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Factors that Examine Task Engagement in African American Adolescents

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Abstract

In this study, we explore in-class factors that affect learning motivation among African American high school youth in a mid-sized city in the Midwest. In-class factors include goal orientations and perceived value of classroom tasks and their affect on engagement. Outside factors refer to what students bring to the learning situation. According to our findings, task orientation had the most impact on engagement. In addition, interviews indicated that students had positive experiences and goals outside of class including achievement-oriented goals, high value for education, and a positive sense of responsibility for self and others. Despite the obstacles African American youth face, we found students had positive attitudes toward learning. Implications for teachers and school counselors are discussed.

Factors that Examine Task Engagement in African American Adolescents

We have chosen to focus this study on African-American youth. We chose this population for a variety of reasons. Many African-American youth face a host of obstacles as they pursue their educational endeavors. The 2005 United States Census Bureau figures state that African-Americans and African American males in particular have higher levels of unemployment, and lower high school graduation and college entry rates than Caucasians. African-Americans also have higher levels of poverty and lower educational attainment. Educational equality for African American students is still slow. Large disparities in educational outcomes between African American students and their white counterparts still persists (Tidwell, 2000). African-American children can be placed in special education programs because teachers fail to appreciate the various learning styles that these children bring to the classroom (Butler, 2003). These teachers also have a tendency to bond less with students who do not resemble them. This problem could be somewhat alleviated by providing better training for teachers and parents and ensuring that all school systems have equal representation and the proper individuals in leadership roles (Ogbu, 2003).

The African-American community has faced, and continues to face, mistreatment and oppression (Ferguson, 2002). African-Americans have suffered a long history of racism, the denial of higher pay in jobs, lack of upward mobility in jobs and the denial of educational opportunities. The above is evident, because they are embedded in public policies, traditions, and thoughts of America. These facts represent a long history of discrimination (Wynn, 1992). Wynn points out that African-American youth establish

their goals based on their environment, perceptions of themselves, awareness of their history, spiritual foundations, and beliefs about their future (Wynn, 1992).

Many youth from diverse backgrounds may enter into their educational endeavors with the realization that they are not expected to achieve beyond a certain level. Looking at a student's orientation toward the pursuit of goals in the classroom can clarify the reasons as to why a student is acting or behaving in certain ways toward school tasks. The tasks and activities students undertake in school will often have inherent meaning or lack thereof, in which the student will perceive the task either to have value or importance or not. Students also bring attitudes, other goals (sometimes that compete with or support classroom goals) values and priorities from outside of class to the school environment. The question many teachers want to know is how this will impact the level of engagement with activities or tasks that students are asked to perform.

In this study we critically examined the motivation orientations and personal values African-American high school students bring to these classroom tasks. In addition, we look at how external factors and goals outside of school may or may not relate to these motivation orientations and the value students attribute to classroom tasks. Finally, we then look at how all of these factors affected students' engagement in classroom activities. The methodology we used is analogous to how an image might appear under a microscope using low and high powers of magnification. Under low power, we get a general picture of what student engagement looks like in the classroom. Under high power, we get a more specific picture of the individual student and the factors that may attribute to his or her level of engagement. What we actually saw under this higher magnification was different than what we had anticipated. First, under the low power of

the microscope, we used surveys to determine students' perceived value of classroom activities, their level of task engagement, and their motivational goals or orientations.

Achievement goal theory surfaced in the eighties. According to this theory, students' beliefs, attributions, and affect influence how they approach, engage in, and respond to classroom activities (Ames, 1992). Motivation research has highlighted two types of goals with varying labels: learning/task/mastery goals and ego/performance goals. We will use the mastery and performance labels. These two goals represent different reasons students may have for approaching and engaging in achievement activity. They also involve different ways students may think about themselves, the task, and the outcome of that task (Ames, 1992). Students may have different goals for different tasks. In this study we consider those with primarily performance goals to have a performance motivation orientation.

Individuals with mastery goals for a particular task are focusing on developing new skills, trying to understand their work, and improving their level of competence. These students are motivated to learn based on their interest in the task and desire to gain understanding (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

On the other hand, individuals with performance goals for a particular task are focusing on obtaining public recognition, doing better than others, or achieving success with little effort. While students with more of a mastery orientation base their success on self-reference standard, students with a performance orientation base success on normative standards. In this case, self-worth is defined by one's ability to perform, and having to put forth effort toward a task indicates some lack of this ability, especially if trying hard does not lead to success (Ames, 1992). Students with more of a performance

orientation are motivated to learn based on a desire to appear competent to others (Ames, 1992).

