



The role of positive academic self-concept in promoting school success

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ABSTRACT

Identity research argues for enhancing students' current and future positive academic self-concepts to strengthen educational success. However, multiple factors from youths' home and school ecologies, as well as structural disadvantage, influence this relationship. Using the data from the Beyond High School Study (N = 9658), this analysis examines the role of academic self-concept in predicting school success over and above co-occurring contributors. The effects of positive academic self-concept on future educational aspirations, accessing educational guidance counseling, and student GPA were tested using stepped linear regression, controlling for student socio-demographics, school environment factors, and parental support. Results confirmed hypotheses for each academic indicator, with positive academic self-concept demonstrating the strongest coefficient. Implications for school-based intervention are discussed, linking to social psychological literature on future-oriented self-cognitions and strengthening motivational and regulatory function, particularly among youth facing systemic challenges.

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1. Introduction

Educational attainment is widely recognized as an enduring protective factor for young people's physical and mental health (Egarter, Braveman, Sadegh-Nobari, Grossman-Kahn, & Dekker, 2009; Suhrcke & de Paz Nieves, 2011). In the United States, a chronic and pernicious relationship exists between social group membership and attainment, underscoring the need to identify readily available points of intervention to promote school success. Related psychological structures of current and future academic self-concept show promise as mutable resources to bolster academic success that are potentially available to all youth (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2002, 2006). However, the picture of educational success is complex, as both educational success and positive academic self-concept are embedded with other risks and protective factors. The current study seeks to examine unique effects of academic self-concept on three indicators of school success, above and beyond other known parental and school contributors.

2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

2.1. Students academic self-concept: effects and social cognitive underpinnings

Academic self concept, or beliefs about oneself as a student, have been shown to have both direct and indirect effects on a range of

educational outcomes, even after controlling for factors such as the previous achievement histories, and these effects can persist into higher education (Liu, Cheng, Chen, & Wu, 2009; Marsh & O'Mara, 2008; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004; Wouters, Germeijs, Hilde, & Verschueren, 2011). Academic-self concept and student achievement are mutually reinforcing. As youth experience school success, their academic self-concept is enhanced; as academic self-concept is enhanced, student motivation, drive and academic accomplishments strengthen. Importantly, linkages between self concept and behavior appear to benefit from domain specificity (Ludtke, Koller, Artelt, Stanat, & Baumert, 2002). For example, academic self concept is demonstrated to be reciprocally engaged with academic achievement, whereas other domains of self-identity have less influence on academic success. Thus, focusing efforts on bolstering academic self concept may influence academic achievements more than interventions to promote global self enhancements, such as self-esteem (Marsh & Craven, 2006).

Individual's self-concept typically functions in a reciprocal relationship with the social environment. Youth derive meanings from experiences related to school and use these experiences in the creation of their self-concepts as students. Consistent negative or positive experiences with school, including experiences with teachers and classmates, become building blocks in academic self-concept, informing students' understandings about how one performs the role of student, and what future outcomes, positive or negative, are likely to stem from behaviors and efforts. For example, a young person who has experienced chronic academic failure and has a negative academic self-concept (e.g. "I am a poor student") will be perceptually biased toward environmental inputs (e.g. teacher remarks, peer attitudes, or larger cultural messages) that reinforce that identity, and less prepared cognitively to incorporate

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schema-discordant input (e.g., about promise of success). Indeed, people who already feel insecure in a particular domain (like academic ability), are more sensitive to environmental cues and subsequent meta-cognitive processes relevant to their insecurity (Tormala, Petty, & Briñol, 2002).

As negative experiences accrue, the self-concept of “poor student” becomes progressively elaborated, organized, and interwoven with other related self-conceptions (e.g. “lazy” “stupid” “failure”). Frequent activation of self concepts leads to automated processing that one is not even aware of. For example, the “negative student self” is drawn into active play when triggered by environmental cues, and subsequently regulates how the young person feels and makes decisions in that moment (Fiske & Taylor, 2007; Nurius & Macy, 2012). On the other hand, as youth experience school success, their academic self-concept is fortified, which in turn may increase motivation, drive, and strengthen academic accomplishments (Marsh & Craven, 2006; Yeung, Rhonda, Craven, & Kaur, 2012; Green, et al., 2012). Self concepts are incrementally built through on-going interactions with the environment and, although somewhat resistant to challenge, they are also mutable. Intervention trials attest that current and future academic self-concept, and subsequent performance, are malleable for youth at risk of school failure (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2002, 2006).

