

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fathers' absence as a mediator of teacher's gender effect on self-concept in young African-American males

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The paper examines how self-concept in young inner city African American males is influenced by their teacher's gender. It also examines how this influence is mediated by father's presence in the child's life. The discussion offers suggestions on how to increase African-American men's presence in the classroom.

Recent empirical investigations show that African-American male students underperform in various academic subjects (Burchinal, McCartney, Steinberg, Crosnoe, Friedman, McLoyd, & Pianta, 2011; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Nebbitt, Lombe, LaPoint, & Bryant, 2009). In addition, studies suggest that African-American students have difficult experiences (Hucks, 2011; Morris, 2007) in school, as evidenced by high rates of school discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba, Horner, Choong-Geun, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). Although many African-American students share these school difficulties, the problems are more pronounced in African-American males (Butler,

Joubert, & Lewis, 2009; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Venable, 2009). For instance, the *2010 Schott Foundation 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education* found that nationally, only 47% of African-American males graduated from high school. It has also been reported that one out of four African-American males is expelled from school every year (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006) and a disproportionate number of African-American male students are in special education and behavioral classes (Harry & Klingler, 2006; Vallas, 2009; West-Olatunji, Baker, & Brooks, 2006). Further, the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that in grades 4 and 8, only 43% and 42% of African-American males scored at or above basic proficiency on reading exams Aud et. El (2011); over half of African-American males in these grades failed to meet minimum expectations for reading.

These disconcerting trends found in middle and secondary schools are not consistently seen in elementary school. In fact, a number of studies have shown found many African-American males begin their school years behind their counterparts but show strong academic improvement by second grade (Edwards & McMillion, 2000; Kunjufu, 1995; Wilson-Jones, 2003). Although African-American males do not progress to the level of their peers, they show remarkable academic progress during this period. However, the academic progress achieved in kindergarten and first grade is ephemeral; studies suggest that between third and fourth grade, African-American males encounter increased academic and disciplinary impediments (Davis, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2011).

Given their academic and disciplinary problems, one might hypothesize that the educational issues which African-American males encounter put them in jeopardy of developing antisocial and criminal behaviors. Indeed, researchers have found connections between students' school experiences and negative outcomes such as delinquency (Collins, 2011; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Venable, 2009). This correlation between school experiences and negative future outcomes makes it essential to conduct more research on the schooling experiences of these young men.

Historically, there have been negative academic and social perceptions of young African-American men (Hucks, 2011). Livingston and Nahiman (2006) theorized that exposure to these negative stereotypes may lead many young African-American males to adopt an overly masculine identity. This theory suggests that while these adolescents are developing their idea of self, the environmental context places them at risk of negative behaviors (Brown & Donnor, 2011). In addition to a societal context that propagates a negative image of African-American men, it has been suggested that students who lack confidence in school lose motivation and become disengaged (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Graham, 1998). Thus, African-American male students who have an underdeveloped sense of self and academic identity are less likely to progress in school (Cokley, McClain, Jones, & Johnson, 2011), are more likely to be identified as "at risk," and more likely to enter special education (Whiting, 2006; Vallas, 2009). As these young men continue through the educational pipeline, they learn to underachieve, rejecting school as a place to develop their identities (Whiting, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

One link between societal conduct and scholastic performance may be students' self-concept (Allen, 2001). Racial identity development theory, social identity theory, adolescent identity development theory, and personality development theory all discuss identity development

(Cross, 1991, 2001; Eccles, 2009; Erikson; 1963; Tajfel, 1982), which is a complicated process involving a multitude of psychosocial factors. In the current educational and social plight of African-American males, identity development is often obstructed and constricted. As noted by researchers, failure to achieve an identity may lead to confusion, discouragement and negative behaviors (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Powell, 2004; Carlson, Uppal, & Prosser, 2000; Dumas, Ellis, & Wolfe, 2012).

The self-esteem of a child directly impacts the development of his or her identity. Adler (1963) suggested that thinking influences the emotions and behaviors of an individual; in essence, our thoughts dictate our actions and define who we are. Horney (1950/1970) noted that an individual's culture and environment also shape the identity of the individual and it is thus crucial to recognize these factors as agents for positive growth.

