Melissa Jonson-Reid, Larry Davis, Jeanne Saunders, Trina Williams, and James Herbert Williams

School performance among African American youths continues to be a major concern. The promotion of self-esteem remains a major focus of school-based intervention programs designed to improve children's academic performance and behavior. Empirical data suggest that academic self-efficacy rather than self-esteem is the critical factor for school success, but few studies have examined self-efficacy and self-esteem with an African American population. Furthermore, although school social workers tend to focus on nonacademic factors that inhibit student performance, little is known about how these factors may be associated with academic self-efficacy. This article explored cross-sectional relationships of various factors to academic self-efficacy. Findings suggest that strategies that build a student's belief in the importance of education may do more to increase academic self-efficacy among African American youths than would a focus on self-esteem. Implications for school social work practice are discussed.

KEY WORDS: academic self-efficacy; African American youths; school completion; school social work

Despite gains in high school completion rates, African American youths continue to have high dropout rates in the inner cities (Garibaldi, 1992; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although there are numerous approaches to dropout prevention, improvement of self-esteem remains a major part of interventions to help students complete school (Hewitt, 1998; Joseph, 1992). Yet, evaluations of programs trying to build self-esteem to improve school performance indicate a disconnect between feeling good about oneself and academic achievement (Aebly, Manning, Thyer, & Carpenter-Aebly, 1999; Dryfoos, 1990; Strusinski, 1997). Several studies have documented a much stronger relationship between academic self-efficacy and school performance (Bong, 1999; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Emerging research indicates that this holds for African American students as well (Davis, Johnson, Miller-Cribbs, & Saunders, 2002; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997).

Supporting a student's ability to complete high school is a primary task of school social workers (Dupper, 1993). School social workers are encouraged to deliver services in a culturally sensitive manner. There is a notable lack of discussion, however, about the evidence base for commonly used interventions, such as self-esteem programs with ethnic minority populations. The most recent article in a school social work journal to address the relationship of self-perceptions to academic achievement among African Americans was a short commentary written almost 10 years ago (Joseph, 1992). The purpose of this article is twofold: (1) to help fill the gap in understanding the factors associated with self-efficacy among African American youths and (2) to create a bridge from what is known about academic self-efficacy to school social work practice. Correlation and regression analyses were conducted using cross-sectional data from a longitudinal study of high school completion among African American youths.

SELF-ESTEEM AND SCHOOL SUCCESS
The theoretical basis for the belief that enhancing self-esteem will enhance school performance is that individuals seek to maximize their self-image (Kaplan, 1986). A student must either achieve success (that is, graduate) or reject conventional success and seek to enhance self-image through deviant means (that is delinquency, dropping out of school, and so forth).
Therefore, many programs have sought to address academic failure by improving positive self-regard. Such self-esteem interventions have the widespread support of educators and the public, and a plethora of materials, task forces, and curricula focusing on self-worth exist (Adler et al., 1992; Covington & Teel, 1996; Hewitt, 1998).

The focus of the educational system on self-worth is inconsistent with the bulk of etiological and evaluation research, particularly with African American youths. An evaluation of the I Have a Dream program, which primarily served African American youths, found that the self-esteem of participants improved, but the academic and attendance measures did not (Strusinski, 1997). Another program found reduced dropout rates, but no significant improvement in self-esteem (Aeby et al., 1999). Although academic success might be theoretically linked to self-esteem, we lack data to show that improving self-esteem improves academic performance.

The focus on the connection between self-worth and school success also seems inconsistent with the perception of students. A study of inner-city children (predominantly African American) found that they identified student behavior or safety as barriers to success in school, but not self-esteem (Gerdes & Benson, 1995). Among African American youths, earlier studies noted weak or negative associations between self-esteem (most notably racial self-esteem) and academic success (Fordham & Ogbe, 1986; Joseph, 1992). The negative association between self-esteem and academic success was attributed to rejecting the need to "act white" to succeed (Witherspoon et al., 1997). More recent work failed to find this negative association (Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus & Harpalani, 2001; Witherspoon et al.). Recent work suggests that academic self-efficacy rather than self-esteem is key to academic success among African American students (Davis et al., 2002; Witherspoon et al.).

