The Effects of Belonging and Racial Identity on Urban African American High School Students' Achievement

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ABSTRACT: A growing body of literature suggests students' feelings of belongingness influence academic achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Additionally, research indicates that many urban African American students are disconnected from the school setting because of a cultural divide between students and educators (Thompson, 2004). This investigation examined the relationship between the individual components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) and sense of belonging on the academic achievement of 105 urban African American high school students. Quantitative analysis using items from the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity-teen and California Healthy Kids surveys, as well as participants' self-reported grades, reveals (a) centrality as the only predictor of sense of belonging, and (b) a positive relationship between sense of belonging and grades. These findings suggest the importance of schools cultivating a culture of acceptance of all racial groups and positive teacher-student relationships.

Keywords: racial identity, sense of belonging, African American, high school, academic achievement

A growing body of literature suggests students' feelings of belongingness influence academic achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). The need to belong encompasses students' feeling about themselves, as well as their relationships with others in the educational setting (Booker, 2016). Sense of belonging has been linked to positive academic outcomes for all students, but it is particularly significant for students from socially stigmatized groups, such as urban African Americans, who have historically experienced discrimination in educational institutions (Murphy and Zirkle, 2016; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Despite these findings, there is a lack of understanding of the role of belonging and its impact on the academic achievement of diverse students (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

High school social structures can affect students' sense of belonging to the extent that they perpetuate racial stereotypes and social exclusion or promote inclusiveness (Booker 2006; Rosenbloom, & Way, 2004). For example, in predominantly African American communities, it is likely that the majority of the teachers are of a different ethnicity with limited teacher-training on serving diverse populations (Epstein, 2005). Teachers' lack of understanding of the unique needs of urban African American students can lead to students feeling disconnected from the school setting (Ford & Harris, 1996). Furthermore, students' racial identity can influence their feelings of belongingness and achievement at school (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). Thus, the authors argue that it is imperative to understand the relationship among students' race, sense of belonging within the context of the school setting, and academic achievement.

Literature Review

Sense of belonging, particularly within the context of a school setting, has been examined in relation to students' educational outcomes for decades. Generally, sense of belonging signifies the feeling of relatedness or connection to others (Goodenow, 1993). While varying definitions of sense of belonging exist, most researchers maintain that sense of belonging is the "extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others-especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80). Research shows that students who report high levels of sense of belonging to the school environment experience positive educational outcomes (Johnson, 2009). For example, high sense of belonging to school has been positively associated with high academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and school satisfaction (Uwah, McMahon, & Furlow, 2008). In contrast, lack of sense of belonging has been associated with depression, anxiety, alienation, and loneliness. Consequently, these negative feelings can lead to decreased academic motivation, engagement, and academic achievement among students (Booker, 2007).

Much of the long-standing empirical research on sense of belonging describes it as a universal construct having the same significance and influence on educational experiences for all racial groups of students. Research has emerged, however, indicating that belongingness has a different meaning for urban African American students whose racial group is associated with negative racial stereotypes (Purdie et al., 2008). Settings alone have the power to signal the degree of threat or safety an individual will experience (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Members of marginalized groups often question their value in mainstream settings, especially in settings in which they have historically experienced discrimination. Consequently, high school, in particular, may present unique challenges for African American students (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

The conceptual framework for the current study draws upon racial identity theory (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Racial identity theory provides an understanding of the significance and meaning that individuals attach to their group membership (Sellers et al., 1998). Researchers have suggested that the three components of racial identity (i.e., centrality, private regard, and public regard) do not function independently; rather, these variables interact to influence attitudes and behaviors (Byrd & Chavous, 2011).

Racial *centrality* refers to the dominance of an individual's race to his perception of self-concept. Since centrality is stable across situations, it is measured by an individual's perception of self with respect to race across various situations. Regard, which entails an individual's affective or evaluative judgment of race, consists of two subscales: public and private. *Public regard* refers to one's perception of how others view African Americans, whereas *private regard* refers to one's positive or negative feelings about African Americans, as well as how one feels about being an African American (Sellers et al., 1998). The two prevalent frameworks used to explain racial identity in relation to African American students' educational achievement are the racial-identity-as-promotive perspective and the racial identity-as-risk perspective (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007).

