Preventing School Failure, 55(1), 53–62, 2010

ISSN: 1045-988X print
DOI: 10.1080/10459880903472835

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A Comparison of African American Students' Self-Perceptions of School Competence With Their Performance on State-Mandated Achievement Tests and Normed Tests of Oral and Written Language and Reading

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This study measured self-perceptions of school competence among 263 4th- and 6th-grade African American students who attended an academically challenged school district. Self-perceptions of school competence are defined as self-perceptions of ability, confidence, and school satisfaction. Results indicated that 4th-grade students had lesser perceptions of themselves as able and confident, but their school satisfaction was notable. Sixth-grade students perceived themselves as able, but they reported less confidence and school satisfaction. Students' self-perceptions were correlated with their performance on state-mandated achievement tests and normed language and reading tests. Better self-perceptions of ability and confidence correlated with better test scores; lesser self-perceptions correlated with lower test scores. Therefore, self-perceptions bore a consistent relation to academic capabilities. These findings suggest that students who do not perceive themselves as able, who lack confidence, or who have diminished school satisfaction may be at risk for school disengagement.

Keywords: academic achievement, academic self-perceptions, achievement testing, African American, self-evaluation

While educational achievement testing purports to measure how well a student has acquired concepts and skills taught at school, student test performance is not simply the aftermath of exposure to curriculum. Achievement is also a reflection of multiple contexts that engender student performance and that sometimes may mitigate test performance. These contexts include insufficiencies in school resources (Bobbett, 1993; J. Lee & Wong, 2004; Leonardo, 2003), inadequacy of school programming (Jackson, 1999), family and community socioeconomic circumstances (Borman, Stringfield, & Rachuba, 1998; Denoyer & White, 1992; Gallagher, 1993; F. R. Lee, 2002; Schellenberg, 1998), and learner characteristics such as cognitive ability (Ackerman, 2003), test preparedness (Buly & Valencia, 2002), and a lack of language-based information learned in and out of school (Meisels, 1989; Popham, 1999). Given the objective reality of these issues among some students in more challenged schools, research needs to be directed at whether affected students subjectively perceive themselves as academically capable, confident, and satisfied with school.

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To substantiate the premise that school, community, and learner characteristics affect performance on achievement testing, it is important to investigate the viewpoints of students who are in circumstances that may place them at risk for unsatisfactory test performance. Self-perceptions of lack of competence might coincide with unfavorable achievement test results (Paris, Roth, & Turner, 2000). Potentially, students who are at risk for diminished test performance may affirm self-perceptions of school achievement and satisfaction, or they may not (Baker, 1999; Saint-Laurent, Hebert, Royer, & Desbiens, 1997).

Students' self-perceptions of school competence

The literature on academic self-concept suggests that students experience school phenomenologically. Adequate instrumentation can allow students to expose their concerns about their school performance (Frey & Ruble, 1987). Measures of academic self-concept have emerged from the body of literature on self-efficacy—the exploration of factors that influence individuals' self-perceptions of competence (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003), as well as the literature on causal attributions (Rogers, 1991), which explores how individuals define the factors and behaviors that can contribute to personal successes and failures. School

competence is a construct that includes self-perceptions of personal control, self-perceptions of academic competence, achievement-related behaviors, and feelings of effectiveness and worth.

Each individual develops a set of self-perceptions of competence on the basis of an accumulation of success and failure experiences (Campbell, Assanand, & Di Paula, 2003). Persons who experience more successes than failures tend to develop positive self-perceptions of ability, while those who experience many failures tend to develop more negative self-perceptions of ability and may have difficulty maintaining achievement motivation (Weiner, 1980).

Research has explored students' self-perceptions of their abilities, achievement, performance, and school satisfaction (Baker, 1999; Benenson & Dweck, 1986; Bouchey & Harter, 2005; Cain & Dweck, 1995; Frey & Ruble, 1987; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Moely, 1995; Paris et al., 2000; Rogers, 1991). Benenson and Dweck as well as Moely found that students' self-perceptions became less positive as they advanced through elementary and middle school. Harter et al. established that self-evaluation is domain specific and that students can differentially view their achievements in various school domains. Other research on domain-specific self-perceptions has focused specifically on students' self-perceptions of reading competence as an important variable within overall or greater self-perceptions of school competence (McCabe & Margolis, 2001). Self-perceptions of reading competence are characterized by a variety of "good reader" self-perceptions that relate to accomplishments, skills, and enjoyment of reading (Borko & Eisenhart, 1986; Henk & Melnick, 1998).