SELF-EFFICACY

The concept of self-efficacy as articulated by Bandura (1997) refers to a person's beliefs in the ability to organize and execute a course of action required to achieve a goal. Self-efficacy is similar to constructs in motivation research such as "self-concept of abilities" in expectancy-value theory (see Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) or "competence" in the development of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research linking academic self-efficacy with school motivation and performance has reported consistently strong effects (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Bong, 1999; Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman et al., 1992). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive review of the extensive literature in this area. Readers are invited to examine Bandura and colleagues (2001), Bandura (1997), and Volume 25 of Contemporary Educational Psychology. Briefly, students with higher academic self-efficacy, regardless of earlier achievement or ability, work harder and persist longer (Pajares, 2002); have better learning strategies, such as personal goal setting or time monitoring (Zimmerman, 2000); and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (for example, delinquency and substance use) that negatively affect school success while controlling for general self-esteem (Chung & Elias, 1996). Both motivation research and self-efficacy research have found that self-efficacy or achievement motivation appear domain specific. In other words, a youth who has high sports self-efficacy may have low academic self-efficacy.

Are Self-Esteem and Academic Self-Efficacy Related?

In studies that report a positive association between self-esteem and academic self-efficacy (or school performance) the amount of variance explained by self-esteem was not large (Liu, Kaplan, & Risser, 1992; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999). One study indicated a small contribution of measures of self-esteem to academic self-efficacy among early adolescent ethnic minority children (Smith et al.). A study of African American preschoolers found some contribution of racial preference and self-esteem to academic performance measures but reported that most of the variance was attributed to academic self-concept (Justice, Lindsey, & Morrow, 1999). Two studies that measured global and racial self-esteem and self-efficacy among African American youths found that only academic self-efficacy displayed a strong relationship with achievement and high school graduation (Davis et al., 2002; Davis et al., 2003; Witherspoon et al., 1997).

Can School Social Work Intervention Affect Academic Self-Efficacy?

Unlike self-perception, which is thought to be more stable over time, self-efficacy appears more easily influenced by changing experiences (Zimmerman, 2000).
This is good news for school social workers in that intervention should be able to affect this factor. This section draws on the work of Bandura (1997) and Wigfield and Eccles (2000) to examine ways in which school social work intervention might relate to constructs believed to influence academic self-efficacy.

**Direct Experience.** Bandura (1997) and Wigfield and Eccles (2000) noted that direct experience is a prime contributor to self-efficacy or achievement choices. Applied to academic self-efficacy, this suggests that earlier negative academic performance is likely to lessen students' belief in their ability to achieve academically. Students often come to the attention of school social workers because of concerns about learning disabilities or decline in academic performance (Jonson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi, 2004). Because most research on academic self-efficacy has focused on white students, it is not known how strongly perceived academic problems are associated with academic self-efficacy among African American students.

**Encouragement and Models of Success.** Another factor noted in self-efficacy research is the fact that adults who provide encouragement and serve as role models may increase self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000). The concept of "socializers" in Wigfield and Eccles's (2000) expectancy-value model of achievement is similar. This may explain why perceived support from parents, teachers, and peers has been linked to higher academic self-efficacy and performance (Bandura et al., 2001; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Parental support of education was found to discriminate between high- and low-achieving African American students in one study, but this study did not measure academic self-efficacy (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). School social workers attempt to improve home, teacher, or mentor support of student performance (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 2000; Jonson-Reid et al., 2004; Pryor, 1996). There is insufficient research to understand whether such efforts to increase encouragement or models of success play a significant role in academic self-efficacy among African American students.

**Power and Control.** Bandura (1997) noted that a sense of power and control over one's environment affects a person's self-efficacy. This sense of power and control may be negatively affected by risk factors at the home, school, and community levels. In one study children reported external factors such as safety and other students' behavior problems as the major barriers to school success (Gerdes & Benson, 1995). A study of math and reading achievement in children found that exposure to violence had adverse effects on reading scores (Duplechain, 1998). A student's fear of victimization at school (for example, bullying) has been found to reduce feelings of social competence (Nansel et al., 2001). Studies have found that lower academic self-efficacy is associated with lower social competence and more negative life events (Chung & Elias, 1996). School social workers frequently intervene to prevent or help students cope with personal problems and bullying and violence (Allen-Meares et al., 2000; Jonson-Reid et al., 2004). It is possible that successful interventions in this area might improve students' academic self-efficacy by increasing a sense of personal power and control. There is insufficient research, however, to suggest how strongly such external factors influence academic self-efficacy.

**Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards.** Finally, there is the possibility that academic self-efficacy is affected by beliefs about the perceived rewards of doing well in school (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). These rewards may be intrinsic, important to the student personally, or extrinsic, leading to an external goal (Ryan & Deci). Many approaches to improving school retention focus on staying in school to achieve future benefits (Kazis, 1993). Recent studies indicate that African American youths have career goals and value education equal to that of other students (Reid, 2001; Spencer et al., 2001). However, not all students may have equal ability to perceive the link between education and later goals. Ogbu (1983, 1988) suggested that education must be connected to future goals through a "status mobility system" that helps students understand how to move from school to later opportunities. It is not known how strongly beliefs about intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are associated with academic self-efficacy among African American youths.

The research on academic self-efficacy among African American students is scant. The present study was conducted to help fill this gap. The research question was To what degree are factors like self-esteem (both racial and general), direct experience (measured by perceived academic difficulties), adult encouragement and role models (measured by...
parent and teacher support and family members who completed education), barriers to perceived power and control (measured by concerns about personal problems and school safety), and perceptions of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards (measured by student beliefs about completing high school) related to academic self-efficacy? On the basis of the literature, we hypothesized that associations between self-esteem and academic self-efficacy, if present, would be small. We also hypothesized that perceived parental support and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards would be positively associated with academic self-efficacy.

METHOD

We used cross-sectional data from a longitudinal study of school completion among African American youths. The students attended an urban high school (total enrollment = 1,200 students) located in a large metropolitan area. The student body was virtually all African American (99 percent), with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls. There was little income variation in the sample. About 58 percent of the sample qualified for reduced lunch, and many of the "nonqualifying" students either refused to apply (personal communication with school secretary, 1999) or had incomes that were not substantially above the qualifying level. A panel of all consenting freshman students entering in 1994 was recruited with the help of a school guidance counselor who served as primary liaison among students, parents, and research team members. The study was explained during the students' homeroom class. Interested students and their parents or guardians signed informed consent statements.

Questionnaires were administered by African American research assistants in the early part of each school year (1994 to 1998). Students were paid $15 for each completion each year. In the first year, 262 students (80 percent of the freshman class) were surveyed. The number of students completing the surveys varied from year to year because of absenteeism on the day of the survey. The present investigation used data collected in the sophomore year because many of the variables of interest were not collected until year two. This sample included 169 students in their sophomore year after excluding cases with missing information (n = 10) on independent or dependent variables. Because the survey excluded nonattendees, it is likely the sample is somewhat biased toward more successful students. On the other hand, the mean GPA for the sophomore year was only 2.08, and year 4 data (not included in this article) indicate that 21 percent of these students later dropped out of school. A comparison between cases that remained in the study and those with missing data revealed no pattern in the characteristics of the two groups.

Dependent Variable

Academic self-efficacy was measured with eight items. Three items were from the Bachman (1970) School Ability Self-Concept Index: (1) "How do you rate yourself in school ability compared with those in your grade in school?"; (2) "How intelligent do you think you are compared to others your age?"; and (3) "Compared to others your age, how important is it to you to be able to use your intelligence?" The research team created five more items: (1) "How capable do you think you are of getting good grades?"; (2) "Compared to others your age, how much value do you place on getting good grades?"; (3) "Compared to others your age, how satisfied are you with your grades?"; (4) "How confident are you that you will be able to perform well in the future?"; and (5) "Compared to others your age, to what extent do you really believe that if you work hard you could improve your grades?" The items were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from far below average = 1 to very much above average = 7. Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Control Variables

The analyses did not include the typical demographic control variables. As noted, there was little variation in income in the sample; the study followed a single age cohort, and all participants were African American. Although studies of academic self-efficacy and specific subjects have found gender differences (Bong, 1999; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), studies have also found that academic self-efficacy is important to male and female African American students (Saunders, 2001; Spencer, Cole, DuPree, & Glymph, 1993; Smith et al., 1999). Because we measured subject-specific academic efficacy and had a relatively small sample, gender was not included in the analyses.

Independent Variables

Self-Esteem Measures. The two types of self-esteem measured in this study were racial self-esteem and
global self-esteem. Global self-esteem was measured with 10 items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). The responses to these items were averaged to give an overall measure of global self-esteem. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .78. The racial self-esteem measure (Hughes & Demo, 1989) consisted of 14 items that were averaged. Examples of these items are “How true do you think it is that black people are hard working?; How true do you think it is that most black people are proud of themselves?” Items were reverse scored when necessary to make positive responses coincide with higher values. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .80.

