

Relations among African-American High School Adolescents' School Achievement, Educational Intentions, Commitment, Values, and Behaviors

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relations of academic achievement with adolescents' personal value of education, educational intentions, and daily education-related behavior. In a sample of 126 urban, minority, male and female, ninth grade students from a midwestern area of USA statistically significant relationships were found between educational intentions and actual education related behavior, as well as between educational intentions and students' personal value of education. Interpretations about directions for intervention are discussed. None of these behaviors were significantly related to academic achievement, however. Practical implications of the results of this study are discussed.

Introduction

Adolescents who are at-risk of dropping out of high school face a variety of obstacles related to their academic intentions, practices, and outcomes. Trusty (2000) found that self-efficacy, family variables (attendance at extracurricular activities, mothers' expectations, availability of computers in the home), and help-seeking behavior were factors affecting the stability of adolescents' long term educational expectations, while negative school behavior was an indicator of lowered long-term educational expectations. Students who exhibit behavior problems in school also show disinterest in academics. Poor academic achievement also predicts drop out (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000). Marginalization by society also contributes to lower academic performance by minorities (Ogbu, 1987), contributing to leaving school early. Thus, support for staying in school becomes imperative for guiding and nurturing at-risk adolescents.

Social support has been shown to be positively related to the self-esteem of children (Guest & Biasini, 2001) and college students (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). Newman, Myers, and Newman (2000) purported that school, parents, peers, and the neighborhood area key factors related to the success of African-American students. Social support can be obtained in all four areas, from some areas, or none. A brief review is included. Teachers are an important source, though many low performing students do not feel supported by teachers (Newman et al., 2000) and that teachers' support has correlated with students' stress levels (Gillock & Reyes, 1999). Parental social support has also been related to academic achievement. Students who do well academically tend to feel more supported by their parents as well (Newman, et al., 2000), and their parents are more involved at school and enthusiastic (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Parental involvement has also been found to vary by socioeconomic status (e.g., Trusty, 1998) and parent involvement and communication about academics were related to educational expectations and future goals for education for low-SES students.

Positive peer support for academic achievement combined with parental influence on students' long term educational goals have been positively related to the academic achievement of Asian-American and White students, but not necessarily for African-American or Hispanic students (Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). The authors interpreted that peer influence on minority students was in opposition to the influence of parents. Similarly, others have concluded that motivation levels of peers (Nichols and Utesch (1998) and risk levels of neighborhoods (Gonzales, et al., 1996) were related to support levels for adolescents' academic achievement. The role of students' own attitudes, behaviors, and expectations is also important. If motivated, students generally behave in ways that contribute to success (Ryan & Patrick 2001; Singh, Granville, & Dika, 2002; Skaalvik & Valas, 1999).

There is a need to expand the current literature on these types of variables targeting adolescents self-perceptions, in conjunction with supports received external to themselves. Thus, based on this review of the literature, the purposes of the present study were to test the hypotheses that (1) educational intentions would be positively related to educational behavior and achievement, (2) family and peer support would be positively related to educational behavior and achievement, (3) adolescents' personal value of education is positively related to educational intentions, educational behavior, and achievement, (4) adolescents' academic achievement is positively related to personal educational commitment, identification of the personal value of education, family support, peer support, and school support, and (5) there will be sex differences in personal educational commitment, identification of the personal value of education, financial value of education, family support, peer support, and school support. The goal of this study was to understand better students' perceptions regarding education and academic achievement, in order to promote a more comprehensive view of the variables associated with the success of urban, African-American students.

Method

Participants

Participants were ninth grade public high school students ($n=126$; ages 13-14) in a major city in the Midwest USA, 99% African-American, and lower socioeconomic status.

Measures

Educational attitudes and behaviors. The questionnaire was originally developed by Somers and Piliawsky (2004) and contained the following seven subscales: 1) Educational Intentions (4 items, $\alpha = .72$; e.g., "I plan to finish high school"); 2) Educational Commitment Behavior (6 items, $\alpha = .60$; e.g., "I am absent a lot from school because I skip my classes"); 3) Family Support for Education (2 items, $\alpha = .83$; i.e., "I have family who motivate me to finish high school"), 4) Peer Support for Education (2 items; $\alpha = .68$; "I have friends who motivate me to further my education after high school"), 5) School Support for Education (single item, "There are people at school who motivate me to finish high school," 6) Identification of the Financial Value of Education (single item, "A high school diploma will help me earn more money"), 7) Identification of the personal value of Education (single item, "If I finish high school I will feel good about myself"). Response options ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

Academic outcomes. Grade point average (GPA) at the end of 9th grade was used as the primary measure of academic performance (potential range between 0.0 and 4.0).

Procedure

Participation was voluntary, consent forms were mailed to parents, and adolescent assent was also obtained. The participation rate was approximately 95%.

Results

Descriptive statistics are included in Table 1. 1) Correlation analyses revealed a significant and strong positive correlation ($r=.52$, $p<.05$) between educational intentions and educational behavior but not achievement. 2) A stepwise multiple linear regression analysis revealed that family support, but not peer support, significantly explained variance in educational behavior ($R^2=.096$, $p<.05$) but not achievement. 3) Another stepwise multiple linear regression analysis also revealed that educational intentions, but not education behavior and achievement, significantly explained variance in personal value of education ($R^2=.36$, $p<.05$). 4) Another stepwise multiple regression analysis revealed that none of the following variables significantly explained variance in achievement: personal educational commitment, identification of the personal value of education, financial value of education, family support, peer support, and school support. 5) Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant sex gender differences.

Discussion

Just over half of the students in this urban American school district drop out before high school completion. A dropout rate of this magnitude gives cause for concern, raising questions about factors that can improve those rates. Results suggest that, as expected, individually and in conjunction with family support, if a student intends to do well and is motivated, then he or she is more likely to behave accordingly. Intentions were correlated with behavior. However, what is generally considered successful educational behavior (attending class, studying, etc.), was not well correlated with actual GPA in this sample.

Future research should consider whether it is GPA or educational commitment behaviors that are actually linked to adaptability or life success. Family was the support source most consistent related to outcomes in this sample, which may suggest the need to engage urban families even more in their children's education. Additionally, in this sample valuing education was related to intentions but not actual achievement, suggesting a need to further explore why this is so and what can be done about it practically. Again, there seems to be a disconnect between support, motivation, intentions, and academic achievement. Prevention and intervention programs should consider these and other findings, and design programs accordingly.

Limitations of the study include its brief survey methodology, modest sample size, and homogeneous sample. Additionally, the sample had a low GPA overall, suggesting a lot of struggle with adapting to the 9th grade transition. Nonetheless, educational intentions and educational commitment behavior are important habits for life success and related to personal values, even if they are not necessarily linked to actual grades in this sample. Involving families and transforming peers' attitudes toward learning and the messages they send to each other may be warranted for intervention, and these results indicate that interventions may be gender-neutral, as there were no sex differences.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
GPA	1.87	.96
Educational Intentions	4.62	.54
Educational Behavior	4.36	.70
Financial Value of Educ.	4.09	1.24
Personal Value of Educ.	4.83	.50
Peer Support for Educ.	3.65	.88
Family Support for Educ.	4.35	.64
School Support for Educ.	3.94	1.15