

# EXPLORING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT OF MIDDLE-CLASS AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS

SELCUK R. SIRIN  
Montclair State University  
LAUREN ROGERS-SIRIN  
Amethyst House

*Because of the scarcity of knowledge about middle-class African American adolescents, the present study explored psychological and parental factors in relation to academic performance. The participants were 336 middle-class African American students and their biological mothers. The findings suggest that for African American middle-class adolescents, educational expectations and school engagement have the strongest relation to academic performance. Self-esteem was not related to academic performance. The results also indicate that positive parent-adolescent relationships, not parents' educational values, were related to better academic performance. Implications for school counselors are discussed.*

**Keywords:** engagement; expectation; Black adolescents

**Most of what we know about** African American students comes from either comparative studies on ethnic differences or studies conducted with low-income African American students (Asamen, 1989; Finn, 1993; Hill, 1997). Comparative studies, mostly using national survey data, contrast racial groups across a variety of school outcomes with the assumption that there is equal educational opportunity and a shared ecological context between these racial groups (Hope, 1995; McCoy, 1999; Tatum, 1987). When studies focus solely on within-

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group differences among African American students, the choice of sample is usually low-income students who are generally considered at risk for school failure (Hill, 1997). African Americans, however, similar to any other racial/ethnic group, are present at all levels of socioeconomic strata. A review of census tracts shows that the majority of African Americans live in neighborhoods that are not low income in terms of socioeconomic status (SES), but are still largely African American in terms of racial background (McCoy, 1999). Yet when research focuses on African American students, it usually generalizes the experiences of low-income students to the whole ethnic group by depicting the typical African American student as educationally at risk (Graham, 1992). This bias in sampling contributes to the negative depiction of African American students overall without recognizing within-group differences (Graham, 1992; Hill, 1997).

Race-comparative studies and studies based on low-income African American students are limited in their ability to draw conclusions about African Americans' academic performance in general and middle-class African American students in particular. Drawing on the prior research on school engagement (Finn, 1989; Steele, 1992), the present study was an attempt to explore academic experiences of middle-class African American students. Because of the scarcity of knowledge about middle-class African American adolescents, the present study explored individual and parental levels of analysis that may contribute to school achievement. More specifically, individual factors—school engagement, educational expectations, and self-esteem—and contextual factors—parent-adolescent relationships and parental educational values—were examined in relation to academic performance.

## RELATED LITERATURE

### SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Steele (1992) argued that African Americans underachieve even when they have ample resources and are well prepared in terms of knowledge and skills. "Something else has to be involved" stated Steele, "[T]hat something else could be of just modest importance—a

barrier that simply adds its effect to that of other disadvantages—or it could be pivotal, such that were it corrected, other disadvantages would lose their effect” (p. 70). According to Steele, the missing part is the process of engaging with school.

Several recent investigations provide support for Steele’s (1992) argument that school engagement, as described by behavioral and affective identification with school, significantly contributes to the academic performance of African American students. Finn’s research on school engagement (Finn, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997) found that those students who were more engaged in school, as evidenced by attending classes on time and initiating discussions with teachers, were more likely to perform well even though they were considered at risk for school failure by way of their SES and racial background. Similarly, Fine’s (1991) research on adolescents who dropped out of school shows that one of the primary reasons for dropping out was that they simply did not emotionally engage with school. The importance of school engagement is also reflected in Voelkl’s (1997) research, which showed that it is important for students to feel “a sense of belonging” in school. Failure to identify with school had much to do with feeling that no one in school cared for them; in effect, students in Voelkl’s study (1997) did not feel that they belonged or that others in the school were concerned for their well-being. Without school engagement, African American students may not be able to develop adequate emotional and behavioral strategies for school success.

#### EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Adolescence is the developmental period when individuals are most concerned about their future (Nurmi, 1991). Graham (1994) found in her review of literature that African American students as a group have high educational expectations. Using an experimental design, Graham and Long (1986) showed that compared to middle-class Whites and lower SES African Americans, middle-class African American students display particularly high levels of educational expectations.