**Constructs Related to Self-Efficacy.** The remaining independent variables were selected on the basis of their relationship to the four major components of self-efficacy reviewed earlier and their relevance to common foci of school social work practice:

- **Direct Experience**—As a proxy for the idea that prior direct academic experience influences academic self-efficacy, two questions from the original study were used that measured students’ perception of how important academic barriers were. Students rated the level of importance of the following issues on a seven-point scale ranging from very unimportant to very important: “Not understanding what is taught. For me this problem is …”; and “Not having the study skills (for example, writing, reading) needed for my classes. For me this problem is …”
- **Encouragement and Models of Success**—Three questions were included to measure perceived level of support and available models of success. First, as a measure of role models who successfully completed high school, students provided the percentage of relatives that graduated from high school.”Two questions related to encouragement were included. Students were asked to rate how important the following problems were from very important to very unimportant: “Not getting encouragement or support from my teachers. For me this problem is …”; “Not getting encouragement or support from my family. For me this problem is …”
- **Power and Control**—In the literature review, risk factors such as school violence and personal problems (for example, reactions to negative life events), commonly addressed in school social work, were related to academic self-efficacy through their possible affect on a student’s feeling of power and control over school success. Students were asked to rate how important the following problems were on a scale ranging from very important to very unimportant: “Having upsetting personal problems that prevent me from attending school. For me this problem is …”; “Being afraid of being picked on or attacked at school. For me, this problem is …”

• Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards—Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are associated with motivation to accomplish goals and are often the foci of dropout prevention efforts. Two items from the original survey were used as proxies for these constructs. Students rated the following statements on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from very much disagree to very much agree: “Completing school is an important part of who I am” (intrinsic); “Completing the school year will help me do something positive with my life” (extrinsic).

**Analyses**

Analyses were completed using SAS for Windows. Correlations were used to examine the bivariate associations between the variables. This bivariate analysis also was used to check for multicollinearity. None of the zero-order correlations were high enough (.80 or above) to suggest a problem with multicollinearity (Lewis-Beck, 1980). A multiple regression model of the association between the selected variables and academic self-efficacy was constructed using the selection $r$ procedure in SAS to provide statistics for the change in $r$ according to all possible combinations of predictor variables. The VIF option in SAS was used to check for multicollinearity in the multivariate model. Variables that were not significant at $p < .10$ did not act as suppressor variables, and those that did not make a significant contribution to the variance explained were dropped from the final model.

**RESULTS**

Bivariate results with regard to the relationship between the two measures of self-esteem and academic self-efficacy indicated that only global self-esteem, not racial self-esteem, was directly associated with academic self-efficacy. Global self-esteem...
had a moderate, statistically significant association with academic self-efficacy \( (r = .26, p < .001) \) (Table 1). Racial self-esteem had a moderate relationship to global self-esteem \( (r = .26, p < .001) \).

Bivariate results also indicated that only three of the eight variables entered as proxies for the four constructs of academic self-efficacy were significantly associated with academic self-efficacy. The two variables measuring intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were significant: (1) Importance of finishing school to self (intrinsic reward) \( (r = .42, p < .0001) \) and (2) the belief that school leads to doing something positive (extrinsic reward) in life \( (r = .41, p < .0001) \). One of the variables measuring the construct of encouragement and role models was significant. There was a small, but significant, relationship between percentage of relatives completing high school and academic self-efficacy \( (r = .16, p = .03) \). But the other variables measuring this construct (support from home or school) were not significant. For the construct of direct experience, neither the variable measuring study skills nor the variable measuring not understanding what is taught had higher academic self-efficacy. It was not possible to control for cognitive capacity, whether students perceived high school completion as important to them personally (intrinsic) or to their future (extrinsic) was important in predicting higher levels of academic self-efficacy. Intrinsic rewards for completing school explained the majority of the variance in the model. Although two earlier studies found that both ethnic identity and self-esteem were associated with self-efficacy (Justice et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1999), differences in the samples of these and the present study make comparisons difficult. Whether students reported higher academic self-efficacy. Both measures of intrinsic (completing school is an important part of who I am) and extrinsic (completing school will help me do something positive with my life) rewards were strongly associated with academic self-efficacy. One of the indicators selected to represent the construct of encouragement and role models was significant. Students reporting a higher percentage of relatives completing high school had higher academic self-efficacy (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

This study builds on earlier investigations of academic self-efficacy and adds knowledge about how factors associated with academic self-efficacy and school social work practice are associated with this construct among African American youths.

