

CULTURALLY DIVERSE HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

THOMAS P. HÉBERT
University of Georgia

SALLY M. REIS
University of Connecticut

Many high ability students from culturally diverse populations exist in large economically deprived urban environments and they are often included in the statistical reports of high school dropouts. A 3-year investigation of the culture of high-ability, high-achieving students in an urban high school was undertaken by researchers from the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. Through ethnographic interviews and case study methods, descriptions emerged of culturally diverse teenagers who achieved in an urban high school. Specific factors that enabled these students to succeed included: the development of a belief in self, supportive adults, interaction with a network of high-achieving peers, extracurricular activities, challenging classes such as honors classes, personal characteristics such as motivation and resilience, and family support. The findings of the study offer educators useful suggestions and strategies for addressing the academic needs of talented youth in an urban setting.

People need to know that there are gifted children here. People who live in the inner city, in the barrio, or on the reservation need to know that their children are gifted. There's too much raw ability going through the cracks. If a child we might lose had the ability to cure

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cancer but ends up joining a gang or dealing dope, that's a double loss to the country.

—Joyce Oatman (as cited in Ryan, 1991, p. 15)

This compelling statement was expressed by a dedicated urban educator of Tilman High School in Chicago. To address these concerns and the limited existing research on high-achieving urban students, a 3-year qualitative research study was conducted to investigate the experiences of 35 achieving and underachieving high-ability urban high school students (Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). In this article, the experiences of the 18 students identified as high-ability achievers in this larger study are discussed. The academic experiences of culturally diverse, high-achieving youth in high schools in urban areas have not been the focus of a large body of research. Through ethnographic fieldwork, this study investigated the experiences and success strategies of high-ability students who achieve.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

High-ability students from culturally diverse populations have existed in urban areas for generations, yet many do not achieve in school. In 1977, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm introduced legislation to include funding for gifted and talented minority children (Davis & Rimm, 1989). In a keynote address before a national forum of educators, Chisholm (1978) pointed out the failure of the nation's educational system to nurture the talents of gifted minority youngsters, faulting American education for inadequate methods of recognizing talent among culturally different students. Absence of data on appropriate educational planning techniques has been noted as one of the reasons for this failure (Baldwin, 1987). Variables such as poverty, social factors, and a relative perception of powerlessness should also be considered by educators in locating the hidden talents of minority students (Baldwin, 1987; Frasier, 1989).

A thorough review of the literature on achievement and underachievement of high-ability students conducted for this study (Reis et al., 1995) showed that it generally focuses on high-ability

underachievers who typically come from upper-middle-class families. The research devoted to high-ability, culturally diverse students in urban environments is limited. Ford and Harris (1990) examined the relevant literature on minority gifted children, particularly African Americans, and discovered that of 4,109 published articles on high-ability youth since 1924, less than 2% addressed children of color. These numbers are disheartening because less information means less understanding of the academic achievement needs of culturally diverse students in urban high schools.

Some social scientists have attributed the underachievement of culturally diverse gifted students to differences in culture and language; minority students, they have argued, are “culturally deprived” or “disadvantaged” compared with White middle-class students. Although the term *cultural deprivation* is rarely used now because of its negative connotation, the theory, unfortunately, is still cited by some educators and policy makers (Hill, 1990).

Educators and researchers have agreed on some findings regarding common barriers to the achievement of high-ability, culturally diverse youth. These obstacles include: the use of definitions of giftedness that reflect middle-class majority culture, values, and perceptions (Frasier & Passow, 1994); the use of standardized tests that do not reflect the exceptional abilities of children of color (Ford, 1994; Ford & Harris, 1990; Frasier & Passow, 1994; Kitano & Kirby, 1986); and low socioeconomic status causing differences in environmental opportunities that enhance intellectual achievement (Ford, 1996; Ford & Harris, 1990; Frasier, Hunsaker, Lee, Finley, et al., 1995; Frasier, Hunsaker, Lee, Mitchell, et al., 1995).

Other social scientists have attempted to explain the school failure and underachievement of culturally diverse students by examining social, psychological, family, and community factors as well as educational programmatic factors and have provided multiple theories of explanations regarding why students do not achieve academically (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Trueba, 1988). Crocker (1987) maintained that the influence of social factors on underachievement has been underestimated and suggested that underachievement among minority students may be due to social forces such as

discrimination, prejudice, and low socioeconomic status. Ford (1992) examined determinants of underachievement in high-ability African American students, and her findings suggest that psychological factors play the greatest role in underachievement.

