

November 2008

## Voices of Hope

Mildred M. Pearson Dr.

*Eastern Illinois University, mmpearson@eiu.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eemedu\\_fac](http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eemedu_fac)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pearson, Mildred M. Dr., "Voices of Hope" (2008). *Faculty Research and Creative Activity*. 16.  
[http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eemedu\\_fac/16](http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eemedu_fac/16)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Early Childhood, Elementary & Middle Level Education at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research and Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact [tabruns@eiu.edu](mailto:tabruns@eiu.edu).

# Education and Urban Society

<http://eus.sagepub.com/>

---

## Voices of Hope

Mildred M. Pearson

*Education and Urban Society* 2008 41: 80 originally published online 6 May 2008

DOI: 10.1177/0013124508316743

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://eus.sagepub.com/content/41/1/80>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Education and Urban Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://eus.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://eus.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://eus.sagepub.com/content/41/1/80.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Oct 23, 2008

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - May 6, 2008

[What is This?](#)

## Voices of Hope

Mildred M. Pearson

*Eastern Illinois University*

Using the self-efficacy literature as a theoretical framework, this article discusses the reality of academic achievement and academic performance among selected African American middle school girls. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches are used to investigate the influence of self-efficacy. Thirty-seven African American middle school girls filled out an adversity questionnaire and also responded to the Children's Self-efficacy Survey. Based on the results, 10 girls were selected for in-depth interviews. Responses to interview questions reveal how these girls' self-efficacy helped them not only cope with obstacles in their lives but also excel academically. These responses provide important insights for educators who want to help this population of students continue to succeed.

**Keywords:** middle school; girls; efficacy

Over the years, there has been ample research on the academic success and failure of African American males and more importantly, comparative studies on the academic achievement of Black and White boys (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001). However, very little research has been done in regards to African American girls, who, according to the NCES report (NCES, 2001), experience higher academic success than African American males and who, according to Kleinfield (1999) and Henderson (1979), are the greatest academic achievers among African Americans. Thus, it is vital to understand what influences and contributes to their academic success. This article focuses on the influence of self-efficacy on the academic achievement and performance of early adolescent African American girls. The author seeks to better understand factors that may help determine why some girls choose to be identified as academically proficient and to accept challenges in spite of adversity.

---

**Author's Note:** Please address correspondence to Mildred M. Pearson, Eastern Illinois University, Buzzard Hall-2215, 600 Lincoln Ave., Charleston, IL 61920; e-mail: [mmpearson@eiu.edu](mailto:mmpearson@eiu.edu)

## Middle School Adolescence

The period of adolescence extends over many years: early adolescence has typically been identified as the period between the ages of 9 and 14, middle adolescence occurs between the ages of 15 and 17, and late adolescence lasts from the age of 18 to the mid-20s, and sometimes later entry into adult roles and responsibilities is delayed (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). The corresponding subdivisions in schools are junior high or middle school, high school, and college. This research concentrates on middle school students, or the early adolescent stage.

Early adolescence is defined both biologically and socially. Biologically, entering into puberty, with its all encompassing changes, indicates the beginning of the adolescent stage. The early adolescent period is said to be the most turbulent stage of a child's life. Crockett (1995) contends that "early adolescence is a stage of rapid cognitive, emotional, physical, and social growth and development" (p. 42). Early adolescents' social and intellectual developments can affect their capacity to learn. It is essential that during the middle school years students receive the social, psychological, and academic support they need to cope with the turbulent early adolescent period.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) in *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* asserts that although most adolescents learn to negotiate the important issues, they also grapple with defining who they are and figuring out what they believe or for what they stand. Adolescence is a time of increasing independence for most American youth (Feldman & Elliott, 1990). Autonomy in its most general sense has been defined as the ability to behave independently and to do things on one's own (Newman & Newman, 1984). As children develop from the primary and elementary ages to the adolescent years, their desire for autonomy increases, and yet during this time of adjusting, they sense some loss of personal control, become less confident in themselves, are more sensitive to social evaluation, and may suffer a decline in self-regulation. It is a time when negotiation is necessary to prevent a decline in academic achievement and self-esteem in boys and girls.

Longitudinal studies of the transition from elementary school to middle school have found that the self-esteem of White girls decreases with the change from sixth to seventh grade but that of White boys does not; African Americans of both sexes appear to negotiate during the transition and their self-esteem increases (Entwisle, 1990). Results of national studies also suggest that for girls, the middle grades can be a time of significant decline in self-esteem and academic achievement (American Association of University

Women [AAUW], 1991; Backes, 1994). For example, a study conducted by the AAUW polled 3,000 boys and girls between the ages of 9 and 15 years regarding their attitudes toward self, school, family, and friends. Results confirmed that the journey into adolescence is marked by a girl's loss of confidence in her abilities. The AAUW study discovered that the most dramatic gender gap is in self-esteem and the area of competence. The study also reveals ethnic differences in self-esteem. Although many African American and Latino girls show a decline in self-esteem in early adolescence by becoming detached from schooling in general, African American girls' self-esteem seems to decline less; it was reported to be higher than that of any other ethnic group (Asian Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Anglo-European Americans, and Latina girls; AAUW, 1991).

Although African American girls tend to do significantly better academically than their male counterparts, limited research focuses on what influences African American girls to be successful in school. Implicit in this research was the nature of self-efficacy as a behavioral factor that influences academic success. Because of the scant data on African American adolescents, the study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. Its main thrust was to provide a body of verified information about a limited phenomenon, that is, the influence of self-efficacy. The findings may contribute to the development of a useful theoretical orientation for those concerned with educational issues, especially those related to African American girls or to gender.

## Theoretical Framework

Self-efficacy theory is the theoretical lens through which this study examines the respondents' beliefs about their capability to produce a desired outcome that will influence academic success. *Self-efficacy* is defined as an individual's perceived capabilities to accomplish results successfully. Efficacy beliefs play a vital role in the development of self-directed life-long learners (Bandura, 1986, 1995, 1997; Lane & Lane, 2001).