Our findings supported our hypothesis that the association between self-esteem and academic self-efficacy, if present, would be small. Of the two measures of self-esteem examined, only global self-esteem was associated with academic self-efficacy. The contribution of self-esteem to the overall variance explained in the multivariate model was small. Such findings are consistent with earlier studies of academic self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001; Rosenfeld et al., 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). Racial self-esteem was moderately associated with global self-esteem, but not with academic self-efficacy. Although two earlier studies found that both ethnic identity and self-esteem were associated with self-efficacy (Justice et al., 1999; Smith et al., 1999), differences in the samples of these and the present study make comparisons difficult.

A multiple regression model of academic self-efficacy was constructed using any variable that had a bivariate correlation \( p \) value of .20 or less. An additional variable, lack of fear of victimization, was added as a suppressor variable for the study skills variable. This means that the variable regarding victimization was able to account for some of the variation in the study skills variable, thus improving the model. Variables were retained according to the procedure outlined in the Methods section. The selection \( \beta \) procedure was used to obtain incremental changes in \( \beta \) for the variables in the final model \( [F(6) = 11.48, p < .0001] \). The final model explained approximately 27 percent of the variance (Table 2). The final model included global self-esteem \( \beta^2 = .071 \), importance of completing school to self \( \beta^2 = .15 \), completing the school year will help me do something positive with my life \( \beta^2 = .035 \), percentage of close relatives finishing high school \( \beta^2 = .016 \), lack of study skills problems \( \beta^2 = .011 \), and lack of fear of victimization \( \beta^2 = .012 \). Related to the construct of direct experience, students reporting no problem with lack of study skills had higher academic self-efficacy. Both measures of intrinsic (completing school is an important part of who I am) and extrinsic (completing school will help me do something positive with my life) rewards were strongly associated with academic self-efficacy. One of the indicators selected to represent the construct of encouragement and role models was significant. Students reporting a higher percentage of relatives completing high school had higher academic self-efficacy (Table 2).
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*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
presence of a learning disability, or past grades in school. This study suggests that among African American high school students, efforts to remove practical barriers to school success should include training in study skills.

In support of Zimmerman's (2000) role models and Wigfield and Eccles (2000) concept of socializers, the percentage of relatives that completed high school was positively associated with academic self-efficacy. There was also a bivariate association between this variable and racial self-esteem. In situations in which such models are not available in the family, it appears important to develop alternate means of adult support of school success. Mentors, if sufficiently trained and consistently engaged with the student (Altschuler, 2000; Brown, 2003), may hold promise for offsetting deficits in this area.

Student perceptions that support from teachers or home were not problems were excluded from the final multivariate model, but caution should be used in interpreting this result. Among younger children who spend more time with a single primary teacher and in the home, perceived support from these areas may be more important in forming the perception of academic competence. Longitudinal research should be conducted to measure teacher and home support and academic self-efficacy over time, beginning with elementary students and following them through high school.

The only variable posited to affect power and control that remained in the model was fear of victimization, but it was not significant. It is possible that this linkage is more salient for younger students (Gerdes & Benson, 1995) or that violence was not common at the study school. Personal problems preventing attendance and fear of victimization were not associated with academic self-efficacy, but they were correlated with perception of study skills.

This study explored cross-sectional relationships of various factors to academic self-efficacy. Longitudinal studies of academic self-efficacy and school performance among African Americans are needed that begin before high school and can develop causal models of these linkages. Causal models should include intermediate relationships between self-esteem and risk behaviors or self-esteem and early academic milestones (for example, reading). Research should also investigate other factors that may influence academic self-efficacy, such as participation in extracurricular activities, mobility, and learning disabilities. Furthermore, because the present study sample was confined to a single school, research is needed to determine whether these findings hold true for African American students in other areas.

CONCLUSION
It is important to note that it was not the intent of this article to suggest that racial identity and self-esteem among African American youths are unimportant, only that they appear less critical to academic functioning than academic self-efficacy. Findings from this effort suggest that strategies that build a student's belief in the importance of education are particularly important in increasing...
academic self-efficacy among African American youths. As availability of role models who completed high school was important, attention should be paid to developing alternative support systems for students whose families may lack this educational background. School social workers should endeavor to include these components in programs designed to improve school completion rates. \textit{CS}

\textbf{REFERENCES}


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