females it is also a primary determinant of future life outcomes especially in the areas of employment and economic stability (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; US Bureau of the Census, 1995). A high school diploma does not guarantee a job, but increases the chances for employment. There are also data indicating that educational achievement influences social relationships. The present imbalance in educational outcomes for African American males and females is believed to be having a

negative effect on their family formation processes (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). That is, there are too few educated men to be matched with the greater number of educated women. Consequently, more women are choosing to remain single. In addition, there is a loss to the greater society of the unrealized potential and talents of these students.

Patterns of school completion are molded by the interaction of the school environment, society and individual characteristics. It is well documented that African American males and females experience the school environment very differently. Males are much more frequently behind in school for their age, typically have lower grades in reading and conduct and are more likely to have failed one or more grades (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982; Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 1997; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). African American males are also much more likely than any other group of students (male or female in any other racial/ethnic group) to receive corporal punishment, to be suspended and to be identified as behaviorally disordered (BD) (Callahan, 1994; Gregory, 1997; McClure, 1994). Behavior disordered students are usually separated from the general school population which leads to their social isolation and stigmatization.

These negative experiences are believed to contribute to African American males viewing school as a hostile environment and feeling increasingly frustrated in their academic efforts which often leads to academic alienation and disengagement (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). Connell, Beale-Spencer and Aber (1994) found a direct relationship between students' emotional and behavioral engagement in school and their academic performance. When academic disengagement begins in elementary school, it is more difficult for these young men to be well prepared for more challenging high school curriculums putting them at risk for further failure and drop out. There is also an associated loss of confidence in one's academic ability and skills and overall sense of self worth (Aunola, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2000; Connell, Beale-Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Jordan, Lara & McPartland, 1996).

By comparison, African American females of all ages fare better in the classroom than their male counterparts. They tend to have more positive experiences which increases their confidence in their academic skills and abilities, enhances their feelings of self worth and reinforces the potential for rewards from the school system (Entwisle, et al., 1997; Gregory, 1997). It is suggested that these more positive experiences may be related to the fact that most elementary school teachers are female. As a group, female teachers are more tolerant of and better able to handle girls' behavior (and misbehavior) in a more positive manner compared to that of boys. Gregory (1997) strongly suggests that an increase in the number of male teachers, especially at the elementary level, would help to change this pattern.

Different societal responses to African American males and females may also account for some of the differences in their level of achievement. Males are more likely to question the importance or relevance of a high school education when they observe high levels of unemployment among African American males regardless of high school attainment (Ogbu, 1990). Given this reality, it is likely that some African American males would invest less energy into their academic efforts and more energy in activities believed to be more rewarding. On the other hand, African American girls are more likely to perceive positive benefits from their educational attainment and subsequently put forth greater effort.

Self Perceptions

Increasingly, there is a trend to examine self-esteem, or self worth, not only in a global or overarching way but also in particular domains or subdomains underneath that larger umbrella (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). Global measures of self-esteem, such as the Rosenberg (1979) Self Esteem scale, are thought to assess a sense of overall well-being or general satisfaction with oneself as a person. This type of measure suggests that an individual's perception of one's strengths or weaknesses affects their overall level of self-esteem.

Recent research provides increasing evidence that by the time a child reaches adolescence there is a stronger differentiation of self esteem into separate domains based on social context and areas of self efficacy, or confidence in one's abilities in specific areas (Dukes & Martinez, 1994; Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998; Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995; Rosenberg, 1979). This differentiation occurs as youth mature and have more varied life experiences. It is then that they are able to realize that they have more skills in some areas than others (e.g. academics), and in some contexts more than others (e.g. school vs. sports). As a result, measures of self-esteem in these separate domains may provide a more accurate reflection of self-perception for the adolescent.
One particular domain of self-esteem that has been examined among African American youth is that of racial self-esteem or self worth. Positive racial self-esteem has been found to enhance academic performance for some African American youth. This may be because it is during the high school years, as students begin to mature, that racial identity, personal commitment to education and academic achievement begin to converge for these youth (Ward, 1990). As a result, higher achieving students would be more likely to have formed a positive racial self esteem that included "one's Blackness" as positively valued and desired. Other recent studies have found that feeling good about one's racial group can have a positive influence on academic outcomes, especially for females (Oyserman, Gant & Ager, 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998). A strong African American identity reportedly increases school persistence and performance for girls, but focuses on action, struggle and survival for boys.

