

**A Brief Report:**  
**Factors Influencing African American  
Youth Decisions to Stay in School**

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*The goal of the study was to assess positive factors that contribute to African American students' intentions to stay in school. Two hundred and thirty-one African American students participated in this study. Using the theory of planned behavior (TPB) as a conceptual model, surveys measured student attitudes toward school-year completion, social support for completing the academic year, and their perceptions of personal control over school completion. The contributions of self-esteem and racial self-esteem were also examined for their influence on academic strivings. The TPB was a better predictor of intentions to complete the school year than student grade point averages (GPAs). Self-esteem added only slightly to the variance explained in predicting intentions to complete the school year, but neither self-esteem nor racial self-esteem was a significant predictor of GPAs.*

Researchers have been given to assessing the normative, nonproblematic, developmental experiences of African American youth (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997). Social scientists are more likely to report that significant numbers of African American youth continue to experience difficulty in completing high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997), earn lower grades and attain less education than their White peers (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992), and are more likely to drop out of school (Garibaldi, 1992). In particular, social scientists have been remiss in studying the positive educational

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decisions of these youth. As a result, there has been less focus on understanding how African American youth view the importance of staying in school and the extent to which the social support of important others (i.e., family and friends) is influential in sustaining their positive educational aspirations. Similarly, little is known about their perceptions of barriers to achieving their educational aspirations. This study was conducted to learn more about the role of these factors in the decisions African American youth make about staying in school. In addition, two areas of self-perceptions, self-esteem and racial self-esteem, were also examined to determine their influence on the educational efforts of these students.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Madden, 1986) was chosen as the conceptual framework for this study. This theory is one of the most well-established models for the prediction of intentional behavior. It has been successfully used to examine academic decisions by a number of researchers (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Koballa, 1988; Norwich & Duncan, 1990).

The TPB suggests that the immediate predictor of a behavior is the intention to carry out that behavior. Intentions are determined by three psychological variables: (a) attitude toward the behavior, (b) social norms toward the behavior, and (c) perceived control over achieving the behavior. The attitude variable represents the individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of the behavior. In this study, we examined attitudes toward completing the school year. The attitude is formed through a consideration of the potential consequences of carrying out the behavior. Positive attitudes are believed to be a result of the belief that the behavior will have positive outcomes.

Social norms reflect the influence of the perceived opinions of important others and the motivation to comply with these social referents. To the extent that important others think the individual should perform the behavior and to the extent that the individual is motivated to comply with these referents, social norms will exert a positive influence on the individual's intentions to complete the behavior.

Perceived behavioral control reflects the individual's perceptions of how difficult it will be to carry out the behavior. That is, it represents the individual's perceived ability to overcome obstacles that may hinder their behavioral attempts. In this study, perceived control over obstacles to completing school was examined.

The TPB asserts that each of the three determinants of the intention operates independently. By contrast, other factors such as self-esteem and racial self-esteem are hypothesized to operate through one of the three determinants of the behavioral intention according to this theory.

Self-esteem and racial self-esteem have received considerable attention as unique constructs in the study of African American youth (Bachman & O'Malley, 1984; Murry, Smith, & West, 1989; Spencer, 1985; Tashakkori & Thompson, 1990). Of particular concern to those interested in the academic well-being of African American youth has been the relationships between self-esteem, racial self-esteem, and academic outcomes. Actually, it has been the sometimes negative relationships among these constructs that have posed a conundrum for researchers and educators. Especially noteworthy has been the observation of what appears to be a negative relationship between the racial identity of African American students and their academic performance. Some have suggested that many African American youth have turned against striving for academic excellence as part of their overall rejection of the dominant culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978). For these youth, striving for academic excellence is thought to be a form of "acting White" and is perceived as betrayal of the Black culture.

Fordham (1996) suggests that African American youth may be employing Whites as an antireferent group and subsequently "Black out" behaviors perceived as White. However, it should be noted that there is little empirical support for the oppositional cultural argument. Indeed, some research efforts have found evidence that fails to support this hypothesis as it relates to African American students (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Still, if intentions to finish high school or to get good grades are perceived to be indicators of academic achievement and thereby forms of acting White, an inverse relationship between a student's racial self-esteem and academic performance might be expected.

