The Power of Self:
Enhancing the Achievement of African American Students

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“...Apart from me you can do nothing” – John 15:5
## Contents

Introduction .............................................................................................................................................. 4

Rationale ..................................................................................................................................................... 4

Paper Overview ........................................................................................................................................ 6

Background and Historical Framework ...................................................................................................... 8
  Explanations for the Achievement Gap .................................................................................................... 8
  History of African-American Education in the United States ........................................................................ 13

The Study .................................................................................................................................................... 18
  Self-Efficacy, the Founding Concept ......................................................................................................... 18
  Self-Efficacy and its Related Constructs .................................................................................................... 21
  Self-Efficacy and Goal-Setting .................................................................................................................. 22
  Goals, Confidence and Emotional Responses ............................................................................................. 27
  Self-Efficacy and its Relatedness to Competition ...................................................................................... 29
  Motivation, Interest and Goals .................................................................................................................. 30
  Self-Efficacy and Self-Concept .................................................................................................................. 33
  Resilience ................................................................................................................................................... 35

Discussion/Recommendations ..................................................................................................................... 37
  Understanding Self-Efficacy and its Related Constructs ............................................................................ 37
  The Importance of Environmental & Social Factors ................................................................................. 39
  Suggested Solutions .................................................................................................................................. 42

References .................................................................................................................................................... 46
Introduction

The academic achievement, or more aptly, underachievement, of African-American students is a topic that has been greatly researched, discussed and debated by educators and researchers alike. Much of the prominent research in the field is devoted to discovering why students aren’t achieving at the same level and rate as white students (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Mickelson, 1990; Steele, 1995; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2003; Coleman, 1966; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Within this one particular body of literature there are a number of differing ideas about the possible causes of this phenomenon. Some studies form cultural arguments, while others look at the impact of socioeconomic factors. In the midst of these differing arguments lies the power of the individual. However, in these arguments, the role of the individual isn’t thoroughly examined or even explicitly mentioned. Other arguments however, look at how students influence their own achievement, whether it be through their perceptions of inadequate opportunity structures (Mickelson, 1990), or a more global perception of themselves and the world around them. (Coleman, 1966). Thus, it is no surprise that research suggests that the beliefs individuals hold about their abilities and the subsequent outcomes of their efforts, powerfully influence they ways in which they behave and achieve (Bandura, 1977, Parajes, 1996, p. 543). It is this idea of the individual’s ability to control or affect their personal educational achievement that is the heart of this research paper.

Rationale

During a recent graduate studies course, I found myself researching the low achievement of “at-risk” teens at a very impressive transfer school. In my quest to find out what could be done to improve students’ scores and graduation rates overall, I saw that students were facing numerous
challenges stemming from poverty; teenage pregnancy and other health concerns, gang-affiliations and safety concerns, death of family members, drug use, etc. Yet in the midst of such overwhelming odds, I have witnessed, both in my personal and professional life, the ability of individuals to succeed and achieve in spite of. Perhaps my opinion is jaded because I met all the qualifications to be considered “at-risk” (Finn & Rock, 1997), came from a single’ parent household, classified as impoverished, and at times below the poverty line, lived in a low-income neighborhood, and still was able to graduate high school and by time this paper is read, obtain a Master’s degree. Now I am not saying that my achievement is all a result of my individual effort, for I credit my faith, family, and teachers in aiding a large portion of my success. However, I do believe that a lot of peers and I experienced the same obstacles, and had access to the same resources, yet in the end, it was those who decided to take advantage of these assets and opportunities that succeeded. Similarly, at the alternative school where I conducted research, students there, although many were experiencing the aforementioned circumstances, were provided with an abundance of resources and services offered to help mitigate these potential issues. Social services, internships, extracurricular activities, and job placement assistance were just a few of the services made readily available to students. Teachers made an effort to engage students both through their instructional styles, materials and activities. Students seemed to respond well and developed positive relationships with the caring teachers and school staff. In my professional work with children, who tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, students are often quickly classified as being either hard-working or low effort. This distinction may come from a difference in upbringing or academic beginnings but ultimately, in my opinion, it is the student’s decision whether or not to put into practice the skills that he or she has been taught. Observing that there are always subgroups of disadvantaged African American students
who are able to succeed, motivated me to find out what role self really plays in impeding or furthering individual success, and to what degree it can be utilized and generalized to help increase the achievement of urban African American students. This paper will look at the various concepts surrounding the role of self in promoting academic achievement. Although primarily looking at self-efficacy, we will examine the roles and relatedness of effort, self-concept, motivation, interests, learning, rewards and goal setting to academic achievement.

**Paper Overview**

In order to fully understand the potential power an individual has in affecting his/her achievement, I believe it necessary to provide an all-encompassing picture of the context in which the individual lies. Human behavior cannot be understood through simple observation or in one particular setting, instead it must be examined in relation to the larger systems of interactions and environments in which it functions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Urie Bronfenbrenner calls this larger system the *ecological environment*, which is comprised of several “systems” that widen in scope as they move further away from the individual. The ecological environment model provides a visual representation of the differing levels of interaction affecting academic achievement that is addressed in related literature. A few of the most insightful studies will be mentioned that look at different interactions individuals take part in, to explain the achievement-gap between whites and blacks.

After looking at some of the popular studies on the achievement-gap, I will present a brief history of African-Americans and their educational journey here in the United States. Doing this serves two purposes; while the earlier studies provide breadth of knowledge in understanding the academic behaviors of African-Americans, the historical component provides depth of
knowledge on how previous inequality and racism has continually impacted African-American achievement through the development of various “systems of inequalities”. Secondly, historical information about the accomplishments of other African Americans who faced extreme challenges can provide evidence for the belief that self-efficacy and its similar constructs can aid in cultivating greater achievement in blacks.

At the core of this work is the examination of self-efficacy, its related constructs, and their usefulness to the aforementioned goal of increasing African American educational achievement. By providing a broad schema of self-related concepts and theories, primarily self-efficacy, this paper seeks to answer the following questions; to what degree are African-American students able to control their own academic success/fate; how effective are these self-related concepts in promoting achievement; and how can educators, more knowledgably and readily, help to cultivate this autonomous achievement? In learning the depth of individuals’ power to affect their achievement, in-school strategies, as well as larger educational policies can be implemented in an effort to actively pursue increased achievement of African-American students. I believe that the theories and studies presented in this paper will prove that an individual can significantly affect his-her own achievement. The ability for there to be differing results for students, who experience the same set of socioeconomic circumstances, shows that perhaps the significant causal factors for this disparity lie instead, in internal characteristics. This will serve as great news for educators. Many of recommendations for school reform and increasing achievement require long-term, expensive and overwhelming action to be taken, whereas the individual-focused reform efforts that are called for later on are both immediate and low cost, as many changes can occur in the classroom. Many interventions only require action on the part of the teacher and the student. More about the ways in which educators can utilize and apply this
knowledge to increase the performance and achievement of African American students will be addressed later in this paper. In addition, in the latter section of this paper, the influence of social factors such as socioeconomic status, neighborhood, family, etc. will be addressed in depth in an effort to acknowledge the inextricable relations between the individual and his/her context. In the meantime, a few of those most well-known arguments in the literature on the underachievement of African Americans will be presented to provide understanding of the general perspectives in this field.

**Background and Historical Framework**

**Explanations for the Achievement Gap**

As abovementioned, there are numerous explanations for the achievement gap between Whites and African-Americans. Although this present review seeks to focus on the role of self-efficacy and related “self-constructs” in promoting achievement, prominent research on reasons for the underachievement of African Americans provides pertinent information to understanding of the role “self” in academic achievement.