### Academic Self-efficacy

*Academic self-efficacy* refers to one's perceived ability to perform academic tasks at desired levels (Pajares & Miller, 1994; Schunk, 1991). Students' self-efficacy for their schoolwork (academic self-efficacy) has been associated with important academic outcomes, including motivation, cognitive engagement, and performance (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Schunk, 1994).

Students who feel efficacious about their ability to master their schoolwork are more likely to select challenging activities, expend effort, persist when tasks become difficult, be resilient to failure or setbacks, have high cognitive engagement, use effective task strategies, and regulate their own learning (Bandura, 1986, 1993; Schunk, 1991, 1994; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). According to Bandura (1977), the behavior on which people base their beliefs can be developed by four forms of influence: (a) enacted mastery influence, (b) vicarious influence, (c) physiological and emotional influences, and (d) verbal and social persuasion influence.

### **Enacted Mastery Influence**

The enacted mastery influence experience is the most influential source of perceived self-efficacy because successful experiences provide tangible evidence that one can accomplish the behavior and can manage whatever it takes to succeed in spite of circumstances (Bandura, 1982; Biran & Wilson, 1981; Feltz, Landers, & Raeder, 1979; Gist, 1989). However, obtaining success easily undermines robust efficacy beliefs because one may come to expect quick results and become discouraged when faced with failure. "A resilient sense of efficacy requires experience in overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort" (Bandura, 1995, p. 3). Obstacles provide an opportunity to discover how to turn failure into success by honing one's capabilities to exercise better control over events. In addition, many people come to realize with mastery experiences that they are able to rebound from setbacks and persevere. Elders and Liker (1982) offer an excellent example of enacted mastery influence in their analysis of the enduring impact of hard times during the Great Depression on women's lives. Two groups of women were faced with economic difficulties. One group was able to endure economic destitution without despairing because earlier hardships caused the women to be more self-confident. The second group of women, who had not suffered earlier, were not adequately prepared to deal with adversity and the Great Depression left them with a sense of hopelessness and no will or effort to persevere. "Knowing how various factors affect the cognitive processing of performance clarifies the conditions under which people get the most out of their mastery experiences" (Bandura, 1997, p. 81).

### **Vicarious Influence**

The vicarious influence experience is partly an appraisal mediated through observing others' attainments. This type of experience involves watching

models perform the task with little adversity. Simply seeing people similar to oneself succeed provides a vicarious experience. The persevering effort of others raises observers' beliefs that they too can master comparable activities (Bandura 1986; Schunk, 1989). Therefore, people appraise their capabilities in relation to the attainments of others. By the same token, observing others fail despite high effort lowers observers' judgment of their own efficacy (Brown & Inouye, 1978). If the modeled activity is personally relevant (e.g., because of culture, gender, age, or class), the probability of the observer's learning vicariously is enhanced (Hackett & Byars, 1986). The most vital and notable vicarious learning occurs early in life, usually from observation of mothers, caregivers, family members, and community members.

Numerous opportunities for vicarious learning may exist for African American girls because many grow up in extended families. African American mothers and "other mothers" (female extended-family members such as aunts and grandmothers, or even neighbors) assist in the interpretation of subtle messages given by the outside world. Mothers are generally seen as key educators, responsible for continuing the cultural traditions of the past and supporting the community's future (Collins, 1987), and African American mothers exert a more permeating influence on their daughters than do mothers of other ethnic groups because of the fact that they communicate racial dangers and other barriers that confront African American women (Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, & Grove, 1996):

The African American community has always recognized and respected the unique relationship between its mothers and daughters. A common saying among African Americans is that "Mothers raise their daughters and love their sons." This is a simple yet powerful statement about the character of these relationships, a character based on the experiences that come with African American womanhood. This character unfolds as the African American mother teaches her daughter how to survive, cope, and succeed in a hostile environment, while fostering family and community loyalty. (p. 100)

According to Greene (1990a), African American girls and women often encounter different standards applied to the same behavior, and it is the African American woman who orients her daughter to know her place in the dominant world. She then models how to mediate between two cultures that are often diametrically opposed (Greene, 1990b). Suzanne Christine's (1987) qualitative research focused on the social interactions between African American working mothers and their daughters. Through intensive interviews and observations of fifty-one women representing four generations, she gathered data as to how mothers pass on their paradigm of mothering and working to their daughters.

This study also demonstrated how African American women transmit their knowledge and skills through modeling and mentoring. The interviews revealed how the performance of multiple roles by African American mothers is facilitated by the existence of a strong female support network. In addition, the study explains African American women's beliefs about how life informs what they do as mothers, which is conveyed to their daughters. Overall, this research reveals how the African American mothers' historical experiences help shape their daughters' female identity and serve as vicarious influence. Modeling does more than provide a social standard against which to judge one's capabilities; for those who observe the behavior of models with competencies they wish to emulate, modeling becomes the method for transmitting knowledge.

### **Psychological and Emotional Influence**

The physiological and emotional influence refers to how the emotional state of individuals affects their behavior. Health and affective states can produce widely generalized effects on one's beliefs in different realms of human functioning. Physical stressors can affect perceived efficacy. Bandura's (1995) theory views stress reactions in terms of perceived inefficacy to exercise control over aversive threats and taxing environmental demands. Controllability is the key to stress relief (Bandura, 1995). It is not necessarily the stressful life conditions but the inability to manage them that can be detrimental physically and emotionally (Bandura, 1992; Maier, Laudenslager, & Ryan, 1985; Shavit & Martin, 1987). Lack of energy, strength, and stamina indicates physical inefficacy.

### **Social and Verbal Persuasion Influence**

The social and verbal persuasion influence experience convinces the individual that he or she is capable of accomplishing the task. People who are persuaded verbally that they possess the capabilities to master given skills are likely to demonstrate greater effort and endurance than if they entertain self-doubts and dwell on insufficiencies when problems arise. It is easier for someone to sustain a sense of efficacy—especially when difficulties arise—when significant others express faith in him or her and convey the idea that he or she has the ability to master the skill. However, the positive message must be within realistic bounds. Social persuasion efficacy has the greatest impact when an individual already believes that he or she can produce an effect through his or her action (Chambliss & Murray, 1979a, 1979b). “To raise unrealistic beliefs of personal capabilities however, only invites failures

that will discredit the persuaders and further undermine the recipients' beliefs in their capabilities" (Bandura, 1995, p. 101). What African American parents tell their children about being African Americans and being academically successful clearly affects them (Thornton, Chatters, & Taylor, 1990).

