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African American Youth Who Receive Positive Messages About their Racial Group May Perform Better in School

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School Cultural Socialization and Academic Performance: Examining Ethnic-Racial Identity Development as a Mediator Among African American Adolescents

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Youth of color represent over half of the school-aged population (kindergarten through twelfth grade) in public schools in the United States. This creates a need for evidence-driven approaches that address the pervasive Black-White achievement gap. A new longitudinal study shows that African American youth who receive positive messages about their racial group in school achieved better school grades one to two years later.

The findings were published in an article written by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh that appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

“African American youth who received positive messages from educators and school personnel about their racial group had better grades up to 1-2 years later,” said Juan Del Toro, postdoctoral research scientist at the University of Pittsburgh. “Our results suggest that African American youth are more likely to be successful in school when they feel a positive sense of community and interdependence.”

The study initially assessed 961 sixth-, eighth- and tenth grade African American students enrolled in 17 public schools throughout the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States during the 2016-2017 academic school year, following them subsequently over three academic years. Participating students completed computer-based 45- minute surveys that measured the following:

- Academic performance: grade point averages ranging from 0-4 were obtained for each academic year of the study period.
- School cultural socialization: adolescents’ perceptions about whether and how their school leaders and educators provided positive messages about their own racial group.

- Ethnic-racial identity development: identity exploration and identity commitment (the feelings of connection and belonging to one's ethnic-racial group).

Researchers used three waves of yearly longitudinal data to examine whether:

- adolescents' perceptions of school cultural socialization (engagement in endorsing racial pride messages) predict identity exploration, identity commitment, and overall grade point averages over a three-year period, and
- a longitudinal link exists between school cultural socialization and school grades conveyed through identity exploration and identity commitment.

"Because the school environment represents a prominent developmental context during adolescence, elucidating the consequences of school cultural socialization is critical to understanding whether such practices effectively promote African American youth's academic performance," said Ming-Te Wang, professor at the University of Pittsburgh. "By understanding that schools can act as agents of positive cultural socialization, we can better inform schools as to why and how they should engage in practices that promote African American pride, history and heritage."

The authors recognize several limitations of the present study that future studies should address, including: the self-reporting by students of both school cultural socialization and student demographics, lack of comparability across students in the way grade point averages were reported and missing data for the most disadvantaged students in the sample.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, School Cultural Socialization and Academic Performance: Examining Ethnic-Racial Identity Development as a Mediator among African American Adolescents by Del Toro, J and Wang, M-T (The University of Pittsburgh). Copyright 2020 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.