In addition to motivation orientation, we also explored to what extent students found classroom tasks to be personally meaningful. As Brophy (1998) states, one cannot expect students to be motivated to engage in tasks unless they perceive value and meaning in the learning. Arnand and Ross (1987) also provide evidence for the value of personally meaningful tasks. These researchers found that fifth- and sixth-graders learned more from learning programs that included personal information, thus making the tasks more personally meaningful (Stipek, 1996). Later, Meece (1991), observed classrooms in which students had either exceptionally high or low levels of motivation. Meece found that the high-motivation classrooms had adapted instruction to students' personal interests.

Next, we wanted to see how these three variables of motivation orientation and perceived value of the task related to the students' levels of task engagement. In order to measure task engagement, we first had to decide on a suitable definition of the term. We chose a version of the definition of task engagement used by Lee and Anderson (1993), in a study of students' task engagement and conceptual change in a science classroom. For the purposes of our study, task engagement refers to students' engagement in classroom tasks with the goal of achieving better understanding of science. By this definition, students engage in classroom tasks with the goal of achieving scientific understanding (Lee & Anderson, 1993). Task engagement is a familiarity or comfort of task for the individual student.

Finally, under the high power microscope, we looked at the external factors and/or goals that may influence students' motivation orientations and/or their perceptions of the personal meaningfulness or value of classroom tasks. Previous research has uncovered various external factors that may influence the school lives of African-American students. Cultural characteristics that may influence the educational experience of these students include extended family life and low-income living situations requiring students to hold jobs (Ogbu, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Researchers suggest that such factors may affect the emotions that students carry into the classroom. There are also higher numbers of African-American families living at or below the poverty level (Gonzales et al., 2005). This economic situation often leads to many of the external factors and goals named by the students in our study. We used open-ended interview questions that allowed a more magnified view of the external factors in the lives of the African-American students in our study.

Looking at these various factors, both inside and outside the classroom, we sought to answer two questions:

1. To what extent does mastery orientation, performance orientation, and perceived value of tasks impact a student's level of engagement?
2. What external factors does a student bring to the classroom that may influence his/her level of motivation?

Methodology

We chose to use both quantitative and qualitative methods. The rationale behind using the quantitative was primarily for reasons of efficiency. Some of the instruments we used already existed and were reliable measures of goal orientation. Students could

complete the engagement and value scales in a relatively short time. The benefit is that we were able to gather a lot of data, considering the time constraint of our study.

We did include several qualitative measures because we wanted in-depth, personal, specific responses from the participants. We wanted the opportunity to view the factors influencing students' motivations under a higher powered microscope. In addition, something like external factors could not be measured effectively with a quantitative measure. We asked students about things that were most important to them and their definitions of success because these questions are personal and could not be answered through a pre-formed survey. These personal questions got at students' personal interpretations and meaning in a way that the quantitative measures could not. Such quantitative methods allowed us to see in general, while the qualitative provided a more personal, magnified look at what was behind those goals and what students brought with them into class.

Participants and Setting

Our sample was comprised of 33 African –American students from a Midwestern high school. The study consisted of 22 females and 21 males. The average age for participants in this study was sixteen. The school has a 60% free and reduced lunch rate and has an 86% African American student population. The community surrounding the school could best be characterized as working-class homeowners.

Both parent and adolescent consent were obtained. We solicited volunteers for the study. The students who volunteered to participate were asked to evaluate their experiences in the science class in which they were being surveyed.

Measures and Instruments: Quantitative

Our study used both qualitative and quantitative ethodological approaches. For the quantitative section, we constructed a linear regression model that examines three independent variables and one dependent measure. These variables are as follows: goal orientation (both task/mastery goals and performance/ego goals), the degree of personal value or meaningfulness experienced in the overall classroom environment, with the dependent variable being the level of engagement, overall, in the classroom. All the measures were obtained through surveys that were based on self-reports, and completed by the students. The aim behind this section of the study was to ascertain whether the type of goal orientation or degree of personal meaningfulness had a greater impact on the outcome variable, the experienced level of engagement or if any combination of that variable accounted for a greater impact. This is, however, only one piece of a more complex, composite picture of the motivational ethos of this one classroom.

