

Relationship Between Academic Self-Concept and School Disengagement among Primary School Pupils in Liberia

Isaac Gbadeh Jolokleh, Edwin B. Arzoaquoi

Department Of Secondary Education, College of Education, University of Liberia

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.910000549>

Received: 26 October 2025; Accepted: 01 November 2025; Published: 18 November 2025

ABSTRACT

In the psychological literature, there has been a lot of discussion on elementary school pupils who are disengaged at school. The student's perception of his or her academic ability is key at the primary school level. This study aimed at establishing a relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement among primary schools pupils in Liberia. Correlational design was used in the study. A simple random sampling technique was used to select the sample, which included 246 pupils from five primary schools in Liberia. A modified version of the Academic Self-concept Scale (ASCS) was used as a tool to measure students' perceptions of their own academic abilities. The information was gathered, put into an analytical format, and significance tests were run using the Statistical Software for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. The gathered information was analysed and given a personality using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study found a significant but positive correlation ($r = .174$, $p = .01$) between academic self-concept and school disengagement. The study may be important to educational authorities and school counselors who might use the findings to create supportive programmes which stimulate the academic abilities of the students and improve academic outcomes. The study might also support students in creating a positive academic self-concept that will motivate them to stay in school, thus avoiding school disengagement.

Keywords: Academic self-concept, school disengagement, grade five pupils.

INTRODUCTION

Growing student engagement is a method for fostering positive academic outcomes and reducing negative behaviors. Adolescents' active participation in school enhances the essential skills, competencies, and values for academic success and facilitates their successful maturation. In contrast, disengagement is associated with negative outcomes, including increased problem behaviors, delinquency, and substance abuse. It is crucial to reiterate that indicators of school disengagement can be identified as early as the first grade (Alexander et al., 2001). In the elementary grades, apathy toward school and eventual abandonment rates have become evident. Absenteeism, subpar behavior, and low socioeconomic status have been identified as reoccurring themes (Dembo et al., 2007).

Disengagement from classroom learning is associated with threats to perceptions of competence, self-determination, and/or relatedness to others who are valued (Howard & Taylor, 2017). They also mentioned that threats could emanate from students, instructors, and other school personnel. It is reasonable to anticipate that psychological school disengagement will lead to internalized behavior, such as tedium or emotional distress, or externalized activity, such as misbehaviour and dropping out.

The disengagement of students increases as they advance through school, with declines being especially severe for low-income African-American, American, and Latino youth attending urban institutions (Benner & Graham, 2009; Wigfield et al., 2015). According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 132 million of the 259 million adolescents worldwide who fell out of school in 2020 were males. Thirty to forty percent of primary school-aged pupils in Mali, Niger, and Senegal are academically disengaged. In addition, the United Nations Institute of Statistics reported that, despite recent improvements in girls' education, the rate of female school abandonment increased in approximately 80 countries worldwide. Many of these nations experienced armed conflict and

political unrest. In comparison to the global average, none of these nations has as many school-aged children, and several have substantially more females than males who have disengaged school (UIS, 2021).

Liberia, which was embroiled in armed conflict from 1989 to 2003, is not granted an exemption. In addition, the Ebola virus disease (EVD) pandemic, which originated in Liberia in 2014 and spread to Sierra Leone and Guinea, increased the rate of student disengagement at the elementary school. The pandemic of the virus necessitated the closure of education systems in these nations, wreaking havoc on children's lives, families, and communities (Sperling et al., 2016). According to the World Education Network (WEN, 2019), forty-six percent of Liberian students are enrolled in elementary school. The total enrolment percentage for elementary schools quantifies the number of students enrolled in elementary schools. A little more than one-third of preschool-aged children have access to early childhood education programmes (USAID, 2021). Sixty-seven percent of households that responded to questions about out-of-school children reported that some of their children had disengaged school (UIS-UNICEF, 2021).