One theory that may explain the underachievement of high-ability urban youth has been offered by John Ogbu (1974, 1985, 1987, 1991). Ogbu, one of the first social scientists to challenge the cultural deprivation theory mentioned earlier, argued that a critically important difference exists between immigrant minorities, people who have moved to the United States because they seek a better life, and nonimmigrant, or *castelike* minorities, people whose status in American society is a result of slavery, conquest, or colonization. According to Ogbu, immigrant minorities such as Southeast Asians, Chinese, or Filipinos, for example, may face insurmountable barriers once they arrive but tend to see those barriers as temporary. However, castelike minorities, such as African Americans and Mexican Americans, not only experience discrimination from the dominant White culture but also get caught in a web of inferiority and self-defeat that discourages them from living up to their potential. Castelike minorities do not regard their situation as temporary, as they tend to interpret the discrimination against them as more or less permanent and institutionalized. According to Ogbu's theory (1987), immigrants believe that education holds golden opportunity for advancement, whereas African Americans and other castelike minorities do not trust the American educational system to educate African American children in the same way that it educates White children. Ogbu believed that the mistrust stems from the exclusion of African Americans from the high-quality education received by Whites and that this exclusion has hampered the academic performance of African American children.

Fordham (1988) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) examined the concept of *racelessness* as a factor in the academic achievement of African American students in a high school in Washington, D.C., and found that high-achieving students were more willing to identify with the beliefs and values of the dominant culture than less successful students. Cordeiro and Carspecken (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of 20 successful Hispanic high school students

from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Successful in school, these students were aware that there needed to be a separation between home and school culture, accomplished through reinforcements from school role models outside the family. They associated with other achieving Hispanic students and participated in magnet and honors programs. Cordeiro and Carspecken described an important aspect of the conditions for success as the “success facilitating interpretive scheme,” a cultural framework defining success in terms of the dominant culture and not what students believed was “typically Hispanic” (p. 289).

Other researchers have investigated the powerful impact of parental involvement on the school achievement of a large national sample of eighth-grade students (Keith & Benson, 1992), and on the academic achievement of Mexican American eighth-grade students (Keith & Lichtman, 1992). Other quantitative research has been conducted on the powerful influences of intellectual ability and academic coursework on academic achievement in high school (Keith & Cool, 1992). Causal relationships have also been investigated between self-concept and academic achievement in a large national sample of high school students (Pottebaum, Keith, & Ehly, 1986) and although a causal relationship was not found, an observed relationship seemed to be implied between achievement and other unknown variables. This study addressed these unknown variables.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study described the experiences of high-achieving, academically able students to provide insight about how the high school experience enables some students to achieve academically and not others. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What factors do high-achieving students identify as influencing their academic achievement in an urban high school? and (b) What relationships and support systems shape the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of high-achieving students in an urban environment?

These research questions required the use of qualitative methods, including comparative case studies (Merriam, 1998) and ethnographic research methods. The goal of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native point of view (Spradley, 1979) by investigating the participants' experiences as expressed in their own words. An ethnographic case study is descriptive and instead of attempting to establish a causal relationship, it seeks to produce both rich descriptions and complex explanations. Case studies also emphasize understanding the environment according to the meaning it has for those involved—what they experience and how they interpret their experiences. This methodology requires investigators to understand the relationships between the participants and their interactions with their surroundings.

SITE

Opened in 1974, South Central High School remains one of three high schools in a large metropolitan community in the Northeast, with the most culturally diverse student body in the city. At the time of the study, 60% of the students were Puerto Rican, approximately 20% were African American, and the remaining 10% were a mixture of White, Asian, and other racial and ethnic groups. The majority were from families of low to limited socioeconomic status. The multicultural student body was a transient population with approximately one third of the students transferring in or out of the high school during an academic year. South Central High, a metallic brown, four-story structure, housed 1,656 students and a faculty and staff of 200. With an architectural style of the 1970s, few windows, and no name on the front of the building, passersby might mistake the high school for an industrial plant.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A combination of case study methods, participant observation, and interviews was used to gather data about the perceptions of the students involved in the study. Observations and the systematic

description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the setting (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) were conducted. The students were observed over a 2½-year period by three researchers for a total of 180 days at different times of the day, at school, and in the community. Observation and interview data were collected from social, athletic, and academic settings. During school visits, documentation encompassed students' participation in all of their content classes as well as in a variety of other settings such as athletic events, after-school clubs, and at home with parents and siblings. These observations were guided by an established procedure: to approach the site as one who is new to the setting and to describe the physical and social setting of the site.

