

PROMOTING COLLEGE ASPIRATIONS AMONG SCHOOL-AGE BLACK AMERICAN MALES

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This chapter explores school-related, interpersonal, social, and family factors associated with college aspirations among school-age black males. Much of the literature on college aspirations among black males suggests that African Americans aspire to attend college at rates similar to their white peers (Mahoney & Merritt, 1993; Pitre, 2006; Toldson, 2008), and across races females aspire to attend college at higher rates than males (Hallinan & Williams, 1990). However, research evidence suggests that many unique school and social barriers prevent black males from accessing institutions of higher education (Chavous et al., 2003; Howard, 2003). Moreover, black males have demonstrated distinct patterns in achieving educational goals that have implications for the work of counselors, teachers, families, and educational activists (Jackson & Moore, 2006; Toldson, 2008).

The literature reviewed in this section surveys factors associated with college access, college readiness, and college expectations. The first section looks specifically at academic and school-related factors. The second section reviews research findings on the influence of family and the third

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section summarizes literature that suggests interpersonal and motivational attributions to college aspirations among black males.

ACADEMIC AND SCHOOL-RELATED FACTORS

In 2003, Howard surveyed African Americans with emphasis on academic identities and college aspirations. This investigator interviewed African-American students at two urban high schools to gain insight relative to their college ambitions, educational capabilities, and academic identities. According to the students interviewed one specific area that affected their academic identity and college aspirations was perceived racism and discrimination, including counselors' and teachers' perception of their intelligence, unfair placement in special needs courses, and teachers' attitude and behavior toward students (Howard, 2003).

To foster college aspirations the investigator recommended that educators use positive reinforcement and strength-based approaches. In addition, the author recommended that all students be encouraged to attend college, and given equal access to college preparatory and advanced placement courses. Howard (2003) advocated for open discussions about race and racism and advancing culturally and racially proficient teachers and counselors. Racial identity and racism are particularly important influences in the academic and college choice process, given the developmental processes of adolescents (Chavous et al., 2003). During mid-to-late adolescence, African Americans have a full awareness of social inequities in education, which place a burden on their achievements and motivation levels.

In a similar study on the educational aspirations of 53,083 black and white high school seniors in Virginia, 68% of black males wanted at least an associate degree, compared to 75% for black females and white males, and over 81% for white females (Mahoney & Merritt, 1993). The study revealed that a larger portion of black students considered counselors to be important in helping them make educational plans, and black males were more likely to use school counseling services to overcome academic weaknesses. Similarly, 66% of black students regarded teachers as important in helping them to make educational decisions, compared to 50% of whites (Mahoney & Merritt, 1993).

The role of counselors and teachers was reinforced in recent studies that analyzed black and white students' college aspirations (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Pitre, 2006; Stewart, 2007). Black students in the study expressed desires to attend college that were similar to their white peers,

even when not controlling for socioeconomic status. However, black students indicated that they lacked college preparation and had less access to college information at their school (Pitre, 2006). Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, an analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study recommended that teacher training and development should emphasize motivational strategies and teaching from a strength-based focus (Stewart, 2007). Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) noted that counselors need to assist students with envisioning a future outside of their economic limitations and reinforce student norms and expectations about college access.

Family Factors

Students who participated in Howard's (2003) study noted that parents' involvement and influence were essential for formulating college aspirations. Parents' expectations and involvement have demonstrated a positive statistical relationship with academic success among black males (Toldson, 2008; Trusty, 2002). However, specific family dynamics underlying parents' expectations and involvement and not fully understood (Toldson, 2008; Trusty, 2002). When researching the relationship between parents' desires and their children's educational aspirations, the strength of the relationship between these two variables was lowest among black males. The correlation coefficients were as follows: black males, $r = 0.54$; black females, $r = 0.58$; white females, $r = 0.63$; and white males, $r = 0.64$ (Mahoney & Merritt, 1993).

Some studies have noted an interaction between parents and socioeconomic status (SES) (Pitre, 2006; Rothsten, 2004). Guidance counselors and churches can mitigate the parent involvement when promoting college aspirations. One program analysis noted that 61% of participating black seniors were accepted to 4-year and 2-year institutions, whereas less than 20% had at least one parent who graduated from a 4-year college or university (Pitre, 2006). Another faith-based program reported that participating in church precollege programs impacted the number of urban students entering college (Timmermans & Booker, 2006). Collaborations between urban churches and colleges were recommended to serve as additional support to assist students and families with preparing for college.