The racial-identity-as-promotive perspective holds there are benefits to possessing high centrality and high private regard. In essence, high centrality and private regard act as buffers to the negative experiences related to race within the school context. For example, research has shown positive associations between high centrality and high private regard with the value of education, academic aspirations, high school and college attendance, and academic achievement (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk, Cladwell, Kohn-Wood, & Zimmerman, 2003; Harper & Tuckman,

2006). Smalls et al. (2007) found that school settings that are congruent with and supportive of students' racial identity greatly contribute to students feeling a strong connection to school. Yet, the role of racial centrality varies across situations. Feeling connected to a group through membership may make some African Americans resilient when faced with discrimination while others may feel vulnerable when faced with negative racial stereotypes (Okeke, Howard, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2009; Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003).

The racial identity-as-risk perspective, on the other hand, acknowledges that there are risks involved when urban African American students strongly identify with their racial group because of its history of being stigmatized (Byrd & Chavous, 2011). The heightened awareness of the group's stigmatized status presents a risk to the self-esteem in domains such as school, where the group may have historically experienced discrimination (Booker, 2006; McGhee, 2003; Steele, 1997). Steele (1997) suggested individuals in marginalized racial groups may choose to dis-identify with the group or the domain as a means of self-protection. This perspective holds that in academic settings, African Americans are likely to be treated unfairly and are subjected to low expectations.

Rather than dis-identify with the group, some individuals will dis-identify with academics, which may result in underachievement. Although most research has failed to support the racial identity-as-risk perspective, few studies have found negative associations between racial identity and academic achievement (Harper & Tuckman, 2006; Worrell, 2007). Because of the limited research related to urban African American students' racial identity beliefs and its relationship among sense of belonging and academic achievement, more research is warranted. The current study examines the relationship between the individual components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) and sense of belonging on the academic achievement of urban African American high school students. Three questions guided this research:

1. Is there a relationship between sense of belonging and racial identity among urban African American high school students?
2. How is racial identity related to urban African American high school students' grades?
3. How is sense of belonging related to urban African American high school students' grades?

Methods and Data Sources

This investigation utilized a quantitative methodology to collect and analyze three forms of data. Initially, a survey consisting of 69 items was administered to high school students. The survey consisted of four sections, which included demographic information (year in school, grades, gender, and race), racial identity, academic motivation, and sense of belonging (connectedness). The present study, however, used 41 items from the full survey, which included three sections: demographic information (self-reported grades), racial identity, and sense of belonging. Academic motivation was excluded from the present study.

The three components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) were measured by the score on the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity-teen (MIBI-t) (Scottham, Sellers, & Nguyen, 2008). Students' sense of belonging was measured by the score of *connectedness* on the California Healthy Kids Survey Module A (WestEd, 2008).

Participants and Data Collection

Students in grades 10-12 (Table 1) from an urban public high school in Southern California were invited to participate in the study (*N=216*). The researchers randomly selected six classes from which to invite participants. Only students who submitted the appropriate

consent and assent forms were given the survey (*N=131*). The survey was administered in class for one hour. Only African American survey data were included in this study. The participants included 48 female and 57 male African American high school students (*N=105)*.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 105)

Characteristics	*n*	*%*
Ethnicity		
African American	105	100
Gender		
Female	48	46
Male	57	54
Grade		
10th Grade	24	23
11th Grade	13	12
12th Grade	68	65

Data Analysis

A correlational analysis was performed to identify positive relationships between each of the three components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) and sense of belonging, as well as students' self-reported grades (see Table 2).

Multiple regression analysis (see Table 3) was conducted to determine which, if any, of the three components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) predict sense of belonging or grades.

Findings

Research Question One: Is there a relationship between racial identity and sense of belonging among urban African American high school students?

A correlational analysis was performed to identify positive relationships between each of the three components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) and sense of belonging (see Table 2). The analysis revealed a positive correlation between centrality and sense of belonging, and between private regard and sense of belonging. There was no statistical association between public regard and sense of belonging. An analysis of multiple regression data revealed centrality as the only predictor of sense of belonging (See Table 3).

