Chapter 10

Achievement, Racial Identity, and Connectedness: Gender Differences Among African American High School Students

Colette M. Boston
Los Angeles Unified School District, USA

ABSTRACT

Literature suggests African American students’ racial identity impacts their feelings of belongingness to the school community as well as academic achievement. Researchers, however, have argued that racial identity impairs or promotes student achievement. This study examined the effects of the individual components of racial identity (centrality, regard, and ideology) and sense of belonging on the academic achievement of 105 African American high school students. Quantitative analysis revealed centrality as the sole predictor of sense of belonging for males and a positive relationship between sense of belonging and centrality and private regard in females. These findings support the significance of positive student-teacher relationships as well as the importance of schools cultivating a culture of acceptance of all students.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the academic gains made by African American students, the Black-White achievement gap continues to be a pervasive issue in education (Hanselman, Bruch, Gamoran, & Borman, 2014). Anderson (2007) stated that African American students have closed the gaps in literacy and high school graduation but have not yet closed the gap in test scores. African American students are one of the lowest scoring subgroups, least likely to be identified as gifted, and the most likely to be placed in special education (Bonner, Lewis, Bowman-Perrott, & James, 2009; Brittan & Gray, 2017). The lack of academic achievement among African American students may be attributed, in part, to schools’ curriculum and social environment that cater to middle-class White students and often fail to address the needs of racially diverse students (Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004). Indeed, schools that support African American

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students’ positive racial identity and strive to cultivate caring relationships increase African American students’ feelings of connectedness to the school community (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Rosenbloom, & Way, 2004).

Historically, discrimination within school settings has been central to the educational experiences of African American female and male students. Because of past discrimination, African American students may often have heightened fear of being accepted and stereotyped (Ogbu, 1978; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). It is, therefore, important to understand the impact of African American students’ race on positive educational outcomes. This study examined the relationship among African American high school students’ racial identity, sense of belonging, academic achievement (grades), and gender. It is significant because few studies have reported gender difference in racial identity (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008).

RACIAL IDENTITY

Racial identity is a construct that has been examined as far back as the 1930s to explore the psychological experiences of African Americans (Clark & Clark, 1939). Scholars have used one of two theoretical approaches to examining racial identity: a mainstream approach or an underground approach (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The mainstream approach focuses on the stigma attached to being a member of a marginalized group (African American) but fails to consider the rich culture of African Americans. The underground approach evolved from the racial identity research of W. E. B. DuBois (1903). The underground approach holds that racial identity is an attribute, shaped by culture, and influences the formation of an individual’s personality (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Racial identity is the significance and meaning individuals assign to membership within their racial group and the way they perceive themselves (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The components of racial identity examined in this study are centrality, private regard, and public regard (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Sellers et al. (1998) proposed one’s perception of race is stable across various situations; however, the significance of one’s race to one’s perception of self is known as racial centrality. Centrality implies a hierarchical ranking of numerous identities. These identities are ranked by order of importance to the individual’s understanding of himself or herself. Racial regard refers to the way an individual feels about or views oneself. In addition, regard consists of an individual’s affective judgment of race. The two subscales of regard are private and public. Private regard entails the extent to which African Americans feel positively or negatively about African Americans, as well as how positively or negatively they feel about their membership within their racial group. Public regard, conversely, is the extent to which individuals believe African Americans are positively or negatively viewed by society (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

One of the most common measures of racial identity is the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The MMRI is based on the strengths of both the mainstream approach and the underground approach to examining racial identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). The MMRI measures four dimensions of racial identity: (a) racial salience; (b) centrality; (c) regard, and; (d) ideology. The instrument employed for this study was the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity-teen (MIBI-t), which is also a valid and reliable measure.