

The Lost Boys: Academic Achievement and School Attitude of African American Male Students' in an Urban Elementary School

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Abstract

With the signing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, much emphasis has been placed on the accountability of schools and school districts to ensure higher academic achievement of all students. The achievement gap remains among African American male students in urban school districts. This purposed quantitative study explored the relationship between African American male students in grades 4th-6th, their attitudes towards school, and academic achievement. The primary setting for this research was an urban public elementary school in Maryland. The research provided an answer to whether there was a relationship between African American male students in grades 4th-6th attitudes towards school and their academic achievement. In order to provide an answer to the purposed research question, the researcher administered the School Attitude Assessment Survey-Revised (2002) and used quarterly benchmark data of African American male students between the ages of 9-11 in grades 4th-6th to measure the relationship among their attitudes towards school and academic achievement. The expected findings of the purposed research showed a relationship among African American male students' attitudes towards school and their respective academic achievement.

Keywords: academic self-perception; attitudes towards teachers; attitudes towards school; goal valuation; motivation; self-regulation.

Introduction

The primary focus for this study is to examine the relationship between African American male students' academic achievement and their personal attitude towards school. The setting for this study was an urban neighborhood located in Maryland. The overarching hypothesis that framed this study was that African American male students who have a positive attitude towards school had higher academic achievement than similar students who had poor attitude towards school. For the purpose of this study, a positive attitude towards school was defined by high academic performance and a poor attitude was defined by low academic performance.

The signing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 by George W. Bush put emphasis on the accountability of schools and school districts to ensure higher academic achievement by all students. NCLB (2001) has become a driving force of educational research and practitioners and policymakers need to become knowledgeable about this research. Examination of the literature associated with the achievement gap of African American males has indicated that while most ethnic groups in urban school districts have made some gains in academic achievement, African American males still rank the lowest (Rowley & Bowman, 2009). According to research conducted by Gorey (2009), the achievement gap among black and white students still exists. The dilemma remains, why are African American male students still ranking low even though funding, teacher responsibility, and accountability have improved (Rowley & Bowman 2009). The rationale behind this study, although other studies have examined at the middle and high school levels the impact of the relationship between student attitude towards school and academic achievement of African American male students (Gordon et al., 2009; Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007; Cokley & Chapman, 2009), no current research exists that examines the same issue within an urban elementary school. Narrative research conducted by Hucks (2011) suggested that studies focused on African American males were absent from research literature in two significant areas: (1) on an intergenerational level, and (2) at the elementary school level. Hence, this study addressed the existing gap in the literature.

Research conducted by Uwah, McMahon, and Furlow (2008) gives validity to the assumption that positive attitudes towards the importance of education improve student test scores and behaviors in a predominately African American urban elementary public school. Research suggests that academic achievement is influenced by student attitudes, which provide a justification for inclusion of urban African American voices in future research efforts to alleviate this achievement gap (McCoach, 2002). In order to increase the academic achievement of African American male students, their educational needs must be addressed (Wright, 2011). Internally, an examination of African American male students' attitudes towards school, within their urban school district, is important to the development of instructional strategies that help close the achievement gap. Externally, an examination of the community resources and programs may aid and promote the development of positive attitudes toward education.

Background, Context, and Theoretical Framework of the Study

The rationale behind the study of African American Male students' academic achievement and school attitudes in an urban elementary public school is to determine the relationship between school attitudes of these students and their academic achievement. The overarching hypothesis that framed this study was that African American male students who had a positive attitude towards school had higher academic achievement than those who had a poor attitude. The signing of the NCLB in 2001 by President George W. Bush put much emphasis on the accountability of schools and school districts to ensure higher academic achievement of all students. Gorey (2009) states that NCLB (2001) was implemented to help close the achievement gap among minority students, but this has been a failure. Many schools in urban communities continue to have stagnant test scores as compared to other schools in the country (Wright, 2011).

Examination of the literature associated with the achievement gap of African American males found that most ethnic groups in the urban school districts made some gains in academic achievement but that African American males still rank the lowest (Rowley & Bowman, 2009). Schools now have to consider other aspects that contribute to the success of African American male students in urban elementary schools. One of these facets is student attitude towards school. The hypothesis is that positive attitudes towards school would increase African American male student's academic performance. Internally, an examination of African American male students' attitudes towards education, within their urban school district, is important to the development of instructional strategies that will help close the achievement gap among minority students. Externally, one must examine the community resources and programs that aid and promote positive attitudes toward education.