The present study: A subset of a larger investigation

The purpose of the present research was to determine to what degree a measure of students' self-perceptions of school competence compared with their performance on various achievement and abilities tests. These data on self-perceptions of school competence are a subset of data collected for a larger study on how language capabilities affect performance on state-mandated achievement tests (Gordon Pershey, 2003, 2008). The findings on self-perceptions of school competence reported here were not included in the 2003 or 2008 reports.

The larger study compared student performance on state summative tests of reading and writing curriculum achievement with subtests of standardized tests of oral and written language and reading capabilities. Participants were 263 fourth- and sixth-grade African American students who attended school in a district where scores on state-mandated achievement tests were sometimes as low as a 14% passing rate, far short of the state's stipulation that 75% of students need to pass. Measurement yielded 26 group mean subtest scores. Group performance on 24 subtests was below normative expectations. Markedly low scores were obtained on vocabulary, written language, and reading to ascertain meaning. Data analysis revealed a consistent interrelatedness between group subtest scores and state-mandated test scores. Knowledge of syntax, written language conventions, vocabulary, and reading comprehension predicted performance and accounted for variance in performance on state testing. Performance on tests of academic achievement was thereby linked to the language factors that contributed to test performance. These findings suggested implications for curriculum and instruction for students whose language-based learning needs place them at risk for diminished performance on mandated achievement tests.

Description of the present study

As part of the larger study, subtests of a standardized measure of students' self-perceptions of school competence were administered. The purpose was to measure how participants' self-perceptions of school competence might affect their performance on mandated testing in addition to the effect of their language skills. This testing, as an exploration apart from the previous analysis of the effect of their language skills.

Three research questions were addressed in the present study. The first question determined participants' scores on four subtests of a standardized measure of self-perceptions of school competence. Second, the research established the degree to which self-perceptions of school competence correlated ($\alpha \leq .05$) with performance on criterion-referenced state-mandated tests of reading and writing achievement and with scores on 26 subtests of standardized measures of oral and written language and reading abilities. Third, the research investigated the occurrence of significant differences ($\alpha \leq .05$) between fourth- and sixth-grade students' self-perceptions of school competence.

Method

Participants

From a potential sample of 259 regular education African American fourth-grade students and 224 sixth-grade students, 263 students participated in this study. We selected 144 fourth-grade students (64 boys, 76 girls) and 123 sixth-grade students (56 boys, 67 girls) on the basis of two criteria. None received any special education or regular education supplemental services. Each student obtained parent or guardian written permission for participation. The most frequent reason for nonparticipation was failure to obtain parental response to the permission request forms.

The mean age for fourth- and sixth-grade students was 10.1 years (range = 9.3–11.5 years) and 12.1 years (range = 11.2–13.7 years), respectively. The fourth-grade students

attended three elementary schools in one community (School 1 had 52 participants; School 2 had 34 participants; School 3 had 54 participants). The sixth-grade students all attended one middle school.

Each participant completed all measures. Occasional errors in administration made it necessary to discard some scores on some subtests. There was never more than one subtest discarded per student.

Setting

Participants lived in an urban suburb about 10 miles from the center of a moderately large city. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), 90.4% of the population of the community was African American. Between one-third and one-half of the African American residents were part of families that own homes. Home values averaged about $70,000, and rental properties were about $500 per month.

According to state department of education data (Ohio Department of Education, 2000), district enrollment was 3,100 students. The percent of children in this community listed as economically disadvantaged was 25.1%, compared with a state average of 13.4%. Transience was noted in the schools. Nearly 13% of all students were not in the district for half of the year; another 13% switched buildings in the district during the year (the state averages are about 11%). A total of 27% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and 31% qualified for Title I services. Special education services were provided to 30% of the student population.

The racial composition of the district staff was 41.1% nonminority, 0.5% Asian, and 58.4% African American. Although class size averaged about 24 students and annual spending per pupil was about 12% greater than the state average, the district was ranked as the fifth lowest of the county's 31 districts in academic accomplishments. The district met only 7 of 27 state academic standards. Meeting so few standards placed the district in "academic emergency," the lowest of four performance categories designated by the state. About 11% of the state's districts fared this poorly.

