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Felecia A. Lee ^a, Rhonda K. Lewis ^a, Jamilya R. Sly ^b, Chakema Carmack ^a, Shani R. Roberts ^a & Polly Basore ^c

^a Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, USA

^b Department of Oncological Sciences, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York, New York, USA

^c Kansas Unified School District 259, Wichita, Kansas, USA

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Promoting Positive Youth Development by Examining the Career and Educational Aspirations of African American Males: Implications for Designing Educational Programs

FELECIA A. LEE and RHONDA K. LEWIS

Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, USA

JAMILIA R. SLY

*Department of Oncological Sciences, Mount Sinai School of Medicine,
New York, New York, USA*

CHAKEMA CARMACK and SHANI R. ROBERTS

Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, USA

POLLY BASORE

Kansas Unified School District 259, Wichita, Kansas, USA

African American males experience poor academic performance, high absenteeism at school, and are at increased risk of being involved in violence than other racial groups. Given that the educational outlook for African American males appears bleak, it is important to assess the aspirations of these adolescent males in order to find the gap between aspirations and educational attainment. In order to promote positive development within this population, it is essential that factors that affect African American males be identified. A survey was administered to male students attending elementary, middle, and high schools in a local school district. A cross-sectional study was conducted to examine the career and educational aspirations of African American males. A total of 473 males were surveyed: 45% African American, 22% Caucasian, 13% biracial, and 19% Other (including Asian

Address correspondence to Felecia A. Lee, Department of Psychology, Wichita State University, 1845 N. Fairmount, Box 34, Wichita, KS 67260, USA. E-mail: falee@wichita.edu

American, Hispanic, Native American). The results revealed that African American males aspired to attend college at the same rate as other ethnic groups. Also, African American males were more likely to aspire to be professional athletes than males from other ethnic groups. Important factors to consider when designing a program are discussed as well as future research and limitations.

KEYWORDS *adolescents, African American, career aspirations, educational aspirations, males*

African American males face a number of challenges. African American males are more likely to die by homicide, more likely to be incarcerated than their White counterparts and are contracting HIV at an alarming rate (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006, p. 2). According to the National Urban League (2007) "State of Black America Portrait of the Black Male" Report, not only are "Black Males under 25 years of age 15 times more likely to die by homicide than their white counterparts," but African American males are also more likely to be convicted and receive longer sentences. These facts reveal the dismal present situation of the African American male.

In regard to education, African American males continue to do poorly. For instance, African American males are struggling in schools and "studies have found that young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty and to receive government assistance... Further, high school dropouts are more likely to become involved in crime" (Child Trends DataBank, 2003, p. 1). James Earl Davis (2003), states in "Early Schooling and Academic Achievement of African American Males," that African American males are disproportionately represented in several categories of academic failure. African American males are also more likely to drop out of school. Despite these findings, African American males consistently report that their education is important to them. In a study conducted by Pedro Noguera (2003), 90% of African American respondents agreed that their education was important and that they wanted to go to college. Interestingly, in the same study, only 18% of respondents stated that they worked hard to achieve good grades. This suggests a disconnect between what African American males aspire to do and their behavioral outputs.

Perhaps the reasoning for this disconnect between educational aspirations and educational attainment is that African American males see alternative avenues to success. A number of ethnic groups in American history have sought ways to gain upward mobility to escape being in poverty. According to Oliver (1980), sports may be seen as a more promising avenue to economic success for lower or working class individuals. This may be because they view their opportunities as limited in assessing traditional careers, but view sports as a viable career opportunity. "African American athletes tended

to use the educational setting to achieve sports stardom when in fact they should have used sports to achieve an education” (Majors, 1998). That is an important observation from Sailes. African American males may only be aspiring for higher education in order to pursue professional athletics. The fact that African American males are overrepresented in the realm of sports along with the aid of the media may cause many African American youth to believe that this career avenue is easily obtainable and will lead to unlimited success, when in fact this is not the case.

