

Gender, Achievement, and African-American Students' Perceptions of Their School Experience

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This article discusses factors related to academic achievement among African-American male and female students. A review of the literature on achievement and gender differences among African-American students and two empirical studies I conducted are presented. The results of the first study, which focused on achievement, indicated that successful achievers reported more positive self-perceptions, more interpersonal support, and more active problem solving. The results of the second study, which focused on gender differences, indicated differences in support favoring females. In addition, some gender differences were found in this sample that differed from those found for White students.

A considerable and continuing problem in American education concerns the schools' failure to effectively educate diverse groups of students. In spite of considerable rhetoric over the past several years, a recent report disseminated by the American Association of University Women concluded that schools consistently shortchange girls (Wellesley College Center for Research on Women [WCCRW], 1992). Similarly, a steady stream of statistical information emanating from school districts, as well as from numerous research studies indicates that African-American, Hispanic, Native-American, and some Asian students are faring very poorly in the nation's schools (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Quality Education for Minorities Project [QEM], 1990). Although interest in the school performance of members of these groups has been somewhat variable in the

past, the increased visibility of African-American students and White females in the nation's schools, the realization that individuals from these groups will soon constitute a major portion of the nation's work force, and the increasingly vocal demands of both White women and African-American women and men for equity in education and elsewhere, has prompted some researchers and practitioners to give serious attention to research aimed at understanding and enhancing the school performance and behavior of the diverse groups in America's schools.

Unfortunately, this increased attention has been characterized by two important conceptual limitations. First, much of the research in this area has tended to treat disparate groups as if they were members of similar, yet exclusive groups labeled minorities or women. Categorizations such as minority fail to recognize the important cultural differences that exist among the various racial and ethnic groups that live in the U.S. Furthermore, the lack of attention to the cultural uniqueness of each of the various groups comprising this society ignores the possibility that some behavior may be culturally based. In addition, research and practice oriented toward women or minorities ignores the fact that all of us hold multiple statuses. All of us are members of race, ethnic, social class, and gender groups. More attention to the ways in which our multiple statuses affect our behavior is needed.

A second conceptual limitation relevant to research in this area is that a large number of studies have taken a deficit-oriented approach to behavior. Specifically, they have emphasized minorities' and women's failure to perform in the same manner as White men and boys. This approach ignores evidence of successful performance, especially in the academic sphere, by members of these groups. This perspective, with its dismissal of the validity of difference, tends to lead to victim blame. It also limits researchers and practitioners to methods and strategies that are most successful with White males and assumes these are the norm, thus leading to the belief that these procedures are the only ones possible. Furthermore, this emphasis detracts researchers and practitioners from obtaining a better understanding of which factors are associated with successful school academics and other behaviors among diverse groups of students.

In this article, I focus on African-American adolescents' perceptions of their school experiences. The first section presents a brief overview of research on the achievement patterns of African-American students. The next section presents my research on ways that African-American students perceive and cope with school. This research addresses the question of whether or not there are differences between male and female students in their perceptions of school and in the strategies they use to cope with common school occurrences. I also describe gender differences and similarities within low- and high-achieving groups of African-American stu-

dents. My premise is that in order to obtain a more accurate understanding of students' school behavior, it is necessary to consider the intersecting statuses they hold as well as their interpretations of the events that occur in the school setting. All of these variables need to be viewed within the broader social context.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

African-American Students' Academic Performance

A large body of literature exists that concerns the school-related behavior of African-American students. Much of this writing concerns this group's academic performance and most often, their performance is discussed in comparison to that of White middle-class students. More specifically, a great deal of the research on this topic focused on identifying reasons why African-American students demonstrate widespread failure and/or low school performance. A comprehensive review of the literature on this topic is beyond the scope and standpoint of this article; however, it is worthwhile to summarize the major trends this research has taken in recent years.