Research provides evidence for the association between future educational expectations and current academic performance (Nurmi, 1991; Voelkl, 1993). Walker’s (1987) study on students’ perceptions

of future opportunities found that African American students who had more positive perceptions of future opportunities were more likely to have high educational and occupational aspirations. The fact that students' educational aspirations increased when students perceived more future opportunities suggests that school engagement will increase as their perceptions of future opportunities increase. In the present study, we use "educational expectations" as a measure of a student's perceptions about their future opportunities. By looking at the link between middle-class African American students' school expectations and school achievement, we hope to provide more insight into how academic performance and future goals are related for this particular group.

#### **SELF-ESTEEM**

Self-esteem refers to the positive or negative value one places on one's own attributes, and it is considered generally one of the most significant developmental accomplishments of adolescence (Coopersmith, 1967; Harter, 1999). It is viewed as a way of monitoring healthy identity formation in general, because it is believed that adolescents with high self-esteem function effectively in a variety of situations, including school contexts. Although global and domain-specific self-esteem have been shown to influence a variety of developmental outcomes, there is a debate about the importance of self-esteem to adolescents' academic performance. Some studies indicate that academically competent students have greater self-esteem than students who do not perform as well academically (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987; Keltikangas-Jaervinen, 1992), whereas others show that no meaningful relationship exists between self-esteem and academic performance (Gaskin-Butler & Tucker, 1995; Mboya, 1989). The present study investigated the relevance of self-esteem to academic performance among middle-class African American students.

#### **PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Parent behaviors that influence academic performance are generally referred to as parental involvement, a term that may include a variety of factors (Epstein, 1987, 1996; Tucker, 1999). The research sug-

gests that various components of parental involvement, such as parent-child interactions, parental educational values, participation in school activities, and parental supervision, contribute to children's academic performance (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Epstein, 1996; Lareau, 1987; Singh et al., 1995; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

The type of parental involvement and the level of its influence on academic performance vary with the developmental stage of the students (Epstein, 1996; Tucker, 1999). Empirical studies show that during the adolescent years, parent-adolescent relationships and parental educational values and expectations make significant contributions to academic performance (Singh et al., 1995; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). During the childhood years, however, parental monitoring and supervision and parental participation in school activities seem to play a more significant role in the academic performance of children (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1996).

Although there is a wide variety of literature focusing on individual and contextual factors that influence academic performance among students, in general, and African American students, in particular, sampling bias has left a gap in the literature regarding the academic performance of middle-class African American students. The present study begins to address this gap by asking the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between school engagement, educational expectations, self-esteem, and parental factors?
2. How well do each one of the individual factors predict academic performance?
3. Do parent-adolescent relationships and parental values make any significant influence on academic performance above and beyond individual factors?

## METHODS

This study examined the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data (ADD Health). ADD Health is a national longitudinal study of adolescent health with a sample of 80 high schools and 52 middle schools from the United States (Bearman, Jones, & Udry,

1997). The participants were representative of the U.S. student population with respect to region of country, urbanicity, school type, race, and school size. This data set was unique because it included a large oversample of high-education Blacks to provide estimates of middle-class African American adolescents. Adolescents in this sample came from households with at least one parent or parent figure who completed college. Detailed information regarding the methodology for the ADD Health data set is provided elsewhere (see Bearman et al., 1997).

#### **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants of this study were 336 African American students and their biological mothers. Within the ADD Health data set, we selected those students whose biological mothers had responded to the parent interviews. Following the convention in previous research, biological mothers who lived with their adolescents were selected as the parent sample, because that represents the best indication of SES (White, 1982). The average of reported total household income was U.S.\$50,840 ( $SD = 28,130$ ). Of the 336 students, 163 were boys and 173 were girls. The age ranged from 12 to 19 years, with a mean of 15.36 years ( $SD = 1.71$ ). The parent sample included 336 biological mothers who currently live with adolescents; 183 were college graduates and 153 had a professional degree beyond college.