African American students, particularly females, are often unable to predict whether certain self-regulated behavior will be rewarded or punished (Holliday, 1985) partly because of barriers, either real or perceived (e.g., racism, prejudice, sexism), that operate on a societal as well as an individual level (Hackett & Byars, 1986). When one faces barriers, social persuasion is essential to master task-related skills, efficacy is necessary for defeating obstacles, and robust efficacy is imperative for overcoming barriers or adversity (Hackett & Byars, 1986).

## Method

The research design was exploratory and descriptive. Exploratory studies are designed to research areas in which little information is available. Most of the studies of African American girls' academic achievement and academic performance have been done at the high school or college level rather than at the middle school level. Hence, this exploratory case study addresses this gap in the literature. The Children's Self-Efficacy Survey (CSES) and an adversity questionnaire were administered to 37 African American eighth-grade girls with high grade point averages (GPAs) from a middle school in the Midwest region of Oklahoma. Of the 37 African American girls, 10 were randomly chosen to participate further in the study through in-depth interviews.

The researcher administered the CSES and conducted informal observations and interviews. The CSES was administered to all eighth-grade African American girls who had a 3.0 to 4.0 GPA at Hilltop Middle School. Semistructured interviews with 10 of these girls explored the influence of self-efficacy and how these girls see and interpret their own "academic world of success." The complementary quantitative and qualitative research approaches add depth and richness to the study.

## Site Selection

Hilltop Middle School, in the midwestern section of the United States, was chosen because it is a specialty school with an academy. The academy consists of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students with a 3.0 or above GPA. It is housed in a separate building from the regular classrooms and is

indeed a school within a school. The students in the academy had four 80-minute core classes on A days and one core class and electives on B days. Eight of the 10 respondents in this study were from the academy, whereas two of the respondents were from regular classes. The academy students and the regular students eat lunch separately, hold separate functions, and go on separate field trips. The concentration areas in the academy are performing arts, fine arts, and foreign language. Hilltop is an urban middle school that had approximately 659 students at the time of the study: 129 were Caucasians, 488 African Americans, 33 Hispanics, 5 Asians, and 13 Native Americans. The researcher met with all eighth-grade girls to distribute and collect self-reported results from a demographic data/profile sheet that included 10 personal data items and two “yes/no” items that elicited the following demographic information: (a) grade, (b) ethnic background, (c) approximate GPA for the previous semester, (d) extracurricular activities, (e) leadership role, (f) love for school, (g) love for studying, (h) family data, (i) parental education, and (j) sibling information. After collecting the demographic profile, the researcher administered an adversity questionnaire she had developed to gather information about the respondents’ worlds, their “adversities or stressful situational experiences” (see Appendix A).

Following the adversity questionnaire, the CSES was administered to all African American eighth-grade adolescent girls with GPAs ranging from 3.0 to 4.0 who had experienced adversity ( $n = 37$ ). The students’ GPA was verified by the school counselor(s). This group was chosen as the sample group. Once the CSES survey was completed and scored, 10 African American girls were randomly chosen to participate further in the study through in-depth interviews (see Table A1).

## CSES

The CSES developed by Bandura (1989) was used to assess students’ academic efficacy level and the influence of self-efficacy during their daily activities at school, at home, or in other settings. The CSES is a nine-dimension, 57-item self-efficacy survey that uses a 7-point Likert-type scale where 1 = *not well at all*, 3 = *not too well*, 5 = *pretty well*, and 7 = *very well*. The scoring of the CSES was based on a scoring measurement found in the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), originally published in 1961 (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). The original test was a 21-item multiple-choice test in which the selections for each item varied from four to seven choices. “Each choice was given a weight of zero, one, two, or three points. The statements were ranked, ordered, and weighed to reflect the

**Table 1**  
**Children's Self-Efficacy Survey Response Categories**

| Category 1           | Category 2                      | Category 3                       | Category 4            |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 to 2               | 3 to 4                          | 5 to 6                           | 7                     |
| Low<br>Self-Efficacy | Moderately Low<br>Self-Efficacy | Moderately High<br>Self-Efficacy | High<br>Self-Efficacy |

range of depression” (Beck et al., 1961, p. 83). Similar to the BDI, the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale responses are based on frequency of occurrences (Reynolds, 1986, 1994). Each choice is given a weight of one, two, three, or four parts. Similar to the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale (RADS), this researcher used a cutoff score approach as well to identify 10 of the 37 respondents to participate further in the study. The responses to the CSES were ranked, ordered, and weighed to reflect the level of self-efficacy in each domain. Values of one, two, three, or four were assigned each statement to indicate the degree or level of self-efficacy. The categories selected for this study are presented in Table 1.

The nine dimensions of the CSES for the 37 respondents and their corresponding mean Os are as follows: self-efficacy in enlisting social resources ( $\bar{X}=5.6$ ), self-efficacy for academic achievement ( $\bar{X}=6.0$ ), self-efficacy for self-regulated learning ( $\bar{X}=5.9$ ), self-efficacy for leisure time skills and extracurricular activities ( $\bar{X}=5.8$ ), self-regulatory efficacy ( $\bar{X}=6.5$ ), self-efficacy to meet others' expectations ( $\bar{X}=6.1$ ), social self-efficacy ( $\bar{X}=6.4$ ), self-assertive efficacy ( $\bar{X}=5.9$ ), and self-efficacy for enlisting parental and community support ( $\bar{X}=5.4$ ). Each subscale consists of 4 to 11 items (see Appendix B). See Table 2 for mean results of the CSES. The Cronbach coefficient alpha raw scores reveal 0.87009 for the academic self-efficacy, 0.664309 for the social self-efficacy, and 0.775352 for the self-regulatory self-efficacy dimension (Table 3). The African American girls' academic self-efficacy and their social self-efficacy were moderately high, with means of 5.99595 and 6.09771, respectively. The African American girls' self-regulatory efficacy was the highest of all three levels of domains with a mean of 6.58919.