Diehl (2022) noted that low academic achievement and school disengagement have significant societal repercussions. Fifty-nine percent of incarcerated individuals and the majority of those with low socioeconomic status did not complete high school. Also, he indicated that many marginalized groups' perpetual poverty, adolescent pregnancy, and early marriages are a result of school disengagement. Sperling et al. (2016) reported that low-achieving students and early school dropouts may have negative economic consequences.

As a result, few programmes addressed the issue of school disengagement comprehensively, particularly among males. The vast majority of policies are implemented in prosperous nations. Almost no country with low or middle incomes has implemented programmes to encourage male enrolment and graduation from primary and secondary schools. Only a handful of initiatives addressed the issue of student disengagement (UNESCO, 2019).

In many countries, over the last 15 years or so, prominent donor organizations have admitted for the first time that more boys and fewer girls are falling behind in school and eventually dropping out (Ridge et al., 2017). They noted that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of countries with high incomes implemented effective learning strategies and programmes to combat the problem of pupils disengaging school. In an effort to reduce male school dropout rates, a number of initiatives and programmes have been implemented across the Caribbean. Despite accumulating evidence of students' academic underachievement, there appears to be no political will to address their lack of school interest (Ridge et al., 2017).

Considering the surge of school disengagement among primary schoolers, Liberia's government approved legislation in 2001 which made public primary schools free and compulsory for every school going age child in the country. After a decade, the government amended the education law to make elementary and secondary school free for all children (Education Reform Act, 2011). Despite all the measures, low enrolment and dropout rates remain a challenge for the country's education sector (Waydon et al., 2016).

Several factors may contribute to school disengagement, but some research indicate that dropouts have typically undergone a process of disengagement. Guo et al. (2022) examined key contributors to school disengagement and found that a negative academic self-concept is a catalyst for it. The term academic self-concept refers to the belief that one has the capacity to study. Subject-specific variations and prior academic success are both factors. Students with a positive self-concept of their capacities believe they are capable of academic success. The research that is available strongly supports the relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement. In challenging tasks, students with a high self-concept perform better than those with a low self-concept, whereas students with a low self-concept perform poorly and may drop out of school as a consequence (Guo et al., 2022). Learners with a positive self-concept are more likely to employ techniques, which leads to greater accomplishments. They asserted that a student's self-concept has a substantial effect on their learning outcomes.

Importantly, contextual factors such as family background, school climate, and academic performance influence both self-concept and engagement. Supportive family structures and nurturing school environments foster confidence and belonging, while harsh or unstable contexts can diminish academic motivation. These variables must therefore be considered when interpreting relationships between academic self-concept and disengagement.

Furthermore, while the present study focused on grade five pupils, their ages ranged from 10 to 22 years. This large age variability reflects Liberia's post-war educational challenges, including late school entry, repetition, and re-enrollment of over-age learners after interruptions caused by conflict and poverty. Clarifying this variability provides a realistic picture of primary schooling in rural Liberian settings.

Thus, it is essential to investigate how primary school students perceive their academic abilities and how this perception relates to their school engagement. The current study could be significant for understanding the academic self-concept of elementary school students and its relationship with school disengagement, as it will enable us to better comprehend Liberian adolescents. The findings might improve students' academic self-concept.

Studies on Academic Self-concept and School Disengagement

Possessing a positive self-concept toward education is a crucial factor for academic success, according to the findings of numerous researchers. Several studies have found a correlation between academic self-concept and school disengagement (House, 2023; Galugu & Samsinar, 2019; DeDonno & Fagan, 2013). The direction of the correlation between academic self-concept and school disengagement has also been investigated. According to psychological literature, there are a variety of perspectives regarding the relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement. Studies have indicated that a student's academic self-concept affects their level of school engagement.

Academic self-concept is a significant factor in both academic success and school disengagement (Marsh et al., 2005; Green et al., 2006; Valentine et al., 2004). However, Jen and Chien (2008) argued that academic accomplishment has a direct effect on an individual's academic self-concept. They argued that academic self-concept does not affect academic achievement, but past performance influences how it develops. Also, Liu (2009) noted that students with lower academic achievement would eventually develop a negative academic self-concept and lack of confidence, which would result in a less positive academic self-concept. Moreover, a low academic self-concept will decrease learning motivation and interest, leading to poor academic performance and subsequent school disengagement. Also, studies have found a positive correlation between academic achievement and academic self-concept. There is evidence, however, that the relationship between academic self-concept and academic performance is negative or statistically insignificant (Areepattamannil & Freeman, 2008).