#### **MEASURES**

This study used existing questionnaires to develop measures of academic performance, school engagement, educational expectations, self-esteem, and parental involvement. All the indices except the parental involvement measures were generated from an in-home questionnaire administered to the adolescents. The parental involvement component of the study was constructed from the interviews conducted with the parents of the adolescents. All index items are presented in Table 1, and their psychometric properties are reported later. The items were reverse coded as needed so that higher scores are indicative of the higher end of the construct it measures. The total index scores were averages of all the items in each measure.

**TABLE 1**  
**Index Items for School Engagement**

<i>Index</i>	<i>Items</i>
School engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting along with teachers?</li> <li>2. Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble paying attention?</li> <li>3. Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting homework done?</li> <li>4. Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble with other students?</li> <li>5. You feel close to people at your school.</li> <li>6. You feel like you are part of your school.</li> <li>7. You are happy to be at your school.</li> <li>8. The teachers at your school treat students fairly.</li> <li>9. You feel safe in your school.</li> </ol>
Parent-adolescent relationships	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You get along well with him or her.</li> <li>2. {NAME} and you make decisions about (his or her) life together.</li> <li>3. You just do not understand (him or her).</li> <li>4. You feel you can really trust (him or her).</li> <li>5. (He or She) interferes with your activities.</li> </ol>
Parental educational values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If {NAME} could be one of the following in high school, which would be most important to you? 1 = a brilliant student, 2 = a leader in school activities, 3 = an athletic star, 4 = the most popular</li> <li>2. How disappointed would you be if {NAME} did not graduate from college? 1 = very disappointed, 2 = disappointed, 3 = not disappointed</li> </ol>

*Academic performance.* Academic performance was assessed by school grades for 1 year in mathematics and English. The range for subject scores was 1 to 4 with 1 (*D or lower*) and 4 (*A*). Grade point average was measured by taking the average of subject grades. The ADD Health data set included students' reports of grades. Several previous studies examined the correlation between self-reported grades and school-reported grades and found significant positive correlations that ranged from 0.76 to 0.84 (Bogenschneider, 1997; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987).

*School engagement.* Following prior research on school engagement, an index consisting of nine items was constructed to reflect students' sense of belonging (Fine, 1991; Voelkl, 1997), and behaviors in school and activities in the classroom (Finn, 1993). Responses were rated along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The scale has a total range of summative scores from 9 to 45. Higher scores indicate greater engagement with school, whereas lower scores indicate disengagement with school. A Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.72 was calculated for this index.

*Educational expectations.* This index consists of three items that asked questions about continuing education after high school. Because attending college is commonly considered a normal educational step among high school students in the United States, this scale asks in detail "how much a student wanted" to attend college, "how likely it was" that they would attend college, and how "likely they were to graduate" from college (Voelkl, 1993). These items reflect concrete and abstract beliefs students might have about their educational future (Mickelson, 1990). Adolescents could respond from 1 to 5 with 1 (*low*) and 5 (*high*) for the first two items, and from 1 to 8 with 1 (*no chance*) and 8 (*it will happen*) for the third item. The items were transformed to standardized *z* scores because of the Likert-type scale differences across the items. Those students who scored high on this index expect to further their education beyond high school. This index has an adequate reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ).

*Self-esteem.* A shortened version of Rosenberg's (1965) self-esteem scale was used in this study. The items have good validity and acceptable reliability (see Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). It is a unidimensional scale, meaning that individuals may be ranked along a single continuum from very low to very high. For this study, we used a 5-point Likert-type scale format where 1 represents *strongly agree*, and 5 represents *strongly disagree*. Scores range from 5 to 25 with higher scores indicating a higher level of self-esteem and lower scores indicating a lower level of self-esteem. The internal consistency Cronbach's alpha for our sample was 0.84.

