

Examining Academic Aspirations, School Attitudes, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Esteem Among African American Youth

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Abstract. The present study examines middle school students' attitudes towards school, academic aspirations and expectations, self-esteem, and ethnic identity using baseline and follow-up data. A total of 34 predominately African American youth from a university-community prevention program were selected to participate in the present study. Our findings suggest that school attitudes were positively correlated with academic aspirations at follow-up, $r = .44$, $p = .03$. In addition, ethnic identity and self-esteem were also positively correlated at follow-up, $r = .43$, $p = .02$. These findings are consistent with the literature, suggesting that African American youth are interested in doing well in school.

1. Introduction

Nationally, African American youth are only 54% likely to graduate from high school [1]. In Kansas, African American youth are 58% and 65% proficient in math and reading compared to their White counterparts who are 88% and 91% proficient [2]. These educational disparities can be understood from an institutional perspective; first, even though African American families value education, discrimination and racism make it very difficult for youth to view it as a feasible option in order to be successful [3]. Second, African American youth are more likely to attend an underfunded institution, making it more difficult to be equivalent to their White peers [4]. Fortunately, there are protective factors that exist that help these youth overcome these difficulties. High parental expectations and values about education are related positively to their children's academic achievement [5, 6]. Viewing teachers and the school as understanding and compassionate helps students perform better [7, 8]. Finally, having a high sense of ethnic identity is related to a high self-esteem [9]. The purpose of this study was to implement an intervention in a school to help increase these protective factors in youth in order for them to be academically successful.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Participants and Measurement

This study recruited a total of 34, predominately African American youth, ages 11-14 to participate. These youth were participants of a grant-funded community-based prevention program geared toward increasing academic success, ethnic identity, and positive school attitudes. The criteria for inclusion in the program targeted youth who came from 3 distinct zip codes in the area (predominately areas of high violence and crime) as well as youth whom the school Social Worker deemed fit for the program. Consent was given by their parents/guardians.

A 98-item questionnaire was administered to students at two time points in the study. The first survey was given before the start of the intervention (Time Point 1) while the second was given at the end of the intervention (Time Point 2). The School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised (SASS-R) ($\alpha = .86$) was included in the survey to measure school attitudes; The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) ($\alpha = .81$) was used to measure ethnic identity; and The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) ($\alpha = .85$) was used to measure self-esteem. All questionnaires were anonymous and researchers were there in order to clarify any questions the participants might have had. Two bivariate correlations were run to determine if there was a relationship between specific variables.

Results

The relationship between school attitudes and academic aspirations was found to be correlated at Time Point 2, $r = .44$, $p = .03$ [Table 1]. There was no correlation at Time Point 1, which could mean that students, after being in the intervention, learned to appreciate and enjoy their school environment more. The relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem was also correlated at Time Point 2, $r = .43$, $p = .02$ [Table 1]. Again, there was no correlation at

Time Point 1, suggesting that after being exposed to and having a better understanding of ethnic identity, students eventually developed a higher self-esteem.

Table: 1
Bivariate Correlations

	Academic Aspirations Self-Esteem
School Attitudes	.44*
Ethnic Identity	.43*

Note:

* $P < .05$

These correlations are calculated at Time Point 2.

Discussion

Having positive attitudes regarding the school setting was associated with youth having higher academic aspirations after the intervention occurred. This is documented in the literature that when youth enjoy where they attend school and have a good relationship with their teachers, they perform better [7, 8]. It is important to note because being in an environment in which youth feel respected and cared for influences their willingness to do well in school and their ability to think about and plan for the future. In addition, when ethnic identity was established in youth, their self-esteem was increased. This has been shown to be true in other groups, but mainly in high school and college-level students [10]. It is interesting to see that ethnic identity can be influenced at such a young age and has important implications for how they view themselves in relation to the world. These findings add to the existing literature and showcase a need to collaborate with schools and families in order to increase efficacy regarding academic achievement in African American youth. Implementing programs that buildup confidence, while identifying barriers that prevent students from being successful, will be important going forward.

3. Conclusions

As our country evolves and the ethnic demographic of who represents the majority changes, it will be important more than ever to incorporate better programs to allow African American youth to succeed. By using what is known to increase academic success, researchers can ultimately narrow the gap that currently exists.

4. References

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