In-depth interviewing was conducted with the identified students, teachers, administrators, school counselors, coaches, parents, siblings, community members, and other parties as their importance emerged through other data-gathering techniques. These semistructured interviews were conducted to obtain as much information as possible about the views of the participants themselves with the goal of providing a clear understanding of the experiences of the high-achieving students in an urban high school. Grand tour questions (Spradley, 1979) were asked of all participants to obtain each participant's viewpoint on the research questions guiding the study. For example, a student might have been asked to respond to "Tell me about the extracurricular activities in this high school" as a grand tour question. Grand tour questions were then followed by more specific questions such as, "How has the Engineering Club assisted your academic achievement?" The participants' responses to general questions guided the direction of the interview and consequently led the researchers toward a deeper understanding of each participant's point of view.

Appropriate documents were also obtained from school and/or requested from the participants. Formal documents, such as elementary school gifted program records, as well as informal documents, such as examples of student work, the program from a winter concert, or posters advertising student council political campaigns were collected. A case study database was created, and a chain of evidence was maintained throughout the entire data

gathering and coding period. The database was organized by participant case study and included observations, copies of documents, archival records, protocol responses, and transcripts of interviews.

Data were coded numerically, and the frequency of different events was tabulated. Explanation building, explaining a phenomenon by establishing a set of causal links about it (Yin, 1994), was employed. The field notes, transcribed interviews, and copies of all documents were coded and analyzed according to the coding paradigm described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Three types of coding described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), referred to as *open coding*, *axial coding*, and *selective coding*, were used in this study. The initial type of coding, known as open coding, involved unrestricted coding of all data included in field notes, interviews, cultural artifacts, and other pertinent documents. In open coding, data were analyzed and coded to verify the quality of the emerging theory. As the researchers verified codes and determined relationships among and between a code, a determination was made about the relationship of a code to a category.

After initial categories were determined, axial coding enabled the researchers to specify relationships among the many categories that emerged in open coding and ultimately resulted in the conceptualization of one or more categories selected as the *core*. A core category accounted for most of the variation in a pattern of behaviors; therefore “the generation of theory occurs around a core category” (Strauss, 1987, p. 34). In the final stage of coding, the relationships among categories were examined to determine the saturation of categories in the identification of the core category. In this study, three researchers coded all of the data. Three additional researchers from the staff of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) coded interviews to verify codes. The team of culturally diverse research associates from NRC/GT spent several days examining the selective coding completed once the core categories were determined. This process of verification paralleled the guidelines suggested by Strauss (1987). Participants in the study also had the opportunity to review codes and verify the findings.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the study involve the trustworthiness by which all qualitative research must be evaluated. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posed a series of questions helpful in determining the worth of a study. They ask:

1. How truthful are the particular findings of the study? By what criteria can researchers judge them?
2. How applicable are the findings to another setting or group of people?
3. How can one be reasonably sure that the findings would be replicated if the study were conducted with the same participants in the same context?
4. How can one be sure that the findings are reflective of the subjects and the inquiry itself rather than the product of the researcher's biases or prejudices?

The following techniques, discussed by Marshall and Rossman (1989), were used to establish the trustworthiness of the study: a search for negative instances and alternative explanations, value-free note taking, and the researchers constantly asking questions of the data. In addition, another researcher playing devil's advocate by challenging the authors' analyses was included in the research process.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Eighteen high-ability, high-achieving students participated in the study (see Table 1). All but 1 student came from families considered low socioeconomic status, and half the students lived in subsidized housing and multiple family units. Most participants came from families with two or more children.

For the purpose of this study, a high-ability student was defined as one who had shown above-average potential as measured by a standardized intelligence or achievement test (above the 85th percentile using local norms) during high school or who had demonstrated superior performance in one or more academic areas.