*Parent measures.* Following the findings of previous parental involvement research regarding adolescents, two components of parental involvement were identified for our analysis: parent-adolescent relationship and parental values of schooling (Epstein, 1996; Singh et al., 1995; Tucker, 1999). The parental involvement measure—parent-adolescent relationship (PAR)—reflects the quality of the relationship between adolescents and their parents. The scale includes five items on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 represents *always* and 5 represents *never*. Some items were recoded so that higher scores reflected more positive parental perceptions of their relationships with their children. Total index scores range from 5 to 25, and the scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73.

The second parental involvement measure—parental educational values (PEV)—was developed to capture parents' views of their children's academic competence (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). The following items were chosen based on their face validity:

If {NAME} could be one of the following in high school, which would be most important to you? 1 = a brilliant student, 2 = a leader in school activities, 3 = an athletic star, 4 = the most popular.

How disappointed would you be if {NAME} did not graduate from college? The response set for this question was a 3-point Likert-type scale with 1 (*very disappointed*) and 3 (*not disappointed*).

The items are scored so that higher scores indicate higher values of academic competence. The items were transformed to standardized z

scores because the ranges of the Likert-type scales were not equal for these two items.

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the measures. The first question we wanted to address was the relationship between individual and parental factors and academic performance. The results of the Pearson's correlation coefficients, presented in Table 2, show a positive and significant relationship between academic performance and educational expectations ( $r = 0.32, p < .001$ ) and between academic performance and school engagement ( $r = 0.28, p < .001$ ). There is also a significant positive relationship between school engagement and self-esteem ( $r = 0.37, p < .001$ ), and between school engagement and educational expectations ( $r = 0.25, p < .001$ ). The correlational analysis indicates that parent-adolescent relationships are related to self-esteem ( $r = 0.22, p < .001$ ), academic performance ( $r = 0.19, p < .001$ ), school engagement ( $r = 0.15, p < .001$ ), and parent educational values ( $r = 0.11, p < .001$ ). The parent educational values measure was found to be significantly related to educational expectations ( $r = 0.21, p < .001$ ), and academic performance ( $r = 0.11, p < .001$ ) and not to school engagement and self-esteem.

The second question that we wanted to explore was how each one of the individual factors influenced academic performances for middle-class African American students. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to predict academic performance from individual factors, specifically the measures of school engagement, educational expectations, and self-esteem. To control for possible multicollinearity, the correlation among the independent variables was examined. The interrelations among the independent variables were modest, and no sign of harmful multicollinearity was detected. A multiple regression analysis revealed that individual factors account for a significant amount of academic performance variability,  $R^2 = 0.12, F(3, 324) = 14.44, p < .001$ . In Table 3, we present standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) to indicate the relative strength of each individual factor. Educational expectations are the strongest predictor of academic performance ( $\beta = 0.263, p < .001$ ), followed by school engagement, ( $\beta =$

**TABLE 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**  
**Among Study Variables ( $N = 328$ )**

	M	SD	AP	SENG	EE	SE	PAR	PEV
AP	2.82	0.80	1.00					
SENG	33.42	5.35	0.22***	1.00				
EE	-0.01	0.86	0.31***	0.23***	1.00			
SE	20.95	3.25	0.14**	0.37***	0.14**	1.00		
PAR	20.73	2.75	0.19***	0.13*	0.09	0.20***	1.00	
PEV	-0.01	0.78	0.15**	0.07	0.22***	-0.01	0.09	1.00

NOTE: AP = academic performance; SENG = school engagement; EE = educational expectations; SE = self-esteem; PAR = parent-adolescent relationships; PEV = parental educational values. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**TABLE 3**  
**Regression Models Predicting Academic Performance ( $N = 328$ )**

Step	Variables	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
1	Educational expectations	.12	.12***	.266**
	School engagement			.136*
	Self-esteem			.055
2	Educational expectations	.14	.02*	.241***
	School engagement			.126*
	Self-esteem			.037
	Parent-adolescent relationships			.131**
	Parental educational values			.079

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

0.138,  $p < .05$ ). Self-esteem did not seem to make any statistically significant impact on the academic performance of middle-class African American students in this sample.