The district met the standard for student attendance but failed the standard for graduation rate (only 75%, which was down by 5% over the past 3 years). In the year preceding this study, of all academic subjects tested by the state, the district achieved a passing rate (at least 75% of pupils pass) only for writing in Grades 6, 9, 10 and 12 and reading in Grades 9 and 10. For Grade 4, 9.5% of students passed all subjects; the state average was 31.9%. For Grade 6, 16.1% passed all subjects; the state average was 32.5%. These were the best fourth- and sixth-grade scores that the district achieved over the 3 years preceding the study. For Grade 9, 41% passed all subjects (state average was 61%), and for Grade 12, 15.5% passed all subjects (state average was 39.8%). At this rate, if one were to look around an elementary classroom of 24 students, 6 will not graduate. Of the 18 who remain, 15 will not pass the Grade 12 test. The student body can be said to have been at considerable risk for academic failure. Large numbers of students were struggling to meet state academic standards.

Instrumentation

Fourth- and sixth-grade students completed a written inventory of self-perceptions of school competence, the Perception of Abilities Scale in Students (PASS; Boersma & Chapman, 1992). Psychometric properties of the PASS, including its structure, reliability, and validity, are detailed in the manual for examiners. The manual describes the PASS's sensitivity for measuring school-related self-perceptions, the strong statistical relation between the PASS and other measures of school-related perceptions, and the established association between the PASS and concurrent and predictive measures of school achievement. Approximately 1% of its normative sample was African American. Boersma and Chapman cautioned users of the PASS in comparing students from ethnic and racial minorities to the normative data but do not rule out the use of the PASS with students from minority groups.

Students in the present study were asked to read and respond with a *yes* or *no* to "I" statements pertaining to school self-perceptions in four strands—general ability, reading and spelling ability, confidence, and school satisfaction. There are 12 items per strand. The PASS was designed to be used with students in Grades 3–6, and its readability level is at Grade 3. Response forms are "bubble" sheets. The test yields percentile and *t* scores (standard scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10) and validity and misrepresentation indicators. A *t* score of 40 or less is considered a critical indicator of diminished self-perceptions of academic competence.

PASS items are phrased in both the positive and the negative. A sample item for general ability is "In school I find new things difficult to learn." For reading/spelling ability, one item is "I am a good reader." A sample confidence item is "Tests are easy for me to take." One school satisfaction item is "I like telling my friends about schoolwork."

Procedures

Individual and small group abilities testing of participants began in February and continued through early June. Groups of about 10 students left class and were assigned to testing stations in unused rooms or areas in the school buildings. Each participant left class for a total of approximately 3–4 hrs to complete the testing, but testing was not completed all on 1 day. Students attended between two and four testing sessions over up to 4 days. As students completed each test, they rotated among the testing stations. Short breaks were given. Subtests of oral and written language and reading and the PASS were administered in randomized order to prevent order effects. (For a full

description of all instruments, see Gordon Pershey, 2003, 2008.)

The researcher and 30 graduate students served as testers. Teams of up to five testers visited the schools weekly for up to 3 days per week. Students had completed courses on standardized testing procedures, child language development and disorders, and speech and language development in African American children. All had experience administering standardized tests and were supervised by the researcher for accuracy and consistency in administration. Testers participated for 15 to 65 hr per person.

The PASS was self-administered (read silently) once students demonstrated that they could read a few of the items aloud. The test was read aloud by the testers to a few students who had trouble reading it. Response forms were scored by the testers on the date of administration.

Data preparation

Standard scores were obtained for the norm-referenced oral and written language and reading subtests and the PASS, which yields *t* scores. Standard scores have equal intervals, allow for comparison across tests and across the two age groups, and compare participants with a normative population of examinees the same age. Scores were entered into the SPSS (Version 10.0) program. Resulting measures include Grade 4 and 6 group standard score means, medians, and modes.

The participants completed the state's criterion-referenced reading and writing achievement tests in March of the same school year. Each participant's percentage correct scores for the state tests were provided to the researcher by the participants' classroom teachers in June of the same year. Scores were entered into the SPSS program, and group mean, median, and mode scores were calculated for reading and for writing in Grades 4 and 6.

Results

Scores on PASS testing

The first research question concerned determining participants' scores on the PASS. No participant was identified by the validity indicators as producing a significant finding for inconsistency, response bias, or misrepresentation. No student's validity indexes were outside of the normative range.