Moreover, there has often been an observed lack of agreement between what is referred to as global self-esteem and racial self-esteem among some African American students (Hughes & Demo, 1989). That is, it appears that some African American students may have overall high self-esteem but feel poorly about their racial selves, as evidenced by poor racial self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1979, 1993). Not surprisingly, research findings indicating such a relationship have been troubling to those interested in African American adolescent self-concept development (Cross, 1987; Porter & Washington, 1979).

Our purpose in this study was to inspect factors that positively contribute to African American youth academic efforts. We hypothesized that each of the constructs determining behavioral intentions as described by the TPB (attitude, social norms, and perceived behavioral control) would be a significant predictor of youth intentions to stay in school and of their academic grade point averages (GPAs). In light of the numerous findings by others of

the critical role played by self-esteem and racial self-esteem in African American students' academic achievement as discussed above, it was hypothesized that these two factors would have an independent influence on student intentions to complete the school year and on their GPAs. We hypothesized that high student self-esteem would be positively related to their intentions to complete the school year and to their GPA; however, high racial self-esteem would be negatively related to these two factors.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study was conducted in a large urban high school in the Midwest with a total enrollment of approximately 1,200 students. The students ranged in age from 14 to 17 years of age with a mean of 14.5 years. The student body was virtually all African American (99%), with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. The sample consisted of 231 African American ninth grade students (103 boys and 128 girls). This group constituted approximately 80% of the total freshman class. Although all students were invited and encouraged to participate in the study, some chose not to and others were absent or failed to secure parental or guardian permission to participate.

Thirty-one percent of the sample indicated that they resided with both biological parents, 28% reported living with only one parent, and the remaining 41% of the sample reported residing in a blended or extended family with relatives. These percentages are similar to those identified at the national level, where 33% of African American youth live with both parents and the remaining youth live in some form of extended or augmented family arrangement (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Similarly, 52% of the students in this sample reported receiving a lunch subsidy, suggesting low-income status. Nationally, 46% of African American students live below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995).

### Procedure

Youth were recruited with the assistance of a school guidance counselor, who served as primary liaison among students, parents, and research team members. Students were initially asked to volunteer through their homeroom class, where the study was explained in greater detail. Both students and their parent(s) or guardian were required to sign informed consent statements before youth could participate in the study.

Most students completed the questionnaire in groups of between 15 and 40 participants. Individual administrations of the survey were conducted to accommodate the schedules of a few students. A team of two African American graduate research assistants administered the surveys. Because of a potential wide variability in reading levels, one of the research assistants read the items to the group while the students followed along with their questionnaires and filled in their answers. The second research assistant was present and available to assist those students who had questions or experienced difficulty in completing the materials. Each questionnaire administration took approximately 1 hour to complete. Participants were paid \$15 for their time and effort.

### Measures

Intention to complete school was measured with five items that assessed the degree to which students intended, would try, expected, and were determined to complete the current school year. These items were answered using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*disagree very much*) to 7 (*agree very much*). The responses to these five items were averaged for one scale score of intentions where higher numbers indicated stronger intentions to complete the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .56.

Students' attitude toward completing the school year was measured with eight items that employed a semantic differential scale. These items asked the respondents how positively or negatively they viewed completing the current school year and represent those most commonly described in the literature (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). On a 7-point scale, respondents indicated whether or not they felt that completing the school year would be rewarding or punishing, useful–useless, bad–good, harmful–beneficial, wise–foolish, unpleasant–pleasant, desirable–undesirable, and boring–exciting. Items were reverse scored when necessary to make positive responses coincide with higher values. Responses to these items were averaged to provide an overall Attitude score toward completing the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .84.

Four items were used to assess students' perceptions of social norms toward school completion, that is, how most people important to them would feel about their staying in school. On a scale ranging from 1 (*unlikely*) to 7 (*likely*), respondents reported whether most people who were important to them (family and friends) thought they should complete the school year (two items), would be disappointed if they did not complete the current school year, and expected them to complete the current school year. These four items were also averaged to provide an overall indicator of strength of the social

norms toward school completion or, in other words, the level of social support students felt they received for completing the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .45.