Our final inquiry was to estimate whether parental factors make any additional impact on school outcomes. To address this, an additional regression analysis was conducted to evaluate whether parental measures predicted academic performance while controlling for the individual factors. The results reveal that the parent-adolescent relationship and parental educational values appear to offer a small but

statistically significant influence on academic performance after controlling for the effects of the individual factors ( $R^{\text{change}} = 0.022$ ,  $F = 4.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Because the second regression model was also significant overall ( $R^2 = 0.140$ ,  $F = 10.510$ ,  $p < .001$ ), a further examination of the parental factors was conducted. The results, presented in Table 3, show that although the measure of parent-adolescent relationships predicts academic performance significantly,  $\beta = 0.144$ ,  $p < .05$ , the measure of the parental educational values scale was not a significant predictor of academic performance for this sample.

## DISCUSSION

The results of our study highlight a number of important points about the school experiences of middle-class African American adolescents. First, to situate our findings in the existing literature, it is necessary to clarify certain aspects of the participants in this study. As presented in Table 2, the students and parents in our study have some unique characteristics. As a group, the students are academically successful and highly engaged in their schooling, and most expect to go to college (see Table 2). In addition, they all live with at least one parent (i.e., biological mothers) who is either a college graduate, or has a professional degree beyond college. The parents are also very much involved with their adolescents' lives, in general, and schooling, in particular. They report that they get along quite well with their children. Hence, while interpreting the results of this study, the ecological context in which these adolescents' schooling occurs should be kept in mind.

Second, the findings from this study suggest that for African American middle-class adolescents, educational expectations and school engagement have the strongest relationship to academic performance. Adolescents who hold well-defined educational expectations and who are engaged in their schooling also seem to do quite well academically. Self-esteem, on the other hand, did not appear to be strongly related to academic performance for this group.

Finally, the results indicate that positive parent-adolescent relationships are related to better academic performance regardless of the individual factors involved. Parents' educational values, however, do

not seem to make any statistically significant impact on academic performance.

Overall, our findings support prior work on school engagement. The role of current school engagement and future school expectations were the keys to academic success (Finn, 1993). The academic performance of middle-class African American adolescents cannot be explained simply by whether their parents value schooling or by how they view their self-worth. Rather, our findings support Steele's (1992) argument that adolescents who are behaviorally and emotionally engaged in their school are doing well academically.

The finding that the educational expectations variable was the best predictor of academic performance builds on past research regarding future expectations (Nurmi, 1991). Nurmi (1991) found that although African American students may espouse positive attitudes about their educational aspirations in the abstract, they are less likely than their White peers to believe that performing well in school will lead to future opportunities such as attending college (Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 1994). Mickelson (1990) called this phenomenon the "achievement-attitude paradox" and showed that although many students value education highly, they often do not perceive education as offering them concrete help in achieving their future goals. This suggests that, for African American adolescents, school engagement and educational expectations should be considered together to better understand African American students' academic performance.

Our findings also shed light on the question of how self-esteem relates to academic performance. For middle-class African Americans in our study, self-esteem does not significantly contribute to academic performance. It should be noted, however, that we used an index of global self-esteem, and it is possible that, as others have shown, to consider the importance of self-esteem for academic performance, domain-specific analyses of self-perceptions should be done (Harter, 1999). Our data indicates that the impact of self-esteem may lie in domains related to school engagement, rather than being directly related to academic performance, because self-esteem was positively related to school engagement and future education expectations. It is not clear, however, whether self-esteem is necessary for future education expectations or for school engagement. Future studies should investi-

gate whether self-esteem affects the relationship between school engagement and academic performance.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study has several limitations that should be noted. First, the parental educational value scale has only two items, and although it has high face validity, it is difficult to establish reliability with only two items. This may be the reason that this variable did not have as strong a relationship to academic performance as might be expected.