In the normative distribution of *t* scores, the mean score is 50 ($SD = 10$). As reported in Table 1, the Grade 4 mean *t* score for general ability was 46.2 ($SD = 8.8$, median = 46.0). The reading and spelling ability *t* score group mean was 55.1 ($SD = 13.3$, median = 54.0); confidence *t* score mean was 50.9 ($SD = 7.9$, median = 50.0); and school satisfaction *t* score mean was 57.8 ($SD = 10.3$, median = 58.0). With the exception of general ability, in which the group mean score was less than 0.5 *SD* below the normative mean, group mean scores equaled the normative mean or were 0.5 *SD* above the normative mean.

Mean scores were essentially unremarkable. The research sample's mean results were often commensurate with the performance of the standardization sample. It is notable, however, that fourth-grade medians showed that half of all students reported self-perceptions of general ability that were markedly lower than the normative mean. The group median score was 46.0, a score in the first 0.5 *SD* below the normative mean score, with half of the participants scoring below this point. Decreased self-perceptions were also true for confidence, where the median score was 50.0, with half of the participants scoring at or below the normative mean. The reading and spelling ability median was 54.0, and the school satisfaction median was 58.0, which are both scores within the first 0.5 *SD* above the normative mean. Medians suggest that a figure approaching half of all participants did not report reading/spelling ability or school satisfaction levels that were consistent with the normative group's mean score.

The purpose of reverting from the use of mean scores to median scores is to draw attention away from the measurement of central tendency to focus on the responses of the individual students sampled. Although a normal distribution of scores would entail that half of the students score below the midpoint, and this is to be expected, this is not a satisfactory circumstance for the individuals whose scores fall below the median and thus reveal their poorer self-perceptions of school competence. The report of median performance purposely refocuses attention on the individual students and their phenomenological perceptions of themselves and reveals areas of student need.

Largely, the Grade 4 group expressed satisfaction with school, but many students in this sample did not perceive themselves as successful in school tasks, as evidenced by the general ability scores. Effectively, the respondents were more likely to be satisfied than confident, and more likely to be satisfied than perceiving of themselves as able.

The Grade 6 mean *t* score for general ability was 54.5 ($SD = 9.9$, median = 53.0). The reading and spelling ability *t* score mean was 57.5 ($SD = 12.9$, median = 54.0); confidence *t* score mean was 54.4 ($SD = 7.9$, median = 54.0); school satisfaction *t* score mean was 49.1 ($SD = 9.38$, median = 49.0). Only the school satisfaction group mean score was lower than the normative mean (> 0.5 *SD* = below); other subtest group mean scores were less than 0.5 to 0.5 *SD* above the normative mean.

For Grade 6, similar concerns regarding group median scores were evident. While the general ability median score was 53.0, approaching 0.5 *SD* above the normative mean, half of all students scored below this point. A similar finding was true for reading and spelling ability and confidence, where the median scores were both 54.0. Most notable was the score for school satisfaction, in which the median score was 49.0. Half of all students reported school

Table 1. Perception of Abilities Scale in Students Scores

	Grade 4			Grade 6		
	M t-score	Median *t*-score	Difference from normative *M*	*M t*-score	Median *t*-score	Difference from normative *M*
General ability	46.2	46.0	$< \frac{1}{2}$ *SD* below	54.5	53.0	$<$ *SD* above
Read/Spell ability	55.1	54.0	$\frac{1}{2}$ *SD* above	57.5	54.0	$\frac{1}{2}$ *SD* above
Confidence	50.9	50.0	at mean	54.4	54.0	$< \frac{1}{2}$ *SD* above
School satisfaction	57.8	58.0	$\frac{1}{2}$ *SD* above	49.1	49.0	$< \frac{1}{2}$ *SD* below

satisfaction that was lower than the normative mean. The sixth-grade students sampled seemed to be at risk for the type of school disaffection or disengagement characterized by Borman et al. (1998).

Comparing Grades 4 and 6, PASS scores suggested that fourth-grade students did not perceive themselves as having strong school competencies, but their satisfaction with school was notable. For sixth-grade students, self-perceptions of abilities were greater but confidence and school satisfaction were lesser.