The demographic report showed that 65% of the 37 African American girls lived with the mother only, 24% lived with both mother and father, and 5% lived with the grandparents. Of the mothers, 27% had at least finished high school, 24% had pursued a college degree but did not complete, 16% held college degrees, and 27% of the respondents did not know their mother's education level.

**Table 2**  
**Mean Results of Children's Self-Efficacy Survey by Domain**

| Variables          | Academic | Social  | Self-Regulatory |
|--------------------|----------|---------|-----------------|
| Mean               | 5.99595  | 6.09771 | 6.58919         |
| Standard Deviation | 0.56487  | 0.52694 | 0.69434         |

**Table 3**  
**Cronbach Coefficient Alpha for Self-Efficacy**

| Variables    | Academic | Social   | Self-Regulatory |
|--------------|----------|----------|-----------------|
| Raw          | 0.870099 | 0.664309 | 0.775352        |
| Standardized | 0.866651 | 0.673614 | 0.811284        |

Because the mother headed many African American homes, 59% of the girls did not know the father's educational background. Five percent of the African American fathers had finished high school, 13% had attended college but did not obtain a degree, and 19% had completed college and obtained a degree. Of the 37 girls, 90% described "life" as the best thing that had ever happened to them and 46% reported the death of a loved one as being the worst thing, as shown in Table A1. Death was also the main obstacle many of the respondents reported that they had had to overcome.

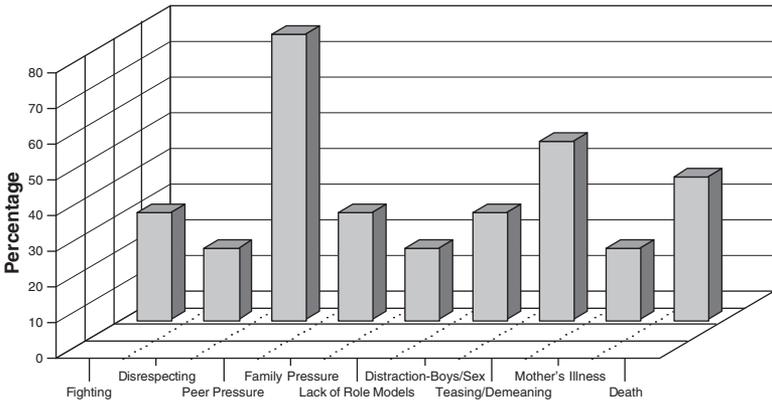
## Analysis

Analysis of the responses of the girls to the surveys and interview questions revealed two important themes: influence and pressure. "Influences" had a positive, persuasive effect on the African American girls, whereas "pressures" had a negative effect.

### **Theme: Influence**

The influence of family, mentors, and peers became a primary theme that emerged from the responses to the interview questions. Historically, the African American mother has been a shining thread of hope for her children. Many respondents recognized their mother or grandmother as the

**Figure 1**  
**Percentage of Responses to Question 3: What Are**  
**Some of the Obstacles You Have Faced in Middle School?**



most influential contributor to their academic success. The African American girls' academic aspirations may be due to the example set by the mother in the home. If the mother had not obtained a degree, many times she attempted, through verbal persuasion, to convince her daughter of the importance of receiving a quality education in order to be competitive in the job market. If a mother or grandmother was not the influence, a mentor became the influence, but the mentor was usually someone within the family unit. Peer influence has shown to be powerful through every phrase of a child's schooling experience. However, very few educators, parents, and students will discuss positive peer influence. The girls' talking continued as they shared how their peers and friends played a role in their academic success. Seventy percent of the respondents received peer support while in middle school, which influenced their behavior to be resilient even when the subject area became difficult.

**Theme: Pressure**

Obstacles in middle school can be overwhelming because of the fact that physical changes, psychological changes, and social changes are also occurring during that time. Obstacles the girls in this particular study faced ranged

from fighting, peer pressure, and dealing with teasing and demeaning comments to dealing with the death of a love one.

*Peer pressure.* Of the 10 respondents interviewed, 8 reported peer pressure of some kind as an obstacle, 4 reported death of a loved one, and 5 reported teasing or demeaning comments due to being in the academy or labeling and stereotyping as obstacles they faced in middle school (Figure 1).

Unlike peer influence where the African American girls were influenced positively, peer pressure had a negative overtone for many of the girls. The African American girls in this study voiced their frustrations with attempting to have friendships outside the academy but appeared to understand that friendships are imperfect. “They [friendships] just go and come I guess and they [the other girls] really weren’t my friends,” said Charity after being transferred from regular classes. Peer pressure, which permeated the interviews, can be overwhelming if an individual does not know how to combat its impact. The students in this study faced peer pressure from being in the academy and from being identified as a geeker or a nerd.

Charity, who was ostracized by her peers because she was in the academy, recalls the following:

*Charity:* Kids talking about that I’m a nerd or whatever but I really don’t pay attention to that. Just because a bunch of kids say that, you know, basically hate’n, doesn’t mean it’s true.

*Interviewer:* Hate’n? Now I’m not familiar with that term. Can you tell me a little bit more?

*Charity:* Umm . . . it’s just basically that the other kids that are not in the academy are jealous of the academy kids. Hate’n comes up—usually its all about jealousy. Just because I get my hair done and stuff I think I’m hard. I think I’m too good for everybody since I’m in the academy—basically things like that. Just because you do well in school and the other kids choose not to listen and not do as well don’t mean I’m a nerd.

Peer pressure appears to function in a way that affects students’ social skills. Not only was the girls’ self-esteem high when faced with peer pressure, but their will to resist this type of pressure was extraordinary.