Oyserman and colleagues (1995) also suggest that some gender differences in identity and self esteem may result from differences in the socialization of African American males and females. These differences range from societal stereotypes such as African American men are lazy and poor workers to African American mothers having higher educational expectations for their daughters compared to their sons.

The relationship between racial self-esteem and academic outcomes has been reported to be both positive (Oyserman et al, 1995; Oyserman & Harrison, 1998; Ward, 1990) and negative (Fordham & Ogbu, 1988). Results from one study of 86 African American youth (Witherspoon, Speight & Thomas, 1997) suggest there is support for both positions leading the researchers to conclude that these issues are complex and may differ among groups of students as various factors may be influencing the findings. It might also be that a variety of racial identity attitudes exist within the African American high school student population. Their analysis did not account for possible gender differences.

After reviewing these studies that have been reported in the literature, it is clear that the relationship between self-perceptions and the academic achievement of youth, and any gender differences, remains unclear. This study was conducted to explore gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions in four domains (self esteem, racial self esteem, academic self efficacy, and importance of school completion to self) and academic outcomes (intentions to complete the school year and grade point average). Two research questions were used to guide the analysis: 1) Are there gender differences in students' academic outcomes and their self perceptions; and 2) Are there gender differences in the relationship between students' academic outcomes and self perceptions.

METHOD

Setting and Participants

Participants in this study were all high school sophomores attending an urban school in the Midwest. The school had a total enrollment of approximately 1200 students with equal numbers of males and females. The student body was virtually all African American (99%).

All members of the sophomore class, approximately 300 students, were invited to participate in the study. Some students did not return a signed parent/guardian permission slip required for participation and others chose not to participate. On any given day, fifteen to twenty percent of the student body is absent from this school. As a result, some students failed to hear about the study because they were not present in school that day.

Two hundred and forty three students (81% of the sophomore class), 136 females and 107 males, participated in the study. These students were between 15 and 18 years of age with a mean age of 15.6 years. Thirty-one percent of the sample indicated that they resided with both biological parents, 28 percent reported living with one parent, and the remaining 41 percent of the students reported residing in a blended or extended family. Fifty-two percent of the students in this sample reported receiving a full or partial lunch subsidy suggesting low-income status.

Procedure

Students were told that this research project was interested in understanding their attitudes toward school and school completion and were asked to volunteer through their homeroom class. Students consenting to participate were informed about the study in greater detail and were required to sign a statement of informed consent prior to participation. In addition, they were required to have signed parental/guardian consent before completing the study instrument. The school guidance counselor served as the primary liaison between students, parents and the research team.

Participants were surveyed in groups of 15 to 40 during the school day at the beginning of the school year. The questionnaire administration took approximately one hour to complete. A team of two African American graduate research assistants administered the survey. To accommodate the wide variability in reading levels among the students, one research assistant read the items to the group while students followed along with their questionnaires. The second research assistant was available to assist any students who had questions or experienced

difficulty in completing the items. Participants were paid $15 for their time and effort upon completion.

Measures

This study examined the impact of four domains of self perceptions (self esteem, racial self esteem, academic self efficacy, and importance of completing school to self) on two dependent variables: intention to complete the school year and cumulative grade point average (GPA). Each variable is described in turn.

Considerable research has documented that the best predictor of a behavior is an individual's intention to complete that behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987; Norwich & Duncan, 1990; Reinecke, Schmidt, & Ajzen, 1996). In this study, students' intentions to complete the school year, the first dependent variable, were measured by averaging the responses to five items. These items followed the guidelines established by Ajzen (1991) for measuring this construct. The items were: 1) "I intend to complete the current school year," 2) "I will try to complete the current school year," 3) "I expect to complete the current school year," 4) "I am determined to complete the current school year," and 5) "All things considered, it is possible that I might not complete the current school year." Students indicated their level of agreement with each item on a seven-point scale from "very much disagree" (1) to "very much agree" (7). The fifth statement was reversed scored for the analyses. The average response to these five items was used as an indicator of the strength of the student's intention to stay in school. Higher numbers indicate a stronger intention to complete the school year. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .82.