The literature review revealed that the relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement has been studied extensively outside of Liberia. This research is also necessary in the context of Liberia. In light of these empirical pieces of evidence and justifications, the researchers sought to determine the correlation between academic self-concept and school disengagement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method: Correlational research design was used in this quantitative study to help it reach its objective.

Participants: Sample for the current study was drawn from five public primary schools in Fuamah District, Bong County, Liberia. Only grade five pupils were selected as participants of the study. Participants were 115 males and 131 female pupils, who were ranged in age from 10 to 22 years. The sample was obtained through simple random sampling. The schools were proportionately selected from all the public primary schools in Fuamah District, Bong County.

Instrument: The Academic Self-concept Scale created by Liu and Wang (2005) was modified to assess the academic self-concept of the study population. In Fuamah, Bong County, 40 grade five pupils (boys and girls) participated in the pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.72 against .70 were used to determine the reliability. Peer reviews and experts in educational psychology confirmed the validity of the content. The questionnaire had 10 items, on which scores were based. The responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale, with a value ranging from 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree) for the positive and negative topics,

respectively. A high score on this questionnaire reveals a positive self-concept, whilst a low score reveals a negative self-concept.

Procedures: Each of the schools selected was visited to start gathering data. To begin with, the researcher made contact with the principals and explained the goal of the study to them. The researcher proceeded to the appropriate class and made sure that pupils were seated properly after getting the principal's approval. The researchers requested that the parents of the participants sign consent forms on their behalf due to the age of the pupils. After being directed to five classrooms and informed of the objective of the study, the pupils who were sampled were let in. During the normally scheduled class periods, the instrument was presented. The researchers told the pupils about the objective of the data collection, then he gave a tutorial on how to record responses. Once it was confirmed that they were certain and had no doubts, students were instructed to complete the Academic Self-Concept Scale questionnaire, which was attached to the demographic information sheet. The researcher occasionally explained if the pupils could ask any questions. The questionnaires took 30 to 45 minutes to complete. The researchers collected the questionnaires that had been completed and thanked the participants.

RESULTS

This section discusses the findings in light of the objective of the study. Before correlation analysis and hypothesis testing were applied to the collected data, descriptive analysis was performed on the scores for academic self-concept and school disengagement. Bivariate product moment correlation (r) was calculated using IBM SPSS 25 to compare means and determine relationships between variables.

Relationship between Academic Self-concept and School Disengagement

The bivariate correlation coefficient was employed and measured at the .01 level of significance to determine the relationship between primary pupils' academic self-concept and school disengagement. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Ha: There is significant relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement.

Table 1 Relationship between Academic Self-concept and School Disengagement

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Academic Self-Concept	2.15	1.463	246
School Disengagement	2.50	1.543	246

Table 2. Pearson Correlation of Academic Self-concept and School Disengagement

Academic Self-concept	Pearson Correlation		.174**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.006
	N	246	246
School Disengagement	Pearson Correlation	.174**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	
	N	246	246
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

In Table 2, the results revealed a correlation between student academic self-concept and school disengagement ($r = .174^{**}$, $p = .01$). Since there was no statistically significant difference between the two means (2.15 and 2.50) and because the p value was less than .05, the results of the current study rejected the null hypothesis. The study found a significant relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement.

DISCUSSIONS OF RESULTS

The findings that academic self-concept and school disengagement are closely related lend credence to some of the reviewed literature. The correlation between academic self-concept and school disengagement is consistent across samples of secondary school students, college students, and university students. Guo et al.'s (2022) findings provide support for the hypothesis that academic self-concept and school disengagement are related. Academic self-concept directly predicted academic performance, school disengagement, and general abilities, according to their findings. They asserted that students with a positive self-concept use more methods, such as communication and public speaking skills, resulting in improved performance. Self-concept is a trait that has a significant effect on how well students learn and interact with instructors.