*Sparkle:* Well, some probably say that I’m a geek and I’m trying to be like them. Well most people, like, the people that’s not in the academy, they were, like, the academy people thinks we’re too good to hang out with them and we’re trying to be like the White people and stuff like that. I got a 4.0 and I’m in

the academy but I don't ever talk about school really unless they get on some school subjects. They say we think we're better than them cause we make better grades, which that's not even true. We just learn faster than what they do. And the rest is just the same; we learn the same thing except we go through ours quicker.

While students are dealing with peer pressure issues, their own personal identity, personal worth, and personal values are being identified and strengthened. Peer pressures inevitably served as a motivator though the comments were negative. Joy clearly understood the "big picture" and utilized reverse psychology to resist the statements made about students in The academy. She emphasized that if the academy students were not "anything" then why were the regular students preoccupied with their success. The academy's organizational structure created a dissonance in the minds of other students and the girls who participated in this study about the girls' social identity. Therefore, the school-within-a-school model added to the peer pressure, and many of these girls reflected on who they wanted to be to guard against this form of peer pressure.

During early adolescence, peer pressure can increase if individuals feel emotionally lonely and desire to be accepted by the opposite sex. In addition to being ridiculed for being in the academy, and resisting stereotypical images, Hope admitted that being distracted more during her eighth-grade year with boys and sex was another obstacle. When told by the researcher that she could ask her anything, Hope responded,

Hope: Well, I have faced this like personal (respondent pauses, raises her eyebrows, and with a high pitch) anything?

*Interviewer:* Anything.

Hope: I have focused a lot on sex. I mean that's all that's going around but I ain't [*sic*] never did anything. But basically young girls like us, boys, like, get more attracted to one thing and it's like that this year and we have a lot of problems with girls getting into that.

*Interviewer:* That? Is in reference to what?

Hope: Sex.

Peer pressure from several sources provided significant barriers for these girls. Barriers can be incredible, unforeseeable, and sometimes improbable, but being able to rise above them is not impossible. Determination to remain focused in school emerged. In the respondents' comments, 60% reported that the way they maintain their grades when faced with problems is by

focusing on their work, whereas 50% stated in a very short candid way that they “just do it.” The Nike slogan has been adopted by the girls in this study as a coping strategy. Hope responded to the question: How do you deal with the barriers faced in school?

*Hope:* I’ll say it was on my mind a lot but I knew that I couldn’t bring my grades down because of the mistake that I made. I just try to take it off my mind and focus on what I have to do and just get it done.

*Family pressure.* Pressures such as divorce or the separation of parents, drugs and alcohol used in the home, incarceration, and other family challenges occurred in the lives of the respondents. One respondent emphasized personal problems with family relationships with her alcoholic stepfather and his aggressive behavior toward her mother. She was happy her mother chose to get out of the relationship because “they [she and her mother] could really make it financially without him,” she said. Although she did not especially enjoy school, she understood the value of an education and was willing to work hard to achieve. Her mother’s problems served as an added stressor and a challenge as she watched her mother endure the pain.

Dealing with conflict and sibling rivalry posed another form of family pressure. One respondent clearly stated she wanted to prove her siblings wrong when they said she would not amount to anything. She shared that her inspiration to do well came from looking at other people and how they became famous. Although her mother and father had separated, this respondent said that the separation had not affected her or her schoolwork.

For Joy, family pressure from siblings was also the barrier for her while at Hilltop Middle School.

*Joy:* Like, my brothers; my mom has two sons and they are, like, the bad ones. One of my brothers is only 16 and he’s not going to school and he used to try to get me to smoke and all that. And my other brother, he’s in jail and he tries to help us at first he didn’t try to help us while we’re in school but now he’s in jail he tries to tell us like what we need to do and stuff. That’s basically it.

*Interviewer:* Were you able to keep your grades up going through all of that?

*Joy:* Yes, because I see where he’s at right now and what he did and I know I didn’t want to go that way. So he was another role in my academic achievement because I see how he was doing and where he’s at and I didn’t want to be like that.

*Life pressures.* Many African American adolescents are forced to grapple with unexpected pressures of life that prematurely force them to

function in adult roles. Terminal illnesses, premature death of a friend, and death of a loved one were realities faced by these respondents. With watery eyes and trembling voices, the girls shared their stories.

Brandy related her obstacles thus: “Recently, my cousin and his girl-friend died and that was hard.”

*Interviewer:* You mentioned losing your cousin. I want to ask this question. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to answer it. How old was he when he passed?  
Brandy: 22

*Interviewer:* I’m sorry to hear that, with him being so young.

*Brandy:* Yes. He got shot; the both of them. Him and his girlfriend got shot.

*Interviewer:* Really?

*Brandy:* Yes, my uncle was the one who found them. His little boy was in the apartment with them.

Natalie adds the same sentiments: “Well, I lost my grandmother and my friend.”

*Interviewer:* Your grandmother and your friend?

Natalie: Yes.

*Interviewer:* Okay, when did you lose your grand momma? And then tell when did you lose your friend?

*Natalie:* Yes, like 1998 and it was two days after Christmas for my grandmother. That was my worst Christmas. (*Respondent puts head down*)

*Interviewer:* Tell me, then, at what time did you lose your friend?

*Natalie:* I didn’t lose them at the same time. He died the morning of Christmas. He had spinal meningitis.

Shanae added: One of my grandmothers died and I face things with my other grandmother even now. She like needs medication because she’s like to the point where I guess she’ll start seeing things and stuff. And we have to help her out sometimes because she’ll start talking and she’ll get crazy and stuff and then we have to calm her down. It just like right now we are trying to get her to go to the doctor so she can better herself. And it’s like she don’t want to go to the doctor; she don’t want to do anything because—right now I’m kind of really scared for her cause she’s not wanting to go at all. You know because she need her medication—because if she don’t have that—I mean she really start seeing things more and the doctor keeps telling her she need to take it.

Learning how to deal with death and loss was evident. Promise, an unusual respondent, had experienced multiple obstacles ranging from family and peer pressure, to death of a loved one, having hereditary cancer, and lastly an abortion. Below is her story.