Many studies fall somewhere on the ecological environment model imagined by renowned psychologist Urie Brofenbrenner (1994, p.197). His ecological model can be useful in understanding and categorizing the multiplicity and interconnectedness of interactions and contexts affecting children’s achievement (Becker & Luthar, 2002, p. 198). First, there is the *macrosystem*, which refers to institutional patterns of culture (economic, social, educational, legal and political systems) that an individual is a part of, the *exosystem*, the media, the neighborhood, the government, distribution of goods and services), the *mesosystem*, which refers
to interactions between family, school and peer groups (for an adolescent student) and finally, the microsystem, which deals with the relations between an individual and his/her immediate setting, in this case it would be same interactions as found in the mesosystem (Brofenbrenner, 1994, p. 514-515). Brofenbrenner’s model, sought to better understand human development through individual’s interactions with the environment. It also helps to provide a framework for understanding how student achievement is affected by differing levels of an individual’s environments.

One of the most prominent researchers on the topic of the Black-White Achievement gap is renowned anthropologist, John Ogbu. His well-known cultural-ecological model looked at the interrelatedness of the environment, culture, child-rearing and attributes of the child, in order to provide a better understanding of child outcomes in specific cultures, namely that of African-Americans (Ogbu, 1981). Ogbu (1981), postulated that the “attitudes and behaviors of black students...should be considered as a mode of adaptation necessitated by the ecological structure or effective environment of the black community” (Ogbu, 1981, p. 179). Ogbu found the attitudes and behaviors of African-American students to be a consequence of their environment, namely that of their more immediate community of African-Americans. He likens their attitudes and behaviors to a survival tactic. However, later on, Ogbu realized that this model lacked generalizability to the entire African-American population, and like this paper presently seeks to do, he desired to understand how differences in success existed among African-American students. In his later modification of the cultural-ecological model, Ogbu, along with Fordham (1986), found that one-reason blacks currently do poorly in school, was of historical consequence and stemmed from their relation to Whites (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 177). That history will be examined a bit further down in this paper. Ogbu also sought to explain the
difference in achievement between whites and blacks and even the intragroup differences through two concepts he labeled *oppositional collective or social identity* and an *oppositional cultural frame of reference*. The former concept relates to the development of a shared identity by black Americans in opposition to white Americans. With this identity comes the belief or perception that despite their individual ability, African Americans will never be able to be treated or achieve like whites. This thinking leads to the latter conception, in which, African-Americans then seek to protect their identity, develop boundaries and norms of behavior. Consequently, schooling becomes an unacceptable behavior (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.181). Schooling, according to the researchers, has become what they called a *subtractive process*, which is defined as “being acculturated into the white American cultural frame of reference” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.182). The school experience is perceived by black students as “acting white” and therefore, “the academic learning and performance problems of black children arise not only from a limited opportunity structure and black people’s response to it, but also from the way black people attempt to cope with the burden of ‘acting white’” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.201). Seeing the action of participating in schooling processes, i.e., learning and doing well, as a subtractive process, according to the researchers, causes minorities to resist or oppose academic striving (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 183). Although Ogbu & Fordham’s (1986) theories are extremely popular and widely used argument in the literature concerning African-American academic achievement, I find it beneficial to look at a few other arguments on this issue. Ogbu’s (1981; 1986) theory mainly dealt with macrosystem level factors, which by default includes all other ecological levels.

Another set of explanations for the achievement gap between African-American and White students focuses on the overwhelming socioeconomic disadvantage facing many African-
American families today (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Finn & Rock, 1997; Mickelson, 1990).
Researchers Finn and Rock (1997), in looking at “at risk” students, characterized by; being a minority student, attending an inner-city school, or coming from a low-income home, found these factors to potentially impede successful academic outcomes (p. 221). Not only are disadvantaged African-Americans performing disproportionately lower than White students, middle class African-American students are performing lower in relation to their peers (Ogbu, 2003). However, for the purposes of this paper, focus will be primarily concentrated on disadvantaged African-American students, primarily in inner-city areas.

Other theories concerning the relatively low achievement of African-American students compared to their white-counterparts relate to the microsystem level factors of the Brofenbrenner model. Finn & Rock (1997) state, “due to structural inequalities in attitudes, resources, and quality instruction, disadvantaged students continue to face barriers to equal educational opportunities” (201). Researchers have identified these barriers as, large class size, lack of resources and materials, inadequate preparation of teachers (Becker & Luthar, 2002), to name a few. The ability of teachers and their instructional material has been found to affect both motivation and achievement (Zimmerman, 2000, p.89; Gillock & Reyes, 1996, p.258).
Continuing to look at microsystem level factors that influence achievement, some research has found teacher and peer relationships to affect achievement. Peer influence is also perceived by students themselves as affecting their achievement; “Many talented Black students find that one of the most surprising sources of obstacles to academic achievement is their peer group” (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997, p. 345).

Researches closer to heart of this study are the literatures that focus on the individual-level factors. These studies have focused on students’ attitudes and behaviors as significant factors that
affect their success. The renowned “Equality of Educational Opportunity Report” (1966), informally referenced as *The Coleman Report* pointed to students’ low self-esteem and *locus of control* as possible reasons for academic failure (Finn & Rock, 1997, p.223). Coleman refuted Ogbu’s earlier claim that involuntary minorities (i.e. African Americans), perceive education as an inadequate means for obtaining success, he stated that in fact, “Negroes are especially strongly oriented toward the school as a path for mobility…. but the results suggest as well a considerable lack of realism in aspirations” (Coleman, 1966, p.280). Roslyn Mickelson (1990) also tried to explain this disconnect through her “Attitude-Achievement Paradox” theory, in which she postulated that students held two attitudes simultaneously, one, she called an *abstract attitude* in which students held the dominant and positive view and value of education and, the other, a *concrete attitude* which was rooted in their realistic perception of the opportunity structure. The latter attitude informed their subsequent academic behaviors. Mickelson declared that students valued education but did not believe that performing well in school would actually manifest in future success.

Although, all of these theories and studies provide great foundations and frame how we think about African-American academic achievement, I believe it to be more efficacious to look at the role of the individual’s perceptions and beliefs about their abilities and power to achieve. There exists a large body of research dedicated to the role students’ perceptions of self and their capabilities hold in affecting their achievement. One key researcher in the field, Barry Zimmerman (2000), states that students’ perceptions about self and their ability to achieve can and does influence their academic achievement (p.82). However, before we dive into this study, it is helpful to look at the history of African-Americans in this nation. Doing so, I believe, provides a deeper understanding of some of the reasons why African-American achievement is
significantly lower than White Americans today. Also, it grants concrete examples of African-Americans being able to succeed in spite of the odds, thus supporting the hypothesis that individuals influence their own achievement.

“Education has had a special place in the hearts and minds of black Americans since the era of Reconstruction. Although public schooling was not widely available until over 100 years after the demise of slavery, blacks held fast to their faith in education as one of the few institutions that could lift them from poverty and oppression” (Mickelson, 1990, p. 44). This statement is in some ways contradictory to Mickelson’s own theory, which stated that students often hold two sets of beliefs about education, one positive and one negative. It completely refutes Ogbu’s, however, which asserted that Blacks oppose the schooling structure and identify it as a white institution (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Education has been sought after and revered by Blacks for hundreds of years, even until now. As above-mentioned, current educational and social systems and structures have negatively impacted African-American achievement; their development is explored below.

**History of African-American Education in the United States**

African-Americans’ extremely disproportionate rate of low school performance is a consequence of their limited social and economic opportunities, stemming from slavery (Ogbu & Fordham 1986). Since as early as 1865, Africans-Americans have fought for racial equality in all aspects of life, especially for laws that granted them the same access to education.