Correlations of the PASS subtests with other measures

The second research question involved establishing the degree to which PASS subtest mean *t* scores correlated with one another, with state reading and writing achievement test mean percentage correct scores, and with standard scores on 26 subtests of standardized measures of oral and written language and reading. Table 2 provides significant ($p \leq .05$) Pearson product moment correlations between PASS *t* scores and state reading and writing achievement test mean percentage correct scores. For Grade 4, within the PASS, general ability correlated with reading and spelling ability ($r = .528$, $p \leq .0001$), with confidence ($r = .508$, $p \leq .0001$), and with school satisfaction ($r = .236$, $p = .006$). Reading and spelling ability correlated with confidence ($r = .518$, $p \leq .0001$) and with school satisfaction ($r = .383$, $p \leq .0001$). Confidence correlated with school satisfaction ($r = .350$, $p \leq .0001$).

Only one significant correlation with the state tests was obtained. PASS reading/spelling ability *t* score correlated with the writing mean percentage correct score ($r = .173$, $p = .048$).

PASS *t* scores correlated with several standard scores of oral and written language and reading. General ability correlated with 10 measures, reading and spelling ability correlated with 6 measures, and confidence correlated with 3 measures. No correlations were obtained for PASS school satisfaction.

For Grade 6, within the PASS, general ability correlated with reading and spelling ability ($r = .332$, $p \leq .0001$) and with confidence ($r = .354$, $p \leq .0001$). Reading and spelling ability correlated with confidence ($r = .299$, $p \leq .0001$). Confidence correlated with school satisfaction ($r = .340$, $p \leq .0001$).

General ability correlated with the state reading percentage correct score ($r = .179$, $p = .050$) and with the state writing percentage correct score ($r = .196$, $p = .038$). Confidence correlated with the state writing percentage correct score ($r = .206$, $p = .029$).

PASS *t* scores correlated with several standard scores. General ability correlated with five measures, reading and spelling ability correlated with four measures, confidence correlated with four measures, and school satisfaction correlated with one measure.

Table 2. Perception of Abilities Scale in Students Correlations

	General ability	Reading/spelling ability	Confidence	School satisfaction
General ability		(4)r = .528, p < .0001 (6)r = .332, p < .0001	(4)r = .508, p < .0001 (6)r = .354, p < .0001	(4)r = .236, p = .006
Reading/spelling ability	(4)r = .528, p < .0001 (6)r = .332, p < .0001		(4)r = .518, p < .0001 (6)r = .299, p < .0001	(4)r = .383, p < .0001
Confidence	(4)r = .508, p < .0001 (6)r = .354, p < .0001	(4)r = .518, p < .0001 (6)r = .299, p < .0001		(4)r = .350, p < .0001 (6)r = .340, p < .0001
School satisfaction	(4)r = .236, p = .006	(4)r = .383, p < .0001	(4)r = .350, p < .0001 (6)r = .340, p < .0001	
State reading	(6)r = .179, p = .050			
State writing	(6)r = .196, p = .038	(4)r = .173, p = .048	(6)r = .206, p = .029	

Note. Grade levels are given in parentheses.

For both grades, correlations within the PASS met high levels of significance. Each subtest correlated with all of the other subtests at least once. Of six possible within-test correlations, there were six within-test correlations for Grade 4 and four within-test correlations for Grade 6. For both grades, scores for general ability and reading and spelling ability correlated. Confidence correlated with both abilities measures and with school satisfaction for students in both grades. School satisfaction correlated with both abilities measures for fourth-grade students but did not correlate with either abilities measure for sixth-grade students. For sixth-grade students, the median level of school satisfaction was one point below the normative mean and did not correlate with self-perceptions of ability.

The state reading test correlated significantly only with the Grade 6 measure of general ability. As a group trend, sixth-grade students could be thought of as being fairly accurate in their self-perceptions of ability in that their ability scores correlated with their overt reading test performance. These correlational data would indicate that self-perceptions of greater ability coincided with better reading scores, and self-perceptions of lesser reading ability correlated with lower test scores.

The state writing test correlated with the Grade 4 measure of reading and spelling ability and the Grade 6 measures of general ability and confidence. The tendency again appeared to be that both fourth- and sixth-grade students who produced better writing samples accurately conveyed stronger self-perceptions of ability; students whose work was less strong accurately reported lesser self-perceptions of ability. Sixth-grade students who prepared better writing samples also reported greater school confidence; students whose writing samples earned lower scores reported less academic confidence. It would seem that better performers had more confidence and weaker performers were less confident.