Research supports that self-concept development during the first two to four years of a child's life is critical; furthermore, data has shown that negative self-concept is a problem that can affect all children, independent of their deprivation levels (Landry, Schilson, & Pardew, 1974). An individual's self perception greatly influences the way he or she responds to others and to the institutions in society. Moreover, an individual's conception of self influences their individual behaviors. Parents and teachers play a pivotal role in enhancing children's feelings of self, through provision of information and through day-to-day interactions.

Spencer (1984) conducted a study in which black and white preschoolers were administered a set of measures to assess for racial dissonance as it relates to self-concept development among this age-group. This study suggests that racial awareness is not yet internalized during the preoperational period (preschool years); instead, racial attitudes are viewed by preschoolers as objectively held information to be carried on into the subsequent developmental stage. Although Spencer's research suggests that racial stereotypes may not be internalized during the preoperational period, contributing at *that* time to a preschooler's self-concept development, this information will eventually be integrated into the "self" during the concrete operational phase (early school years). Based on Spencer's findings, implications for future work with minority preschoolers, specifically with African American male preschoolers, will involve intervening at the preoperational stage to better understand to how best frame objectively held information around racial and gender attitudes before self-concept development occurs.

Alston and Williams (1982) argue that since self-concept is acquired through socialization, fathers are particularly important for a boy's development of self-concept, and their absence from boys' lives puts young males at an increased risk for developmental deficiencies. The literature also suggests that the effects of fathers' might be more pronounced in young boys. The studies to date focused mainly on issues of delinquency and incarceration (Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Juon, Doherty, & Ensminger, 2006) and school behavioral problems (Peterson & Zill, 1986). Additional studies support that fatherlessness may also affect a child's grades and educational achievement. Numerous studies (Miller, 2005; Thompson 2006) theorize that self concept develops through children's emotional characteristics and parent child interaction. These early formations of self-concept are formed through intimate contact with caregivers. In 1985, Riley conducted a study which explored preschoolers' self-concept scores (measured using the Self-Concept and Motivation Inventory) with both a father present in the home and male preschool teacher in the classroom compared to preschoolers with either of the aforementioned variables. Riley hypothesized that having two strong male influences would significantly improve preschoolers' self-concept scores in relation to school. Riley's findings

support that having both a male influence in the home and in the classroom only produced significant changes in self-concept scores for male preschoolers. Riley could not find an indirect influence for significant self-concept change around attitudes toward the school, self and gender concept for males with only one male influence (either a male preschool teacher or a father present in the home). Riley's findings suggest that although having a male preschool teacher may assist disadvantaged male preschoolers with their self-concept development on some level, there may need to be additional male reinforcement outside of the classroom to support these positive effects (e.g., uncle, older brother, male family friend).

Historical work by Bowlby (1969) showed that early interactions between children and their caregivers are important as they help to develop models for children to guide their self-understanding. The support of parental interactions and attachment with self-concept in children in early school years has been supported in subsequent work by Clark and Symons (2000) and Easterbrooks and Abeles (2000). Biller & Bahm (1971) found that father's absence did affect self-concept in young boys. To date, little empirical research has examined these issues in inner city African-American boys in nontraditional class settings. This study therefore examined the impact of being in all-male classes taught by male teachers on the self-concept of young African-American males. In addition, we explored how fathers' presence might mediate the impact of male teachers on self-concept.

METHOD

The study was conducted in two inner-city elementary schools in Baltimore, Maryland, and consisted of all 55 students in all-male classes and 55 students randomly selected from regular co-ed classes. There were no significant demographic or socioeconomic differences between the experimental and comparison groups.

School "A" had a female principal and a population of 440 students, 215 of which were male and 225 female. Within School A, there were two all-male classes, taught by male teachers, two all-female classes taught by female teachers and 20 traditional coed student classes taught by male and female teachers.

School "B" was also headed by a female principal and had a total student population of 580, 294 of whom were males and 286 females. Seventeen percent of the teachers in school B were male teachers. Two classes, from a total of 22, were all-male classes taught by male teachers while the other 20 classes were co-ed and taught by male and female teachers. There were no specific selection criteria for students to be placed in the traditional coed or non-traditional gender specific classrooms.