Toldson (2008) found that across two national surveys, African Americans were the only ethnic group to report more fatherless homes than fathers at home. Only 20–25% of white students reported fatherless

homes compared to 56–60% of black students. Toldson's findings also produced strong evidence that modeling is an important component to academic development among black adolescent males. Father's education, but not mother's education, had a significant impact on black males' – but not as much for black females' academic achievement. Parents who helped their children with homework, were comfortable talking to teachers, urged their children to do well in school, and maintained high expectations generally had high-performing children.

Interpersonal and Motivational Factors

Because of the collectivist orientation of black people, peer influences are hypothesized to be essential to promoting academic success and subsequent college aspirations among African Americans. Numerous studies have found a relationship between positive peer relationships and academic achievement (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Mayer, 2008; Stewart, 2007). Toldson (2008) found that high-achieving black male students reported significantly more positive interactions with classmates and less involvement with bullying and fighting compared to their low-achieving peers.

In a study on preventing high school failure for “at-risk” urban African-American youth, Bemak, et al. (2005) noted that inner-city youth face numerous problems, including witnessing and experiencing violence, parent absenteeism, and community and school discord. Bemak et al. (2005) suggested that group counseling may be effective in urban schools due to the large number of students and a lack of resources to assist each student. Additionally, group counseling allows students to model behavior, develop interpersonal relationships, and gain insight from peers.

Emotional and motivational factors have been found to influence academic achievement and college aspirations. Black students who participated in Howard's (2003) study described a self-perception of intelligence, based on grades and quality of their schools, as a barrier to college aspirations. Toldson (2008) found that quality of life, as measure by overall feelings of happiness and self-worth, was the strongest emotional indicator of academic success among black males. Academically successful African-American males were almost twice as likely to report feeling happy about the quality of their life when compared to those with failing grades. Cognitive-behavioral therapy was cited as a strategy for countering

irrational self-statements among black youth, which can lead to lower future aspirations.

Purpose

The literature presented in this section demonstrates that college aspirations among black males are associated with many developmental factors that cut across various life domains, including the school and family. In addition, many personal and interpersonal attributes influence black males' decision to attend college after high school. Building upon the previous literature, this study compared school experience, family characteristics, and personal attributes of three groups of students. The central group of interest was black adolescent males who aspired to attend college after graduating from high school. The comparison groups were black males who selected other goal-oriented post-high school alternatives, such as technical training or the military, and those who were either unsure or planned to be exclusively unemployed after leaving high school. The three groups are assumed to be diverse, with a considerable degree of within-group differences, which should be considered within the context of the findings. In addition, college aspirations are not always an antecedent to college enrollment; however, the literatures suggest it to be an important first step.

METHOD

Participants

The study population included all school-age African-American males who completed the Health Behavior in School-age Children (HBSC; $N = 1,225$) survey. This database was selected for this study because it had a clear indicator of college aspirations, had an adequate African-American adolescent male representation, was a national survey that included multiple states and geographic areas, and had adequate measures of contributing factors, such as parent relationship, school environment, and wellness. The database is indexed for public analysis at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Procedures

The World Health Organization (WHO) collected data for the HBSC survey between 1997 and 1998. The survey employed a three-stage cluster design in which the school's county was the first stage, the school was the second stage, and the classroom was the third stage. The US sample included 664 schools, in a stratified, two-stage cluster sample of classes at grades 6 through 10. Schools were stratified by racial/ethnic status, geographic region, and metropolitan statistical area status.

The HBSC surveyed 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old children's attitudes and experiences concerning a range of health-related behaviors. The survey seeks to inform health promotion and educational policy aimed at school-age children nationally. A participating school representative (e.g., teacher, nurse, school counselor, etc.) administered the HBSC survey in school settings. The school representatives read scripts that explained the survey procedures. The questionnaire took approximately 45 minutes to complete and was administered in a regular classroom setting.