Perceived behavioral control over completing the school year was measured using four items. Responses were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*difficult or disagree*) to 7 (*easy or agree*). The items assessed the students' perceived difficulty of completing the school year, having control over staying in school, their ability to overcome obstacles to remaining in school, and the extent to which the decision to stay in school was up to the student. An average of the responses to these four items was calculated to provide an overall measure of students' perceptions of control over completing the school year. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .49.

Self-esteem was measured with 10 items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1979). Respondents rated their levels of agreement with each item using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). An example of these items is, "I take a positive attitude about myself." The reliability coefficient of this measure was .78.

Racial self-esteem was measured with 14 items (Hughes & Demo, 1989) that asked respondents to rank their levels of agreement with each statement using a scale ranging from 1 (*true*) to 4 (*not true at all*). Respondents were asked how true they thought it was that most Black people keep trying, love their families, are ashamed, are lazy, neglect their families, are trifling, are hardworking, do for others, give up easily, are weak, are proud of themselves, are honest, are selfish, and are strong. The reliability coefficient of this measure was .80.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary Analysis

The Attitude, Social Support, and Perceived Control scales were significantly correlated with one another and with the intention measure, suggesting that these theoretical constructs fit well together for this group of students. These theoretical components were also correlated with students' GPA and self-esteem. In addition, the mean scores of self-esteem and racial self-esteem were both high, and these two variables were positively correlated, suggesting that these students felt both favorable about themselves in general and their racial group.

### Multivariate Analyses

A series of hierarchical regressions were used in the analyses. Two equations tested how well the TPB variables predicted, first, student intentions to complete the school year and, second, their cumulative GPA. We used two additional equations to test the influence of self-esteem and racial self-esteem on student intentions to complete the school year and their GPA.

The first regression equation examined the influence of the components of the TPB (attitudes, social norm, and perceived control) on student intentions to complete the school year. Both attitudes toward completing the school year and perceptions of personal control over completing the school year significantly predicted students' intentions. (See Table 1 for all means, standard deviations, and regression coefficients.) Social support was not found to be a significant predictor. This finding is consistent with those of others that have frequently found no or only weak support for this component as a predictor (Farley, Lehman, & Ryan, 1981; Godin & Kok, 1996). Still, these TPB components together explained 50% of the variance in this model.

In a second regression equation, self-esteem and racial self-esteem were added to the TPB constructs to predict intentions to complete the school year. Of the two factors added in this equation, only self-esteem was a significant predictor of student intentions. It should be noted, however, that racial self-esteem was only marginally significant in the equation ( $p = .09$ ) but, as predicted, was negatively related to intention to complete school. The addition of both self-esteem and racial self-esteem only slightly increased the variance already explained by the TPB model.

Identical analyses to those employed above were used to predict students' GPAs. However, here only one of the TPB components, attitudes toward completing school, was a significant predictor when entered in the first equation. Neither social norms nor perceived control predicted GPAs for this sample of students. When self-esteem and racial self-esteem were added in a second equation, neither was found to be a significant predictor. Collectively, these factors predicted GPA considerably less well than they did intentions to complete the school year (11% vs. 52%).

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The positive educational decision making of African American youth has received scant attention from social science researchers. At present, there is clearly insufficient understanding of the factors that contribute to their favorable academic efforts. Moreover, the most recent data indicate that the gap

**TABLE 1: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Intentions to Complete School and Grade Point Average (GPA) ( $N = 231$ )**

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Intention</i>				<i>GPA</i>			
			<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Attitude	6.15	0.89	.51**	.05	.50**	.05	.32**	.08	.32**	.08
Social norm	6.62	0.79	.08	.06	.07	.06	.03	.09	.03	.09
Perceived control	5.61	1.09	.29**	.04	.27**	.04	.08	.06	.08	.06
Self-esteem	3.33	0.46			.12*	.10			-.01	.15
Racial self-esteem	3.18	0.43			-.09	.10			-.01	.15
$R^2$			.50		.52		.13		.13	
$R^2$ change					.02*				.0	
<i>F</i>			75.83		47.95		11.30		6.73	
<i>df</i>			3,225		5,223		3,223		5,221	

\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .001$ .

between Black and White high school completion rates is higher now than it was in 1992 (American Council on Education, 2000). Such findings suggest that greater efforts may need to be spent actively fostering positive academic behaviors rather than solely attempting to decrease negative ones.