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

There are a number of risk factors associated with poor academic performance in young African American males include (a) impoverished living conditions, (b) neighborhoods with high crime rates, (c) exposure to substance abuse at an early age, (d) low socioeconomic status, (e) single parent households, and (f) lack of male role models (Noguera, 2003). Protective factors associated with academic success in young African American males are (a) supportive family environment, (b) parental involvement, (c) availability of external support systems (such as peers and teachers), and (d) the presence of a familial role model (Bryant & Zimmermann, 2003; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). Parental involvement in the adolescents’ academic career and endeavors has important implications.

Another factor that may affect African American males and their educational desires are teacher expectations, Ford and Harris (1996) also describe the important role that these expectations can play, especially in the achievement of African American males. According to the article, “For Black Students in particular, educational outcomes and disengagement are influenced by classroom environments, especially student–teacher relations” (p. 1142). If African American students feel that the relationship between them and the teacher is positive, the teacher will have higher expectations and the student will perform better.

There are a variety of other factors that deter African American males from striving to do well in school. This includes the idea that some African American males feel that they are acting or will be perceived by their peers that they are “acting White” if they aspire to succeed in school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Other factors include a lack of educational resources in the home as well as the idea that the path to success is through athletics and entertainment rather than education. According to *African Americans in Sports* (Sailes, 1998), African Americans rely on sports for fame or fortune at higher percentages than Caucasians. This may be one explanation for the reason why African American males gravitate toward sports and not academic success and use this as a way to achieve success. More information is needed in order to understand the aspirations and expectations of African

American males and design interventions that address this discrepancy in aspirations and performance in school. Although African Americans seek out sports as a way to be successful, the odds of achieving success in professional sports (going pro) are limited. According to the NCAA, the percentage of NCAA student-athletes who become professional athletes is 1.2% of men's basketball players and 1.8% of football players (NCAA, 2008).

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

Positive youth development theories suggest that researchers and practitioners should not only recognize, but also promote factors within youth that prevent the development of harmful and unproductive behaviors and enable behaviors that encourage the youth to be successful. Although there are factors that would surely prevent African American males from becoming successful and productive members in society, there are protective and resiliency factors that, if cultivated, will allow this population to succeed and flourish. In developing prevention and intervention programs for African American males positive youth development needs to be taken into consideration, if these programs are going to be effective. Also, in designing educational programs targeted at this population, protective and resiliency factors should be considered.

Along with recognizing theories of positive youth development, the socioecological model suggests that there is an "interwoven" relationship that exists between an individual and their environment and this will affect the success of targeting African American males. The environment includes the family, school, neighborhood at large, as well as national, state, and local entities. It is necessary to recognize these relationships that exist between young African American males and their environment. In order to promote positive youth development there may be resources that need to be accessed within these entities that further encourage success within this population.

In order to determine how African American males view their education and future career goals, a cross-sectional study was conducted among adolescent males aged 8–15. This study aimed to assess their educational aspirations to attend college and future career goals among African American males as well as aspirations among African American males compared to other ethnic groups.

METHODS

Participants and Setting

A total of 473 young males aged 8–15 were surveyed. The sample included 3rd-, 5th-, 7th-, and 9th-grade males. The mean age for the participants

was 11 and the average grade level was 6th. There were 212 African American participants (45%), 106 Caucasian (22%), 61 biracial (13%), and 94 (19%) Other (including Asian American, Hispanic, Native American). This study was conducted in a Midwestern city. No other demographic information was allowed to be collected.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board at Wichita State University approved this study. Approval was also obtained from the local school district. Schools were contacted and times were arranged for surveys to be administered. The surveys were read aloud to the 3rd-grade participants. The guidance counselor administered the surveys at the high school. Pen and pencil surveys were administered. Surveys took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Instrumentation

A survey was developed to ascertain the future career and educational goals of young males. The survey included 17 items and was created by Drs. Rhonda K. Lewis and Jim Snyder. The survey consisted of questions concerning role models, activities that they like to participate in outside of school as well as future career and educational goal.