The sample was comprised of 15,686 sixth-, seventh-, eighth-, ninth-, and tenth-grade students at public and private schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Of this number, 1,225 were African-American males. The WHO reported that of the 17,000 participants, 835 cases were dropped from the database because they were missing a significant number of key variables from the HBSC protocol. In addition, the WHO dropped 479 cases due to the respondents' ages or grades being out of range or unknown. The WHO oversaw procedures to protect the anonymity of respondents. Public files made available for secondary analysis omitted variables that could be used to personally identify individuals.

Measures

College Aspirations

College aspiration was measured with the question, "What do you think you will be doing when you finish high school?" Survey participants were given the following options: 4-year college/university, 2-year community/junior college, technical or vocational school, apprenticeship/trade or on-the-job training, working, armed forces/military, unemployed, and don't know. The responses from the original questionnaire item were reconfigured to simplify the analyses. Four-year college remained an independent option to form the category "College Aspirations," "unemployed" and "don't know" were

combined to create the category “No Plans,” and all remaining response options were combined to create the category “Other Plans.” With most of the factors explored, researchers assumed a linear relationship with the three categories, whereby protective factors were hypothesized to evince a stronger association with College Aspirations and Other Plans, when compared to No Plans.

Contributing Factors

The causal determinants of central interest are (1) academic and school-related factors; (2) family factors; and (3) mental health, wellness, and motivational factors. To improve the clarity of the findings, specific questions and indexes that measured various aspects of each causal determinant are listed and explained throughout the report. The following are general descriptions of the four factors that were posited to have a relationship with academic achievement among African-American males.

Academic Achievement and School Factors

HBSC participants responded to the question, “In your opinion, what does your class teacher(s) think about your school performance compared to your classmates?” Response options were very good, good, average, and below average. School-related factors explored the relationship between perceptions of school, relationships with teachers, and school safety issues with college aspirations. Perceptions of school, explored how much the respondents enjoy going to school and are not bored by school, as well as whether they found the schoolwork important and meaningful. Perceptions also included measures that gauged how equitable the students found school. Relationships with teachers reflected the students’ report of how much the teachers were interested in them, respected them, treated them fairly, and provided them with positive feedback. School safety issues explored the students’ perception that school was a safe and drug-free environment.

Family Factors

Family factors that were posited to contribute to college aspirations among school-age African-American males included parents’ education and their relationship with children. Parents’ education compared the college aspirations of students whose father or mother did not finish high school, graduated from high school, had some education after high school, or graduated from college. Indices of parents’ relationship with their children consisted of ease of communication with father and mother, the parents’

involvement in the child's school, and parenting practices, such as encouragement.

Mental Health, Wellness, and Motivational Factors

Mental health, wellness, and motivational factors explored emotional well-being, self-confidence, and peer relationships. Emotional well-being consisted of many affective components such as quality of life, happiness, loneliness, nervousness, and despondence. Peer relationships gauged students' self-report of the extent to which they found it easy to make friends.

Analysis Plan

The principal analytic technique used in this study was a multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) in college aspirations among black males, with white males serving as a comparison group. General linear modeling approaches were used to reveal differences in the relationship between college aspirations and associated variables along race lines. The hypothesized relationships between college aspirations and external measures were tested with a p -value of 0.01 where the p was less than 0.01, the likelihood that the reported result is due to random chance factors is only 1%. In most cases, this study did not set a standard significance level. Rather, the actual p -values were used to gauge statistical certainty and values that ranged from 0.05 to 0.000 were interpreted.

Means plots are used throughout the results to display the linear relationship between various indicators of college aspirations and hypothesized covariates. The plots include a dashed reference line on the Y -axis that marked the estimated mean of the variable of interest. The reference line is useful for determining the distribution of scores around the mean for various levels of post-high school plans.

RESULTS

Descriptive Information

The participants of the survey were 14,363 sixth through tenth graders who completed the HBSC questionnaire. The total number of black males was 1,133, comprising 8% of the sample. Compared to males in other racial

Table 1. College Aspirations among Black, White, and Hispanic School-Age Males and Females.