Between of 1865-1877, African-Americans rallied together to bring public education to the South for the first time. Fordham & Ogbu (1986), state that, “Within their ecological structure black Americans traditionally have been provided with substandard schooling, based on white
Americans’ perceptions of the educational needs of black Americans; and white Americans have controlled black Americans’ education” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 179). The first schools created for African-Americans were of substandard quality and definitely unequal to those attended by White students. This disparity is evidenced in the low state expenditures per child, capital outlays, substandard library books, school services and facilities, and unequal treatment of teachers (Walker, 2001, p. 755). In the midst of their unequal schooling experiences, African Americans were able to experience triumphs, both large and small. Some African-Americans relished in the opportunity to teach their students free from the “white supremacist-gaze” (Hooks, 1994) and racist micromanagement of Whites. In addition, many African-Americans were able to make their experiences profitable, some becoming doctors, professors, lawyers etc.

George B. Vashon was one of the African Americans able to benefit from this early segregated education. He became the first black graduate of Oberlin College in 1844. Vashon went on to become an attorney and a founding member of Howard University (Blue, n.d). Caroline Wiley, the only black female in her college class, also attended Oberlin College, after attending a private school for Colored Youth. Wiley went on to become an educator and one of Philadelphia’s first black female doctors (Granshaw, n.d.) .Well renowned civil rights activist and scholar, William Edward Burghardt Dubois attended one of these “separate but equal” educational facilities and went on to be a founding member of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), the organization that helped lead the fight to end unequal schooling and lack of quality education for African-Americans in the early to mid-20th century.

Throughout the early 1900s, the NAACP became fervent fighter for equal educational facilities for Blacks (Walker, 2001, p. 755). Charles H. Houston, a dean at Howard’s School of Law which, Vashon ironically helped found, headed the effort to reverse the separate-but-equal
doctrine in place at the time (NAACP: 100 Years of History,” n.d.). In a study commissioned by the NAACP in the 1930s, Nathan Margold found that, unsurprisingly, the educational facilities Blacks were subjected to were separate indeed, but very unequal. Thus, this finding contradicted the equality aspect established by the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, (“NAACP Legal History). Houston went on to cultivate a strategy to combat the established law based on Margold’s call for a series of lawsuits to challenge the system. Houston’s “equalization strategy” sought to make facilities for Black students equal to those of White students. His prediction that states would be financially unable to provide and maintain facilities for blacks equal to whites and thus cave into integration, were proved true. Margold experienced some victories that resulted desegregation of schools and admittance of a black student into an all-white law school.

These victories opened the door to the Supreme Court decision that changed education in America, as we know it. In 1954, after winning a series of civil rights cases, Thurgood Marshall and a team of NAACP attorneys garnished their greatest win in the landmark case of Brown v. Board. The Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The presiding judge, Chief Justice Warren, delivered this prolific the opinion of the court, still relevant to this day:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments...Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms...Segregation of white and colored children in public
schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn” (Warren, para. 10)

Despite this proclamation and subsequent changes made over the years to provide blacks with the same benefits and quality of education as whites through integration, the remnants of slavery and Jim Crow laws prevailed.

The busing and housing crises of the 1970s, helped demographically solidify the stark differences in the quality education experienced by suburban middle and upper class, and the inner-city poor and working class. In an effort to provide more blacks access to higher quality white schools, a court-ordered busing policy was put into place that brought African-American students to schools out of their districts. However, the effort to achieve racial balance was in vain, as the goal to have more blacks and whites attend school together, sent whites running for the hills. (Coleman, 1966, p. 3). A new era of segregation began, as the process of suburbanization rapidly increased; Whites moved their families to more middle class, rural areas and enrolled their children in private schools. Housing and marketing strategies became popular tactics in preventing Blacks from gaining access to these “vanilla suburbs”. As a result, the growing number of African-Americans occupying the cities had to now all share the significantly lower amount of money that was used to fund schools in city communities, (“Busing and “White flight”)

A 2003 report conducted by Harvard’s Civil Rights Project (Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003), declared, “At the dawn of the 21st century, education for Blacks is more segregated than it was
in 1968.” One out of six black American students, the researchers stated, occupy what they call *apartheid schools*, schools that are 99-100% minority, have limited resources and are permeated by social strife and health problems (Frankenberg et al., 2003, pg. 28). One hundred-plus years later, segregated schools are still unequal; poverty and other socio-economic (social) issues abound, schools have less advanced courses, lower teacher qualifications, and students have much lower average test scores (Frankenberg et al., 2003, pg. 11).

The racism and discrimination experienced by African-Americans in the past has had long-lasting and damaging effects, which are still visible even today. Although legalized racism and court-sanctioned laws and policies are no longer a part of our society, remnants of their dark reign are still experienced through “institutional racism” (Muriji, 2007), and the very depressing opportunity structure for Blacks (Ogbu, 1981). However, we can glean from the history of African-American education, the high value place on obtaining an education (Coleman, 1966, p. 280, Mickelson, 1990, p. 44), and striving to obtain one in the face of discouraging odds. Author, Mavis Sanders reiterates this point, stating, “Thus, there is evidence that despite racial discrimination, many African Americans possess an achievement ethos that demands a commitment to excellence for both individual and collective mobility” (Sanders, 1997, p. 85).

While the residual effects of racism and discrimination can serve to explain the low achievement of some African-American students, understanding how others manage to greatly achieve can serve to boost the achievement of African Americans overall. In a study on resilient students, researchers Finn and Rock (1997), highlighted these high-achieving students, stating, “a substantial number of African-American and Hispanic-origin students from low-income homes were identified who received reasonable grades throughout high school, attained reasonable scores on external achievement tests, and graduated on time with classmates” (p. 231). Their
findings for such will be examined further later on this paper. Reasons for the achievement disparity amongst students who experience similar socio-economic circumstances, seems to inevitably lie in the control of the individual and their respective beliefs, perceptions and/or attitudes. The following study looks at the relation between individuals’ perceptions about themselves, their capabilities and academic behaviors, and their subsequent achievement.

**The Study**

**Self-Efficacy, the Founding Concept**

The primary concept of this study is that of *self-efficacy*. Phrased as a type of “personal expectancy”, self-efficacy is defined as “judgments about how well one can organize and execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations containing many ambiguous, unpredictable, and often stressful elements” (Bandura & Schunk, 1986, p. 587). The most prominent work on the topic is Albert Bandura’s (1977), self-efficacy theory, which sought to make sense of how behavior is acquired and regulated (p. 192). Although Bandura (1977) in this case was looking at self-efficacy as a tool in analyzing changes made in fearful and avoidant behavior, his basic and fundamental postulations can and have been generalized to the realm of academics. His study of how individuals perceive their choice of activities, how long they will persist and how much effort they exert on a given task (1977) is pertinent to achieving success in today’s classroom.

The importance of Bandura’s (1977) study is relayed through this aforementioned idea that people who feel efficacious tend to work harder and persist longer when they face obstacles and challenges, than those who are unsure of their capabilities (p. 194). Bandura’s (1977) self-
efficacy theory goes on to say that self-efficacy is derived from four major sources of information, that of “performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states” (p. 195). Observation of others is highlighted as a manner by which individuals tend to assess their own capabilities. “…Because acquisition of response information is a major aspect of learning, much human behavior is developed through modeling”, stated Bandura (1977, p. 192). Vicarious experiences, those which result from comparisons to others, are viewed as having some benefit but are categorized as being a less dependable source of self-efficacy. Bandura stressed, relatedly, that if the vicarious method is used, it proves to be more fruitful in promoting self-efficacy if an individual is able to observe the model being successful at whatever task he/she is required to complete.