*Promise:* When my grandmommie got sick, everybody was like we going to start doing this we going to start doing that but that only lasted for a little while. I have a tumor in my right kidney, which is cancerous. I had to have a lot of operations in the past because it's hereditary. It's basically in my family and I have sickle cell and real bad respiratory problems. My life has flashed before my eyes about four times, because I go out to places and girls that don't like my older sister will pull out knives to stab me and cut or fight me. I try not to fight or get involved because I know that by me having cancer I try to keep that on my mind instead of getting involved too much with everybody else. My grandmother died of this same cancer. She wasn't old; she was the closest thing to me. She was the one to keep my head on straight and when I fall she was always there to pick me up. She was living with it; she doesn't believe in operations, she wanted to go whole. She didn't believe in taking it out. She was like she not going to let it get her down. She fought for the longest. I had to make the choice of do I actually want to keep her on the life machine or do I want to let her go. She fell into a coma, she woke up and she was telling me that she wants to go home and her soul was tired. I didn't catch on until after she died. I felt like it was my responsibility and I made the right choices because she's not suffering any more but it also hurts. But that's something I will have to live with. It's been a month or so.

Promise continued by sharing she had had an abortion and experienced the death of her sixth-grade friend who was thrown from a car in her presence.

Although these African American girls faced enormous obstacles, they were triumphant in defeating their personal life giants, and whether faced with peer pressure, family pressure or life pressures, these respondents were victorious in their academic pursuits and resilient enough to bounce back.

## **The Multiple Selves Experience**

"Multiple selves" can be described as how the girls acted in school, in the classroom (especially in the academy), outside the classroom with the regular students, at home, with friends, and in the community. The primary obstacle that the African American students experienced was having to function in multiple worlds because of race, class, and gender issues. The girls discussed their multiple-selves experiences as they navigated through the academy and discovered negotiating strategies to become successful and progress academically. Boykin (1983) proposes that the academic achievement and performance of African American students is influenced by their ability to come to terms with three patterns of behaviors: the mainstream

experience, the minority experience, and the African American cultural experience. The proper use of the self-system and the capability to cognitively evaluate their behavior and their circumstances and make adjustments as necessary gave the Black girls in this study a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This cognitive ability, which included motivation through internal standards and self-reflection, gave these girls self-regulatory efficacy and resulted in their academic success as reflected in their score of ( $\times 6.5$ ) on the CSES.

The African American girls in this study, who were of all sizes and shapes, well groomed, and very confident about themselves, align with the academic findings related to self-esteem. Their high self-esteem may perhaps be due to being in the academy, which particularly increased their personal self-esteem. They were able to defy the stereotypical images placed on them by using this strategy. Finally, African American girls are dealing with forces that promote educational and social inequity. Yet in this study, these girls were able to achieve academic excellence. They were influenced through the enacted mastery influence, social or verbal persuasion, and/or vicarious influence.

## **Implications for Teachers**

The self-efficacy of the African American girls in this study points to the strong possibility they will be successful and have the ability to persevere in their lives, careers, and future-oriented goals as responsible adults, as reflected in the subtheme of peer pressure. It is imperative that teachers develop a curriculum that is culturally responsive and culturally sensitive, one that is inclusive of others, encouraging role models to exhibit excellence while embracing differences. African American girls will continue to thrive and excel in areas that are forbidding not only for girls but rare for today's women. Moreover, teachers must become voices of hope so that students can find their voices. These girls had discovered the "Up" connection in the academy. They discovered while finding their voices that they had untapped potential, unseen promises, untaught principles, unbelievable possibilities, and underdeveloped power.

It is critical for middle school educators to provide pedagogical practices that support academic achievement among girls, especially African American girls, while preparing them to adequately navigate in a multicultural society. Educators must be willing to challenge African American girls to rise to academic excellence, empowering them to use their minds,

stretching them to their maximum potential, and encouraging them to optimize their opportunities in order to live in a competitive society. Teachers' beliefs and efficaciousness to teach academically challenged students is also vital. The home and community life that African American girls bring to the school and the classroom cannot be overlooked or ignored. Their teachers' belief that these girls can excel academically despite their head shaking, long nails, weaved hair, loud voices, or overweight size is essential. Such variances must be viewed as only differences, not deficits or deficiencies. Teachers' willingness to reject deficit thinking and stereotypes while embracing a belief that students from all backgrounds can learn and thrive is also critical. Having a culturally relevant curriculum and being culturally sensitive is important, and educators must be aware of who they have in front of them and how they can offer support for academic achievers who are efficacious in their pursuit for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2002). A culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson Billings asserts, is "a theoretical construct that rests on three propositions: Successful teaching focuses on students' achievement, successful teaching supports students' cultural competence, and successful teaching promotes students' social political consciousness" (p. 111). Teachers must also look for ways to involve and inform all students that being smart is okay! They should nurture their dreams and embrace talents in order to give them a sense and a voice of hope.

Educators must also pay close attention to what research has to say about the environmental effects of schooling on adolescents and know that students arrive at school with a valuable cultural capital, and no matter how it differs from mainstream society, they should build on the academic potential in all students (Thompson, 2004). African American adolescents, especially from single-parent homes, are often depicted as underachievers. However, in this particular study, 7 of the 10 girls were raised by the "mother only" and were high achievers. Mothers and "other mothers" in the African American culture have been a powerful force in the education of the family (Cooper, 2001). They deeply care about their children's schooling. In fact, their shared conviction that educational attainment is vital to their children's success contributes to their efforts to find competent and caring teachers—even if it requires them to exit the traditional public school system despite their limited socioeconomic means. Therefore, teachers must demonstrate the pedagogical art of caring, nurturing, and bonding with students, especially during the adolescent years.