This article reports the findings from a study of 231 African American high school freshmen. These youth were queried about their intentions to complete the school year. In addition, we assessed their actual GPAs. The TPB was used as a conceptual model for this study. In addition to the conceptualizations of the TPB, however, the researchers were also interested in inspecting how student self-perceptions might play a role in their academic efforts. The interest in this aspect was sparked by frequent anecdotal reports that African American youth may be experiencing intrapersonal conflicts with regard to their perceptions of self. Foremost, it is contended that some African American youth fail to do well academically because they perceive positive academic efforts to be instances of “acting White.” Hence, some hold that in an effort to sustain a positive Black identity, these youth oppose doing well in school.

Our findings indicate that the TPB was a useful tool in explaining intentions to complete the school year for this group of African American youth. By far, student attitude toward school was the most significant predictor of their intentions to stay in school. Those students who believed that school would be a rewarding and beneficial experience reported the strongest intentions to remain in school. Although not a surprising finding, it does suggest that still greater emphasis should be placed on the “selling” of the rewards and benefits of staying in high school. In other words, students must believe that they will receive a favorable return on their time and investment in school.

We also found the perceived control component of the TPB model to be a significant predictor of student intentions to complete the school year. That is, the greater the students’ perceptions of their abilities to overcome barriers related to school completion the greater were their intentions to complete the school year. This finding suggests that efforts to enhance the favorable academic decisions of African American youth should consider as part of that strategy the removal of perceived obstacles, for example, getting to school, and so forth. However, the social normative component of the TPB model was not predictive for this group of students. It should be noted that other research efforts have also failed to find support for the social normative component of the TPB model. Some report finding a strong relationship between social norms and attitudes and have suggested that people’s attitudes are influenced by significant others, and consequently, these two constructs do not operate independently as suggested by the TPB adherents (Vallerand,

Deshaies, Currier, Pelletier, & Mongeau, 1992). It may also be the case that our instruments merely lacked the sensitivity to assess the influence of the social network of these youth. In either event, we do not wish to suggest that our findings provide strong evidence that the social network of these youth is unimportant to their decisions to remain in school.

The inclusion of racial self-esteem and self-esteem measures into our analyses only slightly enhanced our ability to predict students' intentions to stay in school. Again, our main goal here was to inspect for possible evidence of the phenomenon referred to as acting White, or oppositional behavior. Specifically, we wanted to see if having high racial self-esteem would negatively influence a student's academic efforts. Also of interest was the assessment of self-esteem generally on academic decisions. Self-esteem was found to be a significant predictor of student intentions to complete school, whereas racial self-esteem only approached significance. However, it is noteworthy that the influence of racial self-esteem was negative, as predicted, suggesting that this area of inquiry warrants further empirical study with, perhaps along with other considerations, a larger sample size. Finally, neither of the self-perception variables was related to GPA. The failure to observe a relationship between our measures and grade point average is likely due to the fact that many factors contribute to actual student achievement, for example, types of courses taken. It is also true that our instruments were slanted toward the assessment of intention to complete school rather than assessing grades *per se*.

Although the observations of this study appear to be in agreement with some of the conceptions and findings of others, it is important to recognize the limitations of this study. The sample used in this study is relatively small and cross sectional in nature. Hence we strongly encourage others to employ, when possible, larger samples and those with even greater racial diversity. Some of the measures we employed would clearly have benefited from higher levels of internal consistency. Also, like some previous researchers who have employed the TPB as a conceptual model, we are unsure how the influence of others, that is, persons in the social networks, manifests itself in the decision-making process. This is an important question with respect to improving our understanding of how African American teenagers make positive academic decisions, given the influence that we believe peers are likely to exert on one another.

The students participating in this study were African American, attending a virtually all-African American high school and living in primarily low-income families headed by a single parent. Their responses may be typical of students who have similar experiences, but the results should not be generalized to all African American students. Many characteristics of high schools,

neighborhoods, and families, which differ from setting to setting, may influence both academic outcomes and perceptions of self as well as the responses students make on these measures. Yet although the results of this study do not necessarily reflect the reality of all African American students, they do examine the reality for significant numbers of these youth.

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