Verbal persuasion was found to be dependent on the perceived credibility, trustworthiness and expertise of the person doing the encouraging (Bandura, 1977, p. 202). Verbal persuasion overall was determined to be an unstable method of producing self-efficacy, a point of contention between Bandura and some later researchers. One set of researchers were Schunk and Gunn (1983), who found that ability feedback such as, “you’re good at this”, had a stronger effect on self-efficacy and performance than feedback referring to students’ effort “you’ve been working hard”. Heyman and Dweck (1992), however, sided with Bandura’s views on verbal praise, they stated, “such praise is often ineffective in promoting adaptive motivation and may even have a detrimental effect, especially when it’s considered to represent false reassurance” (p.233). Physiological states also were found to provide information on efficacy; for example, sweating and a rapid heart rate could be a signal to an individual of their inability to perform a task (Schunk, 1991, p. 208).
Performance accomplishments are found to be the most effective source in causing physiological changes where personal perception of efficacy is concerned. Through personally experienced successes, the level of individuals’ efficacy expectations is raised (Bandura, 1977, p.195). There are other “symbolical procedures”, (Bandura, 1977, p.197) Bandura mentioned that do show effect, but participant performance is viewed as being superior (Bandura, 1977, p.197). When individuals are given a chance to practice or try their hand at a task and experience real success and rewards, their self-efficacy is more likely to increase (Bandura, 1977, p.202).

It is important to understand that an individual’s belief that he/she can complete a certain task is not an immediate response derived from any of the aforementioned procedures, instead it is first a cognitive process, as individuals weigh and combine factors related to their performance before making judgments about their capabilities (Bandura, 1977, p. 212). This means other thoughts, such as perceptions of self or perceived ideas about how others view their capabilities, how hard a task is, how long it may take, all serve to possible influence feelings of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is not the only active cognitive function influencing student behavior; Bandura also found that “the capacity to represent future consequences in thought” (Bandura, 1977, p.193), provides one cognitively based source of motivation. Self-motivation is a related byproduct of such “future-oriented thinking”; for it is cultivated through an individual’s ability to mentally visualize future consequences. Bandura(1977) also distinguished between efficacy expectations and what he called outcome expectations, the latter is the individual’s belief that a specific action will produce a certain outcome, while the former is the belief that the individual can actually perform the task at hand (p.193). Bandura (1977) postulated that motivation, and subsequently, success, can also be fostered through the concept of goal-setting, which, will be talked about a bit later. Although Bandura(1977) admitted that efficacy expectation was not the sole
determinant of behavior, he maintained that “efficacy expectations are a major determinate of people’s choice of activities, how much activity they will expend, and of how long they will sustain effort in dealing with stressful situations” (Bandura, 1977, p. 194).

**Self-Efficacy and its Related Constructs**

Self-efficacy finds itself situated amongst a robust group of self-related constructs, which, seek to bolster achievement and success through individual effort, yet, despite their similarities, these constructs contain stark differences. The varying concepts will briefly be described in this section and in the later sections, examined, more in depth, in relation to other ideas.

Frank Parajes (1996) and Dale Schunk (1989, 1991) conducted further examination of Bandura’s (1977, 1981) contributions on self-efficacy, comparing and contrast similar constructs. In addition, Parajes (1996) sought to highlight and differentiate self-efficacy from other similar expectancy constructs in order to accurately distinguish how each of them is able to influence human motivation and behavior. These other self-beliefs are not completely unrelated to self-efficacy instead; it is believed that perceptions of efficacy mediate the effect other self-related concepts and skills on subsequent performance because they influenced effort, persistence and perseverance (Parajes 1996, p.552). If a student does not believe in his/ her capability to complete a task, it’s unlikely they will accomplish it even if they have the skills to do so. Similarly, having a high sense of efficacy doesn’t mean one will engage in the behaviors that are consistent with their perceptions of efficacy if they also believe the outcome of engaging in that behavior will have undesired effects (p.558). This last point pertains to the *expectancy-value theory*, which says an individual’s behavior depends on the value he/she places on the outcomes. According to Parajes(1966), the expectancy value theory suggests that an individual’s perception
of the outcome and the value of the task necessary to achieve the outcome will regulate his/her behavior just as strongly as his/her self-efficacy beliefs, and independently of them (Parajes, 1996, p.559). On the contrary, Schunk (1991) asserted that despite the expectation and valuing of outcomes, individuals have to judge themselves capable of the completing the tasks in order to achieve these outcomes they expect (Schunk, 1991, p.176). Self-perception and self-efficacy seem to have a significant and relatively superior effect on academic achievement.

Parajes (1996) goes on to describe the power an individual possesses, asserting they can alter their environment and more specifically, influence their own actions. The beliefs individuals have about their ability and the outcome of their efforts, powerfully influence their behavior and subsequently, their attainments (Parajes, 1991, p. 543). This idea is related to what Schunk (1991) titled, attributions, the different causes people give as reasoning for particular outcomes. Examples of attributions include, luck, task difficulty, ability and effort. These attributions are related to self-efficacy in that they can serve as the basis for students’ judgments of how capable they are of successfully completing a task.

Schunk (1983; 1989; 1991) also makes mention of perceived control or locus of control, a concept similar to attribution. Perceived control however, focuses on how much autonomy an individual believes he/she possesses that is responsible for their subsequent success or failure (Schunk, 1991, p. 209). People differ on whether they believe outcomes are externally controlled, occurring independently of one’s behavior, or internally controlled, based on personal behaviors (Schunk, 1989, p.175).

Self-Efficacy and Goal-Setting
In a later study, along with two other researchers, Bandura, Zimmerman, & Martinez-Pons (1992) continue to look at the role of self-efficacy beliefs in academic attainment. Self-efficacy was seen to positively and directly affect the goals students set, for themselves. The researchers state, ”perceived self-efficacy influences the level of goal challenge people set for themselves, the amount of effort they mobilize, and their persistence in the face of difficulties” (Zimmerman et al., p. 664). In this study the researchers positively highlighted, what he called self-regulated learners. Self-regulated learners are defined as “setting challenging goals for themselves”; “enlisting self-regulative influences that motivate and guide their efforts”; exhibiting a high sense of efficacy in their capabilities”; and a commitment to fulfill these challenging goals” (Zimmerman, 1992, p.664). Zimmerman et al., study proved, “students’ beliefs in their efficacy for self-regulated learning affected their perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement influenced… their academic goals and their final academic achievement” (1992, p.663). Here we see an almost linear connection between perceived self-efficacy for self-regulated learning and perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement, academic goals and finally, their academic achievement. Academic self-regulation deals with students’ ability to be proactive regulators in their own learning process. The researchers found that “personal goals played a key role in students’ attainment of grades in school” (Zimmerman et al., 1992, p. 673); high self-efficacy equaled high goal setting. Students’ perceived self-efficacy and goals, in combination, affected their subsequent academic attainment (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 674). “Perceived self-efficacy can also provide students with a sense of agency that will motivate them to take part in their own learning process, a key component being goal-setting “(Zimmerman, 2000, p. 87). A major part of an individual’s agency comes from setting personal goals and the student’s belief in their ability to successfully meet them.
Researchers, Heyman & Dweck (1992), also found the goals approach to achievement to be an adequate way of understanding and explaining how individuals think about and respond to challenges. They, however, make two sets of distinctive goals they labeled *performance goals* and *learning goals*, the former focuses on judging and validating one’s ability, while the latter focuses more on increasing existing ability and gaining more skills (Heyman & Dweck, 1992, p. 233). *Performance goals* are deemed to have negative effects, resulting in a “helpless” motivational reaction stemming from the belief of low ability. *Learning goals* on the other hand, foster a “mastery-oriented” response, a focus on learning and obtaining skills and accepting obstacles and challenges as a part of the process (Heyman & Dweck, 1992, p. 233). The helpless response can manifest itself in forms of sadness, anxiety and defiance (1992, p. 234), while the mastery-oriented response can be exhibited through perseverance, use of problem-solving and critical thinking. Bergin and Cooks (2000) in looking at competition among students of color found, that those engaged in what they call a *mastery situation*, another name for learning goals, attributed their success to effort rather than ability. This difference in attribution is pertinent because those who attribute effort for their successes have a greater locus of control, and tend to increase use of effective earning strategies and deeper processing (Bergin & Cooks, 2000, p. 443), because they believe hard work is the reason for their success or failure rather than just an inherent or chance possession of intelligence.