TABLE 1
Study Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Grade</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Test Percentiles</i>	<i>Quality Point Average Class</i>
Female participants					
Alexa	12	Hispanic	Math	94	11.46
			Reading	98	H
Nicki	12	Caucasian	Math	91	11.02
			Reading	95	H
Mary	12	Caucasian	Math	96	11.03
			Reading	94	H
Marisa	12	Caucasian	Math	99	97.16
			Reading	98	H
Jana	12	Hispanic	Math	95	99.16
			Reading	97	H
Rosa	12	Hispanic	Math	90	11.10
			Reading	98	H
Toni	12	African American	Math	78	10.6
			Reading	90	H
Tania	10	African American	Math	93	10.6
			Reading	91	H
Claire	10	African American	Math	92	9.3
			Reading	90	H
Male participants					
Vaughn	12	Caucasian	Math	96	8.8
			Reading	96	H
Carlos	12	Hispanic	Math	88	8.9
			Reading	90	H
Wallace	11	African American	Math	88	6.3
			Reading	88	H
Roberto	11	Caucasian	Math	96	10.9
			Reading	92	H
Lucio	11	Hispanic	Math	99	8.7
			Reading	99	H
Orlando	11	Hispanic	Math	94	11.4
			Reading	85	H
Matteo	11	Caucasian	Math	97	8.8
			Reading	98	H
Alfred	9	African American	Math	99	9.7
			Reading	98	A
Jesse	9	African American	Math	92	9.7
			Reading	96	H

NOTE: A = Academic; H = Honors.

Students qualified for the study as achievers when they met three of the following four criteria: The student (a) had been enrolled in an academically gifted program, (b) was achieving at a superior level academically as evidenced by high grades, (c) had received a teacher/counselor nomination, or (d) had earned academic awards and honors. No gifted program was available at South Central High School, but the majority of these students had been identified and provided service by a gifted program in elementary or middle school.

Two students are described next to illustrate the participants involved in the study.

CLAIRE

Claire, an African American 10th-grade student, was motivated to achieve in academics as well as athletics, despite a childhood marked by divorce and disruption. She was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1978 and lived there until first grade when she moved to the Northeast with her brother Colin, her mother, who was in the process of divorcing her father, and her mother's boyfriend. At the time of this sudden and abrupt move, Claire's mother was pregnant with her half-brother, Terrell. Her mother never married Terrell's father, who left soon after Terrell was born. Although they only saw each other several times a year, Claire remained close to her father and had even considered moving back to North Carolina at some point in the future.

Her mother's perspectives on life had great impact on Claire's "just do it" attitude. Claire's mother had been promoted several times and was currently a library supervisor at a small college. Also a high school graduate, Claire's mother had attended night school and had enrolled in summer school while Claire and her brothers were visiting their father in North Carolina. A benefit of her current job was that she could enroll as a student and attend classes tuition free. Claire believed that her mother's Christian beliefs helped her to set goals and believe in her hopes for future accomplishment. Her mother hoped to graduate from college the same year in which her daughter would graduate from high school.

Claire's reflections on elementary school included her most memorable teacher, Mrs. Scott. Described as a supportive second-grade teacher ("She loved me!") Mrs. Scott would allow Claire to attend special presentations in other classes throughout the school. She remembered interests in anything that had to do with the human body and medicine. During that elementary school year, Claire decided she wanted to be a doctor. Claire believed the popular television program *The Cosby Show* may also have influenced her choice to become a pediatrician. By eighth grade, her goal still had not changed. Despite family financial problems, her mother, realizing the seriousness of Claire's intent, purchased a set of medical encyclopedias. She inscribed them with these words: "To Dr. Claire, Love, Mother."

In seventh and eighth grades, Claire attended a junior high school. She immediately recalled how she was "talked about," the gossip revolving around "an African American person getting all As!" She felt angry but "cooled off and did not fight." Seemingly a nonconfrontational person, Claire again applied her emotions to achieving rather than defending her goals.

In high school, Claire was encouraged by her guidance counselor to gradually enroll in honors courses. This guidance counselor, whom she indicated "adored" her, was disappointed if Claire did not strive. Knowing that she was always academically at the top in her classes, the guidance counselor persuaded Claire to take two honors courses in her freshman year and three as a sophomore. Honors French, geometry, and English provided her with ample stimulation and homework.