General ability *t* scores correlated significantly with 15 of 26 possible standard scores. For Grade 4, several measures that assessed vocabulary correlated with self-perceptions of general ability. Therefore, it might be said that students who perceived their abilities as stronger evidenced better vocabularies, whereas students who perceived their abilities as less strong scored lower on tests that measured vocabulary skill. For sixth-grade students, five subtests that measured oral and written language correlated with general ability. Two of these were subtests where mean and median scores were near the normative mean, and two of these scores were on a subtest in which the mean and median standard scores were >1.5 *SD* less than the normative mean score. This is a strong indicator that students who obtained moderate as well as extreme scores had accurate self-perceptions of their abilities.

Of 26 subtest standard scores, 10 correlated significantly with reading and spelling ability. Fourth-grade correlations were related to oral and written language and reading capabilities, but the sixth-grade students' self-perceptions of reading and spelling ability correlated only with scores for oral and written language. Again, scores for measures of vocabulary correlated with self-perceptions of reading and spelling ability. Students who perceived their reading abilities as stronger evidenced better vocabularies, while students who perceived their reading abilities as less strong scored lower on tests that measured vocabulary skill.

Self-perceptions of confidence correlated significantly with three fourth-grade and four sixth-grade subtest scores. Measures of written language and reading capabilities were correlated with confidence in the fourth grade and measures of oral and written language and reading capabilities were correlated with confidence in the sixth grade.

No Grade 4 subtest scores correlated significantly with school satisfaction. School satisfaction correlated significantly with one Grade 6 written language subtest. In Grade 6, stronger writers expressed more satisfaction with school, whereas less strong writers were less satisfied with school.

Differences between fourth and sixth gradres

A third research question explored differences between the fourth- and sixth-grade samples. A one-way analysis of variance determined where there were significant cross-sectional differences between the fourth- and sixth-grade samples when PASS *t* scores were compared (see Table 3). For general abilities, the Grade 4 mean *t* score was 46.2 and the Grade 6 score was 54.5. These scores were significantly different ($F(1, 245) = 47.564$, $p \leq .0001$). For confidence, the Grade 4 mean *t* score was 50.9 and the Grade 6 score was 54.4, a significant difference ($F(1, 245) = 11.630$, $p = .001$). For school satisfaction, the Grade 4 mean *t* score was 57.8 and the Grade 6 score was 49.1. This difference was significant at $F(1, 245) = 46.886$, $p \leq .0001$. Reading/spelling ability scores were not significantly different. Coupled with these differences between fourth- and sixth-grade samples evidenced on the PASS, it is important to note that, on the whole, for the state tests and for the standardized subtests, cross-sectional student performance diminished significantly from fourth to sixth grade.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, which attempted to establish student performance on the PASS, the Grade 4 students expressed satisfaction with school but did not

Table 3. One-Way Analysis of Variance Comparing Grade 4 and Grade 6 Perception of Abilities Scale in Students Mean *t* Scores

	$F(1, 245)$	p
General abilities	47.564	$\leq .0001$
Confidence	11.630	.001
School satisfaction	46.886	$\leq .0001$

perceive themselves as successful in school tasks. Fourth-grade students were more likely to be satisfied than confident and more likely to be satisfied than perceiving of themselves as able. However, for Grade 6, school satisfaction decreased markedly. Half of all sixth-grade students reported school satisfaction that was lower than the normative mean. The sixth-grade students sampled revealed some of the traits that can be associated with school disengagement (Borman et al., 1998).

Fourth-grade students did not perceive themselves as having strong school competencies but their satisfaction with school was notable. For sixth-grade students, self-perceptions of abilities were greater but confidence and school satisfaction were lesser. Boersma and Chapman (1992) noted that low school satisfaction scores suggest a negative response to school tasks, especially those involving verbal skills and interactions. Confidence has to do with how individuals appraise the limits of their abilities in order to arrive at a sense of the level of success that can reasonably be accomplished. Confident learners will have positive expectations within reasonable limits and will sustain the academic task motivation that is necessary for success. Learners who lack confidence may have negative perceptions of their own abilities that translate into low expectations and little investment of time and effort in academic tasks (Boersma & Chapman). Diminished school satisfaction and school self-confidence are both cause for concern.