MEASURE

The McDaniel-Piers Children's Self-Concept Scale (McDaniel & Piers, 1975) was used in this research because of its widespread use in measuring the self-concept of children. The instrument has also been used in studies of teaching behavior and in studies on the effects of parental attitudes on self-concept. The McDaniel-Piers Children's Self-Concept Scale is an adaptation for children of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale. Items deemed appropriate for younger children were selected from the original instrument and their wording was simplified. The tester reads the

item and the child responds “yes” or “no” on an answer sheet. It consists of 40 items that can be read aloud by the test administrator, and it can be administered in groups. The norms of the scale were based on over 2,000 children ages 6 to 9 years old from metropolitan schools. Self-concept scores range from 0 to 40 with a mean of 25.87 and a standard error of measurement of 2.77. The scale has an internal consistency reliability of .70 in addition to high test-retest reliability and a high level of concurrent validity in that high level of self-concept is inversely related to measures of psychological problems.

PROCEDURE

All students were administered the instrument in the school environment in groups of 20 to 25 students until all students were tested. The instrument was administered to all students, including girls in coed classes. However, only the responses of African-American males who were in all-male classes and males randomly selected from the traditional classes were included in the analyses.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of African-American male students in grades two through four in all-male classes taught by male teachers ($n=55$) and males in traditional classes taught by female teachers ($n=55$); 72% of the sample were drawn from School B whereas 28% were from school A. The largest number of boys were in the fourth grade (43%), followed by third grade (33%), and then second grade (24%). Over two-thirds of the sample (69%, $n=76$) were from a family headed by a single mother, 34 students (31%) were from two-parent families. The majority of the students (83%) received free lunches were low income.

RESULTS

We first determined if there were differences in the self-concept of African-American male students with male teachers ($n=55$) and those in traditional classes with female teachers ($n=55$). There were significant differences in self-concept scores ($t = 3.223$, $p = .002$), the mean score of the traditional class was 26.78 and the mean score of the all-male class was 30.16 suggesting that students in the all-male classes had a better self-concept than those in traditional classrooms. These differences were also consistent across grade levels, suggesting that a male presence may have some effect during the early education years.

Next, we determined whether the differences in self-concept were based on parental residential status. Among youth enrolled in the all-male classes we looked at self-concept scores based on whether the student resided in a home with both mother and father or just mother. There was no significant difference in self-concept between those with two parents or one parent ($t = 1.467$, $p = .149$). This suggests that residential status did not affect self-concept in these students.

To understand more about how parental residential status might influence the effects of male teachers on self-concept, we looked at differences in self-concept among those male

students whose father was absent from home. Among children who resided with a single mother there was a significant difference in self-concept between those in the traditional classes and those in male teacher classes ($t = 2.956$, $p = .004$). The mean self-concept score was higher in those in the male-taught classes (30.51) than in students in the traditional female-taught classes (26.97). These results suggest that positive effects are associated with the interactions between male teachers and male students, particularly when a child is not residing with his father.

ONE YEAR FOLLOW UP STUDY

One year later we examined longitudinal effects of the self-concepts of African-American males who had previously been in all-male classrooms. The analyses included males who had been in all-male classes either one or two years prior but who were, at the time, completing an academic year in a traditional classroom setting with a female teacher. As in the initial data collection, both male and female took the self-concept instrument although we analyzed only data from male students.

We wanted to determine whether African-American males who had participated in an all-male/male teacher educational setting would exhibit more positive self-concept after leaving that setting than African-American males who had never participated in this nontraditional setting. More specifically, we wanted to understand whether the positive differences we had observed in self-concept continued in primary school-aged African-American males after they left a nontraditional setting.

Twenty-six subjects were randomly chosen from the earlier study sample for participation in the follow-up study, with equal numbers selected from the original treatment (non-traditional setting) and control (traditional setting) groups. At the time of data collection, all participants in the follow-up study were in the third grade, were in co-educational settings, and were in classes without a teacher's assistant. To minimize the interference of extraneous factors, we controlled for free or reduced lunch, number of years in a non-traditional school setting (none, one, or two years), and family composition: two parents, single mother, or other primary care-giver (i.e., single father or grandmother). Non-traditional students were defined as those who had been in an all-male class taught by a male teacher for one or more years. Traditional students were those who had attended co-educational classes taught by a female instructor throughout their school years.