Conversely, two types of performance goals were postulated by researchers, Hidi & Harackiewicz (2000), further evidencing their complexity and the need not to write off performance goals as inherently bad or as ineffective motivating mechanisms. The first, *extrinsic goals* are those in which students focus on obtaining external rewards, such as, grades, or parent approval, and avoiding punishment. On the other hand, students who adopt extrinsic goals are
more concerned with outperforming their peers and appearing more competent relative to them. Students who pursue *relative ability goals* do so more in an effort to attain competence, and the authors suggested that students, who hold these goals, could be even more positively motivated to outperform others.

In his formative study, Albert Bandura (1977) stated, “behavior is related to its outcomes at the level of aggregate consequences rather than momentary effects”. This statement suggested that behavior is more influenced by overall, long-term outcomes over time rather than immediate consequences (Bandura, 1977, p. 192). Bandura seemingly contradicts himself, for in a later work he declared *proximal goals* to be more fruitful in boosting achievement than *distal goals*. Bandura and Schunk (1981) conducted an experiment testing the effectiveness of goal setting in increasing self-percepts of efficacy and intrinsic interest in students shown to be disinterested in mathematics. The study looked favorably on and emphasized the importance of setting *proximal goals* rather than what they call *distal goals* (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p.587). Proximal or “sub-goals” help in creating standards against which students measure their performance. Sub-goals can also even enhance interest in activities, as the authors expounded upon by stating, “when people aim for, and master, desired levels of performance, they experience a sense of satisfaction” (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p.587). Students can experience feelings of positivity and contentment when one successfully achieves a goal. The findings of their study proved their initial hypothesis “children who set themselves attainable sub-goals progressed rapidly in self-directed learning, achieved substantial mastery of mathematical operations, and heightened their perceived self-efficacy and interest in activities that initially held little attraction for them” (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p.595). Bandura and Schunk (1981) further explain the importance proximal goal setting holds in developing self-knowledge, as students who set proximal goals
were more accurate in their self-appraisals (p.596). Distal goals were determined to be an ineffective measure of self-appraisal and in the development of skills, because the broad time length makes progress ambiguous. Bandura and Schunk (1981), concluded that, “judgments of one’s capabilities can affect the rate of skill acquisition, and performance mastery, in turn; can boost self-efficacy in a mutually enhancing process” (p.596). They also interestingly noted that children who were in the proximal-goal setting group, felt high levels of efficacy and showed notable levels of intrinsic interest, while children in other conditions (distal goals or no goals) generally expressed self-doubt in their capabilities and showed very little spontaneous interest in solving the math problems (Bandura & Schunk, 1981, p.597).

Researchers Sirin and Sirin (2005) conducted a study examining within-group differences among African-American students in grades 9 to 11 in an effort to pinpoint factors which contribute to the differentiation between those who are successful in school and those who are less so. Although the researchers were concerned with boosting school engagement, their findings prove both relatable and useful to the present work. They found that school participation and future school expectations are related to academic performance (Sirin & Sirin, 2005, p.11). Their findings echo similarly the concept of goal setting. Sirin & Sirin (2005), emphasized the importance of students’ possessing expectations to continue in school as well as actively participating in school, taking an interest in and completing tasks, actions that are considered integral parts of goal setting. Participation is a vital component of the goal-setting process, for it can enhance academic performance through maintaining interest in tasks, and continuing expectations for attendance in school.

Also similar to the process of goal setting is that of self-monitoring. Schunk (1983) found both concepts to be, forms of self-motivation because, individuals are required to compare their
present performances to personal standards. Schunk (1983) sought to make a connection between self-monitoring its effects on a perceived self-efficacy and achievement. Schunk (1983) found explicit progress monitoring to be a highly effective method in promoting percepts of efficacy and achievement (p.91). Monitoring, he asserted, provides a measure of progress, which helps to validate efficacy. In addition to being a useful tactic for teachers’ time management, self-monitoring also gives students an opportunity to exercise responsibility (Schunk, 1983, p.92).

Goals, as we will see shortly, are also related to the promotion of interest and the cultivation of motivation to succeed. “Goals…were presumed to guide an individual’s approach to academic activities as well as their thoughts, feelings, and performance” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, p.160)

**Goals, Confidence and Emotional Responses**

In the field of academic motivation, researchers Heyman & Dweck (1992), ask, “Why some children do not seek or enjoy challenging tasks, or give up easily upon facing obstacles” (p.232). The researchers term these premature resignations, maladaptive *motivational responses*. This lack of motivation has been attested to students’ problems with ability or performance; however the researchers contest that children considered to be bright and gifted can also face these issues who have admirable records of success. They further assert, unexpectedly, that the most motivationally vulnerable students are bright girls, who have admirable records.

Heyman & Dweck (1992) draw connections between the goals, confidence and the subsequent motivational responses they call, *mastery-oriented* or *helpless responses*. The researchers share that the confidence level of students on the performance goal orientation track affected the type of motivational response evoked. Heyman & Dweck (1992) found that performance-goal
oriented students with low confidence would be more likely to exhibit a helpless motivational response because failure would just be reaffirming their belief their ability is inadequate (p.236).

Relatedly, Hidi & Harackiewicz (2000) found that negative performance goal effects, such as negative affect and withdrawal, only occurred with those who had low levels of self-competence (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 161). Confidence was shown to have no effect on students that are learning goal oriented, they responded in a mastery-oriented fashion regardless. Failure, for those who hold learning goals would not be attributed to self-deficiency but rather just a need for greater exertion of effort or a change in strategy (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000, p.235).

Heyman & Dweck also mentioned interesting concepts, characterized as states vs. actions. They connected their findings to the former work by asserting students who hold performance goals would focus on past, present, or future states, while those with learning goals would be more focused on actions such as efforts and strategy (Heyman & Dweck, 1992, p. 238-239).

Heyman & Dweck (1992) go on to assert that goal and goal-like manipulations can impact the levels of intrinsic motivation. *Intrinsic motivation* is defined as “interest, enjoyment, and free-choice persistence” (p.243). Setting goals have been found to have positive effects on intrinsic motivation. (Heyman &Dweck, 1992, p.241). Ames (1990) states, “Learning goals promote intrinsic motivation more effectively than do performance goals. Both researchers caution however, against avoiding performance goals, as ability without achievement can be maladaptive (p. 244). They suggest instead, “the coordination of learning goals, performance goals, and intrinsic interests” (Ames, 1990, p.244), which they believe can be important in adaptive motivation. The researchers offer a picture of the most desirable academic environment as having a mix of learning and performance goals without being overwhelmed by the latter’s striving. Heyman & Dweck also cautioned against providing students with rather easy situations
in which they can be successful at, because in reality it is an unsuccessful and debilitating remedy (p.232). Possessing performance goals can also be a source of promoting intrinsic motivation because, “performance-approach goals represent a positive striving toward competence, and people pursuing such goals may care more about doing well at a task, view activities as more challenging, or become more involved in their work” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, 166).

