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The Relation among Parental Factors and Achievement of African American Urban Youth

Abstract

Research has repeatedly suggested that SES is a major factor in diminishing academic achievement of African American urban youth; however, there are other factors also influencing children's achievement. In an effort to examine how other factors contribute to academic achievement, this study, investigated a subsample of 60 low-resource middle school parents and students (41 boys and 19 girls). Several questions addressed the relation of SES to achievement**,** support, social support and mother's well-being, respectively. Additionally, the relations between mother's well-being, and students' perceived monitoring by their parents, and negative learning attitudes were examined as were the perception of parental monitoring and academic achievement, negative learning attitudes and achievement. The results revealed a significant relation between perceived social support and mother's well-being but in a negative direction. Parents reporting lower levels of well-being reported higher levels of social support. The results also revealed that youth who perceived their parents to monitor their activities more had higher levels of achievement. These findings illustrate the importance of the perceptions of adolescents as well as the potential role of parental monitoring on adolescents' academic achievement. Although several factors were examined, only those factors with significant relationships will be discussed.

The disproportionate number of African American children failing in school has been an issue of concern for several decades (Coleman et al., 1966; Deutsch, 1967; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992; Ford, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Glasgow, 1980; Ogbu, 1997; Sanders, 1996; Sampson, 2002). Although there are many factors contributing to the school failure of African American youth, researchers frequently cite low socioeconomic status (SES) as one important factor (Carter, 1984; Coleman et al., 1966; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982; McLoyd, 1990, 1997; Reynolds, 1989; Taylor, 1997). However previous research on the academic achievement of African American youth often compared their achievement outcomes to those of White youth, rather than focusing only on differences in the achievement process among African American adolescents. Comparative studies of this nature led researchers to view the behavior of African American youth as deviant (Hare & Costenell, 1985). Research, although sparse, has begun to focus more on specific educational constructs geared toward the academic achievement of African American urban youth (Entwisle, & Alexander, 1992; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982; Ford, 1992; Ogbu, 1985).

Considerable research, however, continues to assess the influences of socioeconomic status on the life of African American families as well as on the academic achievement of African American youth. The widespread focus by a number of researchers on socioeconomic status for African American youth may be attributed to the multi-substantiated reports that they are more likely than White youth to live in low-income homes and single-parent families (Hernandez, 1993). The Economic hardship confronting single-parent families has detrimental consequences for families and for the schooling of individual children (Pong, 1997). Pong further asserts that income

positively affects achievement, particularly mathematics achievement. Some researchers have shown that lower income individuals incur more psychological problems, and are more likely to endure stress than more affluent individuals (Dressler, 1985). Another report by McLoyd (1997) concludes that SES remains a strong determinant factor in the education of African Americans, particularly of those in the inner-city. However, socioeconomic status can only partially account for differences in attained levels of academic achievement (Adams & Singh, 1998). A close examination of factors other than SES that influence the academic achievement of African American youth is necessary, since income level is not likely to change in the near future (Wilson, 1996) other factors must be examined in order to help understand this phenomenon.

Researchers suggest that families with inadequate support are more apt to experience higher levels of stress (McLanahan & Adams, 1989), and experience more negative events (Simons, et al., 1993). A supportive kin network has also been linked to parents' well-being, particularly the well-being of African American families (Dressler, 1985). Another avenue of research linked parental hassles to student learning attitudes (Spencer, Dupree, Swanson, & Cunningham, 1998). Research, although sparse, reveals that student attitudes play a major role in achievement (Dreher & Singer, 1985; Ford, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Mickelson, 1990) Polite, 1992; Sanders, 1995; Trotter, 1981). While other researchers linked parental monitoring to students' achievement.

Few studies have examined the influence of socioeconomic status on the support network, the influence of the role parents' well-being plays in parental monitoring and how these relate to students' learning attitudes, and ultimately on children's achievement.

This study, in addition to examining how socioeconomic status (SES) relates to social support provided to low-income African American parents, will examine the influence of social support networks on low-income parents' well-being and the role parents' well-being plays in parental monitoring and learning attitudes, and ultimately children's achievement. Of the factors of interest, the findings revealed a positive relationship between social support and mother's well-being, and perceived parental monitoring and academic achievement. This paper, given these findings, will focus (primarily) on the relation among social support and parents' well-being, and students' perceived parental monitoring and academic achievement.