Considering that overall findings showed that sixth-grade students' skills on standardized measures were, in many cases, farther from expectations than fourth-grade students' were, it is troubling that the sixth-grade students believed themselves to be in possession of stronger school abilities. It is conceivable that a sixth-grade student who thinks he or she is doing well even though he or she is not achieving up to standards might not put forth his or her best effort—the student may be of the belief that his or her efforts are sufficiently successful. Conversely, a fourth-grade student who thinks he or she is not able, although he or she may well be, might also stop putting forth effort and enter into a condition of inertia and learned helplessness (Skinner, 1948), under the mistaken notion that his efforts will not result in gains.

The second research question examined the degree to which PASS scores correlated with one another, with state reading and writing achievement test scores, and with standardized measures of oral and written language and reading. It is important to note that sixth-grade students' self-perceptions of greater or lesser ability correlated with their greater or lesser achievement test performance. Fourth-grade students who perceived their abilities as stronger evidenced better vocabularies. Several subtests correlated with confidence. Fourth- and sixth-grade students who prepared better writing samples reported greater school confidence. Therefore, self-perceptions of ability and confidence bore a consistent relation with capabilities that were assessed.

There are possible reasons why inadequate test performance might correlate with self-perceptions of lesser ability and low confidence. Students who perceive themselves as having inadequate abilities may not invest patience and perseverance when difficulties are encountered and may not score up to their potential on testing. Achievement is unlikely to ensue when effort is not expended. Therefore, achievement is related to not only the cognitive and linguistic abilities that promote it but also to students' perceptions of their abilities. Feelings of lack of confidence and disengagement might coincide with unfavorable achievement test results (Paris et al., 2000). Students who believe that they are not able to perform certain school tasks and who expect to fail may be less likely to apply themselves to task-related strategies.

School satisfaction correlated with abilities measures for fourth-grade students. For sixth-grade students, school satisfaction was low and did not correlate with self-perceptions of ability.

Considering the third research question, there were significant differences between the fourth- and sixth-grade samples' perceptions of their abilities and confidence, with both scores being lower among sixth-grade students. School satisfaction was significantly higher for sixth-grade students. It is notable that state test and standardized subtest performance was significantly lower for the sixth grade than for the fourth grade.

Although this is a cross-sectional study and it is not defensible to assume that any kind of progression or trend from Grade 4 to Grade 6 can be observed, it is worrisome that sixth-grade students scored less well in academics and abilities and saw themselves as less able and less confident but more satisfied. The possibility exists of a progression from grades four to six toward mediocrity, complacency, and low achievement motivation (Benenson & Dweck 1986; Moely, 1995; Urdan & Davis, 1998). It is troubling to speculate that the Grade 6 students might not have expended sufficient effort to perform well on the tests. On the other hand, this apprehension may be entirely unwarranted in that it is possible to speculate on several other reasons why the differences between grades might have occurred: (a) the participants were entirely different as individuals; (b) perhaps, as a group, Grade 6 students presented with language capabilities that did not sustain the ability to perform well, as the larger study (Gordon Pershey, 2003, 2008) suggested; (c) the two forms of the state-mandated tests used in each of the grades could have been dissimilar in difficulty, with the sixth-grade test presenting inordinate difficulty or the fourth-grade test being less demanding; (d) the Grade 6 participants may not have been prepared by the curriculum and instruction offered in the fifth and sixth grades to take the sixth-grade test; (e) the normed and criterion-referenced instruments used may have been unrepresentative of the capabilities of these students (Kranzler & Miller, 1999; Washington, 1996). Nevertheless, regardless of the applicability of these reasons, tests usually seek to establish

that age and ability are covarying gradients. It is presumed that older students have greater knowledge and skills; as age increases, so does performance (Bond, 1995). It is notable that mean achievement was not greater given an increase in the age of the participants, and, as would be expected with age, additional school experience, more experience producing written language, and more familiarity with test taking. The significantly poorer performance of the sixth-grade sample highlighted the problem that group performance did not improve along the age gradient. Students continued to be at risk, perhaps even at heightened risk, for diminished test performance and possible school failure.

A limitation of the present study is that no information was gathered on why students might have been satisfied with school or confident. Information on potentially relevant factors, such as school climate, atmosphere, or morale, was not obtained. Nor were results separated for male and female students. It is notable that a decline in girls' self-confidence between the ages of 9 and 15 years has been documented (Orenstein, 1994) and may have contributed to this study's findings.