Nieto (1999) stated that students from cultural diverse backgrounds bring "cultural capital" to the classroom. With more insight into how much culture has an affect on learning, teachers can better serve students in the classroom. Also, understanding how different cultures view the importance of education can give insight on how students of diverse backgrounds respond to various classroom-learning activities. An understanding of cultural attitudes towards education and the affect it has on learning can initiate curriculum changes and address the needs of the multiple learning styles within the classroom; including those of African American male students.

Bowman (1994) recognized that cultural perceptions and academic achievement play a significant role in how culturally diverse students perform in school. African Americans have a unique and complex culture, which makes them culturally diverse, and this will have an affect on academic performance. This is especially true for African American students that reside in an urban setting. King (1997) made the connection between culturally sensitive material and student achievement. The results of the research indicated that student self-esteem and learning achievement improved because of the culturally responsive classroom material. Harper's research (2008) revealed a relationship between African American students' and ethnic identity beliefs, achievements, and behaviors. The rationale behind this study is to determine the relationship between male African American students' towards education and their academic achievement. A relationship between school attitude of male African American students and academic achievement will provide information that is vital to administrative leaders and teachers about the significance school attitudes and community resources have on increasing academic achievement and community resources for African American male students in an urban public school. The theoretical basis for the study consists of five theories identified as constructivist, "cultural capital," achievement goal, expectancy-value, and planned behavior. These five theories serve as the theoretical framework for this study. Each theory creates a unique understanding of the hypothesis and the research questions. Learning begins from the first breath taken at birth until the last breath before death. Different scholars have described this long journey of learning. Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1972; Satterly, 1987) based his theory of learning on the development of a child's understanding and response to physical experiences within his/her environment. Lev Vygotsky (Atherton, 2011; Vygotsky, 1986) based his theory of social constructivism on a child reaching full potential of learning with the assistance of an adult or a more knowledgeable peer. Constructivism can be defined as the theory used to explain how individuals know what they know (Schunk, 2008). All of these scholars and others have influenced today's classroom practices and the modern day constructivist learning theory. The constructivist theory is based on how individuals learn what they know from their surroundings and others. African American students in urban neighborhoods learn what they know from their surrounding environment and bring these environmental behaviors into the classroom. Their urban environment directly affects African American student performance in the classroom (Cokley & Chapman, 2009). If African American male students have negative attitudes towards achievement, this would account for stagnate academic achievement (Rowley & Bowman, 2009).

The achievement goal theory explores the rationalizations for participating in achievement behaviors. Covington (2000) suggested that achievement goals influence academic achievement. Kaplan and Maehr (1993) recommended that schools that emphasize task goals were more conducive to African American students because these schools emphasized learning and improvement.

The expectancy-value theory is based on the work of John W. Atkinson (1957), which states students'

motivations to succeed and achievement behaviors are influenced by their beliefs about how successful they were with respect to completing and their value of the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Wigfield and Eccles (2000) theory gave basis to consider the urban influence on African American male students and the beliefs generated within that urban culture towards school and education. If the views are negative towards school and education within the urban culture, then this might contribute to the low academic achievement of African American male students in an urban environment.

The planned behavior theory is determined by three factors including 1) attitude towards behavior, 2) the perceived social pressure to perform the behavior, and 3) the relationship between self-efficacy and the behavior. The combination of these three factors forms the behavior intention (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002). It has been observed that African American students give more credence to the messages of others than to their own performance attainments (Usher & Pajares, 2006). In other words, American African male students in an urban setting may value the opinion of others within the culture, rather than the opinions of their teachers and educators.

Theoretically, if a relationship between school attitudes of male African American students and academic achievement is determined, it will provide information that is vital to administrative leaders and teachers regarding the significance that school attitude has on increasing academic achievement. It may also provide information that is important to community leaders, to aid in the development of community resources, for African American male students in urban public school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to add to the existing body of research that deals with the relationship between African American male students' school attitudes and academic achievement. In addition to looking at African American male students' school attitudes and its relationship between academic achievements, this study will address the relationship between academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/self-regulation, and African American male students' academic achievement. There is an existing debate that on the relationship between the achievement gap of black males and their attitudes towards school (Gordon et al., 2009; Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007; Cokley & Chapman, 2009). According to the research conducted by Gorey (2009) the achievement gap among black and white students still exists. When focused solely on black male achievement gap, studies of middle school and high school (Gordon et al., 2009; Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007; Cokley & Chapman, 2009) students support this concept but there is a gap in the literature when it comes to black male achievement gap and elementary school (Harper, 2008). This study will confirm a relationship between school attitudes of upper elementary school African American males and academic achievement.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question 1:

What is the relationship between the school attitudes of African American males in grades 4-6 of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement?