Review of Literature

Social Support and Well-being

Researchers since the Coleman et at. report (1966), repeatedly suggest that SES is a major factor in the diminished academic achievement of African American youth (Brooks, 1988; McLoyd, 1990; Walsh, 1986). However, Clark (1983) contends that a well developed support system can mediate the physical and mental overload that low-income families routinely experience, especially single parent families. One defense against stress, asserts McAdoo (1982), is the use of high levels of kin support. Taylor and Roberts (1995) posit that social support buffers feelings of psychological distress. In an empirical study they reported that those adolescents whose parents received more kinship support were better adjusted psychologically. Edmund (1990) views social support as a useful community intervening strategy for both African American and Hispanic American children living in poverty.

Research indicates that kinship support is beneficial, particularly for low-income single-parent households (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; McLanahan, 1985**;** Taylor, 1996; McLanahan, Wedemeyer & Adelberg, 1981). According to Coleman (1991), social support provides strength for parents and children to draw on in difficult times, such as when encountering emotional or financial hardship or problems with schoolwork, teachers or peers. The importance of kin as a salient support factor is further conveyed by Scott (1989) who posits that when African Americans have no blood kin, they will form fictive family relationships (see also Stack, 1974). Nevertheless, Taylor and Roberts suggest that kin support is absent or marginal at best when kin supporters are challenged by economic hardships. Yet, Taylor and Roberts (1995) suggest that social support promotes growth related child rearing practices (Taylor & Roberts, 1995).

Moreover, Taylor and Roberts (1995) examined the link between kinship support and the well-being of 51 low-income African American mothers, and found that support for low-income African American mothers was related to parents' well-being and parenting practices. Burchinal, Follmer, and Bryant (1996) conducted a study on a study of 61 low-income mothers that replicated a study by Taylor (1986) and noted a similar finding—that social support for low-income African American mothers was related positively to maternal caregiving**.** In that same vein, Spencer, Cunningham, and Swanson (1995) report that adolescence, although a vulnerable period, benefit from kin and non-kin support. However families living in distress or experiencing economic problems are less likely to assist their youth as they transition through adolescence (Spencer & Swanson., 2000).

Watson, Brown, and Swich (1983) maintain that a support network that builds positive human relations is more likely to render a productive home learning environment. Further, Glasgow and Ray (1986) report, that informal social support from friends and relatives has an impact on the general well-being of low-income single parents. The association of social support and well-being was an outgrowth of efforts to understand and develop preventive programs for mental illness (Cohen et al., 1982). Colletta and Lee, (1983) contend that the harmful effects of stressful situations may frequently be averted with ample sources of available support. Nevertheless, social support has not been found to be uniformly helpful. Neighbors (1997) links the interpersonal stress associated with emotional or financial strain to the well-being of members of the informal network. Neighbor's (1997) findings, based on data from the National Survey of Black Americans in the United States, reveled that stressful interpersonal relationships (marital and family conditions), although often helpful, were also sometimes the source of stressful events.

Cohen and colleagues (1982) conducted a comparative study of an ethnically mixed urban group of parents with family income ranging from $5,000 to $16, 000, and examined some aspects of chronic stress that are seldom addressed in many studies (e.g., support and coping, the effects of stressors on feeling bad, feeling good, and well-being). They found that support did not have a moderating effect on stress and well-being. In contrast, Keith (1997) using data from the National Survey of Black Americans found that single females, divorced and separated individuals compared to married higher income individuals, reported a low relationship between family closeness and received

support. Keith maintains that a lack of family ties may lead to a lower sense of well-being.

Hence, social support network may not always have positive influences (Milburn, 1986). Milburn further contends that negative conditions can exist in instances when support is out of sync with parents' needs; the types of support services may be inappropriate, not timely or not aligned with the needs of the recipient. Milburn did not deny the importance of social support however, if appropriateness and time restraints are met. He showed that appropriateness is viable, especially for support groups that meet the diverse needs of parents. Sometimes the seriousness of the problems exceeded the capabilities of the support network.