The survey on goal orientation was borrowed from Ames and contains two scales that we treated as separate variables: task/mastery orientation and ego performance/orientation (Ames, 1992). The task/mastery scale contained 20 items, and the performance/ego scale contained 14 items. Based on prior research on goal orientation, to score high on the mastery orientation essentially means that students undertake tasks that have a learning focus, while in contrast, to score high on the performance orientation, students work to look smart or competent to others, putting the emphasis on performing well. Students can score high on both. Examples of the task scale appear as follows: “Students often do extra work because they want to learn new things” and “ Making mistakes is part of learning,” as opposed to performance items that

appear: “Students compete against each other to get high grades,” and “Doing better than others is important to me.” Responses were based on a 5 point likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

The survey used to estimate perceived value or meaningfulness asked students to rate their experience with the overall tasks and activities they often encountered in class in terms of utility, value or importance, and meaning. There were 14 items for this survey on a 5 point likert scale from very much untrue to very much true. To score high would indicate that students value class activities and perceive those activities and tasks to be meaningful. Examples of the scale include; “What I learn in this class is useful, or potentially useful,” and “Overall the kinds of tasks we undertake have value to me.”

The last scale, level of engagement, was based on a survey that aimed to measure the degree that the students found themselves cognitively or affectivity involved with the overall tasks and activities in the class. Items tried to gauge level of concentration, interest, effort, persistence, and so on, again based on a 5 point likert scale. Some examples are as follows: “I am often highly involved with the tasks we complete in class,” and “I put a lot of effort into the work we do.”

Data Collection Procedures and Linear Analyses

Protocol. Researchers distributed the surveys to groups of volunteers on several different occasions over a period of two weeks to reach all participants. The surveys were administered in the school building but outside of the classroom. Students were told verbally and on their consent forms that they did not have to answer any of the questions they did not want to answer. Participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time. The instrument completion process took thirty minutes per student. After collecting

information for two weeks, the data were entered into a statistical program, using backward solution in the multiple regression model.

Analysis. Each variable was treated as a continuous measure. The multivariate linear regression looks at the effect or beta weights of each variable on the dependent measure. Included are the portions of the variance explained by each variable on the outcome measure, engagement. Several correlation matrices are included to examine if any of our independent variables are similar, and what percentage of the variance is accounted for on the level of engagement. ANOVA's were run to test if the R square values were not equal to zero. These analyses can help identify any factors that are more strongly related to the level of task engagement.

Qualitative Methods

An open-ended survey and informal group interviews were used to learn more about the external factors and goals affecting these students' lives. We used a free-response format because we did not want to impose limits on student responses. We did not want to narrow their answers by providing only the options we could imagine. This way, we were able to magnify the power of our microscope as we looked more deeply into the meanings of the students' responses. The survey was done both verbally and in writing. The survey consisted of three broad questions relating to personal priorities, definitions of success, and activities/responsibilities outside of school:

1. What do you consider to be the top 5 things that are important to your future?

Name these five things in order of importance.

2. What does it mean to be successful? How do you envision the road to success?

3. What kinds of activities/responsibilities do you have outside of school? How do they affect your attitude toward learning, in both positive and negative ways?

We provided as much space as students needed to record their responses. Students were given approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. After they had completed the survey, we conducted brief group interviews in which students could share their responses orally. The brief interviews were approximately 20 minutes with approximately 3-4 students per group. Participation in the interview was optional, although most students did contribute their responses to at least one of the questions. Afterwards, we collected the surveys, without names, and began a more thorough analysis of their written responses.

Question 1: What do you consider to be the top 5 things that are important to your future? Name these five things in order of importance.

In analyzing these responses which were written in by the student, we noticed that many of the responses reflected a number of recurring themes. Interestingly, was the frequency at which similar responses formed patterns. We collapsed the top two responses as the most important priorities, with the following three questions in the second most important priorities. All of the responses were listed on a separate sheet and further categorized along these emerging themes: education, career/job, family/others, self, possessions, and religion.

Question 2: What does it mean to be successful? How do you envision the road to success?

We looked at each sub-question separately. First, we recorded all the responses on a one-page list so we could search for patterns or categories. Seven categories emerged

for the responses to “What does it mean to be successful?” The student’s definitions of success fit into categories involving (a) accomplishing goals, (b) education, (c) working hard, (d) doing one’s personal best, (e) career, (f) lifestyle, and (g) personal gratification.