Conclusion

This study found that students in a challenged district who were at risk for inadequate test performance affirmed some self-perceptions of school competence, but potential issues of school engagement were evident. Questions remain, including, could diminished self-perceptions of school competence be related to attending challenged schools? Would these students' self-perceptions have been different if they had attended higher performing schools? Would their perceptions differ if they were not being educated in a test-driven environment? Would their perceptions differ if their district had not been given the widely publicized label of being in an "academic emergency?"

High-stakes, summative tests do not identify the academic supports that students at risk would need to receive to enhance engagement; indeed, summative assessments of school and district progress seldom identify how individual students can be helped to perform better on curriculum demands and on subsequent testing. By and large, test outcomes do not point to useful guidelines for how to design ensuing instructional practices relative to future test expectations (American Educational Research Association, 2000; Hoffman, Paris, Patterson, Salas, & Assaf, 2003; Kohn, 2000).

Students who are at risk for test failure may need to experience a variety of academic and extra-curricular successes to provide a basis for self-perceptions of school competence. For example, students may develop more steadfast self-perceptions of school competence if they perceive school as a place where self-affirming learning occurs (Flowerday & Schraw, 2003; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994), rather than as a place where work is done in order to please or appease a teacher. Also, self-perceptions of school competence could be enhanced when educators' feedback to students is seen as reinforcing of their efforts, when academic success is frequently attained, and where the social climate between teachers and students is comfortable (Baker, 1999; McCabe, 2003; Warren, 2002). Teachers can help students develop constructive causal attributions—positive expectations and beliefs about what causes success or failure. Educators need to guide students toward mature, accurate, careful self-monitoring and self-evaluation of their abilities and accomplishments.

Given the importance of assessing and promoting students' self-perceptions of school competence, the next step would be to encourage students to develop the kinds of self-perceptions that would help them progress academically. A variety of evidence-based resources are available to school personnel who are interested in effective practices for fostering positive school climate, building students' self-esteem, and increasing motivation for students. These resources address a variety of strategies, for example the following:

- *Enhancing school climate.* The Center for Social and Emotional Education (2009) provides information on measuring and researching school climate and offers a five stage model for school climate improvement. This model suggests that schools identify measures for engaging students in learning and school activities, addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and reengaging those who have become disengaged. Engagement encompasses developing and sustaining the students' social, emotional, civic, and intellectual capacities, as well as fostering an environment where students are welcomed, supported, and feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe.
- *Goal setting*. Students can be encouraged to set attainable learning goals (Ames & Archer, 1988) that, when met, can build their self-perceptions of accomplishment. Attaining goals demonstrates to students their own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and may minimize the sense of inertia and learned helplessness that might have been present in this study's participants.
- *Causal attributions*. Students can be guided to explore the factors that they perceive lead to school success (e.g., luck, effort) and can conduct an objective assessment of factors that generally do lead to success. Identifying these factors can help motivate students toward setting goals (Ames & Archer, 1988).
- *Persistence.* Zimmerman (1997) noted that students who perceive themselves as efficacious are more likely to be persistent in academic tasks. Again, regarding the participants in the present study, the risk for lack of persistent engagement in school would appear to stem from lesser self-perceptions of school competence. Encouraging academic persistence might be among the

most important interventions for school personnel to use.

- *Transitions*. Students may experience changes in their self-perceptions of school competence when they change grade levels, adjust to new teachers, encounter new academic subject matter, and experience the many other changes that schooling brings. It may be simplistic to view data collected at one administration, as the PASS data are, as representative. Repeated measures of students' self-perceptions across contexts may be a more comprehensive form of assessment (Margerison, 2001).
- *Parent involvement*. Connell, Spencer, and Aber (1994) suggested that greater school engagement was derived from motivation and a positive sense of self, and that these characteristics were related to parent involvement in their children's education.

There is a need for designing and validating research tools that can reveal students' self-perceptions of school competence. Further research on the strength of the PASS as a measurement of self-perceptions of school competence may be useful. It might be worthwhile to present a sample of students with the PASS and a variety of other measures to determine what the different forms of testing may reveal. Examples of other instruments can be found in Ames and Archer (1988), Connell et al. (1994), and Harter and Whitesell (2001).

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