**Self-Efficacy and its Relatedness to Competition**

Competition has long been thought to be a rational means for fostering motivation and self-efficacy in students. Many believe that when placed in competitive situations, people are motivated to do their best and achieve even greater than they would on their own accord. However, views on competition are split. Researchers, Bergin and Cooks (2000) present on this dichotomous view. On the negative side, competition can be seen as placing undue or excess focus on grades and competition rather than on learning (Bergin & Cooks, 2000, p.468). In addition to its focus on external assessments, competition also comes with the inevitable byproduct of creating “losers”. The researchers however, find that competition may not necessarily be a bad thing for those with high ability (Bergin & Cooks, 2000, p.469). On the positive side, competition can provide students, both with standards upon which to judge their performance by and the incentive to achieve greater. Competition can also be viewed as a type of performance goal, as previously defined, and thus it can be expected to have positive effects on intrinsic motivation as students may respectfully enjoy beating out classmates. Although a bit unconventional, competition amongst peers can have positive effects on students’ achievement, if conducted properly. Bergin and Cooks (2000) like a few of the previously mentioned researchers, castoff Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) postulation that African–American students
reject academic achievement instead, their study highlighted students of color that engaged in and enjoyed academic competition (Bergin & Cooks, 2000, p.467). Even though most of the students found competition beneficial, the researchers emphasized that most of the students were focusing on grades and not learning. The researchers wisely pointed out that the students who enjoyed competition were those who were doing well, however, for students not doing well, and even those who are, competition can be debilitating. Due to competition’s tendency to place emphasis on grades and performance rather than learning, Bergin and Cooks (2000) suggest schools “should avoid emphasizing bases for social comparison such as class ranking “ (p.469) and instead should increase the interest level of courses and emphasis on developing skills that yield benefits for life and satisfaction (p.470). Bergin and Cooks (2000), in their study on competition found its relatedness to perceptions of ability, a construct similar to confidence. Ultimately they concluded that competition might not necessarily be harmful for those who enjoy taking part in it and have high perceptions of ability (p.469).

**Motivation, Interest and Goals**

Researchers Long, Monoi, Harper, Knoblauch & Murphy (2007) in looking at “Academic Motivation and Achievement Among Urban Adolescents” discovered that, “three sources of motivation may relate to the academic achievement of predominately African American urban students during their transition to high school…interest…self-efficacy…achievement goal orientation” (2007, p.198). Individuals with high self-efficacy beliefs, they asserted, view difficult tasks as challenges, remain committed to their goals, and increase their efforts when faced with failure” (Long et al., 2007, p. 200). Students’ perceptions of not only their capabilities, but also the tasks at hand, can influence their performance, and subsequently their goals. The researchers considered motivation, interest and goals to operate within a very
influential educational structure. They state that students’ motivational beliefs and dispositions, similar to self-efficacy, domain interest, and achievement goal orientations develop, “partly as a consequence of the educational environments they experience…factors that hinder the relationship between motivation and achievement can consist of poor resources, dilapidated facilities or equipment, ineffective teachers, or other indigenous factors often associated with academic transitions (i.e., increased stress levels, decreased self-esteem, and loss of social status) (Long et al., 2007, 216). It is important to always be thinking of these concepts and behaviors in relation to the respective environments in which they are occurring.

In their very insightful work, researchers Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) seek the answers to “Motivating the Unmotivated”. They identify interests and goals as being effective agents in increasing academic motivation, both separately and relatedly. The researchers define interest as “the interactive relation between an individual and certain aspects of his or her environment” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, p.152). They go on to assert that there are subcategories of interest, that of situational interest and individual interest. Individual interest is generally viewed as a positive, stable, personal orientation while situational interest is seen more as being externally generated and normally only active for short amounts of time. Unlike individual interest, which is normally a predetermined, internal, uncontrolled connection that evokes positive feelings, situational interest is externally imposed, triggered by factors in the individual’s environment. However, interest is capable of shifting from situational or externally imposed to becoming self-determined (individual interest), as a student begins to make connections, enjoy and desire to continue gaining more information on his/her own. At this point interest has shifted from being externally generated to in the control of the individual for they must choose to make personal
connections, meaning or relevance with the subject matter (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, 155-156).

The relationship between motivation and both types of interest is seen as a bidirectional one, with individual interests being able to increase motivation and students’ academic motivation being able to provide opportunities for interests to be deepened and cultivated and sometimes even altered. Examples of this relationship can provide a clearer picture and understanding. A student’s personal (individual) interest in rock collecting could promote motivation to perform, enjoy tasks in an Earth Science class and subsequently, perform well. Conversely, a student with a motivation to do well can gain interest in an English course after Othello is made relevant to his/her life and he/she begins researching Shakespearean plays. The researchers conclude that, “The elicitation and utilization of situational interest could make a significant contribution to the motivation of academically unmotivated children” (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 154).

Rewards are also related to promoting interest. “More specifically, a combination of intrinsic rewards inherent in interesting activities and external rewards, particularly those that provide performance feedback, may be required to maintain individuals’ engagements across complex and often difficult—perhaps painful—periods of learning”, state Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000, p.159). There are natural, internal rewards, those of satisfaction and enjoyment that students automatically receive as a result of engaging in an activity, task or subject of interest, but then there are external rewards which, can help further and promote interest in a subject not necessarily of personal choice, incentive. Both external (situational) interest and rewards are shown to be able to have a positive effect on student motivation which has positive implications for cultivating self-efficacy and giving educators tangible strategies to help do so.
Long et al. (2007) also provided insight on the relatedness of all three concepts, stating “when student learning goals and self-efficacy are encouraged to grow, domain interests will likewise increase and empower achievement across a variety of subjects and domains” (p.213)

**Self-Efficacy and Self-Concept**

Self-efficacy can also influence *self-concept*, another of the related constructs linked to achievement. Self-concept is seen as being comprised of a combination of self-perceptions from both the academic setting and nonacademic domains. Thus self-concept is seen as incorporating such broad perceptions as self-worth and self-efficacy (Schunk, 199, p. 212)

James Coleman’s (1966), *Equality of Educational Opportunity* is also a well-known survey in the Sociology of Education literature. In the report, requested by Congress, Coleman (1966), shared that students’ *self-concept* (defined as attitudes about themselves), and their feelings about their environment, both affected school achievement and are consequences of school for achievement in life(p. 281). If self-concept is low, Coleman (1966) asserts, it will affect the effort he/she puts into the task. Coleman’s findings suggest that students’ perceptions and beliefs about the world around them will impact their achievement. “Children from disadvantaged groups…assume that nothing they will do can affect the environment…it will give benefits or withhold them but not as a consequence of their own action” (Coleman, 1966, p. 321). Negative perceptions and mistrust of opportunity structures, especially schools, Coleman (1996) argues, causes students to be doubtful of the possible rewards one can yield and consequently, fail to consider their behaviors as impacting their achievement or success. African American students’ achievement related beliefs, capabilities; goals and/or outcomes extend beyond their personal perceptions. These statements are seemingly extremely similar to Ogbu and Mickelson’s claims,
yet Coleman made an effort to clarify where they deviated. In a paradoxical assertion, Coleman stated, “Negroes are especially strongly oriented toward the school as a path for mobility…. But the results suggest as well a considerable lack of realism in aspirations” (p. 280). Apparently, more than just African-American students’ perceptions of the opportunity structure are responsible for their comparatively low achievement. Coleman (1966) diagnosed, what he believed to be the comprehensive reasoning in a statement saying, “the orientations of the children themselves…how they feel about themselves, their motivations in school, their aspirations toward further education and desirable occupations…play a special role, for they are in part an outcome of education, and in part a factor which propels the child toward further education and achievement” (p. 275). Here, Coleman finds achievement to be the result of a broad range of factors; including self-concept, motivation, and outcome expectations.