H1: There is a significant relationship between the attitudes of African American males in grades 4-6 of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement.

H01: There is no significant relationship between the attitudes of African American males in grades 4-6 of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement.

Research Question 2:

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 4th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading?

H2: There is a significant relationship between school attitudes of 4th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

H02: There is no significant relationship between school attitudes of 4th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

Research Question 3:

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 5th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading?

H3: There is a significant relationship between school attitudes of 5th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

H03: There is no significant relationship between school attitudes of 5th grade African American male students' of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading.

Research Question 4:

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 6th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading?

H4: There is a significant relationship between school attitudes of 6th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

H04: There is no significant relationship between school attitudes of 6th grade African American male students', of an urban elementary public school, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

Research Question 5:

Is there a significant predictive relationship between 4th- 6th grade African American male students' of an urban elementary public school with respect to academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/ self-regulation, and their academic achievement in math and reading?

H5: There is a significant predictive relationship between 4th- 6th grade African American male students' of an urban elementary public school with respect to academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/ self-regulation, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

H05: There is no significant predictive relationship between 4th- 6th grade African American male students' of an urban elementary public school with respect to academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/ self-regulation, and their academic achievement in math and reading.

Method

Quantitative data sources used in the study included the SAASR (McCoach, 2002) and African American male participant's quarterly benchmark assessment data. The quarterly benchmark assessment was analyzed after the SAASR (McCoach, 2002) was administered to participants. The target populations of the purposed study were African American male students in grades 4-6 in urban elementary schools in Maryland. Common characteristics of the group include male, of African American decent, between the ages of 9-12, and attends a school in an urban area of Maryland. The participants involved in this study met all of the common characteristics.

One school district was chosen for this study. The school was chosen, because it was located in an urban area, and more than half of the school population consists of African American students. The school consisted of 515 students in grades Pre-K-6th, 270 students were African American males (www.Mdreportcard.org).

Data analysis

Two Pearson product moment correlations were conducted. The Pearson product moment correlation was conducted in order to assess if there was a relationship between the attitudes toward school score and the quarterly benchmark math and reading assessments. All three variables were continuous. A multiple linear regression statistical procedure was conducted to test for a predictive relationship between the independent (academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation,) and dependent (academic achievement in math and reading) variables.

Ethical Issues

To avoid any possible ethical issues, the research study was presented for IRB approval at both Capella University and the School District's Research Department. The research study was a non-experimental design, which decreased any risk to participants. No harm came to the participants involved in this research study.

Findings

A total of 18 participants were used in the study. Participants ranged in grade level from 4th to 6th. The most-common grade level was 5th (8, 44%) followed by 6th (7, 39%). There were only three (17%) 4th graders. Academic achievement was measured at three points for math and reading scores. Math scores ranged from 25% to 86% at all three points. The average math scores were 56% at time 1, 59% at time 2, and 53% at time 3. Reading scores ranged from 35% to 82% at all three points. The average reading scores were 56% at time 1, 58% at time 2, and 55% at time 3. Table 4 presents the means and standard deviations for math and reading scores.

Table 4. Mean and Standard Deviations for Math and Reading Achievement Scores

Score	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Math		
Time 1	56%	19%
Time 2	59%	16%
Time 3	53%	16%
Reading		
Time 1	56%	11%
Time 2	58%	12%
Time 3	55%	12%

Five research subscales were created from the SAASR questionnaire. Attitudes toward school scores ranged from 1.80 to 7.00 with an average of 5.09 (*SD* = 1.58). Academic self-perceptions scores ranged from 4.40 to 7.00 with an average of 5.68 (*SD* = 0.84). Attitudes toward teachers ranged from 2.70 to 7.00 with an average of 5.67 (*SD* = 1.05). Goal valuation ranged from 6.00 to 7.00, with an average of 6.81 (*SD* = 0.30). Motivation self-regulation ranged from 3.40 to 6.60 with an average of 5.62 (*SD* = 0.94). Means and standard deviations for the scores are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for Research Subscales

Subscale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Attitude toward school	5.09	1.58
Academics self-perception	5.68	0.84
Attitudes toward teachers	5.67	1.05
Goal valuation	6.81	0.30
Motivation self-regulation	5.62	0.94