Plans after high school?	Black Male (<i>N</i> = 1,133)	Black Female (<i>N</i> = 1,542)	White Male (<i>N</i> = 4,631)	White Female (<i>N</i> = 5,149)	Hispanic Male (<i>N</i> = 847)	Hispanic Female (<i>N</i> = 1,061)
Four-year college	701 (61.9%)	1,039 (67.4%)	2,829 (61.1%)	3,693 (71.7%)	432 (51.0%)	600 (56.6%)
Other plans ^a	316 (27.9%)	360 (23.3%)	1,206 (26.0%)	843 (16.4%)	272 (32.1%)	259 (24.4%)
No plans	116 (10.2%)	143 (9.3%)	596 (12.9%)	613 (11.9%)	143 (16.9%)	202 (19.0%)

^aTwo-year community/junior college, technical or vocational school, apprenticeship/trade or on-the-job training, working, armed forces.

groups, black males had the highest percentage of participants who aspired to attend college. When replying to the question, “What do you think you will be doing when you finish high school?” nearly 62% of the black male respondents replied, “4-year college or university,” compared to 61% of white males and 51% of Hispanic males. Females generally reported higher college aspirations than males. Table 1 displays the total number and percentage of black, white, and Hispanic school-age males and females who reported plans to attend college after completing high school. χ^2 Analysis indicated strong differences ($p < .001$) in college aspirations across race/gender groups.

Academic and School-Related Factors

Reported level of academic achievement was compared among black and white males who (1) aspired to attend college after high school, (2) reported other plans, or (3) had no aspirations beyond high school. Black male students who aspired to go to a 4-year college or university reported significantly higher levels of academic achievement than those who had other plans or no aspirations ($F = 90.78$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). As Fig. 1 indicates, black male students who aspire to go to a 4-year college were the only group of black male students who reported a level of academic achievement that was higher than the mean of their peers (represented by the dashed reference line perpendicular to the *Y*-axis). When comparing the relationship between future plans and academic achievement across races, a more lucid pattern emerged for white males. White males who aspired to go to a 4-year college reported higher levels of academic achievement than

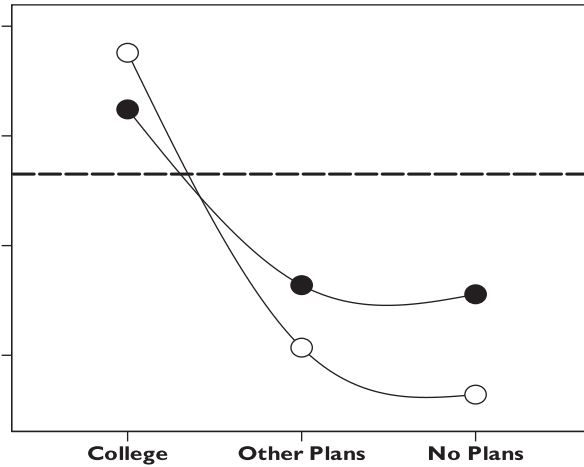


Fig. 1. The Relationship between College Aspirations (X-Axis) and Academic Achievement (Y-Axis) among black and white Males. *Note:* ● = black male students; ○ = white male students. *Source:* Health Behavior in School-age Children survey (2003). The dashed reference line on the Y-axis marks the estimated mean dependent variable. The aspirants were asked the question: What do you think you will be doing when you finish high school?

black males; however, black males with other plans or no aspirations had significantly higher reported levels of achievement than white males with identical plans. This finding was statistically significant as an interaction effect ($F = 6.58$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$).

Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, and significance of school-related factors that contribute to college aspirations among black males. All factors tested through MANOVA procedures indicated a significant relationship with college aspirations. The factor question that revealed the strongest association with college aspirations for all males was, "How do you feel about school at present?" Students who indicated that they "liked school a lot" were also more likely to express interests in attending college after high school. Liking school also revealed significant racial differences, whereby black male students with college aspirations and with other plans expressed stronger affinity for school than their white counterparts. A similar pattern emerge with participant responses to the question, "How often do you think that going to school is boring?" Black male students with college aspirations and other plans expressed

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios of School Factors that Contribute to College Aspirations among Black and White School-Age Males.