Research comparing the educational achievement of African-American and White students has consistently shown that Whites tend to outperform African Americans on a variety of measures. However, recent research suggests this gap is narrowing somewhat. For example, Nelson-Le Gall (1991) wrote that data from the ongoing National Assessment of Educational Progress study showed steady gains in achievement among African Americans during the past 2 to 3 decades. Armor (1992) attributed this gain to increases in African Americans' socioeconomic status during this time period. R. Scott (1985) studied racial differences in high school students' performance on the California Achievement Test. He found that, although Whites obtained higher scores overall, the magnitude of the racial differences varied across subjects. African-American and White students' scores were closest in spelling and math and furthest apart in reading. In addition to gains in academic performance, there are indications that African Americans have increased their levels of educational attainment. Between 1960 and 1986, the average level of educational attainment for African Americans increased from 8th grade to the completion of high school (QEM, 1990).

In spite of these trends, however, the academic performance of African-American students continues to lag behind that of Whites. One study found that this gap appeared as early as the end of 2nd grade (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). In addition, major differences still existed between these two groups in the types of programs there were placed in, their college

attendance rates, and the degree to which they were excluded from school (Nelson-Le Gall, 1991; QEM, 1990).

Research that has attempted to explain African-American students' school performance may be categorized into three general but related approaches. One, focusing on individual characteristics, suggests that African-American students' school failure is related primarily to psychological factors such as poor self-concept (Powell, 1989) or lack of motivation (Graham, 1989). This approach has been criticized for its oversimplicity and lack of sensitivity to African-American experiences (Graham, 1989).

The second approach has focused on the lack of equity of school resources as the primary source of the low academic performance of African-American students. This approach argues that African-American students, especially those from poor backgrounds, are denied access to adequate educational resources, are subjected to low teacher expectations, and are victims of school policies such as tracking or exclusion from school (Fine, 1991; Oakes, 1985). Others suggest that African-American students may be less inclined to become involved in learning from a curriculum that ignores or debases their culture and heritage (Boateng, 1990). Note that many of these researchers argue that these school-related factors may lead to changes in individual characteristics such as decreased self-esteem and motivation.

The third perspective argues that the explanation of poor school performance among African-American students is found in structural conditions in American society. Such conditions include racial stratification, which is used to maintain African Americans' low status in this society (Mickelson & Smith, 1989), and societal policies that exclude African Americans from fully participating in social and economic institutions (Ogbu, 1990). According to Ogbu, schools are organized to provide an inferior education to African-American students, thus perpetuating their low status in society. This perspective suggests that specific student factors, such as negative self-perceptions, decreased motivation, and lowered levels of academic achievement are the result of society's perpetuation of low status for this group both in the schools and in the community through exclusion from the work force.

Relatively few studies have investigated the antecedents of academic success in African-American students. It seems particularly useful to investigate this phenomenon because those students who perform well are subjected to the same oppressive societal and school conditions as those who fail. How do these students resist the debilitating impact of these conditions? Some research suggests that academically successful African-American students have high levels of resilience and that these students were more likely to identify sources of interpersonal support in and outside

of the school setting (Pollard, 1989). However, more research is needed in this area.

Gender Differences in Achievement and Motivation of African-American Students

For many years, research on African Americans paid little attention to within-group differences, especially with respect to school performance. Research on gender has tended either to focus on Whites only or has focused on assumed similarities and ignored racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences among women. As a result, it appears that research on gender differences among Whites may be generalized to all other racial and ethnic groups. However, studies of gender differences in the school behavior of African Americans indicate that such generalizations may be invalid.

Research on gender differences in the academic performance of African-American students shows a tendency toward higher levels of achievement among girls than among boys (Mickelson, 1989; Nelson-Le Gall, 1991). This pattern seems to be related to historic as well as contemporary factors. Jones (1985) noted that around the turn of the century, African-American female adolescents had higher school attendance and literacy rates than men. She argued that African-American males were less likely to attend school because they needed to work to help their families survive, and they were barred from the types of jobs that required schooling. Nelson-Le Gall indicated that African-American male students were more likely to be misjudged by teachers and less likely to receive educational encouragement and information than African-American female students.