Research Question 1

What is the relationship between the school attitudes of African American males in grades 4-6 of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement? To assess research question 1, six Pearson correlations were conducted on the six math and reading academic achievement scores and attitudes toward school scores for all participants. The results of the tests were not all significant. However, with only 18 participants, the power of the analyses was extremely low. Results of the six Pearson correlations are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Correlations between Academic Achievement and Attitudes Toward School

Time	Attitudes toward school with Math	Attitudes toward school with Reading
1	-.10	-.31
2	-.06	.07
3	-.15	.19

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Research Question 2

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 4th grade African American male students of an urban elementary school and their academic achievement in math and reading? For research question 2, six Pearson correlations were conducted to assess the relationship between the six math and reading academic achievement scores and attitudes toward school scores for 4th graders only. Not all test results were statistically significant. With only three participants, the power of the analyses was extremely low. Results of the six Pearson correlations are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Correlations between Academic Achievement and Attitudes Toward School for 4th Graders

Time	Attitudes toward school with Math	Attitudes toward school with Reading
1	-.98	-.42
2	.39	-.40
3	-.82	-.69

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Research Question 3

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 5th grade African American male students of an urban elementary school and their academic achievement in math and reading? For research question 3, six Pearson correlations were conducted to assess the relationship between the six math and reading academic achievement scores and attitudes toward school scores for 5th graders only. Only eight participants were used and the data was not statistically significant because the power of the analyses was extremely low. Results of the six Pearson correlations are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Correlations between Academic Achievement and Attitudes Toward School for 5th Graders

Time	Attitudes toward school with Math	Attitudes toward school with Reading
1	-.46	-.33
2	-.31	.07
3	-.48	.25

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Research Question 4

What is the relationship between school attitudes of 6th grade African American male students of an urban elementary school and their academic achievement in math and reading? For research question 4, six Pearson correlations were conducted to assess the relationship between the six math and reading academic achievement scores and attitudes toward school scores for 6th graders only. Only seven participants were included and the power of the analyses was extremely low so no statistically significant data was obtained. Results of the six Pearson correlations are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Correlations between Academic Achievement and Attitudes Toward School for 6th Graders

Time	Attitudes toward school with Math	Attitudes toward school with Reading
1	-.60	.45
2	-.20	-.49
3	-.43	-.73

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Research Question 5

Is there a significant predictive relationship between 4th-6th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school regarding academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/self-regulation, and their academic achievement in math and reading?

To assess research question 5, six multiple linear regressions were conducted to assess if academic self-perception, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/self-regulation predicted academic achievement. Prior to the analysis, the assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity were assessed via scatter plots. The scatter plots showed little deviation from normality and homoscedasticity thus the assumptions were met. The results of all six-regression models were not significant (see Table 10). Since the multiple regression models were not significant, the individual predictors were not examined further. Results of the multiple linear regression models are presented in Table 10. Individual predictors of the multiple linear regressions are presented in Table 11.

Table 10. Model Tests for Multiple Linear Regressions with Academic Self-Perception, Attitudes Toward Teachers, Goal Valuation, Motivation/Self-Regulation Predicting Academic Achievement

Time	Math			Reading		
	<i>F</i> (4, 13)	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i> (4, 13)	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
1	1.96	.160	.38	1.81	.187	.36
2	1.09	.400	.25	1.59	.236	.33
3	1.71	.207	.35	0.95	.469	.23

Table 11. Beta Coefficients for Multiple Linear Regressions with Academic Self-Perception, Attitudes Toward Teachers, Goal Valuation, Motivation/Self-Regulation Predicting Academic Achievement

	Math			Reading		
	Time 1 <i>B</i>	Time 2 <i>B</i>	Time 3 <i>B</i>	Time 1 <i>B</i>	Time 2 <i>B</i>	Time 3 <i>B</i>
Academics self-perception	.14	.07	0.11	-0.10*	0.05	0.09
Attitudes toward teachers	.01	.03	0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.01
Goal valuation	.19	.19	0.15	0.11	0.07	-0.02
Motivation self-regulation	-.08	-.06	-0.07	0.06	0.03	-0.02

Note. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01.

For all the research hypotheses, insufficient numbers of participants made the power of the analysis extremely low and no statistically significant information was gleaned from the data.

Discussion of the Results

The purpose of the study was to identify whether or not there was a significant relationship between the school attitudes of African American male students in grades 4th-6th in an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading. The SAASR (McCoach, 2002) was used to measure the academic self-perception, attitudes toward teachers, and attitudes toward school, goal valuation, and motivation/self-regulation of the study participants. Quarterly assessment benchmark scores in math and reading were used to measure the academic achievement of the study participants.