2.2. Indicators of school success

The current work examines three aspects of school success that have been shown as important intervention targets: school grades, educational aspirations, and accessing academic guidance (Cohen et al., 2006, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2002, 2006). School attainment has been demonstrated, in turn, as a robust indicator of subsequent work and economic success (Crissey, 2009; Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

As an indicator of school success, GPA reflects both current academic standing as well as future educational prospects. Academic aspirations are associated with positive perception of parental aspirations (Tynkkynen, Tolvanen, & Salmela-Aro, 2012), educational attainment (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Heckhausen, Chang, Greenberger, & Chen, 2013; Marjoribanks, 2005), and adult income (Sabates, Harris, & Staff, 2011). Aspirations play a self-regulatory function in moving an individual toward goal-congruent behaviors and resisting diversions (Cross & Markus, 1994), whereas weaker self-regulatory capabilities are evident among those with, negative academic self-concepts (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Roeser, 2002). Thus, self-concepts contain important information about one’s current academic self-concept as well as informing aspirations for future educational success.

Aspirations represent desired end states whereas procedural knowledge takes the form of strategies to guide progress toward end states. School-based adults such as teachers and guidance counselors provide important resources for students to help develop strategies, and “connect the dots” between aspirations and outcomes. Accessing adult resource persons, therefore, serves as an important indicator of an agentic step that students can take to achieve procedural knowledge for how to actualize higher educational aspirations. Further, accessing adult resource persons may demonstrate self-efficacy in taking initiative toward a personal goal, as suggested by the recent findings (Morgan, Leenman, Todd, & Weeden, 2013).

Developing procedural knowledge, as a component of cognitive schemas, involves first learning and then encoding general “if-then” and “how to” procedural information into self-relevant and self-efficacious forms germane to attaining a future self (Fiske & Taylor, 2007). Scheduling and meeting with resource people such as guidance counselor manifest a pathway to enriching academic self-concept and to increasing the odds of achievement. Within a social cognitive framework, these actions demonstrate persistence and motivation toward a personal goal of accessing higher education.

2.3. Co-contributors for school success: parental and school factors

The ability of a young person to succeed academically is influenced by factors constituting ecological contexts, including social supports at home and in school, as well as student background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. From a young age, parents influence children’s academic achievement, evident as early as the kindergarten years (Froiland, Peterson, & Davidson, 2013) with effects continuing into young adulthood (Faas, Benson, & Kaestle, 2013). Parental factors including involvement (Hill et al., 2004), academic encouragement (Witkow & Fuligni, 2011), acceptance (Pallock & Lamborn, 2007), educational aspirations/expectations (Spera, Wentzel, & Matto, 2009; Vitoroulis, Schneider, Vasquez, Soteras de Toro, & Gonzáles, 2012), and familial assets (Kim & Sherraden, 2011) are all associated with a range of indicators of academic success, with continuing effects evident in young adulthood achievement (Gordon & Cui, 2012).

Within the high school years, peers and school-related experiences grow in their influence of students’ academic values and competencies/expectancies. Longitudinal studies provide compelling evidence for the effects of unsafe schools and poor teaching quality on student engagement and retention (Fortin, Marcotte, Thierno, Potvin, & Royer, 2013; You & Sharkey, 2009). In contrast, student perception of positive teaching climate is associated with decreased school drop-out rates (Barile, et al., 2012). Student academic achievement has been positively associated with range of school-level factors including perceived belonging (Frey, Ruchkin, Martin, & Schwab-Stone, 2009; Pittman & Richmond, 2007) and teacher support (Frey et al., 2009; Tinsley & Beale Spencer, 2010), whereas factors such as feeling unsafe are related to worse academic achievement (Akiba, 2010). Collectively, family, peer, and school factors constitute important aspects of students’ ecologies within which academic self-concepts are forged and exert influence on academic success.

2.4. Research hypotheses

Our analytic-conceptual model (see Fig. 1) embeds adolescent positive academic self-concept as an individual factor within a multi-level set of success contributors. We tested two research hypotheses relative to three distinct, yet interrelated, variables theorized to promote academic success: higher educational aspirations, accessing the guidance counselor for academic purposes and GPA.

- 1) A multi-level framework capturing the domains of: a) demographics, b) family supports, c) school supports, and d) individual level academic self-concept, will provide significant cumulative explanation of each of the academic success indicators.
- 2) Academic self-concept will sustain unique and significant contribution to these indicators of success after accounting for other variables.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The sample was drawn from five pooled survey waves of senior class cohorts from twelve high schools from the western Washington region between 2000 and 2005 (N = 9658) participating in the UW-Beyond High School Study of educational attainment and transition to adulthood. Schools were selected to capture a cross-section of communities in terms of area socioeconomic characteristics. Participants were recruited from class lists of students identified by each of the participating schools as completing their final semester of high school. All participants were surveyed within two months of commencement after obtaining direct consent or, (in the case of students under age 18) both direct consent and surrogate consent from a custodial parent/guardian. Surveys were pencil and paper. Participation was voluntary

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