The second dependent variable was the student's cumulative grade point average (GPA) recorded on a scale from 0 to 4. GPAs were recorded from official school records at the end of the academic year.

Self-esteem refers to how individuals feel about themselves in a comprehensive, or global, manner (Rosenberg, 1979). Self esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979) that is comprised of ten statements to which respondents indicate if they strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), or strongly disagree (4). Examples of these items are: " I take a positive attitude about myself," "On the whole I am satisfied with myself," and "I wish I could have more respect for myself." Items were reverse scored when necessary to make higher responses correspond with greater self-esteem. Responses to the 10 items were averaged for one scale score. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .77.

Racial self-esteem is defined as how the individual feels about his or her racial group membership, or ethnic pride (Porter & Washington, 1979). Hughes and Demo (1989) report that racial self-esteem as defined by Porter and Washington has been found to be an important factor in the self-perception of African Americans. In this study, racial self-esteem was measured with a 14 item scale (Hughes & Demo, 1989) about Black people to which respondents indicated their level of agreement. Respondents were asked how much they believed it is true that most Black people keep trying, love their families, are ashamed, are lazy, neglect their families, are trifling, are honest, are selfish, and are strong. Responses for each item were made on a four-point scale ranging from true (1) to not true at all (4). Some items were reverse scored for the analysis so

that higher responses indicated greater racial self-esteem. Responses to the 14 items were averaged for one scale score. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .80.

Academic self-efficacy, that is, how the individual feels about his/her academic capabilities, was measured with an eight item scale. Three items were used from Bachman's School Ability Self-concept Index (Bachman, 1970). These items were: "How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your grade in school?", "How intelligent do you think you are compared to others your age?", and "Compared to others your age, how important is it to you to be able to use your intelligence?". Five additional items were created and added to these. These items were: 1) "How capable do you think you are of getting good grades?," 2) "Compared to others your age, how much value do you place on getting good grades?," 3) "Compared to others your age, how satisfied are you with your grades?," 4) "How confident are you that you will be able to perform well in the future?," and 5) "Compared to others your age, to what extent do you really believe that if you work hard, you could improve your grades?". All items were measured on a seven point scale ranging from "far below average" (1) to "very much above average" (7). Responses to these individual items were averaged to provide one scale score where higher scores indicate greater academic self-efficacy. Cronbach's alpha for this eight item scale was .89.

The "Importance of school year completion to self" is an assessment of how important completing the current school year is to students' sense of whom they are or their personal identity. Importance of school year completion to self was assessed with a single item: "Completing the current school year is an important part of who I am." Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with the statement on a seven point scale ranging from disagree very much (1) to agree very much (7).

RESULTS

Of the 243 surveys collected, 202 (83%) had complete data for the variables of interest in this study and were used in the analyses for this report. The high school was only able to provide the grade point average for 169 of the students in our sample (70%). Therefore, only the responses from these students were used in analyses using grade point average as a dependent variable.

Bivariate Analyses

Reported level of intentions to complete school and grade point averages were compared for males and females using independent sample t-tests. Females reported significantly stronger intentions to complete the school year compared to males. Similarly, the average GPA for females (2.20, a low C) was significantly higher than the average GPA for males (1.85, a high D).

Females in this study also reported significantly higher levels of academic self-efficacy and greater importance of school year completion to self. There were no differences between males and females' average responses on the measures of self-esteem and racial self-esteem. Table 1 provides the average response, and standard deviation for males and females on each of these measures and the t-test values for each of these analyses.