These gender differences may also be affected by other factors. Fleming (1984) found that college environment had an impact on gender differences in cognitive growth. In historically African-American colleges, African-American men showed greater cognitive growth than African-American women. The reverse pattern was evident for African-American students attending predominantly White colleges (Fleming, 1984). Mickelson (1989) noted that socioeconomic status also affected educational attainment among African Americans. She indicated that African-American women from lower class backgrounds attain less schooling than Whites, middle-class African-American women, or African-American men.

A few studies have investigated sex differences in achievement-related variables among African-American students. Sewell, Farley, Manni, and Hunt (1982) found that sex differences in achievement motivation favored males. However, these researchers did not find a relationship between motivation and school achievement. Other studies have identified sex differences in African-American students' perceptions and attitudes.

Williams and Haynes (1984) surveyed high-school students' perceptions of counselors. They found that more males held a negative view of their counselors' effectiveness, whereas more female students held a positive view. Marcus, Gross, and Seefeldt (1991) investigated elementary students' perceptions of teachers. They found that African-American boys felt they were treated more negatively by their teachers than African-American girls or Whites. Finally, Thomas and Shields' (1987) investigated work values of African-American adolescents. Their results indicated that although both boys and girls valued intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work, girls held stronger extrinsic values than boys. More research is needed in this area of gender differences in African-American students' perceptions and attitudes.

More recently, research has focused on African-American men. This is partly due to the growing realization that the status of African-American men is under severe attack in this society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the school setting. For example, in a study of Chicago schools, Rowan (1989) found that African-American male students were significantly more likely to be retained or demoted than African-American female students at every grade level. Furthermore, Rowan argued, African-American male children began to exhibit negative attitudes and behaviors toward school as early as 4th grade. Rowan further suggested that African-American male students tended to avoid intellectual activities as a result of the racism they encountered, peer pressure, and because they were not well prepared for the school setting. Another perspective that may help explain the behavior of male African Americans in school is provided by Ross and Jackson (1991) who studied teachers' perceptions of African-American elementary students. The teachers were given hypothetical descriptions of students and asked to rate their preferences for them as well as predict their expected achievement. Male African Americans were viewed more negatively by the teachers than were female African Americans. These early school experiences have important ramifications because African-American men are increasingly less likely to enter and be retained in college than African-American women, White women, or White men (Dunn, 1988; Hacker, 1992).

Although recent evidence has compelled a focus on the education of African-American men, data exist that suggest that African-American women do not fare so well in school either. For example, Grant (1984) observed six 1st-grade classrooms that ranged in composition from 20% to 96% African American. Half of the classes were taught by White teachers and half by African-American teachers. Grant found that both groups of teachers rated the performance of African-American female students below that of White female students, but above that of African-American male students. In addition, African-American females were more likely to be

encouraged to develop and assessed by social rather than cognitive skills. Grant's work was supported by a later study of teacher-student interactions at the elementary level (Irvine, 1986). In this observational study of 63 classrooms ranging from kindergarten to 5th grade, Irvine found that African-American girls received less positive feedback from teachers as they progressed in grade levels. Irvine noted that in this case, teachers' interactions with African-American girls became more similar to their interactions with White girls at the higher grade levels.

Chester (1983) found that, at the college level, African-American women had lower aspirations and reported lower self-esteem than African-American men. A recent review of major research on schools' contributions to gender differences found that African-American females tend to be given short shrift in classrooms in comparison to Whites (WCCRW, 1992). However, as Fine (1991) pointed out ". . . in the United States, public schools . . . were never designed for low income students and students of color. And they have never been very successful in this work" (p. 21). Therefore, it is not surprising that evidence exists that historically "attempts by black women and girls to gain quality education in this society have been thwarted by dominant American mores and values, prejudice against women, racial discrimination and the American legal system" (Lewis et al., 1989, p. 379).

Clearly there is a need for more research concerning the ways in which African-American women and men cope with school—particularly when that coping leads to academic success. In addition, more research is needed that takes socioeconomic status into account as well as gender and race. Often socioeconomic status and race are confounded in studies that compare White students with African Americans or other minority groups. However, research by Graham and Long (1986) indicated that the interaction of race and socioeconomic status affects children's attributional thinking more than either of these variables alone. Such research needs to take the particular perspectives African Americans bring to the school setting into account. These perspectives are shaped not only by the historical and contemporary oppression that African Americans encounter, but also by the strengths and adaptations drawn from African-American culture. As Collins (1991) indicated, gender among African Americans needs to be conceptualized within this cultural framework.