House (2023) achieved the most recent and equivalent results. Academic self-concept and general academic aptitude were found to be significant predictors of school disengagement for both male and female college students in a longitudinal study of American university students. Earlier studies discovered a correlation between a number of academic self-concept characteristics and school disengagement, with a stronger association among male students. Low academic self-concept was found to be a predictor of student withdrawal and school disengagement in this study. The study's findings corroborate those of previous research involving secondary school pupil samples.

Roberts and Fall (2011) examined the Education Longitudinal Survey data from 2002-2004. In order to examine the relationship between academic self-concept, academic achievement, and school disengagement, a sample of secondary school students from the United States was chosen. They asserted that students' perceptions of their social context—their instructors' and families' support—predicted their sense of self. Also, their control beliefs and school affiliation predicted their academic success. The study also discovered a correlation between grade10 students' academic success and behavior and their likelihood of dropping out of school in grade12.

This study confirms the findings of Bodkin-Andrews et al., (2013), whose objective was to determine if there was a significant relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement. The longitudinal study's sample consisted of a total of 1,376 students from five secondary institutions in New Australia. The research revealed a correlation between academic self-concept and disengagement. Based on these results, it appears that enhancing academic self-concept may be a viable strategy for addressing patterns of school disengagement among Australian adolescents.

However, there have been contradictory findings regarding the relationship between academic self-concept and school disengagement. Amoah et al. (2021) investigated the scholastic achievement and academic self-concepts of Ghanaian College of Education students. They produced results that contradicted those of the present study. There was no statistically significant gender difference in the academic self-concept of college students concentrating in education, according to the findings of this study. In addition, the study revealed that students who performed poorly in class did not disengage from school.

Matthew et al. (2019) conducted a study using data from senior secondary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria, to determine the relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement. Similar results were also reported by them. Using one's perception of themselves in the classroom, self-concept was conceptualized. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Fisher's Least Significant Difference t-tests revealed that academic self-concept significantly influenced the academic achievement of students.

In spite of contradictory findings, it is essential to remember that academic self-concept and school disengagement are positively correlated. Students of varying cultures, ethnicities, and academic levels must cultivate a positive academic self-concept in order to improve their academic performance and remain in school.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the current study revealed that there was a correlation between students' academic self-concept and school disengagement at the primary school level. Researchers contend that social comparison, which occurs when students evaluate their own and others' abilities, plays a role in the development of academic self-concept.

School counselors or authorities should construct encouraging programmes that boost children's academic ability in order to nurture the development of high academic self-concept and emotional intelligence skills. Additionally, parents ought to create a welcoming environment that deters students from disengaging school.