Other definitions of self-concept help to provide a better understanding of Coleman’s postulated correlation between African-American students’ achievement and self-concept. In a study conducted by Witherspoon et al. (1997) the authors look at the connection between racial identity (the attitudes one holds about his or her Blackness), self-esteem and academic self-concept in predicting the success of African-American high school students. Self-concept was defined by the researchers as, one’s sense of personal efficacy about academic activities (Witherspoon et al., 1997, p.347). In this explanation, self-concept is conceived to be very similar to that of self-efficacy. Their conception, however, of self-esteem is more similar to Coleman’s conception of self-concept. The authors found that their notion of academic self-concept (self-efficacy), and students’ racial identity attitudes (whether they were pro-white, anti-black, pro-black and anti-white or decline of anti-white feelings but strong pride in black identity) were not significantly correlated (Witherspoon et al., 1997, p.352). Therefore, students’
perceptions of or beliefs about their race did not significantly relate to their beliefs about their own self efficacy. However, Witherspoon et al. (1977) did find a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic self-concept; as self-esteem increased so did academic self-concept and likewise, as self-esteem decreased so did academic self-concept (p. 353). Long et al. found that among urban adolescents, “declines in academic performance after a transition to middle school were a reliable predictor of lower self-concept, intrinsic motivation, and confidence in intellectual abilities” (Long et al., 2007, p. 201). They attributed this decline to a mismatch between the student and their classroom environment, resulting in negative motivational outcomes especially for struggling students.

Frank Parajes (1996) shared another definition for self-concept, making sure to distinguish it from self-efficacy. Parajes (1996) stated, that the former concept “includes the evaluation of such competence and the feelings of self-worth” (p.561). Similar to Coleman’s characterization, self-efficacy on the other hand, is defined as “a context-specific assessment of competence to perform a specific task “(Parajes, 1996, p.561). Self-concept is rendered to be more global and less context dependent and its judgments are based on social and self-comparisons (Parajes, 1966, p.561). Parajes also declared that self-concept can operate independently of self-efficacy, one can believe in their ability to successfully complete their math assignment but not harbor positive feelings of self-worth. Parajes (1996) concludes that neither has a stronger influence on achievement but rather, “different situations call forth different self-beliefs” (p.562).

**Resilience**

Finn and Rock (1997) examined the last “self-related” concept, that of resilience. They identified this notion to be the reason for the academic success of some “at-risk” students. “At-risk”
students tend to be a minority attending an inner-city school, come from a low-income home, or come from a home where English is not the first language, experience academic difficulty, and/or are more likely to drop out of school, often. These risk factors often lead to engagement in risk behaviors (i.e. skipping school or class, not completing required assignments) by students (Finn & Rock, 1997, p.221). However, the authors found a substantial number of “at-risk” students were able to achieve well. Those students were credited with having resilience, “successful adaptation to life tasks in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions” (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 222). Resilient students were found to be distinct from their lower-achieving peers in terms of their underlying motivational processes evidenced through such engagement behaviors as, coming to class on time, being prepared to work, expending effort needed to complete assignments, and avoiding being disruptive in class (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 231). The authors went on to then draw the connection between resilient students and other successful students who were not at risk, they found both groups possessed the same positive attributes associated with high academic achievement, positive self-regard, a belief that they were in control, and engagement behaviors that facilitated learning (Finn & Rock, 1997, 231). These attributes characterize the theories of self-concept, locus of control and mastery-oriented actions. Finn & Rock (1997) made sure to stress the point that neither students’ self-perceptions, nor school behaviors occur independently of their larger social context, that is, family, peers, and the school environment. Resilient students were also found to possess differences in home-related characteristics such as family structure, parent education, and income, than their low-achieving peers (Finn & Rock, 1997, 231). Thus, a fuller explanation is needed to truly understand on why some students were able to achieve in spite of adversity (Finn & Rock, 1997, 231).
Parajes (1996), also made connections between self-efficacy and resilience stating, “efficacy beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when encountering obstacles, and how resilient they will prove in the face of adverse situations—the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience’ (p. 544).

**Discussion/Recommendations**

**Understanding Self-Efficacy and its Related Constructs**

The question of how to bolster the academic achievement of African Americans is a widely and hotly debated issue. With approximately 8.4 million African-American students enrolled in U.S. public schools, as of 2011, this is an issue of massive scale. The educational experience of African Americans here in the United States has been wrought with discrepancies, inequalities, and inferiority. Therefore, it is no wonder that many of the studies on this topic focus societal, economic, cultural, political and even larger-scale educational factors to explain the enduring educational gap and underachievement of African Americans. Environmental and socio-economic circumstances do, without a doubt, affect students, especially African-Americans living in lower-income, urban areas. However, there isn’t a substantial amount of literature devoted to uncovering how some African-Americans manage to greatly achieve in the midst of these unfair and overwhelming challenges. Therefore, the goal of this paper was to discover how and to what degree African-American students could effectively be in control of their own achievement fate.
The above study sought to discover how effective were self-regulated beliefs, attitudes and behaviors in explaining and increasing achievement in African-American students. Joanne Whitmore states, “The main difference between high ability achievers and high ability underachievers is that the achievers have learned the attitudes and strategies that enable them to be successful in a school setting” (Whitmore, 1980). This statement interestingly categorizes these positive academic “attitudes” and “strategies” as learned responses. Based on the above quote and the studies examined, we see that even though these ideas of efficacy, resilience and motivation are mainly internal constructs, educators still have a role in promoting, encouraging and bettering them. Many of the studies examined found the cultivation and proliferation of such self-concerning notions yielded positive results. Albert Bandura (1981), the premier researcher in the field of self-efficacy, found that setting proximal goals was an effective means of promoting self-efficacy, competence, and intrinsic interest (p. 595). Researchers, Finn & Rock (1997), found “at-risk” students possessed personal discipline and positive work habits, which explained their achievement in spite of adversity (p. 231). These “positive work habits” could consist of the time management and task completion characteristics of goal-setting. Barry Zimmerman (2000) found self-efficacy to be related to motivation, he stated that self-efficacy predicted such motivation measures as, students’ activity choices, effort, persistence, and emotional reactions. Students’ beliefs about their academic capabilities play an essential role in their motivation achieve, he concludes (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 89). Together, Bandura, Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons (1992) assert that students do not adopt academic aspirations imposed upon them but instead, their academic attainment is largely regulated through self-motivating influences (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 673). The researchers also found that students’ self-efficacy, belief in their ability to complete a specific task, led to their increased confidence in their ability to master
academic subjects and attain higher academic performance (Zimmerman 1992, p. 674). As Bandura (1986) found, too much interference can be detrimental to students’ achievement. Instead, he recommended that students gain the opportunity to experience personally achieved success in an effort to boost achievement.

Through the history of African-Americans we gained insight into the role a person’s cognitions play in achieving success despite harrowing and challenging odds. There have been disparities in the quality of life experienced by White and Black Americans since the commencement of the latter’s history in the United States. Despite these inconsistencies and inequalities, many African-Americans have managed to greatly achieve and become successful individuals in a variety of fields. This ability to achieve despite the odds is often credited to the self-regulated actions of the individuals. In an article entitled “Intrinsic Motivation”, Priscilla Theroux (1994) writes, “In my experience... achievement depends on willingness to accept a challenge, take risks, make errors and the belief that one has the control over the outcomes. Achievement is hindered by perfectionism, fear of failure, and the belief that control; credit and/or blame belong to someone else” (as cited in para. 6)

The Importance of Environmental & Social Factors

In the studies discussed, we see that the individual never completely operates by his/her self, either teachers and/or peers are possibly influencing students, or, teachers are helping to achieve this autonomous achievement. It is important to highlight that actions, emotions, behaviors or attitudes do not occur in a vacuum but operate within a larger social, world and even temporal context and thus, strategies and plans to increase academic achievement cannot ignore the potential effects of parents, peers, and both the school and social environment.
In a 2009 New York Times article, it was stated that the poverty rate for African Americans stood at almost 25%, three times the rate of blacks (Patterson, 2009). Patterson goes on to mention William Julius Wilson’s work, “More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City” (2009), which, concluded that Black poverty is the result of a tragic interaction between socioeconomic and cultural forces” (Patterson, 2009). As noted in the historical component of this paper, these forces, identified by Wilson include; federal transportation and highway policies that moved jobs from cities to the suburbs, wide-spread housing segregation through unfair practices of home mortgage lenders and insurance redlining, prejudicial hiring practices, and substandard schools in impoverished neighborhoods” (Branch, 2011, p. 125; Wilson, 2009). In her review of Wilson’s text, Branch (2011) states, “we cannot ignore the lasting effects of an American society that has undermined the social and economic well-being of Black Americans” (126). When we relate these ideas to the topic at hand, it is easy to see how past and present systems and occurrences of inequality have contributed to lowered achievement of African-American students.