SCHOOL-RELATED PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS

The research described in this section brings together two of my primary areas of interest: issues related to successful educational and occupational

coping among African-American women (Pollard, 1990), and factors underlying successful school achievement in African-American and Hispanic students (Pollard, 1989). Studies of African-American women's perceptions of their coping strategies in higher education and in the workplace suggest that many of the resources other students and workers have access to are not available to these women. However, African-American women are able to identify alternative sources of support, most often outside of their educational and occupational institutions (Pollard, 1990; E. Scott & Pollard, 1981).

Two studies focusing on African-American students are described here. The first study investigated factors related to successful academic achievement among minority adolescents of lower socioeconomic status (Pollard, 1989). The questions addressed in this study included: What factors differentiated between high and low academic achievers in this population and are there gender differences in these factors? This study focused on within-group rather than cross-race comparisons. In addition, this study focused on students of low socioeconomic status, because poor students of color have more difficulties coping with school than other groups and relatively little research has investigated academic success in this population.

The sample for this study consisted of 361 high- and low-achieving male and female adolescents in five middle schools and five high schools in a large urban community. In all of the schools, a majority of the students were from minority groups. All of the students demonstrated average levels of reading ability as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Hieronymus et al., 1991). A majority of these students were African American. Table 1

TABLE 1
Characteristics of the Sample: Study 1

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Number of People</i>
Achievement level	
GPA \geq 2.5	217
GPA \leq 1.5	144
Ethnicity	
African American	295
Hispanic	66
Gender	
Female	182
Male	179
Grade level	
Middle school	204
High school	157

provides a summary of the gender, ethnic, grade level, and achievement characteristics of this sample.

The students responded to a group-administered survey questionnaire in their schools. The questionnaire included the following achievement-related social psychological factors: perceptions of support from teachers, perceptions of support from other individuals, self-perceptions of ability, parental influences, involvement in school activities, attitudes toward education and individual success, and problem-solving strategies.

With respect to academic achievement and consistent with data from samples of White students (Meyer, 1987), data analyses showed that high achievers had higher self-concepts of ability; reported experiencing more support from teachers, parents, and others; and demonstrated more active problem-solving strategies. These characteristics also have been identified in resilient children (Werner, 1984). It may be argued that the adolescents included in this study experience stress emanating from their backgrounds of poverty as well as from racial discrimination in society and the schools. In spite of these negative conditions, some of these children exhibited social and psychological characteristics that enabled them to successfully cope with school.

With respect to gender differences, in this predominantly African-American sample, female students engaged in more active problem solving than did male students. Female students reported more active problem solving in two ways. First, female students indicated that they would make more of an effort to solve problems than male students did. Second, when asked how they would handle a series of common school-related problems such as conflicts with others or difficulties in doing schoolwork, more female than male students said they would seek help from others. These were the only statistically significant findings with respect to gender. However, there were also slight, although not statistically significant, gender differences in perceptions of social support favoring females.

The results of this study suggested two areas warranting further investigation. The first concerned additional exploration of gender differences in African-American students' perceptions of their school-related experiences. In particular, it was important to examine whether there were other differences in the ways male and female African-American adolescents described and interpreted their school experiences and the ways they coped with them. For example, do male and female African-American students differ with respect to their descriptions of their academic work? In addition, more detailed information concerning the specific nature of interpersonal support and problem solving was needed.

The follow-up study used a structured interview format that allowed students to provide detailed information concerning their school experiences. The primary purpose of this study was to examine gender and

achievement level differences in African-American adolescents' academic self-perceptions, problem-solving strategies, and perceptions of the nature of interpersonal support available to them inside and outside of school.

The follow-up study included 98 African-American adolescents in two middle schools and two high schools in a large urban community. The African-American student population in these schools ranged from 41% to 99%. Students were in Grades 6 through 12. The students were randomly selected from two stratified groups based on cumulative grade point average and sex.¹ Table 2 provides a description of the sample.

