

Increasing School Belonging, Educational Aspirations, and Academic Self-Efficacy  
Among African American Male High School Students:

Implications for School Counselors

By Chinwé J. Uwah

In light of the current emphasis on accountability and student achievement, school counselors are increasingly being asked to demonstrate how their work impacts academic achievement (Education Trust, 2007). School counselors can work as systematic change agents who intentionally cultivate a belief that all students are capable of achieving at high levels. African American students account for 14.7% of all dropouts--nearly twice the rate of White students (US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2006). Research shows that lower-income and minority students often attend underfunded and dilapidated schools with limited course offerings, are served by under qualified and inexperienced teachers, and are less likely to have access to rigorous courses (Education Trust). National statistics continue to show significant differences in high school graduation rates, college attendance and completion rates between African American male and White students (NCES).

Professional school counselors are ideally situated to serve as advocates not only for social and personal development, but also for student achievement (American School Counselor Association, ASCA, 2005). Students' emotional and behavioral attitudes about their competence and attitudes toward the school environment play important roles in their educational adjustment. Although a supportive school environment is beneficial for all students, the school environment may have more of an impact on African American males who have been traditionally underserved and underperforming (Taylor, 1994).

## Current Study

Using a correlation and multiple regression design, the current study examined the relationships among school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and educational aspirations among 40 African American male high school students (Uwah, McMahon, Furlow, 2008). This study was conducted in a small, predominately African American high school in a large southeastern city. The school, which was in its second year of operation at the time of the research study, was designed to maintain a smaller student body relative to other schools in its district, and has as one of its goals to foster a sense of community within the school. Of the 70 African American males enrolled in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, 40 completed the research packet, resulting in a 62% response rate.

### **Method:**

Data were collected in the spring semester of the school year. With the assistance of several teachers, we distributed a survey packet, which included a cover letter, demographic questionnaire, and the two survey instruments. Students were given a standardized set of instructions. After both surveys were completed, we thanked students for their participation and collected forms. Materials were coded as they were received and all responses were kept confidential.

*Data Sources.* Sources of evidence included surveys measuring school belonging and academic self efficacy. The demographic questionnaire requested information regarding participants' educational aspirations. School belonging was measured overall via *The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM)*. The PSSM (Goodenow, 1993) is an 18-item inventory that measures the subjective sense of belonging in school. Academic self-efficacy was assessed via Jonson-Reid et al. (2005)

eight-item scale. Researchers also explored several subcomponents of belonging including feeling encouraged to participate (FEP), perceived likeness and inclusion (PLI), as well as general feelings of belongingness (GFB).

**Results:**

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients were computed for all scales and subscales (Table 1). On average, students scored around the 3.0 scale midpoint on the PSSM scale ( $M = 3.10, SD = .39$ ) and on all the subscales: FEP ( $M = 3.02, SD = .49$ ), PLI ( $M = 3.31, SD = .42$ ), and GFB ( $M = 2.99, SD = .56$ ). Generally, these students held a moderately high degree of perception of school belonging. With regard to the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale, on average, students scored well above the 3.0 midpoint scale ( $M = 3.99, SD = .49$ ), indicating a relatively high perception of academic self-efficacy.

Pearson correlations were calculated among all variables except for those correlations between variables with educational aspirations (where Spearman's rho was used instead). A nominal alpha level was set at .05. The PSSM scale, the GFB subscale, and the PLI subscale were not significantly correlated with Academic Self-Efficacy scores. However, analyses revealed a statistically significant relationship between Academic Self-Efficacy and FEP ( $r(38) = .42, p < .001$ ) and educational aspirations ( $r(38) = .39, p < .05$ ).

A multiple regression model was estimated using educational aspirations, PLI, FEP, and GFB scores to predict Academic Self-Efficacy scores. The regression equation was significant ( $F(4,35) = 3.38, p < .05$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .28. Of the four predictors, only the FEP subscale ( $\beta = .39, p < .05$ ) and educational aspirations ( $\beta = .33, p < .05$ )

significantly predicted Academic Self-Efficacy. Both variables had positive relationships with Academic Self-Efficacy scores.

Results indicated that feeling encouraged to participate was a significant, positive predictor of academic self-efficacy. These results indicate that, for the participants, the most salient aspect of school belonging appeared to be when students felt they were the recipients of direct, targeted invitations to participate in school programming, whether academic or extra-curricular. These specific gestures from teachers, counselors and administrators appeared to increase their confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

### **Suggestions for School Counselors:**

The overall results of this study are particularly relevant for professional school counselors, as school counselors have traditionally focused on building encouraging and supportive relationships with their students in order to foster self-confidence among their students and to create encouraging, cooperative learning environments. This research suggests that school counselors should become more intentional about establishing such relationships with students who may not solicit counseling services, and in particular African American males. Reaching out to these students and encouraging them to become peer mentors or peer mediators, to join diversity clubs or students leadership teams, as well as serving as a school counseling office aide can help positively impact a sense of belonging, academic self-efficacy and educational aspirations.

In addition, organizations and programs such as Bailey's *Gentlemen on the Move* (Bailey & Paisley, 2004), Grimmatt's *Brothers in Excellence* (Grimmett, 2006) are great examples of multifaceted programs designed to meet the specific needs of African

American males. The Boys and Girls Club, Urban League, and 100 Black Men are organizations that make a difference by discussing notions of masculinity, providing leadership skills, and exposure to college/work settings. Active recruiting may be especially important with African American males, because of the power of direct invitation.

### **Importance of the study for Counselor Educators:**

This study also has implications for counselor educators working with school counselors who serve a diverse population. In preparing social justice minded school counselors, counselor educators can emphasize the importance of becoming change agents. Acting as agents of school and community change, school counselors can help create a climate where access to and support for quality programming and rigorous academics is the standard. As school leaders, school counselors may initiate partnerships and collaborations in school improvement initiatives targeted to assist the academic success for African American males, and other marginalized groups of students. Moreover, counselor educators may emphasize that as student advocates and school leaders, school counselors are in an ideal position to create the types of learning environments that support the academic, career and social success for all students from diverse backgrounds.

Reference for the entire article:

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