Table 1

Differences between mean responses of males and females on study variables

	Males M (SD)	Females M (SD)	n	t-value
Intention (DV)	6.09 (1.50)	6.51 (0.82)	202	-2.58**
GPA (DV)	1.85 (0.85)	2.20 (0.78)	169	-2.68**
Self esteem	3.43 (0.41)	3.45 (0.41)	202	-0.18
Racial Self esteem	3.19 (0.42)	3.22 (0.42)	202	-0.37
Academic Self efficacy	5.25 (1.12)	5.65 (0.88)	202	-2.85**
Completing Important to Self	6.17 (1.54)	6.71 (0.99)	202	-3.05**

** $p \leq .01$

Bivariate correlations for the study variables are provided in Table 2. It can be noted that three of the four self-perception variables, self-esteem, academic self-efficacy and the importance of school completion to self, were significantly correlated to the first dependent variable, students' intentions to complete the school year. Academic self-efficacy and importance of school completion to self were the only two self-perception variables significantly correlated with the second dependent variable, grade point average. The two dependent variables were also significantly correlated with one another.

Among the independent variables, racial self-esteem and academic self-efficacy were positively correlated with self-esteem. Academic self-efficacy and importance of school completion to self were also significantly correlated.

Table 2

Bivariate correlations of study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Intentions	-					
2. GPA	.35**	-				
3. Self esteem	.26***	-.04	-			
4. Racial Self esteem	.05	.01	.26***	-		
5. Academic Self efficacy	.47***	.42**	.23**	.07	-	
6. Completing Important to Self	.55***	.26**	.11	.12	.41**	-

** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Self perceptions and intentions to complete the school year

To understand gender differences in the relationship between the self-perception measures and the two dependent measures, a series of multiple regression equations were used. In the first equation, the four self-perception variables were entered to examine their relationship to intentions to complete the school year. Self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, and importance of school completion to self were all significant predictors; racial self-esteem was not significant. Collectively, these variables explained 40 percent of the variance in intentions to complete the school year ($F(4,198) = 32.83$, $p < .001$). The regression coefficients for this equation are provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Relationship between self-perceptions and intentions to complete school year (n = 202)

	Self Perceptions	
	Beta	SE
Self esteem	.16**	.17
Racial Self esteem	-.06	.16
Academic Self efficacy	.26***	.07
Completing Important to self	.43***	.06
R^2	.40	
Adjusted R^2	.39	
F	32.83***	
(df)	(4, 198)	

** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

In a second equation, main effects and interactions with gender were tested. This model was significant and explained approximately 43% of the variance in intentions to complete the school year ($F(9, 193) = 16.01$, $p < .001$). However, as noted in Table 4, there was a main effect but no interactions with gender found for this sample of students. This suggests that there are no gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions and intentions to complete the school year, only a difference in the level, which males and females report on these measures. This pattern was first noted in the bivariate analyses (see Table 1, above) where females reported significantly higher levels of academic self-efficacy and importance of school completion to self-compared to males.

Table 4

Gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions and intentions to complete school year (n = 202)

	Self perceptions + Interactions	
	Beta	SE
Self esteem	.16*	.21
Racial Self esteem	-.14*	.20
Academic Self efficacy	.13	.10
Completing Important to Self	.32**	.08
Gender	1.62**	1.46
Gender * Self esteem	.01	.34
Gender * Racial Self esteem	.70	.33
Gender * Academic Self efficacy	.53	.15
Gender * Important to Self	.35	.12
R^2	.43	
Adjusted R^2	.40	
F	16.01***	
(df)	(9, 193)	

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Self-perceptions and grade point average

Similar equations were used to test the relationship of the self-perception variables to the second dependent variable, grade point average. In the first equation with the four self-perception variables entered, both self-esteem and academic self-efficacy were significant predictors. It should be noted that self-esteem had an inverse relationship with GPA suggesting that as GPA rises, self esteem decreases. Collectively, these four variables explained 21 percent of the variance in grade point averages ($F(4, 153) = 10.09, p < .001$). The regression coefficients for this equation are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Relationship between self perceptions and students' grade point average (n = 169)

	Self Perceptions	
	Beta	SE
Self esteem	-.15*	.15
Racial Self esteem	.02	.15
Academic Self efficacy	.41***	.07
Completing Important to Self	.12	.05
R^2	.21	
Adjusted R^2	.19	
F	10.09***	
(df)	(4, 153)	