The questions that were included in this analysis were:

- What kind of job do you want to have when you grow up? (Open Ended)
- How far do you see yourself going in school? (High School, Some College or 4-year College degree)

Data Analysis Used

SPSS 16 was used in order to conduct the analysis. For the purposes of this assessment, frequencies and descriptive statistics analysis were calculated on the open ended questions.

RESULTS

Career Aspirations

The results showed African American adolescent males were much more likely to aspire to become professional athletes than non-African American males. Table 1 shows that the NBA and the NFL were the top two jobs that African American males aspired to obtain and the aspiration to become a doctor was the third highest occupation listed. Non-African American males, however, were more likely to report wanting to be a professional, such as a doctor or an engineer and rank NFL as the third top choice.

TABLE 1 Top Three Jobs Desired by African American and Non-African American Participants

African American males		Non-African American males	
Job type	Percentage	Job type	Percentage
NBA	36 participants (17%)	Doctor	17 participants (7%)
NFL	27 participants (13%)	Engineer	11 participants (4%)
Doctor	14 participants (7%)	NFL	10 participants (4%)

TABLE 2 The Percentage of Males who Envision Themselves Completing a College Degree

Race	Percentage
African American	74%
Caucasian	74%
Other	69%

Note. This table displays that within this sample, African American males envision themselves completing a college degree at the same rate as Caucasian Americans.

African American males were more likely to aspire to be athletes than individuals in other ethnic groups.

Educational Aspirations

The results showed that African American males aspire to attend college as any other racial group (Table 2). Seventy-four percent of African Americans aspired to go to college compared to 74% of Caucasian male adolescents. Other ethnic groups reported that 69% wanted to attend college.

Beliefs

The results show that 69% of African American males strongly agreed with the statement “I believe that I can become whatever I want to become” and 56.5% of non-African American males strongly agreed with the statement.

The results show that 61% of African American males strongly agreed with the statement “I believe the adults in my life support me” and 53.4% of non-African American males strongly agreed with the statement.

DISCUSSION

African American males aspired to attend college at the rate of any other racial group. This may be, in part, a result of their desire to become professional

athletes. College may be the avenue that they view as being the most successful in obtaining their goal of becoming a professional athlete. These findings seem to be consistent with previous literature (Noguera, 2003).

Major Contributions

African American males were also more likely to aspire to be professional athletes than any other racial group prior to and following the intervention. This is consistent with previous literature: "Many black males view sports or music as a more promising route to upward mobility than academic pursuits" (Noguera, 2003, p. 438). This may explain the inconsistency with the findings that African American males value their education, but do not work hard enough to attain good grades. Perhaps they do not see models in their community. If they feel that the only way to become successful is to be a professional athlete or famous musician, than education may not be the avenue that leads to success in their eyes. Another factor that may contribute to African American males aspiring to become professional athletes more than any other racial group is that they lack positive male role models within the family and/or the community who pursue other professions. Thus the only successful African American males that they observe in the media are professional athletes.

Young males on a daily basis they are exposed to the influence of the media, which tends to show African American males as sports and entertainment professionals. When listening to and viewing the media, which is an everyday occurrence for most African American males, they are continually bombarded with the idea of what a successful African American male looks like. If this is all that they see, it is no wonder that this is what they aspire to be.

Although African Americans and Caucasian youth aspired to go to college at the same rate, the other group, including Native Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and Biracial, did not report as high a rate as African Americans and Caucasian Americans. This is consistent with other research. "Literature has noted that Afro-American children and youth have higher aspirations to achieve than any other group" (Shade, 1983, p. 140). The question becomes if they do aspire to attend college as any other racial group, why are they not attending college at the same rate as other racial groups? According to the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2006), only 8% of African American males graduate from college. One possible explanation may be associated with teacher expectations. As previously cited, African American males may feel that they are not challenged enough and therefore may feel that they are not prepared to attend college or they do not feel that their teachers believe that they can attain success in college. The influence that a teacher's expectations have on a young African American male may be detrimental. If the young male does not feel that he is being challenged and if his teacher feels that he cannot achieve, perhaps he does not.