Second, this study used a measure of global self-worth, and as mentioned, there may be differences between unidimensional self-esteem and multidimensional self-esteem as proposed by Harter and others (for a review of this research, see Harter, 1999).

Last, this study was based on correlational analyses, using cross-sectional data. Because the evidence for the impact of individual and contextual factors on academic performance is correlational, it is not possible to determine the causality of the relationships noted.

Despite these limitations, the present study was an attempt to explore factors that affect academic performance among middle-class, African American students. Our study was exploratory in nature and, therefore, an early step in fleshing out the particular educational needs of middle-class African American students; however, future studies could examine more fully the cultural-contextual factors, such as the influence of school and neighborhood characteristics.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

As the findings of this study show, the academic performance of African American adolescents cannot be explained as simply a matter of whether they are engaged in school, or whether they feel good about themselves. Their perceptions of their educational future must be attended to in any effort to improve academic performance or increase school engagement. African American students need to receive guidance about their education and occupational futures that is grounded in the sociocultural, economic, and historical reality of their lives, and that provides them with concrete strategies to attain their

dreams and aspirations despite existing barriers (for further details, see Carter & Cook, 1992; Helms & Cook, 1999).

School professionals may present African American students with a realistic assessment of their future possibilities without underestimating an individual student's resources and abilities. This is not an easy task to accomplish. If such guidance were offered ineffectively, a student might come away with a sense that there is no point in trying to attain his or her goals because there are too many barriers in the way. For realistic assessments to be useful for students, psychologists, counselors, and teachers must provide strategies for students to use when facing existing barriers. For example, African American adolescents will face racism and discrimination as they pursue academic and occupational goals. For this reason, African American students—regardless of income—require coping skills and strategies for successfully negotiating racist or discriminatory situations.

Although middle-class African American adolescents have their parents as role models, they would also benefit from a variety of male and female role models that represent the wide range of job interests and high career aspirations. Having models is an important part of career development, and it makes the entire school experience personally meaningful to youth (Davalos & Haensly, 1997). It is key that students see how education is relevant and useful for their lives. Schools might also bring back successful graduates and showcase their stories for current students to see. On a similar note, it is critical for students to tour colleges, not only to see the school setting itself but also to meet with college students who come from similar backgrounds. Last, because good parent-child relationships appear to enhance school performance, school professionals can develop programs that seek to include parents as a resource person for adolescents' career development (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Programs that focus on improving the quality of the relationships between parents and adolescents can foster parental involvement in adolescents' schooling.

## CONCLUSIONS

The academic experiences of middle-class, African American students have been largely overlooked in social science literature. This

study offers a preliminary exploration of different factors that may influence academic performance within this population. Our findings suggest that students' performances will be enhanced if they have optimistic beliefs about attending college, and if they are engaged in school behaviorally and emotionally. Furthermore, we found that a strong parent-adolescent relationship is related to positive school outcomes regardless of other individual factors. These findings are just an initial step in understanding how various individual and parental factors contribute to the academic performance of middle-class African American students. We hope that what we report in this exploratory stage will help generate further theoretical and empirical work about the educational experiences of this particular group of students.

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*Selcuk R. Sirin is an assistant professor in the Psychology Department at Montclair State University. His research focuses on developmental challenges for children who come from underrepresented populations and ways to increase professionals' ethical responsibility to deal with these challenges.*

*Lauren Rogers-Sirin is a doctoral candidate at Boston College. She researches the impact of race on therapists' clinical decisions. She is also interested in professional ethics and racial identity development.*