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Differences in the relationship between these variables and grade point average for males and females were tested in a second equation. In this case, there was no main effect but the interaction of gender and academic self-efficacy was significant suggesting differences between males and females in this area (See Table 6). To better understand this difference, simple regression was used to examine the relationship between academic self-efficacy and grade point average for males and females separately. Academic self-efficacy was a much stronger predictor of GPA for females, explaining 28 percent of the variance ($F(1,99) = 38.43$, $p < .001$; Beta = .53), compared to males, explaining just 8 percent of the variance ($F(1, 55) = 4.43$, $p < .05$; Beta = .27). This suggests that feelings about one's academic abilities is much more important in predicting academic performance (GPA) for females than it is for males.

Table 6

Relationship between self perceptions and students' grade point average (n = 169)

	Self perceptions + Interactions	
	Beta	SE
Self esteem	-.19*	.19
Racial Self esteem	-.02	.19
Academic Self efficacy	.62***	.09
Completing Important to self	.22*	.05
Gender	-.57	1.37
Gender * Self esteem	.26	.31
Gender * Racial Self esteem	.55	.31
Gender * Academic Self efficacy	- 1.26***	.14
Gender * Important to Self	-.20	.11
R^2	.27	
Adjusted R^2	.23	
F	6.10***	
(df)	(9, 148)	

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This study examined gender differences in the relationship between self-perceptions and two academic outcomes, intentions to complete the school year and grade point average, in a group of African American high school sophomores. Self-perceptions were examined in four areas: self esteem, racial self-esteem, academic self-efficacy and importance of school year completion to self. Understanding gender differences is important not only to increase our understanding of disparate trends of high school completion between African American males and females but also to increase our ability to better meet the unique needs of these students.

The gender differences in academic outcomes found in this study were generally consistent with the typical patterns of educational and societal experiences of African American youth in this country (Entwisle et al, 1997; Gregory, 1997; Ogbu, 1990). For example, it is known that girls are more frequently rewarded in school for their efforts and as a result, are more likely to develop their academic skills. In this study girls had higher cumulative grade point averages, on average, compared to the boys. This is one indication that the girls in this study have relatively stronger academic skills and perhaps put forth greater effort. While it is recognized that many factors influence a student's GPA, such as the number and difficulty of classes taken and completed, and the individual grading practices of teachers, good academic skills are still necessary to earn higher grades.

Similarly, students are able to graduate from high school with a wide range of grade points. However, it is more difficult to enroll in post high school education programs, especially college, with lower grade points. When looking at grade point averages among this sample of students, females in this study had significantly higher grade point averages than the males. This is consistent with the national trend for African American females who typically have higher grades and more frequently enter college than African American males (Wilds, 2000). However, it should be noted that both males and females in this study had fairly low GPAs overall making college entrance problematic for both groups. On average, girls had a low C average (2.20 on a 4 point scale) compared to the boys who had a high D, on average (1.85 on a 4 point scale). Identifying ways to increase the academic achievement of both groups of students is certainly warranted.

The females in this study also had significantly stronger intentions to complete the school year than their male peers. This may be related to the girls doing better academically overall as reflected by their relatively higher grade point averages. Students doing well in school are more likely to feel a stronger commitment to completing their high school education. However, girls' stronger intentions may also reflect the societal message they receive that completing a high school education is likely to be economically and socially rewarding (Entwisle, et al., 1997). Boys reporting weaker intentions to complete the school year, on average, may be a reflection of the societal message which they receive that high school completion is less likely to bring economic or social rewards (Gregory, 1997).

The differences found in self-perceptions between males and females in this study are consistent with those found in their academic outcomes. Specifically, females reported higher levels of academic self-efficacy and importance of school completion to self. As suggested above, having greater confidence in their academic abilities is consistent with girls having higher grade point averages compared to the males. Similarly, girls reporting a stronger sense of the importance of school completion to self is consistent with their stronger intentions to complete school. These study findings are not unexpected given that girls typically have received more positive messages about their academic abilities and performance, and observe the potential rewards received by other women who have completed high school.