For the African Americans in this study, one might project that such adverse circumstances would have caused the girls to perform poorly in school and despair by dropping out. These African American girls did not drop out but chose to persist and beat the odds. Lisa Delpit (1995) explained that the connection educators may have with girls, particularly across class and cultural lines, is a complicated one. She explained that the only way to start a dialogue is with “a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but also hearts and minds” (pp. 46-47). True educators must be willing to listen with genuine hearts, establish a level of trustworthiness, and seek to assist in propelling girls to reach their next level of success (high school, college, engineering, medical school, etc.). Such educators will help these students gain resources, skills, and cultural capital needed to advance at the rate of their privileged peers (Bartolome, 1994; Solorzano, 1997). Moreover, these educators will support their students in the community, by attending their events and recognizing their efforts and accomplishments outside of school (clubs, organizations, churches, etc.). They will include role models who will speak to the girls’ “lived experiences,” which is always appropriate and very powerful.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Further studies must call into question the monolithic and polarized construction of identity for African American students. One cannot understand the African American girl without understanding the unique nature of her African American heritage. Research is needed to determine the extent to which teachers, administrators, and society act on and respond to the messages received from African American girls, especially those whose social skills have been negatively affected.

A study similar to this one using white adolescents as respondents could also yield valuable information. The primary obstacle that the African American girls experienced was being able to function in multiple worlds because of race, class, and gender issues. I believe European American girls’ experiences are different because they are not a racial minority, but they may also experience class and gender barriers and it would be interesting and instructive to hear their stories. In addition, it would be interesting to repeat this study with a group of African American girls from a more diverse academic background, not just those with a 3.0 to 4.0 GPA. Also, a study of African American males with otherwise similar characteristics could reveal gender differences among

same-race peers. Finally, a longitudinal study with these girls could show whether the “voices of hope” have become “voices of hope fulfilled.” The researcher is planning to complete such a study.

In conclusion, the girls in this study demonstrated amazing self-efficacy; however, even this characteristic might not be enough for them to actually succeed academically if schools, instead of offering support, present additional obstacles. Schools must examine their ideologies and be willing to maintain democratic and equitable classrooms. Those who influence today’s students must be knowledgeable about the positionality of the students and families they serve. The need for culturally sensitive teaching methodologies is critical. Teachers, listen to the voices that whisper hope in the face of adversity, voices that say “I can, I must, and I will succeed.” Let us be sensitive to, support, and celebrate these voices so that the hopes and dreams of these students and many others will become reality.

---

## Appendix A: Adversity Questionnaire

---

1. Have you ever experienced any of the following problems or difficulties below? If yes, please check any of the following you have faced.  
 Parents divorce  
 Death of a love one:  mother  father  sister  
 brother  grandmother  grandfather  friend
  
  2. Do you suffer from any kind of serious illness/handicap?  
 yes  no  
 If yes, your explanation is optional
  
  3. Have you ever been asked to do something unlawful by peers or anyone else such as drugs, alcohol, or participated in any gang related activities?  
 yes  no
  
  4. Describe the best thing that has ever happened to you.
  
  5. Describe the worst thing that has ever happened to you.
  
  6. What adversities (obstacles, problems) have you had to overcome in the last two years?
-

**Table A1: Adversity Questionnaire Results**

| Best Experiences       | Worst Experiences      | Problems to Overcome                 |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Life                   | Death                  | Death/trauma                         |
| Winning                | Menstrual cycle        | Peer pressure                        |
| Academic achievement   | Medical attention      | Family member incarcerated           |
| Birth of a loved one   | Abuse of family member | Poor academic achievement            |
| Traveling              | Incarceration          | Family turmoil                       |
| Church attendance      | Display bad manner     | Distrust parents                     |
| Phone privileges       | Secrets discovered     | Being disobedient to parents         |
| Family bond            | Fighting               | Accident                             |
| Supportive friends     | Peer pressure          | Fighting                             |
| Change of neighborhood | Parents' divorce       | Alternative choices                  |
| Employment             |                        | Teasing insults for academic success |
| Separation of siblings |                        | Parent separation                    |
| Becoming a teenager    |                        | Friendship problems                  |
|                        |                        | Self-improvement                     |

### Appendix B: Nine Dimensions of Children's Self-Efficacy Survey

| Dimension   | <i>n</i> | Mean       | Standard Deviation |
|---|----------|------------|--------------------|
| (1) Self-efficacy in enlisting social resources                           | 37       | 5.635135   | 0.63627            |
| (2) Self-efficacy for academic achievement                                | 37       | 6.024024   | 0.54630            |
| (3) Self-efficacy for self-regulated learning                             | 37       | 5.93120394 | 0.74548            |
| (4) Self-efficacy for leisure time skills and extra-curricular activities | 37       | 5.810811   | 0.72026            |
| (5) Self-regulatory efficacy  | 37       | 6.462462   | 0.71411            |
| (6) Self-efficacy to meet others' expectations                            | 37       | 6.101351   | 1.05320            |
| (7) Social self-efficacy  | 37       | 6.391892   | 0.75586            |
| (8) Self-assertive efficacy   | 37       | 5.932432   | 0.80504            |
| (9) Self-efficacy for enlisting parental and community                    | 37       | 5.405405   | 1.22241            |

