My name is Martinque Jones and I’m a fourth-year psychology student here at The University of Texas.

My research project is focusing on the academic achievement of African American high school students, and so I’m looking specifically at how cultural identity and academic attitudes impact the academic achievement of these African American high school students. I found that, as academic self-concept increases (which is how one feels about their academic abilities), their academic achievement increases, and as devaluing academic success increases (and devaluing academic success is how one disidentifies with school, basically), then their academic achievement decreases.

I really love this quote from The Schooling of Black Americans; it’s by Dr. Claude Steele, and he gives this example about a student named Jerome. And so Jerome was this third grade African American student and he presents his artwork to a teacher. And this is not any, just any regular artwork — this is like the beginnings of, like, really — a really good artist, and it just outshines his peers. Yet, his teacher overlooks it. And so, something as simple as that — having really good work just overlooked just because of the fact that the student is African American — that really hurts a student for the rest of their academic career.

Even in really looking back at my experience in high school, just having someone tell you “oh, for an African American student, you sure are very articulate” — that’s supposed to be a compliment, but to me that sounds like, well what are you really trying to say? Are you trying to say all African American people can’t speak well or I’m special because I can speak well? I really don’t know how to take this comment, and it just kind of goes back to my family going back and telling me “you’re a good student, no matter what kind of comments come out of people’s mouth.”

And I think I’ve succeeded because I had a particularly supportive family that told me that “you need to do this no matter what” and they valued education a lot and they really pushed me to succeed. And I think that for other African American students, it may be an issue of maybe they don’t have that supportive family and, in conjunction with that, if the information is not culturally relevant and not something that they can relate to, then there’s no incentive to become educated. I think that a lot of African American students don’t understand the power of education and how it allows for social mobility in really achieving one’s goals.

Just having a teacher in your environment, a teacher that lives down the street from you or a teacher that you can see in the grocery store, as opposed to having someone that’s so disconnected from the community come and teach you — I think that students value those things. And I think for African American students more so, it’s so important to have teachers that understand what’s going on. I think within the educational system, if they actually took the time to actually teach African American history in its depth, beyond Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King, and actually went back to the Kemet communities, and looking at African history, I think that would also empower African American students to really be engaged in learning environments.

Education has been really important to me, because it’s given me a way to really value myself and a lot of things — negative things — are perpetuated in the media, and so, in looking at African American women, it’s often (more so than not) about valuing your body, and like, if you look good, then you can value yourself. If you have a lot of men you can value yourself. And I never found myself really falling into
that, so I found another way to value myself, and it was by getting good grades and performing well in school.

And as I progress as an academic, in looking at the issues surrounding African American students and African American communities, I think this optimism is ever so important, because so many of the situations are so dismal. As we talked about just a minute ago, there's no way that I can solve this problem, and it would be really easy for me to be pessimistic and say "well crap, I'll never answer this so let me just go do something else." And I have faith that within the next 10 or 20 years, that I may be able to provide a small solution to the issue.