Four categories emerged for the second sub-question, “How do you envision the road to success?” Students’ responses included notions such as (a) doing the right thing, (b) focusing on the future, (c) encountering rough times, and (d) having to overcome obstacles.

Question 3: What kinds of activities/responsibilities do you have outside of school?

How do they affect your attitude toward learning, in both positive and negative ways?

Student responses fell into eight categories: extracurricular activities, babysitting, housework, significant others, friends, children, jobs, and homework. We then recorded the number of responses for each category.

Limitations

Quantitative limitations included small sample size and non-random assignment (i.e. self-selected population). We also ignored potentially important factors such as teacher effect and peer interactions. Thus, students may have responded differently to some or all of the study’s scales if the participants were randomly selected and other variables were also being assessed.

Results

Quantitative

We had hypothesized that task orientation goal structure and perceived value would have the greatest impact on level of overall engagement in the classroom. However,

multiple regression analysis showed that only one variable (mastery goal orientation) was significantly impacting the level of engagement. Mastery goals were significant at $p < .005$, beta .528, and adjusted R square .262. None of the independent variables were highly correlated with each other, and were significantly different from one another.

Qualitative

The researchers asked three questions to get at motivation and perceived value. The questions were as follows: 1) what do you consider to be the five things that are important to your future? List in order of importance; 2) what does it mean to be successful, and how do you envision the road to success? and; 3) What kinds of activities/responsibilities do you have outside of school? How do they affect your attitude toward learning in both positive and negative ways?

Question #1. An overwhelming majority of the students ranked education as the most important thing for their future. The second most important thing that many of the students put was having a good job or a good career. Third, family ranked high as one of the most important things toward their future. Spirituality was another thing that the students thought was really important to their future. See Table #1.

This question indicated that the students knew and understood the value of having a good education. Many of them stated that they needed to graduate from high school and go on to college or get some type of trade in order to prepare them for the future. Only a few of the students listed having good health and significant others as the most important things for their future.

Question #2. When asked “what does it mean to be successful and how do you envision the road to success?” an overwhelming number of the students stated that in

order to be successful one needed to complete their goals, do the best to their ability, have a good career, do whatever makes them happy, have a good life, never let anyone step in your way, and have control over everything in their lives. For each student his or her definition of success varied, but their road to success mainly depended on getting a good education. Again, the majority of the students felt that a good education would allow them to be successful in life. Others envisioned the road to success by doing the right thing, focusing on the future, and overcoming obstacles. See table #2.

What it meant to be successful meant different thing to each individual. But all of the students fell under these categories: accomplishing goals, education, working hard, personal best, careers, and emotional gratification. This indicates that the students have some idea as to what it takes for them to be successful. Each person apparently held a different definition of success.

Question #3. In naming what kinds of activities/responsibilities that these students held outside of school, and how these affected their attitudes toward learning, the students responded in the following ways. See Table #3.

The majority of the students participated in extracurricular activities such as cheerleading, basketball, track, and choir. These students stated that these activities give them a positive attitude toward learning, because they teach you how to deal with all types of people and they allow you to strive for the best. The students indicated that they must maintain a certain grade point average in order to be eligible to play sports, etc. Many of the students also held jobs outside of school. They stated that the jobs gave them a sense of responsibility and allowed them to balance their finances. Their jobs did

not really have an impact on their studies, because they did not allow their jobs to interfere with their schoolwork.

Four of the students surveyed indicated that they were parents. They stated the responsibilities of caring for a child did not allow them much time to participate in sports or any other extracurricular activities. They also indicated that they try to stay positive for their children, because they want their children to be positive people. One of the parents surveyed stated that their child was young and sometimes the child interferes with her sleep, so by the time she gets to school she is really tired.

Some of other activities that were mentioned were significant others, homework, babysitting their younger relatives, and visiting friends. The students overall had a positive attitude about their extracurricular activities. While talking to the students, they indicated that these activities could only have a negative impact on their lives and school if they allowed them to. They preferred to stay away from negative people and surround themselves around positive people so that they could stay positive. Overall the students seemed positive about what they were doing.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that affected task engagement in African American Adolescents: These students were extremely goal-oriented. They placed a lot of value on goals and learning orientation. It was interesting to see if the realities that they faced had any bearing on their levels of motivation and their perceptions of the future as well as their success. Other research done with young African-American students show that the external factors have a profound impact on their

learning and motivation. Previous research tended to focus on the negative components of African-American youth and their environment in relation to their learning. External factors had a more positive influence on their levels of motivation and goal orientations. Examples would be the students' high levels of goal orientation. Many students had education and goals related to education as their number one priority.