Unlike the first study, socioeconomic status could not be utilized as one of the sample selection criteria. However, students were asked about their parents' occupations and the structure of their families. Student response with regard to parent employment may be placed in the following categories: unemployed, semiskilled workers, and service workers. Two of the students were self-supporting. Almost half of the subjects ($n = 48$) lived in homes headed by their mothers. One third ($n = 30$) lived with two parents and one fifth ($n = 20$) lived with their fathers or other family members. Data analyses showed no differences in student responses related to parent occupation or family structure.

Consistent with other research on African-American students (Mickelson, 1989; Nelson-Le Gall, 1991), girls in this study had higher achievement levels than boys. Unlike studies with samples of White students, however, there were no gender differences among these African-American students with respect to academic self-perceptions. Specifically, in this study, the students' perceptions of academic self-concept were related more closely to actual academic achievement than to gender. Nearly half of all male and female students (47.6% of boys and 49.1% of girls) said they were average students. About one third of both the boys and girls rated themselves as slightly above average. Students used their grades and their assessments of their classmates' academic performances as the bases of their own academic self-perceptions. By contrast, studies with samples of White students indicated that academic self-perceptions were more closely related to gender and that boys consistently rate their academic abilities higher than girls do, even when there are no differences in achievement (Linn & Peterson, 1985).

With respect to problem-solving strategies, the findings from the follow-up study suggest more gender similarities than differences. Both male and female students indicated they would respond actively to most common school-related problems such as conflicts with others or difficulties with

¹In the follow-up study, reading ability could not be controlled for because standardized test data were not available. As a result, it is probable that a range of abilities was included in the sample. However, all students who were identified as having characteristics that would categorize them as exceptional were excluded from the study.

TABLE 2
Gender and Achievement Level Characteristics of the Sample: Study 2

	<i>Females</i>		<i>Males</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
GPA \geq 2.0	39	39.8	17	17.3	56	57.1
GPA \leq 1.9	14	14.3	28	28.6	42	42.9
Total	53	54.1	45	45.9	98	100.0

school work. With the exception of one type of problem, both sexes indicated they would first seek support from others—teachers, administrators, or family members—in solving problems encountered at school. In addition, a majority of both boys and girls indicated they would attempt several problem-solving strategies on a contingency basis (e.g., “First I would try X and if that didn’t work, I’d try Y”). The analyses identified only one statistically significant sex difference in the students’ problem-solving strategies; namely, dealing with a conflict with a peer. More female than male students indicated that they would handle a peer who started a conflict with them by telling a teacher (69.9% of females and 38.1% of males) or moving away from the peer (81.3% girls and 18.8% boys). More male than female students said they would talk directly with the peer who started the conflict (72.7% boys vs. 27.3% girls) or would confront the peer aggressively (66.7% boys vs. 33.3% girls). Student achievement levels did not influence their selection of problem-solving strategies.

Finally, regarding support, the results of the second study suggested that both boys and girls could identify teachers who provided support for their schooling; however, they differed in the types of help they reported receiving. Girls were twice as likely as boys (69.2% vs. 30.8%) to indicate that teachers were supportive of them by providing specific help with schoolwork. This category included such examples as “taking time to provide special help,” “explaining things when I don’t understand,” and “letting me come after school or during ‘prep’ period for extra help.” Contrastingly, more boys than girls (60% vs. 40%) reported that teachers provided support to them through such responses as “listens to and understands me,” and “lets us get to know him/her” or “jokes around with us.” This finding contradicts research with samples of White students that argued that teachers tend to support the academic behavior of male over female students (E. Scott & McCollum, 1993). There were no differences between high- and low-achieving students with respect to types of teacher support.

There were no sex or achievement level differences in students’ descriptions of other types of interpersonal support for their schooling. Over two

thirds of the boys and girls did not find their peers particularly helpful toward them with respect to schoolwork. However, 91% of the boys and 86% of the girls identified individuals outside of school who supported their schooling. Most often these were family members. Two kinds of help were provided by these out-of-school sources: specific help with homework and general advice and encouragement to persist and work hard.