African American males believe that they can become whatever they want to become. There has been little research conducted on whether this is a true statement for African American males, but the results from this study show that African American males do, in fact, believe that they can become whatever they want to become.

Lastly, the results of this study show that African American males believe that the adults in their lives support their dreams. Again, there has been little research conducted in this particular area. It must be questioned that if African American males believe that they can become whatever they want to become and they believe that the adults in their lives support their dreams, why does the outlook for success for African American males look so bleak and what factors can we promote to encourage their success?

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that the sample size may not be representative of all African American and non African American males in the Wichita School district. It is difficult to generalize the sample to the broader population.

Another limitation of this study was the wording of the instrument. The 3rd-grade participants commonly misinterpreted the question "I believe that I can become whatever I want to become." To be assured that questions are interpreted correctly, some questions may need to be written in a manner that corresponds with the appropriate reading level.

Future Research

Future research should explore the role and importance of teacher expectations in the career and educational aspirations of African American males. If young African Americans state that they want to go to college (educational aspirations) but do not feel that they are being challenged by their teachers or do not feel that teachers believe in their ability to achieve higher educational outcomes, this may contribute to their aspirations to attend college only to become a professional athlete. As previously noted, a protective factor for youth is having an external support system. This system can include educators and because students spend such a large amount of time with teachers, this may be a starting point for revealing a multitude of avenues for success for African American youth.

Another direction for future research would be to pursue who young African American males view as role models. If the only role models that many African American youth have are those that they see in the media, they will have a very skewed and narrow view of what constitutes a successful African American male. It is also important that young African American males be exposed to success in ways other than becoming a professional athlete as well as being given the information that this is possible.

Implications for Designing Educational Programs

Given the findings of the study there are several factors to considering when designing educational programs for African American males. There are personal levels for intervention as well as environmental levels for interventions. A personal factor that needs to be addressed for African American males to be successful in education are poor grades. Individuals that are able to intervene at that level are teachers, parents, and other significant persons in the life of the adolescent (uncles, aunts, grandparents). These individuals need to be involved in any educational program that looks to address educational issues African American males because due to the findings of this study, we know that African American males believe that those in their lives support them. If they feel that they are supported by significant others in their lives and those significant others support educational, African American males may be more apt to consider what is being taught.

Environmental factors that should be considered within this population are the neighborhoods that these youth may reside in. As previously stated, risk factors that are associated with poor grades, which in turn spawn many other academic issues in the lives of African American males, include impoverished living conditions and neighborhoods with high crime rate. These substantial issues must be addressed concurrently as other issues relevant to the school are addressed. It is neither plausible, nor advantageous, to ignore larger forces outside of school that effect education and expect that an individual is unaffected. Perhaps to address some of these neighborhood problems that very much affect the education of the adolescent, the youth can be given the opportunity to become involved in ways to make the neighborhood a better place, such as getting involved in restoration activities with their own neighborhood.

Also, because African Americans aspire to attend college and believe that they can become anything that they aspire to be, it is important to design programs that continue to promote those ideas. Perhaps within an intervention it is especially important to expose young African American males to other career paths as well as to ways to obtain high education. One of the barriers to success in African American males may be their lack of understanding concerning educational paths and career paths and exposure to this may promote and encourage their success.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, it is important to understand the opinions of young people in order to design effective interventions and to determine their thoughts and perceptions about their career aspirations, lifestyles, and future aspirations. Although the success for African American males appears unlikely,

there are protective factors that are associated with the academic success of African American males and positive outcomes. Interventions and programs that are developed must be tailored to fit the unique situation of young African American males. Success is a possible outcome for African American males. It seems that they desire success in academics as well as in their future professional careers. They just may not know how or know what to do to get there. Perhaps through effective interventions that provide mentoring and positive role models for African American males, improvement in academic outcomes and other positive outcomes is attainable.

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