This study did not find gender differences in students' levels of self-esteem and racial self-esteem. This suggests that boys and girls in this study are doing equally well in these two areas. However, if areas of self efficacy are a better measure of overall well-being for adolescents as some have proposed (Dukes & Martinez, 1994; Rosenberg, 1979; Rosenberg et al, 1995), then the girls in this study, who reported greater academic self efficacy, are (again) doing better than their male peers.

Gender differences were not found in the relationship between self-perception measures and students' intentions to complete the school year. The results point out, however, that helping students incorporate school completion into their self concept and strengthening their academic self efficacy is at least as important as enhancing their self esteem, if not more so, to increase their intentions to complete school.

While school completion cannot be discounted in its importance, it must also be remembered that in today's society, post high school education has become increasingly important for economic and social stability. In this study, academic self-efficacy was a strong predictor of girls' academic achievement as represented by grade point average. However, strengthening academic self-efficacy in males does not guarantee the same results. Given that males nationally and in this sample appear to be struggling to match the level of academic achievement of girls, future research should focus on increased understanding of factors that better predict higher achievement among boys. It will be these factors that will have a greater impact on decreasing the disparity in educational outcomes between males and females.

The small sample size and a focus on students from one all African American high school are limitations of this study. Given these limitations, the results of this study should be used within the context of adding to our knowledge of African American students' self-perceptions and school outcomes and to suggest directions for future research. Certainly future research should examine these relationships with larger samples of African American students in similar and more racially diverse schools. The role of self-perceptions may vary as a result of the school and community environment (Connell, Beale-Spencer, & Aber, 1994). For example, the role of racial self esteem, which was not a strong predictor in this study, may be more important in understanding academic outcomes in more racially or economically diverse schools.

Further, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other groups of African American youth. A prospective study extending to high school graduation would provide valuable information about high school completion that was not possible to capture in this study.

The authors recognize that self-perceptions have been defined and measured in numerous ways as researchers attempt to understand this complex area. The measures used in this study were chosen because of their relationship to and use in past studies found in the literature. It is difficult to compare the results of seemingly similar studies when the measures used in each of them are different. Hence, our choice of measures was in part predicated on their use in the work of others in this area so that comparisons might more validly be made.

It was concerning to the authors that school records that included a student's grade point average were not available for nearly one-third (30%) of the participants in this study. Obviously, this data would have made the analysis stronger and more complete. However, more importantly, this large percentage of students "lost" in the system from an apparent inability to track student progress, and the low grade point averages (C-/D+) of students as noted above, suggests a less than ideal academic experience for these students. The academic standards of this school system, the educational preparation these students received prior to entering high school and their social environment which may contribute to their poor academic performance all warrant serious attention. Unfortunately, these difficulties are not unique to this school but are shared by many other schools in the country, especially those who primarily serve minority, low-income students.

While it appears that in many cases the educational system and society have tended to ignore both the needs and the potential talents of African American youth, and males in particular, researchers, educators and practitioners must take every opportunity to better understand these young men so that informed policy and practice decisions can be made. Research into this complex area of African American achievement must be continued and expanded if we are to begin to change the current trends in academic achievement among these youth. In addition to quantitative studies such as this one that examines characteristics across a group of youth, qualitative studies, including ethnographic case studies and focus groups, may also help to unravel the dynamics of gender-specific educational attitudes and intentions.

This study also suggests that how African American youth think about themselves plays a role in their academic intentions and performance. Therefore, the messages that are sent to these youth must be changed if the disparity in educational achievement is to be narrowed. All students, not just females, must be encouraged, challenged and nurtured in their academic skills beginning in elementary school. Behavior problems must be confronted with more positive discipline methods to ensure that academic skills can be developed. It is unrealistic to think that even the most gifted high school educator could "undo" negative attitudes toward school and poor academic skills that had been fostered over the last nine years. It is incumbent upon not only educators, but families and policy makes as well, to more closely monitor their role in the formation and development of academic attitudes and outcomes and positive self-perceptions among African American youth. While it is recognized that it will take a concerted effort to change the present trends, the continued individual and societal loss of potential skills, talents and contributions from these youth is too high to let this pattern continue.

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