Students had no difficulty identifying their models for future plans and aspirations. In addition, three fourths of both male and female students identified same-sex adults as important models for their educational and occupational plans for the future. Interestingly, only seven students identified an adult from the school setting. Most often the boys named a male family member and the girls identified a female relative. The individuals were identified as important models to these students because they were personally supportive, had desirable personal characteristics, or because they had high levels of occupational and/or educational attainment. The fact that boys in this sample easily identified same-sex models, especially within their families, belies a common stereotype that positive role models do not exist for African-American male children and adolescents.

To summarize, the two studies previously described were aimed at exploring how African-American male and female adolescents perceived and coped with their school experiences. The primary parameters of interest were achievement level and gender. The two studies cannot be compared directly because of differences in methods and design. In addition, some variables that were controlled in the first study (ability and SES) could not be controlled in the second investigation. However, compared together, these two studies provide three key findings about African-American adolescents in school. First, unlike studies that focus almost exclusively on school failure among African-American youngsters, these studies suggest that many of these students show evidence of possessing several of the social and psychological variables associated with academic success. Second, as with all students, interpersonal support is an important factor needed to help African-American adolescents cope with school. However, many of these students find such support outside, rather than within, the school setting. Finally, when support is found within the school setting, there are important differences in the frequency and nature of support African-American boys and girls receive.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous research indicated that gender differences in the school performance and behavior of African-American populations favors girls (Mickelson, 1989; Nelson-Le Gall, 1991). The research described in this

article corroborates these findings and identifies specific school-related factors that contribute to this gender difference.

The results of the first study indicate that some of the social and psychological variables associated with success in African-American students are the same as those associated with success for White students (Meyer, 1987). High-achieving African-American students report greater confidence in their abilities, more support from others, and more active problem-solving strategies. This finding is noteworthy because the African-American students came from relatively poor economic backgrounds. Previous research suggested that socioeconomic status interacted with race to a greater extent than found here (Graham & Long, 1986).

However, contrary to research on samples of White students, gender differences—when they appeared—favored girls in the two African-American samples. In addition, findings from both studies suggest that these students must obtain interpersonal support from outside, rather than inside, the school setting. This latter finding supports other research suggesting that African-American students perceive a lack of resources and support available to them within the school setting (Fine, 1991).

Consistent with prior research (Marcus et al., 1991), African-American boys in the two studies described here reported less academic support from teachers than girls did. However, it is noteworthy that both boys and girls in the second study indicated satisfaction with the type of support they received from their teachers. This particular finding suggests that some students, especially African-American boys, may not realize that they are at risk for academic failure because of the type of academic support they receive at school.

These findings need further exploration. Additional research is needed to clarify inconsistencies in students' perceptions of the type of support they obtain at school. For example, why are African-American boys less likely to seek support from others? Are these students able to distinguish support that is helpful for academic achievement from other types of support? How do both African-American boys and girls go about seeking and obtaining support outside of the school setting?

There is also a need for more research regarding how African-American students, as well as students from other cultures, perceive the role that gender plays in school. It is particularly important to obtain information regarding how students from various cultural backgrounds view the impact of race and gender on their behavior. In addition, the effects of socioeconomic status within samples of African Americans need further investigation.

Recent analyses of achievement patterns among African-American students emphasize the need for a cultural framework (Ogbu, 1990). Such a framework should incorporate not only the necessity to cope with historical

and ongoing oppression, but also highlight the strengths and adaptations that have been learned by members of this group. For example, when African-American women did not have access to interpersonal support within educational and occupational institutions, they adapted by identifying alternative sources of support within their communities (Pollard, 1990).

For a number of years, research on gender and race was often conducted in relative isolation. More recently, some researchers have recognized that such isolation is artificial. As a result, more information about the intersections of these statuses is available (Collins, 1991). Descriptions of some of the ways in which perceptions are affected by race and gender, as well as the relationships between those perceptions and academic success, may be helpful both to researchers and to practitioners who are concerned about meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

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