	Black		White		F Ratio	
	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	Plans	Race
How do you feel about school at present? ^a	3.01 (0.83)	2.37 (1.00)	2.81 (0.88)	2.30 (0.97)	82.24*	17.54*
How many days did you skip classes or school this term? ^b	1.67 (1.28)	2.06 (1.55)	1.64 (1.21)	2.15 (1.60)	32.80*	0.53
How often do you think that going to school is boring? ^c	3.12 (1.13)	3.77 (1.14)	3.41 (1.06)	3.85 (1.13)	50.67*	20.16*
The rules in this school are fair ^d	2.99 (1.31)	2.43 (1.32)	3.13 (1.20)	2.81 (1.26)	18.62*	6.36
Our school is a nice place to be ^d	3.19 (1.26)	2.70 (1.36)	3.25 (1.22)	2.82 (1.26)	25.01*	1.08
I feel I belong at this school ^d	3.24 (1.35)	2.91 (1.53)	3.47 (1.20)	3.01 (1.33)	21.73*	8.40
I am encouraged to express my views in my class(es) ^d	3.58 (1.21)	3.10 (1.34)	3.64 (1.07)	3.14 (1.22)	31.72*	0.04
Our teachers treat us fairly ^d	3.37 (1.22)	2.79 (1.42)	3.37 (1.13)	3.13 (1.21)	18.39*	5.59
When I need extra help, I can get it ^d	3.80 (1.18)	3.24 (1.36)	3.89 (1.00)	3.48 (1.17)	31.66*	7.76
My teachers are interested in me as a person. ^d	3.54 (1.19)	3.04 (1.41)	3.33 (1.13)	2.97 (1.15)	23.66*	8.03
Do you feel safe at school? ^c	3.75 (1.28)	3.56 (1.37)	4.08 (1.08)	3.63 (1.31)	31.24*	20.15*
How often you have use drugs or alcohol just before school or on school property? ^c	1.84 (1.50)	2.54 (2.27)	1.87 (1.46)	2.27 (1.99)	38.28*	1.19

* $p < .01$ ^a4 = like it a lot 1 = don't like at all.^b1 = 0 days 5 = 4 or more.^c1 = never 5 = very often.^d5 = strongly agree 1 = strongly disagree.

significantly more interests in school than white male students with college aspirations and other plans. Black male students with no aspirations after high school had attitudes about school that were more similar to white students with no aspirations.

Analyses of interaction effects between black and white male students indicated that black male students without college aspirations were significantly more sensitive to issues of fairness. When rating the statements, “Our teachers treat us fairly” ($F = 5.02, df = 2, p < .01$) and “The rules in this school are fair” ($F = 5.03, df = 2, p < .01$), black students with no college aspirations were more likely to strongly disagree than black students with college aspirations and their white counterparts with no aspirations. Fig. 2 visually depicts the interaction between race and college aspirations on issues of school fairness. Notably, the opinions of black and white males who aspire to attend college are similar; however, black males with no plans after high school have much more cynical opinions about school and teacher fairness than similar whites.

Family Factors

Across black and white males, father’s education had the greatest impact on college aspirations, followed by mother’s education. Interestingly, black

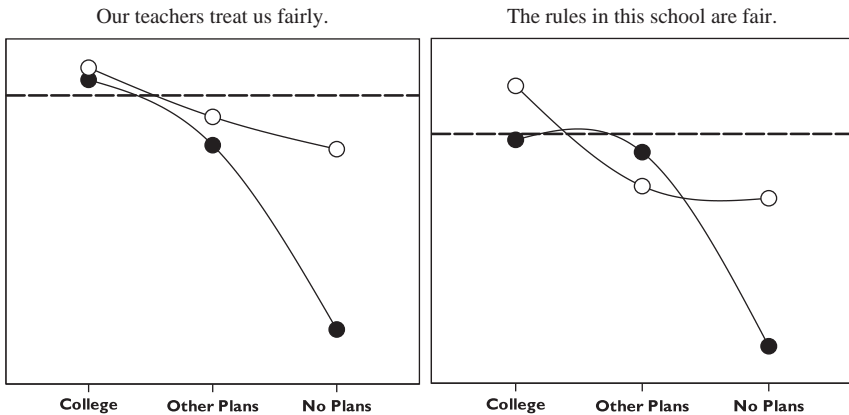


Fig. 2. Interaction between Race and College Aspirations (X-Axis) on Issues of School Fairness (Y-Axes). Note: ● = black male students; ○ = white male students. Source: Health Behavior in School-age Children survey (2003). The dashed reference line on the Y-axis marks the estimated mean dependent variable.

males with plans other than college, reported mothers with educational level significantly lower than black males with no plans. Parents who were involved in their son's education, as evidenced by helping with school problems, visiting the school, and encouraging their sons to do well in school, also evinced sons with higher aspirations to attend college. Black males with college aspirations reported that it was easy to talk to mothers about things that bother them. However, black males with other plans, reported the highest level of ease when communicating with their fathers. The interaction is significantly different ($F = 8.02$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$) from the pattern reported among white males wherein college aspirants reported the highest level of communication with fathers. As Table 3 indicates, all family factors tested influenced aspirations to attend college.