Nonetheless, the preponderance of research findings on the well-being of single parent families generally link well-being to the social support parents' received. A study by Pittman and Lloyd (1988) on the quality of family life social support, and stress of moderate income single parents living in Utah is one example of this linkage. Their study shows that support produces a significant effect on the qualities of family life. Likewise, Gladow and Ray (1986) found that low-income families report a positive relation between social support and well-being. Similar findings have been presented by other researchers (Cohen, 1996; Linn, Husain, & Whitten, 1990; Randolph, 1995). Colletta (1979) does not dispute the importance of social support, but rather emphasizes the adequacy of matching family's needs with appropriate support sources, as reflected in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model. Colletta (1979), Milburn (1986), Roy and Fuqua (1983) all recommend that networks be suited to the family needs in order to provide a beneficial family support system.

Perceived Monitoring

Critical tasks of parenting include monitoring of children's whereabouts, supervision of their activities (Chilcoat, Breslau, & Anthony, 1996; Richardson, Radziszewska, & Dent 1993; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Spencer et al., 1998), and assisting with school-related activities (Crouter, MacDermid, McHale, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990). Linver and Silverberg (1997) suggest that parental monitoring strongly affects achievement. They also assert that monitoring children's behavior conveys to them a sense of responsiveness and acceptance. Simons, Beaman, Conger, and Chao (1993) suggest that parents who receive more social support are more effective parents. In addition, Chilcoat, Breslau, and Anthony (1996) allege that economic status and being a single parent might reduce the amount of quality time available for parents to interact with their children or monitor their children's time.

Parental monitoring and supervision of children's activities is a central aspect of parental involvement. Adolescence is a time in which achievement is influenced by numerous variables (Ford, 1992a). Parental monitoring, although influential, is only one of many factors influencing students' achievement (Spencer Dupree, & Swanson, 1996). Parental monitoring of adolescents is vital given the vulnerable nature of this age group. Particularly for African American adolescents who in addition to exploring many new roles in their search for a sense of self in preparation for adulthood (e.g., peer pressure, identity and self-image, independence), must contend with stereotypical labels (Spencer, Cunningham & Swanson, 1995). Parental assistance in helping adolescents navigate through this potential stressful developmental period is warranted. However, it is often the perception of adolescents, during this developmental transitional period, that cause

them to misinterpret or mislabel "being monitored" for "being hassled" (Spencer & Cunningham, 2000). Most research conveys the importance of parental monitoring; however there are potential risks associated with monitoring. Crouter and colleagues (1990) report that too little monitoring might constitute a risk factor, however too much monitoring might impede the child from developing independently.

Additionally, Linver and Silverberg (1997), in a study on maternal predictors of adolescent achievement, discovered that monitoring made the largest individual contribution to school grades. Monitoring, as presented by Linver and Silverberg, is the extent by which parents keep track of their children's activities and whereabouts. Research has repeatedly shown that parental involvement in children's schooling bolsters children's achievement (Epstein, 1995; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), and monitoring, although distinct from parent involvement, may have a similar relation to academic achievement.

Research Purpose

The disproportionate number of African American children failing in school has been an issue of concern for several decades. Although there are many factors contributing to the school failure of African American youth, researchers frequently cite low socioeconomic status (SES) as one important factor (Coleman et al., 1966; Entwisle & Alexander, 1992; Entwisle & Hayduk, 1982; Reynolds, 1989). The overall goal of the investigation was to determine the extent to which parental factors above and beyond socioeconomic status (SES) contribute to students' perception and school achievement.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were drawn from a larger longitudinal research project, the Promotion of Academic Competence Project (PAC) that examined the development of competence and resilience of African American youth (Spencer, 1989). The goal of the larger project was to improve understanding about patterns of developmental transition for economically disadvantaged African American male youth. These data were initially collected during the 1989-1990 year (year 1) and annually thereafter including the 1992-1993 (year 3) academic years. During year 1 the students were in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, and during year 3 data collection students were in 8th, 9th and 10th grades.

The participants' ages ranged from eleven to fifteen in year 1, and from fifteen to seventeen in year 3. The participants for this study (African American middle and high school students in a Southeastern urban city) were a subsample of 60 low-income high school parents and students (n =41 boys and n =19 girls: eighth (37%), ninth (28%) and tenth (37%). 80% of the participants families reported living below the federal guidelines for poverty .

