

What Works Clearinghouse



February 2010

WWC Quick Review of the Article “Recursive Processes in Self-Affirmation: Intervening to Close the Minority Achievement Gap”[†]

What is this study about?

This study examined whether having African-American middle school students write essays affirming their personal values improved their academic performance.

The study analyzed data on about 175 African-American and 190 European-American students (the study’s term for white students who are non-Latino and non-Asian) at a suburban middle school who were randomly assigned to intervention and comparison groups at the beginning of seventh grade.

The study measured effects by comparing the seventh- and eighth-grade GPAs of students in the intervention and comparison groups. These GPAs included grades from the four core academic subjects: science, social studies, math, and English.

The study examined effects separately for European-American and African-American students and for low- and high-achieving students.

WWC Rating

The research described in this article is consistent with WWC evidence standards

Strengths: This study was a well-implemented randomized controlled trial.

What groups of students were contrasted?

Seventh graders were placed at random into intervention and comparison groups near the start of the school year.

Both groups were given structured writing assignments three to five times during their seventh- and eighth-grade years.

The intervention group wrote about their personal values (e.g., relationships with friends and family, religious values) and why these were important to them.

The comparison group wrote about neutral subjects, such as their daily routine, or why values they considered unimportant might be important to others.

What did the study authors report?

Among African-American students, completing writing exercises about their values increased their average seventh- and eighth-grade GPA by a quarter of a letter grade (0.24 points), a change that was statistically significant. The intervention did not have a statistically significant effect on the academic outcomes of European-American students.

Among low-achieving African-American students, the effect was somewhat larger, an increase in average seventh- and eighth-grade GPA of 0.41 points. In addition, the intervention reduced the likelihood that low-achieving African-American students were assigned to a remedial program or were retained in grade.

[†]Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, 324(5925), 400–403.