Research hypothesis 1 tested whether there was a significant relationship between the school attitudes of African American males in grades 4th-6th of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement. In this study, this hypothesis was not supported. Prior research indicated that African American males' perceptions towards education have an influence on how they perform academically in school (Wright, 2011).

Research hypothesis 2 tested for a significant relationship between school attitudes of 4th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading. There was no significant relationship found. This finding was not consistent with prior research. For example, Kincaid and Yin (2011) found that African American males in urban environments have socioeconomic factors that affect their academic performance and their perceptions of education and the role it

has in their lives.

Research hypothesis 3 tested for a significant relationship between school attitudes of 5th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading. There was no significant relationship found. This finding was not consistent with prior research. Mickelson & Green (2006) found that attitudes toward school were another predictor of academic performance among African American students.

Research hypothesis 4 tested for a significant relationship between school attitudes of 6th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading. There was no significant relationship found and the hypothesis was disproved in this study. This finding is not consistent with prior research. The achievement gap of African American males indicated that while most ethnic groups in urban school districts have made some gains in academic achievement, African American males still rank lowest (Rowley & Bowman, 2009).

Research hypothesis 5 stated that there is a significant predictive relationship between 4th-6th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school, academic self-perceptions, attitudes toward teachers, goal valuation, motivation/self-regulation, and their academic achievement in math and reading. There was no significant predictive found in this study. A multiple linear regression was calculated and the regression was not significant. These findings were not consistent with prior research. Mickelson & Green (2006) found that attitudes toward school were another predictor of academic performance among African American students. However, there was a significant predictive relationship between academic self-perception and the academic achievement in reading of 4th-6th grade African American male students of an urban elementary public school. The present study findings support this, but the results could not be justified because of the limited amount of participants involved in the study.

John Ogbu (2003) identified institutional racism as a persistent barrier to academic achievement of middle-class students by means of cultural mistrust. Ogbu (2003) also focused on the community and the general “code of silence” that tends to emerge from African American communities. The “code of silence” is defined as general mistrust African American parents and communities have for school agents. The “cultural mistrust” that John Ogbu speaks of, could be the explanation for the lack of participants in the study. The parents involved in this study were reluctant to have their child participant in the study. This could explain the lack of participants involved in the study that may have had an affect upon the results.

In summary, there was no significant relationship between the school attitudes of African American male students in grades 4th-6th in an urban elementary public school and their academic achievement in math and reading. However, the results indicated possible correlations between academic achievement and attitudes toward school of the African American male students' in grades 4th-6th. Because of the limited amount of participants involved in the study, the results could not be justified. The results of all six-regression models were not significant, but the individual predictors of the multiple linear regressions did show a relationship between academic achievements of the African American male students in grades 4th-6th in reading and their academic self-perception. Again, this could not be proven significant, because of the limited amount of study participants.

Implications

If the results were found significant, the educational leader of an urban elementary school should consider conducting research concerned with reversing the trend of underachievement at his/her school. Even though the results of the research study were not significant, this does not imply that there was not a relationship between 4th-6th grade African American male students' attitudes toward school and their academic achievement in math and reading. If a significant relationship were proven in this research study, then educational leaders would have to consider alternative instructional methods that would cater to the cognitive needs of African American male students in grades 4th-6th.

The results of the study may have been found insignificant at this time, but the literature warrants further research and investigation into the school attitude of African American males and academic achievement (Gordon et al., 2009; Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007; Cokley & Chapman, 2009). Future researchers could repeat this study within the same context of an urban elementary school district, but reach out to multiple schools instead of one school. This would increase the chances of recruiting significant amounts of participants. To counter the “code of silence” which is defined as the general mistrust African American parents and communities have for school agents (Ogbu, 2003). Future research could be conducted directly through school districts, rather than an outside source conducting research, which could lessen the level of mistrust among parents and communities.

In summary, the results of the study may not have been significant, but this was not consistent with the literature. The implications of the results warrant further investigation into the school attitudes of African American male students and their academic achievement. This could provide an educational leader of urban elementary school, solutions to reversing the trend of underachievement at his/her school.

Conclusion

Overall, the overarching hypothesis was not proven significant in this research study. However, this does not conclude there was no significant relationship between African American male students in grades 4th-6th and their attitudes toward school and academic achievement in math and reading. It could be concluded that the limited number of participants involved in the research study had a negative effect on the result. It is recommended that this research study be conducted again on a larger scale and include more than one urban elementary school to ensure a larger number of research study participants.

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