It has been demonstrated that family support is a key factor in promoting achievement among students at risk, as well as behavioral and emotional engagement (Finn & Rock, 1997, p. 231). In a study in the Journal of Black Psychology, researchers Darenbourg & Blake (2014) looked at the effect of peer and parental influence on the achievement of Black adolescent, they in turn contribute thought-provoking insight. They found that during the transition from middle to high school both peers and parents significantly affect children’s attitudes and school related behaviors and values of school. “Specifically, findings suggest that the values that parents instill in their children about academics relate to the engagement and achievement of their youth”
(Darensbourg & Blake, 2014, p.203). As is expected, children who exhibit more positive behavioral engagement have higher achievement scores and classroom grades.

Researchers Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, and Mason (1996) state that the academic underachievement among African American youths is a social concern (p.366). In a one year study of African ‘Americans and their peer, family and neighborhood contexts, the researchers find that peer and neighborhood contexts may be a more powerful influence than that of the family in determining school performance of African Americans. They found however, that maternal control did influence African American student achievement in low risk versus high-risk neighborhood (Gonzales et al., 1996, p. 380). The researchers similarly laud Brofenbrenner’s ecological model as effective framework for understanding the differences and interrelatedness of contexts in which the African American student is located. They warn that failure to consider this model will lead to an underestimation and mischaracterization of peer, familial and neighborhood influences on the academic achievement of African American (Gonzales et al., 1966, p.380).

When we narrow our scope, we see how educational-level issues can interfere with African – American students’ learning and subsequent achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997). African-Americans or Latinos populate most of the nation’s large cities, with more than 20% of the cities’ population falling below the poverty level. 79% of these large city districts are funded at a lower rate than suburban schools. Currently, blacks in inner city, urban neighborhoods experience “old school buildings…have not been well-maintained…classrooms typically have few instructional supplies and little equipment…less access to science and math resources, programs” (Anyon., 1997, p. 7). Research also shows that instruction in inner-city schools is often based on cognitively low-level, unchallenging and rote material (Oakes, 1990). Long and
associates (2007) concluded that “students’ motivational beliefs and dispositions, similar to self-efficacy, domain interest, and achievement goal orientations, develop “partly as a consequence of the educational environments they experience” (p. 216).

The potential effect of family, peers, neighborhood and school environment should never be considered lightly and it is my hope that educators and politicians, alike will continue to work to help increase the educational achievement of African-Americans and achieve equal and highly education as for all students.

**Suggested Solutions**

In seeking potential solutions to the problem of underachievement in African Americans, Jean Anyon (1997) states, “Participants in the school are the key to reform” (p.10). This statement reiterates the potential power of the individual in controlling his/her achievement but also, the potential influence of the actors in direct contact with the student; i.e. teachers. Although, much reform needs to occur outside of the school structure to boost achievement, much can be done within schools to help students succeed. Although it is ultimately up to the individual to actually to complete tasks, study, and utilize the help given but the structure, resources and instruction which a school possesses can do much to aid students when they desire to achieve. A great portion of an individual’s success can be greatly credited to his/her self-assessments, judgments pertaining to academic capabilities, individual interest, and/or desired outcomes, but it is impossible to disentangle achievement from the larger context in which the individual operates. “Because personal agency is socially rooted and operates within sociocultural influences, individuals are viewed both as products and producers of their own environments and of their social systems” (Parajes, 1996, p. 544).
In their study on why students risk of failure, Gillock and Reyes (1996) further examine this point. They found students’ declines in grades, a well-documented impact of school transition, to be predicative of their self-worth and sense of competence, which within these two definitions lays the concept of self-efficacy (Gillock & Reyes, 1996, p. 247), but, were positively related with their perceptions of teachers’ authority and competence (p. 258). As Bandura (1977) stated, ability is of little value if an individual does not believe in his/her power to accomplish the task or activity at hand. For students to be able to experience high self-efficacy, self-concept, resilience, etc. educators must initially teach and/or encourage these percepts. A primary step in fostering these notions comes through engaging students. When students take interest in a subject they tend to more readily engage in academic behaviors. Engaging students can be done through the cultivation of situational interest, adaptation of instructional styles (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), teaching goal-setting and outcome expectancy strategies (Bandura, 1986), to name several. Darensbourg and Blake (2014) also support these strategies for increasing achievement, stating, “The more students find school interesting or important to their future goals, the more likely they are to invest or exert energy in that domain (p.196). As was examined earlier, generating situational interest in students can lead to students paying closer attention, persisting for longer periods of time, learning more and enjoying their involvement (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 1996, p.153).

Researchers, Long et al., (2007), offered a few educational environment recommendations which included; redesigning courses and instructional methods to increase engagement and learning, providing resources, assessing understanding and skills, creating smaller learning communities, coordinating communications within the community, and eliminating tracking. Barry Zimmerman (2000) asserted that, “Self-efficacy beliefs are responsive to changes in instructional
experience” (p.89). It is very likely that such improvements will not only support the growth of motivation but also contribute to its potency and effectiveness in empowering achievement (Long et al., 2007, p.217). Sirin & Sirin suggested that to increase participation (engagement) and school expectations of African American adolescents, counselors and teachers could present students with concrete strategies for attaining their future dreams, similar to the concept of goal setting, (12).

How students receive information to form and modify their perceptions of self-efficacy matters. Schunk (1991) warned that information from direct, vicarious and persuasory sources may not be consistent (p.202). Instead, Parajes (1966) recommends that interventions be designed around raising competence and confidence through successful experiences completing tasks at hand (p. 569). This would be an effective strategy for it has been found that successful and authentic mastery experiences are the most influential source in promoting self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986)

Some researchers even suggest integration as possible strategy (Braddock, 1980). Studies have shown three areas of student outcomes that are strengthened by an integrated classroom: enhanced learning, higher educational and occupational aspirations, and positive social interaction among members of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Students in integrated environments seem to perform better on tests, perhaps through the increased opportunities available to them at such schools, or perhaps as a result of informal networks at these schools; networks that would not be available at even the best segregated school with the most resources (Braddock, 1980).

With all the respective and collective findings on the possible benefits of self-efficacy and similar constructs, a great and vast amount of research still needs to be conducted in order to
significantly and widely boost the academic achievement of African American students. While there are abundant numbers of studies on the benefits of self-efficacy and related self-concepts, there are barely any that study their effects on African-American students’ achievement. An extensive study needs to be conducted on how differing environmental levels, self-efficacy and its related constructs all interact to affect student achievement, specifically African-Americans.

From the compiled evidence of this study we see that achievement is a complex issue. Achievement does not have one, or a specific set of influencers, instead, it is affected by a complicated assortment of interactions of differing environmental levels (Brofenbrenner, 1994). Although self-efficacy can lead to positive academic behaviors that result in achievement gains, an individual’s belief in their capabilities is not developed in isolation. Instead, family background, community, peers and teachers can all either, negatively or positively influence their perceptions of themselves and their ability. It is my hope that educators will seek to employ the skill-building, self-regulating, and engaging instructional styles mentioned here in an effort to increase the achievement of a historically disenfranchised but resilient group of individuals.
References