Mental Health, Wellness, and Motivational Factors

As Table 4 indicates, black male students with College aspirations reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and confidence, and fewer feelings of loneliness and helplessness. College aspirants also found it easier to make new friends. Across all participants, level of confidence revealed the strongest relationship with college aspirations; followed by quality of life. However, analyses of interaction effects and means plots (see Fig. 3) suggest that for black males, quality of life has the most linear and lucid relationship with college aspirations. Black males who reported being very happy about their life at present were more likely to aspire for college than black and white males with other plans or no plans. Conversely, level of confidence only displayed a linear relationship with college aspirations for white students. Black males with no aspirations to attend college reported higher levels of confidence than black and white males with plans other than to attend college. The interaction effect for quality of life ($F = 4.23$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$) and confidence ($F = 5.20$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$) were significant findings.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study confirmed many of the positions from the research presented in the literature review and offer other new insights into the experiences and development of black adolescent males who aspire to attend college. Like previous research, this study found no evidence that black

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios of Family Factors that Contribute to College Aspirations among Black and White School-Age Males.

	Black		White		F Ratio	
	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	Plans	Race
Mother's highest level of education ^a	3.23 (0.93)	2.95 (1.06)	3.37 (0.86)	3.00 (1.01)	53.19*	1.95
Father's highest level of education ^a	3.21 (0.94)	2.57 (1.09)	3.36 (0.90)	2.92 (1.06)	79.99*	10.53*
If I have problems at school, my parents are ready to help ^b	4.06 (1.47)	3.52 (1.80)	4.39 (1.11)	4.01 (1.33)	23.26*	22.59*
Parents are willing to come to school to talk to teacher ^b	4.12 (1.39)	3.45 (1.71)	4.35 (1.09)	3.98 (1.36)	28.27*	19.13*
Parents encourage me to do well at school ^b	4.49 (1.25)	3.67 (1.72)	4.77 (0.77)	4.52 (1.07)	35.49*	62.01*
How easy is it for you to talk to your mother about things that really bother you? ^c	2.49 (1.37)	2.12 (1.53)	2.75 (1.04)	2.48 (1.18)	5.48*	3.88
How easy is it for you to talk to your father about things that really bother you? ^c	2.88 (1.22)	2.55 (1.37)	2.97 (0.97)	2.79 (1.13)	6.14*	3.91
How well off do you think your family is? ^c	2.99 (1.12)	2.76 (1.25)	3.01 (0.94)	2.80 (1.04)	16.13*	0.02

* $p < .01$

^a1 = did not complete high school 4 = college graduate.

^b1 = never 5 = always.

^c4 = very 0 = not at all.

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios of Mental Health, Wellness, and Motivational Factors that Contribute to College Aspirations among Black and White School-Age Males.

	Black		White		F Ratio	
	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	College (M, SD)	No Plans (M, SD)	Plans	Race
Is it easy or difficult for you to make new friends? ^a	3.33 (0.73)	3.11 (0.87)	3.13 (0.72)	2.84 (0.84)	22.07*	32.63*
In general, how do you feel about your life at present? ^b	3.39 (0.72)	2.98 (0.98)	3.18 (0.74)	2.97 (0.86)	29.02*	25.17*
Do you ever feel lonely? ^c	3.32 (0.79)	3.19 (0.96)	3.23 (0.78)	3.08 (0.88)	14.16*	4.80
How often do you feel left out of things? ^d	2.19 (1.22)	2.33 (1.29)	2.27 (1.03)	2.43 (1.14)	3.15	7.57*
How often do you feel helpless? ^d	4.05 (1.29)	4.13 (1.23)	3.90 (1.22)	4.16 (1.00)	11.68*	0.06
How often do you feel confident in yourself? ^d	3.97 (1.38)	3.75 (1.55)	3.96 (1.09)	3.40 (1.34)	36.36*	1.34
In the last 6 months, how often have felt low? ^e	2.27 (1.42)	2.37 (1.41)	2.13 (1.21)	2.32 (1.37)	4.12	1.37
In the last 6 months, how often have felt nervous? ^e	2.53 (1.42)	2.38 (1.36)	2.45 (1.19)	2.51 (1.28)	0.21	0.27

* $p < .01$

^a4 = very easy 1 = very difficult.