Procedure

Participants completed Likert –type questionnaires designed to measure five constructs. The variables are: SES—parents' self report of income level; social support-parents' reported perception of kin and non-kin support received; well-being—mothers' impression of general good feelings of self; parental monitoring—students' perception of parental monitoring of their activities; learning attitudes—students' selection of learning preference toward learning (negative learning); Achievement—teacher reported grades at

the end of the school year. Parents of ninth through tenth grade students from four different middle schools were interviewed in their home environment by a research assistant at the end of the school year, and students completed several self-report measures as part of group administered surveys during free periods in school. Although this study examined the relation among parental factors and achievement of African American urban youth, only those factors revealing significance will be discussed.

Measures

Participants completed Likert –type questionnaires designed to measure five constructs. The variables are: SES—parents' self report of income level; social support-parents' reported perception of kin and non-kin support received; well-being—mothers' impression of general good feelings of self; parental monitoring—students' perception of parental monitoring of their activities; learning attitudes—students' selection of learning preference toward learning (negative learning); Achievement—teacher reported grades at the end of the school year.

SES

Background measures were determined using parents' self reported family income. These figures were transformed into an index based on family size and federal poverty guidelines. Reported family income was divided by the criterion income for poverty for that family size (e.g., for a family size of 4, the criterion for poverty was an annual family income of $13,950). An index of 1.0 indicates that the family is living at the poverty level; an index of less than 1.0 indicates that the family is living below the poverty level.

Social Support

A 23-item family support information survey was utilized to measure sources of support. Of the 23-items 17 had Likert responses that assessed kin and non-kin support. The measure was designed to assess the amount of support adult individuals feel they receive from various family members, other relations, and organizations while raising their children. The items were presented in a six-item Likert scale: "not at all helpful," "helpful," "sometimes helpful," "generally helpful," very helpful," "extremely helpful," "not applicable." The alpha reliability was .72 for support. (The alphas for all measures are based on the full sample of 562)

Well-being

A 34-item measure was designed to ascertain parents' good feelings about self. This measure focused on personal opinion regarding one's good feelings about self. Sample items are "Are you good at bouncing back from bad experiences?" and "Are you good at getting others to help if needed?" The alpha reliability is .75

Adolescents' Perception of Parental Monitoring

The Children Hassles Scale (Kanner, Feldman, Weinberger, & Ford, 1987) measure was constructed from 20-items. However, only 10-items (Appendix D) pertaining to perceived parent monitoring will be used. The items were followed by a 4-point Likert scale. Examples of items are "Try monitoring friends" and "Try monitoring school activities." The alpha reliability is .80.

Grade point average (GPA) was an average of teachers' reported grades at the conclusion of the school year. The average was ascertained

from student report cards. The demographic statistics for the sample indicate that this was primarily a low-income sample as 78.4% of parents' yearly annual income was between $2,501 and $20,000

Results

A total of 41 males and 19 females were in the sample studied in this investigation. It was hypothesize that mothers with greater perceived social support will report higher levels of well-being (controlling for SES). In order to test this hypothesis a stepwise regression was employed. The results showed a significant relationship between well-being and support after controlling for SES in the equation, (Beta = -.35, $p < .01$). However, findings showed a negative relationship between well-being and social support, indicating that increased levels of support are associated with decreased levels of parents' well-being. Results are reported in Table 1 (Table 1 here).

Since income was not significantly related to either support or well-being, a bivariate correlation could best explain the relation between support and well-being (Table 2 here) It was also hypothesized that students who report greater perceived monitoring by their parents will have higher achievement (controlling for other variables in the equation, SES, social support and well-being). This hypothesis was tested using linear regression. No variables were significant at the .05 level but a trend ($p < .10$) was found for perceived parental monitoring. Results are displayed in Table 3 here).

An additional analysis was conducted in which the effects of nonsignificant variables were removed. The results (see Table 4) revealed, after removing extraneous variables, that parent monitoring was related to achievement ($r = .28$, $p < .05$). It appears then, that

perceived monitoring is related to academic success and independent of income level, or support received (Table 4 here).