Research Question Two: **How is racial identity related to urban African American high school students' grades?**

An analysis of the data showed no statistical relationship among the components of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) and students' grades (See Table 2).

Research Question Three: How is sense of belonging related to urban African American high school students' grades?

This study revealed a positive relationship between sense of belonging and grades among urban African American participants (see Table 2). Multiple regression analysis was conducted

to determine if sense of belonging predicts grades. Table 3 summarizes the analysis results: sense of belonging was found to be a predictor of student grades.

Table 2: Correlation Table of All Variables

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. GPA	—				
2. Sense of Belonging	.22*	—			
3. Centrality	-.02	.38**	—		
4. Private Regard	.54	.28**	.58**	—	
5. Public Regard	-.99	.04	.26**	.28**	—

*Note. * $p <.05$, ** $p <.01$*

Table 3: Summary Table of Regression Analyses

Variable	B	SE B	β	T
Predicting Sense of Belonging				
Centrality	.29	.10	.34	2.95*
Private Regard	.11	.13	.10	.89
Public Regard	-.07	.09	-.08	-.79
Predicting Grades				
Centrality	-.12	.10	-.14	-1.14
Public Regard	.08	.09	-.10	-.98
Private Regard	-.09	.12	-.9	.80
Sense of Belonging	.23	.09	.25	2.35*

*Note. * $p < .05$*

Discussion

A major finding of the present study was that centrality is a predictor of sense of belonging. This suggests students with high centrality (students whose race is central to their self-concept) feel more connected to their school. Findings from this study support the racial identity-as-promotive perspective. Centrality acts as a buffer to negative racial stigma because of the social support received from fellow racial group members who also experience discrimination (Okeke, Howard, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2009; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). As a result, students may still feel connected to the school setting despite their perceptions of discrimination. Further, study results suggest that, for African American students to feel the sense of belongingness, schools must cultivate a culture of acceptance of all racial groups and promote positive teacher-student relationships.

The significant association between sense of belonging and grades found in this study is consistent with the literature related to sense of belonging and academic achievement (Anderman, 2003; Goodenow, 1993). For African American youth, the school setting may evoke

the fear of being stereotyped or the fear that they are not valued, in addition to other contextual factors that increase the risk of educational failure (Booker, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Steele, 1997). Understanding the significance of the role that sense of belonging has on the academic achievement of African American youth is important information for researchers, administrators, and educators charged with implementing policy, curriculum, and academic supports to ensure the success of these youth.

Educational Importance

There is an abundance of research that identifies the causes of urban youths' underperformance. Despite the challenges African American youth face, there are many who experience academic success (Thomas, et al., 2009). As a result, researchers know little about factors that contribute to the success of African American students who face barriers within the school environment (Noguera, 2003). The present study is important because it contributes to the limited literature related to sense of belonging and urban African American students' academic achievement. Although sense of belonging is important to the achievement of all students, it is particularly significant for urban African American students who often contend with negative stereotypes and racism that undermine their feelings of being valued in educational settings (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The findings from this study reveal the significance of the teacher's role in promoting African American students' sense of belonging. African American students feel more connected to school when they perceive teacher expectations are high and they feel valued and cared for by other adults on campus (Booker, 2006). Teacher support within the classroom setting has also been found to promote mutual respect among classmates and positive peer interactions, which cultivate feelings of belongingness (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

An important implication of this study is the need for on-going professional development for teachers and school staff on the importance of cultural inclusiveness, cultural sensitivity, and research-based practices to promote positive teacher-student relationships and achievement. Research demonstrates that urban African American students benefit from establishing positive relationships with staff that exhibit a caring disposition and establish a safe environment for communication (Booker, 2016). Schools need to listen to students' voices, particularly students from marginalized groups, to diminish the cultural divide and understand how to best support them (Thompson, 2004). This can include opportunities for students to have mentors and work collaboratively with staff on school projects, school leadership, and decision-making. Providing these supports and strengthening the relationships with school staff will increase urban African American students' sense of belonging to the school and lead to increased academic achievement.

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