^b4 = very happy 1 = not happy at all.

^c4 = no to 1 = very often.

^d1 = never 5 = always.

^e1 = rarely never to 5 = about everyday.

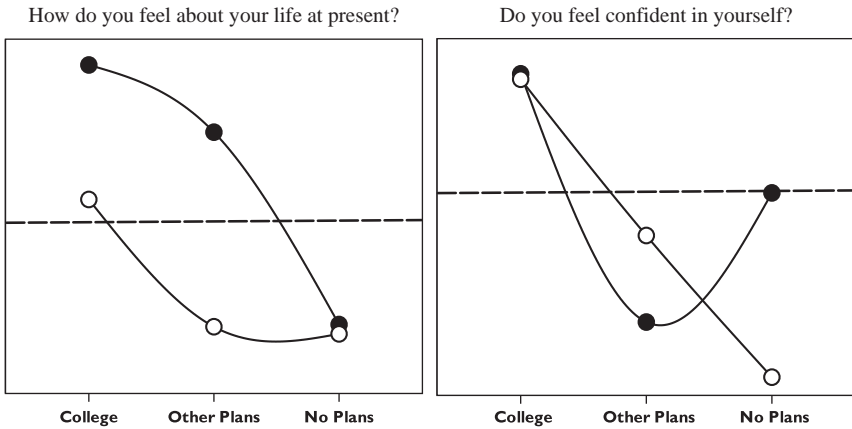


Fig. 3. Interaction between Race and College Aspirations (*X*-Axis) on Quality of Life and Confidence (*Y*-Axes). Note: ● = black male students; ○ = white male students. Source: Health Behavior in School-age Children survey (2003). The dashed reference line on the *Y*-axis marks the estimated mean dependent variable.

males aspire to go to college less frequently than males in other races. When considering college aspirations exclusively, the significant disparity is between genders, not races. The study also confirmed the relationship between college aspirations and academic achievement, positive school experiences, healthy communication with parents, and adaptive social and emotional patterns.

When rating all variables tested across the three domain areas explored, academic achievement had the strongest association with college aspirations. Students who aspired to go to college exhibited more motivation to do well in grade school, and more confidence in their academic abilities. However, comparisons by race suggested that level of academic achievement did not predict future plans for black males as clearly as it did for white males. White college aspirants slightly outperformed black college aspirants, but black noncollege aspirants significantly outperformed white noncollege aspirants. In fact, black male students with “no plans” after graduation reported higher levels of academic achievement than white male students who had “other plans.” This finding suggests that black students are not receiving the necessary guidance to select post-high school paths that match their academic potential, which has been noted in previous studies (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Griffin, Allen, Kimura-Walsh, & Yamamura, 2007; Mahoney & Merritt, 1993).

Overall, the findings on school-related factors indicate that black male students who aspire to go to college have a more positive perception of school, more congenial relationships with their teachers and perceive school as a safe and drug-free environment. Racial differences in perceptions of school demonstrated that black male students with college aspirations had a stronger affinity for school than their white counterparts. Generally, black male college aspirants found school to be interesting and expressed satisfaction attending school.

On the contrary, black male students with no plans after high school were considerably more prone to sense unfairness from teachers and the overall school experience. Compared to white male students with no plans, black students were considerably more likely to feel that the rules and the teachers at school were unfair. The school-related findings collectively suggest that black male students are more sensitive to positive and negative aspects of school, when compared to white male students. The findings imply that reducing racial discrimination, improving school conditions in disenfranchised communities, and elevating teacher cultural competence are important in promoting college aspirations, as suggested in previous research (Chavous et al., 2003; Howard, 2003).

Findings on family factors demonstrated that social modeling plays an important role in promoting college aspirations among black adolescent males. Father's education had a significant impact on black males' college aspirations, ranking second overall to the academic achievement. The effect size for fathers' education was considerably greater than mothers' education. Mothers' education was not significantly different across races, however, white males reported higher educational attainment among their fathers than black males. Interestingly, when comparing all three groups, black males with "other plans," reported mothers with the lowest educational levels. This finding suggests that some black males may be making post-high school plans based on economic situations and a need to provide income for the family. Ease of communication with fathers and mothers was also important in promoting college aspirations. However, black males with other plans, reported the highest level of ease when communicating with their fathers, when comparing them to college aspirants and students with no plans.