The important quantitative finding in our study was that mastery goal orientation was correlated with African American students' task engagement. Mastery goal orientation is students' perceived competence in terms of self set standards. Research also indicates that when students use a mastery orientation, they experience interest in learning course materials and generally have more positive attitudes toward learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

In order to get students actively involved in attempting to master the course materials, students must be able to directly relate the materials and/or see personal value in it. African American students are more engaged and encouraged to think at a deeper level about course material when the material is something that they can directly relate what they are learning to their lives (Evans-Winters, 2005). The goal then would be for teachers and educators to create meaning for students when presenting course materials. In addition, there are things that school counselors and educators alike can do.

School counselors and teachers who have wide levels of experience often find themselves overwhelmed by the changing demographics in United States schools (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Educational professionals can find themselves overwhelmed with the number of outside factors that children are bringing with them to school, particularly those districts that are failing and have high levels of low income children.

One way to combat these feelings of stress and perhaps hopelessness is to revisit one's thought patterns on education and the educational process (Martin, 2002). Most importantly, the delivery of instruction to low income African American students given the number of outside distractions that these children may bring is crucial (Martin, 2002).

Teacher education programs as well as counselor education programs must adequately prepare individuals for working with racial and economically diverse students (Constantine & Yen, 2001). School counselors specifically must infuse multiculturalism and social advocacy in their curriculum (Martin, 2002). It is imperative that school counselors become culturally competent by taking multicultural/diversity courses and attending workshops that focuses on special populations. On-going professional development and increased professional development can assist teachers and school counselors with developing the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively assist diverse populations (Martin, 2002).

Bart and Matthews (2001) note that there were five specific strategies those teachers can use to help students develop and maintain high career aspirations for students. They are as follows: (a) use career related examples that draw the connection between schoolwork and later career, (b) relate student interests to possible career choices, (c) draw a connection between essential skills for specific careers, (d) assist students with understanding the correlation between success in school and success at work and vice versa, and (e) make sure that students understand that successful and rewarding careers require proper training and skills.

Instead of adopting a deficit view of African American children, school counselors and teachers must understand the barriers that could negatively affect the

academic success of African American students. School counselors in particular must understand the external oppressors for African American children and take the proper action to effectively assist them (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003). School counselors must be keenly aware of identifying barriers and helping African American students succeed academically (Bailey, et al., 2003). School counselors act as advocates and change agents for all students. They must align their jobs so that they are assisting with eliminating and alleviating barriers for academic success for all students (Bailey, et al., 2003).

Teachers, counselors, policy makers, and administrators should be looking at African American youth as a very motivated and goal-oriented group, rather than looking at them as a deficit population. This could be extended to broader societal contexts. There needs to be more research focus on the positive aspects of this group, rather than the negative aspects. African-American youth are not expected to achieve. This is evident in all of the negative statistics that are out there on them. Because cultural experiences are different does not mean that we should adopt a cultural deficit model for education for African Americans. Educators must adhere to the various learning styles of their students to effectively assist them. Furthermore, educators must understand that there are both internal and external factors that will affect the task engagement and motivation of students.

If educational professionals are to make progress toward building effective support systems for African American children and families, we must understand the many dimensions of racism and oppression facing African American youth (Oakes,

Quartz, Ryan, & Lipton, 2000). More importantly how these institutional barriers will affect their academic success and access to certain resources.

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TABLE 1

The top 5 things important to future:

POSSESSIONS	1
RELIGION	2
SELF	4
FAMILY/OTHERS	6
CAREER/JOB	7
EDUCATION	30

TABLE 2

What does it mean to be successful?

LIFESTYLE	1
CAREER	2
WORKING HARD	3
PERSONAL BEST	3
EDUCATION	5
PERSONAL GRATIFICATION	5
ACCOMPLISHING GOALS	18

TABLE 3

Activities/Responsibilities outside of school

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS	1
FRIENDS	1
HOMEWORK	2
BABYSITTING	3
CHILDREN	4
HOUSEWORK	4
JOBS	7
EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES	12