### References

- American Association of University Women. (1991). *How schools shortchange girls*. New York: American Association of University Women Education Foundation.
- Backes, J. (1994). Bridging the gender gap: Self-concept in the middle grades. *Schools in the Middle*, 3, 19-23. EJ 483 319.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy mechanism in human agency. *American Psychologist*, 37, 122-147.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bandura A. (1992). Self-efficacy mechanism is a psychobiologic functioning. In R. Schwarzer (Ed), *Self-efficacy: Thought control of action* (pp. 455-394). Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28(2), 117-148.
- Bandura, A. (1995). *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- Bartolome, L. I. (1994, Summer). Beyond the methods fetish: Toward a humanizing pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 64(2), 173-194.
- Beck, A. T., Ward, D. M., Mendelson, M., Mock, J., & Erbaugh, J. (1961). An inventory for measuring depression. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 4, 561-571.
- Biran, M., & Wilson, G. T. (1981). Treatment of phobic disorders using cognitive and exposure methods: A self-efficacy analysis. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*, 49, 886-899.
- Boykin, W. (1983). The academic performance of African-American children. In J. Spence (Ed.), *Achievement and achievements motives* (pp. 342-371). San Francisco: Freeman.
- Brown, I., Jr., & Inouye, D. K. (1978). Learned helplessness through modeling. The roles of perceived similarity in competence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 900-908.
- Cauce, A. M., Hiraga, Y., Graves, D., Gonzales, N., & Grove, K. (1996). African American mothers and their daughters. In B. J. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes and cheating identities* (pp. 100-116). New York: New York University Press.
- Chambliss, C. A., & Murray, E. J. (1979a). Cognitive procedures for smoking reduction: Symptom attribution versus efficacy attribution. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 3, 91-96.
- Chambliss, C. A., & Murray, E. J. (1979b). Efficacy attribution, locus of control, and weight loss. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 3, 349-354.
- Christine, S. (1987). *Generation to generation: The transmission of knowledge, skills, and role models from Black working mothers to their daughters in a southern community*. New York: New York University Press.
- Cooper, C. M. W. (2001). *School choice reform and the standpoint of African American Mothers: The search for power and opportunity in the educational marketplace*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Collins, P. H. (1987). *The meaning of motherhood in Black culture and Black mother daughter relationships*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Sage Publication Inc.
- Crockett, M. J. (1995). Creating successful schools for all early adolescent learners: No easy answers. *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 79(575), 42-50.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: New York University Press.
- Elders, G. H., Jr., & Liker, J. K. (1982). Hard times in women's lives: Historical influences across forty years. *American Journal of Sociology*, 88, 224-269.
- Entwisle, D. (1990). Schools and the adolescent. In S. Fieldman & G. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 197-224). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Feldman, S., & Elliott, G. (1990). *At the threshold: The developing adolescent*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Feltz, D. L., Landers, D. M., & Raeder, U. (1979). Enhancing self-efficacy in high avoidance motor tasks: A comparison of modeling techniques. *Journal of Sport Psychology, 1*, 112-122.
- Gist, M. E. (1989). The influence of training method on self-efficacy and idea generation among managers. *Personnel Psychology, 42*, 787-805.
- Graham, S., Taylor, A., & Hudley, C. (1998). Exploring achievement values among ethnic minority early adolescents. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*, 607-620.
- Greene, B. A. (1990a). What has gone before: The legacy of racism and sexism in the lives of Black mothers and daughters. *Women and Therapy, 9*, 28-29.
- Greene, B. A. (1990b). Study bridges: The role of African American mothers in the socialization of African American children. *Women and Therapy, 10*, 205-225.
- Hackett, G., & Byars, A. (June, 1986). Social cognitive theory the career development of African American women. *The Career Development Quarterly, 44*(4), 322-334.
- Holliday, B. G. (1985). Differential effects of children's self-perceptions and teacher's perceptions on black children's academic achievement. *Journal of Negro Education, 54*(1), 71-81.
- Henderson, G. (1979). *Understanding and counseling ethnic minorities*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Kleinfield, J. (1999). Student performance: Males versus females. *The Public Interest, 134*, 3-20.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2002). I ain't writing nutting: Permissions to fail and demands to succeed in urban classrooms. In L. D. Delpit & J. Dowds (Eds.), *The skin that we speak: Thoughts on language and culture in the classroom* (pp. 107-120). New York: New Press.
- Lane, J., & Lane, A. (2001). Self-efficacy and academic performance. *Social Behavior and Personality, 29*, (7), 687-694.
- Maier, S. F., Laudenslager, M. L., & Ryan, S. M. (1985). Stressor controllability, immune function, and endogenous opiates. In F. R. Brush & J. B. Overmeier (Eds.), *Affect, conditioning and cognition: Essays on the determinants of behavior* (pp. 183-201). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2001). *The educational progress of Black students*. Washington, DC: US Department of Education.
- Newman, B. M., & Newman, P. R. (1984). *Development through life. A psychological approach*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- Pajares, F., & Miller, M. D. (1994). Role of self-efficacy and self-concept beliefs in mathematical problem solving. A path analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 86*, 193-203.
- Pintrich, P. R., & DeGroot, E. V. (1990). Motivational and self-regulated learning components of classroom academic performance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 82*, 3340.
- Pintrich, P. R., & Schrauben, B. (1992). Students' motivational beliefs and their cognitive engagement in classroom academic tasks. In D. Schunk & J. Meece (Eds.), *Student perceptions in the classroom: Causes and consequences* (pp. 149-183). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Reynolds, W. M. (1986). *Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resource.
- Reynolds, W. M. (1994). Assessment of depression in children and adolescents by self-report questionnaires. In W. M. Reynolds & H. F. Johnson (Eds.), *Handbook of depression in children and adolescents* (pp. 209-234). New York: Plenum.
- Shavit, Y., & Martin, F.C. (1987). Opiates, stress, and immunity: Animal studies. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 9*, 11-20.
- Solorzano, D. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 24*(3), 5-19.
- Schunk, D. H. (1989). Self-efficacy and achievement behaviors. *Educational Psychology Review, 1*, 173-208.

- Schunk, D. H. (1991). Self-efficacy and motivation. *Educational Psychologist, 26*, 207-231.
- Schunk, D. H. (1994). Self-regulation of self-efficacy and attribution in academic settings. In D. H. Schunk & B. J. Zimmerman (Eds. ), *Self-regulation of learning and performances: Issues and educational implications* (pp. 75-79). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Thompson, G. (2004). *Through ebony eyes. What teachers need to know but are afraid to ask about African American students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thornton, M. C., Chatters, L. M., & Taylor, R. J. (1990). Sociodemographics and environmental correlates of racial socialization by Black parents. *Child Development, 61*, 401-409.

**Mildred M. Pearson** is the Director of Faculty Development and an assistant professor in Early Childhood, Elementary, and Middle Level Education at Eastern Illinois University. Her research interests are in self-efficacy, self-regulation, resilience, gender differences, and academic performance among African American girls. She received her EdD from Oklahoma State University.