In the follow-up study, both groups demonstrated a negative change from the prior year in self-concept scores. Scores from the entire sample ranged from a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 36 with a mean score of 23. Table I shows the mean scores and frequency distribution of the sample and subgroups within the sample.

Table 1
Self-Concept Mean Scores over Independent Variables

Criterion Variable: Self-Concept score	Mean	S.D.	N	Pct.
For entire sample	23.000	6.911	26	100.0
Family Composition				
1=Two parents	23.167	8.329	6	24.0
2=Single mother	22.625	6.985	16	64.0
3=Other	20.330	2.309	3	8.0
Free Lunch				
1=Yes	24.765	6.629	17	65.4
2=No	19.667	6.500	9	34.6
Years in all-male class				
0=None	22.769	5.183	13	50.0
1=One year	20.000	9.121	6	23.1
2=Two years	26.000	7.506	7	26.9

There was no significant differences in mean self-concept scores between those who had previously been in the nontraditional all-male class setting with a male teacher and those who had been enrolled only in traditional class settings with a female teacher ($t = .570$, $p = .581$). To further explore this phenomenon, we separated those who had spent only one year in all male classes from those who had spent two years in the all male setting. There was no significant difference in self-concept between these two groups ($t = .051$, $p = .959$), suggesting that the nontraditional settings effect on self-concept was no longer present one or two years after the child had been removed from the nontraditional class setting and placed in a more traditional setting.

CONCLUSION

This data analysis indicated that at the third grade level, African-American males who stopped participating in a nontraditional educational setting (all-male classes with a male teacher) did not exhibit a greater positive self-concept than African-American males who had participated only in traditional educational settings (co-educational classes with a female teacher). Thus the strong, consistent differences in self-concept between the treatment and control groups appeared to dissipate upon exiting the program. The decrease in self-concept was observed whether the subject had spent one or two years in an all-male class.

Furthermore there was no difference in self-concept between males in nontraditional classes and traditional classes when there was a father in the home. However, there was a difference in self-concept among boys who had a male teacher without a father in the home. This suggests that it may be important for young African-American boys without residential fathers to have meaningful and prolonged interactions with an African-American male figure of authority and personal significance.

Though the differences were not statistically insignificant, it is notable that subjects who spent only one year in the nontraditional program demonstrated a much steeper decline with self concept than those who spent two years in the program. In fact, those who participated in the nontraditional classes for only one year before being placed in a traditional class exhibited a level of self-concept below that of subjects who never participated. The highest level of self-concept among the 26 participants was observed in the group who spent two years in a nontraditional class. This finding might indicate a relationship between greater length of time spent in a nontraditional setting and higher levels of self-concept which indicates a need for further study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD CARE

Given the importance of self-concept for academic achievement, early child care workers need to be mindful of the issues that influence self-concept in this population. For too long we have addressed the racial academic achievement gap from an educational standpoint without paying adequate attention to the social and demographic issues that might also contribute to this educational gap. Davis (2003) suggests that in school, many African-American children manifest symptoms of problems they witness at home or in their communities. Davis also suggests that many African-American children are reared in homes and communities that are chaotic and unstable and insufficient in nurturance; such environments do not facilitate learning environments. Further, many African-American male students have few interactions with African-American males of authority and personal significance, and almost 70% grow up in single mother headed households. This combination of factors may have a negative effect on their self-concept. The chance of having an African-American male teacher is very low; Whiting (2009) reports that African-American males represent only one percent of the teaching profession. One way to address this is for school child care facilities to be at the forefront in actively recruiting, training, and supporting African-American men who have the capacity to be role models and leaders for all students. Grantham (2004) asserted that we should identify meaningful ways to ensure an African-American male presence in the class room, by recruiting tutors, educational assistants, storytellers, and room fathers, as well as teachers. In addition, it might be beneficial to use non-educational personnel, such as African-American male custodians, to act as mentors and role models and incorporate them into educational process. Regardless of the method, it's important for young African-American male students to have access to African-American male mentors. Having schools focus on this area might improve the academic performance of these at-risk males and prevent the lost of their potential.

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