REFERENCES

1. Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Kabbani, N. S. (2001). The Dropout Process in Life Course Perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 103, 760-882.
2. Amoah, S., Acheampong, H., Sefah, E., Britwum, F. & Adjei, E., (2021). Academic Self-Concept and Academic Performance of College of Education Students. *Journal of Education and Practice*. 12. 34-40. 10.7176/JEP/12-24-06.
3. Areepattamannil, S., & Freeman, J.G. (2008). Academic achievement, academic self-concept, and academic motivation of immigrant adolescents in the Greater Toronto Area Secondary Schools. *Journal of Advanced Academics*, 19(4), 700-743.
4. Benner, A. D., & Graham, S. (2009). The transition to high school as a developmental process among multi-ethnic urban youth. *Child Development*, 80, 356-376.
5. Bodkin-Andrews, G.H., Denson, N., & Bansel, P. (2013). Teacher Racism, Academic Self-Concept, and Multi-culturation: Investigating Adaptive and Maladaptive Relations with Academic Disengagement and Self-Sabotage for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Australian Students. *Australian Psychologist*, 48(3), 226-237. 10.1111/j.1742-9544.2012.00069.x
6. Cokley, K. (2000). An investigation of academic self-concept and its relationship to Academic achievement in African American college students. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 26, 148.
7. DeDonno, M.A., & Fagan, J.F. (2013). The Influence of Family Attributes on College Students' Academic Self-concept. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 15 (1), 49-62.
8. Dembo, R., Wareham, J., Poythress, N., Meyers, K., Cook, B., & Schmeidler, J. (2007). Continuities in problem behavior among high risk youths. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Substance Abuse*, 16(4), 91-118.
9. Diehl, D. (2022). The Effects of Educational Disengagement. *PACEs Connection*.
10. Education Law of Liberia (2011). Education Reform Act of 2011 (Title 10, Liberian Code of Laws Revised). Liberia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
11. Galugu, N., & Samsinar, S. (2019). Academic self-concept, teacher's supports and student's engagement in the school. *Guidance and Counseling Study Programmes*.
12. Green, J., Nelson, G., Martin, A.J., & Marsh, H. (2006). The causal ordering of self-concept and academic motivation and its effect on academic achievement. *International Education Journal*, 7(4), 534-546.
13. Guo, J., Yang, L., Zhang, J., & Gan, Y. (2022). Academic self-concept, perceptions of the learning environment, engagement, and learning outcomes of university students: relationships and causal ordering. *High Education*.
14. House, D. J. (2023). The Relationship between academic self-concept and school withdrawal. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 133:1, 125-127 [10.1080/00224545.1993.9712129](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1993.9712129)
15. Howard, A. & Taylor, L. (2017). School engagement, disengagement, learning supports, & school climate. *Centre for Mental Health in Schools*.
16. Jen, T.H., & Chien, C.C. (2008). The Influence of the academic self-concept on academic achievement: from a perspective of learning motivation. *Conference Proceedings of IRC*.
17. Liu, H. (2009). Exploring changes in academic self-concept in ability grouped English classes. *Chang gung. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(2), 411-432.
18. Liu, W. C., & Wang, C. K. J. (2005). Academic Self-Concept: A Cross-Sectional Study of Grade and Gender Differences in a Singapore Secondary School. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 6(1), 20-27.
19. Marsh, W. H., Trautwein, U., Ludtke, O., Koller, O., & Baumert, J. (2005). Academic self-concept, interest, grades, and standardized test scores: Reciprocal effects models of causal ordering. *Child Development*, 76 (2), 397f.
20. Mathew, G., Iyagba, N., Wokoma, P., & Wokoma, I. (2019). Influence of Academic Self-Concept on Academic Performance among Senior Secondary Schools Students in Rivers State, Nigeria. 3. 47-68. 357403189

21. Ridge, N., Kippels, S. & Chung, B. J. (2017). The challenges and implications of a global decline in the educational attainment and retention of boys. Qatar, World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE).
22. Roberts, C., & Fall, A. (2011). High School Dropouts: Interactions between social context, self-perceptions, school engagement, and student dropout. *Journal of Adolescence* 35(4): PubMed. [10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.11.004)
23. Sperling, G.B., Winthrop, R. & Kwauk, C. (2016). What works in girls' education: Evidence for the world's best investment. Brookings Institution Press.
24. UIS-UNICEF (2021). Global monitoring Report. United Nations Children Funds.
25. UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2021). Global monitoring Report. UNESCO.
26. UNESCO (2019). Global monitoring Report. UNESCO.
27. USAID (2022). UNICEF / Liberia Education Report.
28. Valentine, J. C., DuBois, D. L., & Cooper, H. (2004). The relations between self-beliefs and academic achievement: A systematic review. *Educational Psychologist*, 39, 111-133.
29. Waydon, E. B., Ying, L. & Ketter, B. L. (2016). Free and compulsory primary education policy in Liberia: Gap Between Promise And Actual Performance. 5(1).
30. Wigfield A., Eccles J., Fredricks J., Simpkins S., Roeser R., Schiefele U. (2015). Development of achievement motivation and engagement. In Lerner R. (Series Ed.) & Garcia Coll C., Lamb M. (Volume Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology*, 7th Ed. Vol. 3, Social, and emotional development. 657-699.
31. World Education Network, WEN (2019). Ministry of Planning and Economics, Liberia.