A two-way analysis was conducted to see if grade or gender of the student interacted with student perception of parental monitoring. Results indicate that student's grade and gender were no main effects, nor did they interact, in relation to predicting parent monitoring. It is important to note that, although findings were not significance between perceive parental monitoring and negative learning attitudes, a trend was noted.

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that a multiplicity of factors directly or indirectly impact achievement. The relation between support and well-being was supported. It was found that maternal support related to maternal well-being but in an unexpected direction. Instead of perceived support networks relating to mothers' increased sense of well-being, the results of this study revealed the opposite relation. Some plausible explanations for the inverse relationship might be attributed to the following: supportive individual might have been a source of stress, support provided might have been out of sync with parents' needs, parents' circumstances may have warranted unrequested assistance, or parents with lower levels of well-being seek higher levels of support.

Findings indicate that a students' perception of parental monitoring was related to achievement. Thus, it appears that the closer children are monitored or perceive that they are monitored, the better they perform in school. The present study, given the everyday stressors incurred by African Americans living in low-resource families, suggests that parental monitoring is a useful method that enhances school success. Prior research indicated that a relation exists between SES and achievement. Boocook (1972) reported

that SES was the powerful family predictor of school performance. Others also reported similar findings (Duff & Houston, 1965; Rumberger & Willams, 1992; Sander, 1995). However, unlike previous findings, the hypothesis that children from higher income level parents would have higher levels of achievement was not supported in this investigation. Although unexpected, these findings were not surprising given such a restrictive subsample. However, the sample in this investigation differs from that in prior studies. Other studies (Caldas & Bankston, 1997) had a larger range of SES represented whereas the sample in this study was based on a disproportionate number of low-income families. Further, the relation between SES and achievement was similar to that reported in White's (1982) meta-analysis, but the modest sample size in this study resulted in the correlation being insignificant.

Conclusion and Implications

Over four decades of research indicates that African American youth do less well in school than white middle-class students. Ample research today echoes similar findings. If studies continue contrasting the academic success of middle-class white students with low resource African Americans, research will likely continue to report the academic failure of African American youth.

Although the present research study has pointed out the important role parental monitoring plays in the educational process of children from low-income parents, it has also raised a number of questions that reveal the need for future research.

The present research illustrates the need for future studies that focus specifically on African American families and youth. It further highlights the role African American parents' play in the academic prowess of their children. Further research is needed in

order to understand how specific types of monitoring, and age differences affect achievement (to understand the types of monitoring that enhance or impede GPA as children get older).

Research is also needed to understand the effect of other potential factors (e.g., racism, teacher expectations, and school resources) in combination with parental monitoring on students' achievement.

Finally, this research only examined a subsample of African American students in low resourced urban schools. Additional research is needed to determine the influence parental monitoring has on the achievement of African American youth from a broader sample.

The present research provides policymakers and practitioners with a means to enhance the educational processes for African Americans from low-income youth, as well as viable ways to involve parents in the academic success of their children. Schools, teachers, and policymakers would benefit by understanding how to better support parents in their important task of monitoring their adolescents. This study suggests that such monitoring is central to children's academic achievement.

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Table 1
Regression Table of Parent Well-being (*N* = 57)

Variable	B	SEB	*β*	*R2*	*Δ R2*
Income	.26	.70	.05	.13	.11
Parent Support	-.45	.16-	-.35**	.13	.10

Adjusted *R2* = .10
**p<.01

Table 2

Correlation between Parent Support and Well-being (N=57)

Variable	Correlation	P-value
(1) Support (2) Well-being	-.36	.006*

**p< .01

Table 3
Hierarchical Regression Table of Students' Achievement with Predictor Variables (N=60)

Variable	B	SEB	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Income	.501	.731	.09	.024	.024
Parent Support	.7.54	.179	.06	069	.045
Well-being	3.17	.013	.035	.072	.003
Monitoring	2.14	.012	.230	.124	.052

Adjusted R^2 =.076
*p< .05, $^{+}$p<.10
Note. Adjusted R^2 is reported for the total model

Table 4

Table of Correlation between Parental Monitoring and Student GPA (N=60)

Variable	Correlation	P-value
(1) GPA (2) Monitoring	.28	.03*

*p<.05