Findings on mental health, wellness, and motivational factors revealed unique interpersonal patterns and emotional attributes associated with college aspirations among school-age black males. Specifically, compared to students with other plans or no plans, college aspirants found it easier to make friends, felt better about their life, felt confident, and experienced

fewer periods of loneliness and helplessness. Crude indicators of sadness and anxiety did not reveal any significant differences between groups. Quality of life and confidence appeared to have a unique association with race. “Confidence” revealed a linear relationship with college aspirations among white males; however, the relationship among black males was more curvilinear. Black students with no post-high school plans expressed levels of confidence exceeding black and white students with other plans. As a construct, confidence may be culturally dependent, as street codes and hip hop idioms places a premium on expressions of confidence and bravado even during periods of pain and uncertainty (Brown, 2006; Toldson & Toldson, 1999). The findings revealed that “quality of life” is a more robust predictor of college aspirations among black males than confidence. Quality of life was previously reported to be the greatest emotional indicator of academic success among black males (Toldson, 2008).

Limitations

There are several limitations that must be considered within the context of the findings. First, since data were collected about a socially desirable attribute, some students may have used impression management during self-report procedures. Although all surveys were confidential, some respondents may have embellished grades or other information to present their abilities and achievements more favorably. In addition, the surveys were all lengthy and solicited information beyond this study’s scope. The length may have created some fatigue and led to “Yea-Saying” or “Nay-Saying” whereby respondents tend to select only the positive or negative answers on the survey.

Policy Implications

The findings on the relationship between academic achievement and college aspirations reinforce the need for college access programs for black male students. College access programs that emphasize college preparation and funding for higher education could reduce the ambivalence associated with future plans. Programs such as Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) and Upward Bound are US Department of Education programs that support the findings, by offering awareness of and access to college for lower income students.

The findings suggest that educational policies would best serve black male students by helping them to become invested in the “concept” of school. Helping students to be interested in school, by finding their class work meaningful for their current and future lives is important for black males to cultivate a perspective of school that is consistent with high achieving. Moreover, counselors and teachers should be familiar with issues of racism and justice. An inclusive multicultural curriculum and strength-base pedagogy could increase the sense of belonging that black male students need to cultivate college aspirations.

The findings suggest that teachers are most effective at promoting college aspirations when they have a personal connection with their students. Educational policies should measure holistic teacher qualities including: (1) abilities to make students feel supported and respected; (2) skill at creating forums for students to express themselves; and (3) ability to criticize students without making them feel bad about themselves. Incentives for teachers to become involved with students outside of the classroom, such as through clubs, sports, and other activities, could also cultivate more cordial student–teacher relationships and promote college aspirations.

Educational policy should increase attention to parent involvement in children’s learning experiences. Tax breaks and other incentives can be given to parents who devote a certain number of hours to parent–teacher associations and volunteering at the school. Additionally, school policies should incorporate parent involvement practices, including having parents ‘sign-off’ on homework and providing each parent with a “Parent Handbook” that details ways of getting involved in their child’s education. Also, funding for fatherhood programs and mentoring programs is supported by the current findings.

Furthermore, economic policies need to be examined to determine whether work values are compromising educational values. Current economic trends require mothers to spend more time working. Black mothers have unique challenges because they are more likely to raise a child without a father. Fair trade practices that improve the wages and benefits, such as paid leave, of her employment, and social welfare that allows her to be a parent, will ultimately promote college aspirations among black male students.

Educational policy should recognize the significant contribution of emotional well-being to the academic success of African-American males. Policies that increase funding for school counselors and require a smaller ratio of counselors to students could help to improve the emotional well-being of students. The American School Counselor Association

recommends a school counselor to student ratio of 1:250 (Towner-Larsen, 2000). Since many African-American students deal with greater social and environmental pressures, greater emphasis should be placed on family counseling, loss and bereavement, and community empowerment. Policies that emphasize mentoring programs and other means to reduce isolation among school-age black males are also likely to improve academic progress and promote college aspirations.

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