She experienced a difficult adjustment from academic to honors courses. Admitting that the "academic courses were easy" and that "they didn't help me much," she found that As were more elusive when she moved up to the honors level, and received Bs for most of the academic year, "finally getting an A toward the end of the year." The amount of homework and studying involved in the honors courses, combined with all of the extracurricular activities, caused Claire to feel "pulled in a lot of different directions." She worried about "burn-out." She felt guilty when she missed an athletic practice and she had missed many due to testing for the Upward Bound

summer program, special projects, and French club responsibilities. "People know me. I'm in everything!" she said. Claire was a sophomore class officer, winner of many awards and athletic letters. She believed that "if you try and fail, that's good. If you don't try and fail, that's stupid!" Claire believed this was especially true for bright females, noting, "girls go dumb when they get to this high school. It must have something to do with boys."

College plans included a prestigious school. Her first choice was Brown, although she planned to apply to other Ivy League schools. Somewhat hesitantly, she added that she would probably apply to Spellman and Howard, traditionally African American universities, because, "I'm not cultural. I've got to learn something about my background." She was applying for scholarships and intended to finance college by working during school. She was determined to pay off all loans within 2 years after graduation.

ROBERTO

Roberto was the all-American teenager. A short, muscular young man with a warm, friendly smile, he wore his brown hair short and, much to the chagrin of his parents, was determined to keep his soft brown mustache. Roberto wore T-shirts and sweat-shirts proclaiming loyalty to the state university's basketball team and constantly carried a heavy backpack of textbooks over his right shoulder. A well-mannered young man, Roberto spoke in a soft, polite tone of voice and was always very careful not to offend people by his comments concerning his school and his peers at South Central High.

The only son in a very close-knit Italian family, Roberto and his older sister were brought up to respect their elders and value their Italian heritage. Both Roberto's parents had emigrated from Italy and provided their children with a bilingual home filled with, in their words, family traditions and Roman Catholic values. Roberto appeared to be the epitome of wholesomeness; he had been a Boy Scout, handled a daily paper route as a young teenager, and continued to serve as an altar boy in the nearby parish church. Roberto expressed his love of family openly and explained that on

weekends he would take a city bus across town and visit an elderly, bedridden aunt. Once a month, Roberto would travel by bus to the state university to visit his older sister in her campus dormitory. He enjoyed a close relationship with his sister, and although his own achievements in high school were far more notable, he spoke of his sister's academic accomplishments with pride.

Roberto was identified for a gifted and talented program in third grade and he enjoyed the opportunities available to him in his elementary school's enrichment program. Roberto's elementary and junior high school report cards were filled with glowing teacher comments such as "Roberto is a true delight. He has been a model student. He is a well adjusted, pleasant young man," and "Roberto is a well-behaved, industrious student with excellent work habits. He works diligently with a minimum of direction. With these excellent qualities, he will continue to achieve academic success."

With achievement scores consistently ranking in the high 90th percentiles, Roberto was on the high honor roll all throughout high school. In his freshman year, he was ranked 2nd in his class of 490 students and by his junior year, he had held on to 4th place in a class of 360. He good-naturedly explained this drop in class rank by pointing out the challenges afforded him in a demanding honors physics class. Although Roberto found his physics course rigorous, he readily admitted that math and science were his passions. He described himself as someone who enjoyed learning "concrete, black and white subjects" and he looked forward to a career in engineering.

Roberto was known throughout school as an important member of the jazz band, the cross-country team, and the treasurer of the National Honor Society. Due to his reputation as a math whiz, he was often seen in the school's media center during study hall periods providing tutorial support to his friends. Beyond the school day, Roberto's life revolved around hockey. Because South Central High did not have a team, Roberto played in the city's hockey league, competing against well-funded suburban teams. His parents did not appreciate his passion for the sport and struggled to understand why he insisted on working at a nearby ice arena to earn the money to pay membership fees to his hockey league. He

described emotional conversations with his parents because they worried that he might injure himself, and he explained, "I love the sport! I've just got to play."

FINDINGS

In this study, high-achieving students identified with the beliefs and values of a small culture of high achievement in their high school, consisting of the students themselves and the faculty members who supported them. The dominant culture of the high school was Latino, but few differences were found in the perceptions of beliefs and values of high-achieving students across cultures—although always aware of their own cultural backgrounds, these students were able to work within this culture of high achievement to succeed.

Some of the high-achieving students in the study experienced periods of underachievement during their high school years; however, they were supported in their achievement by a network of high-achieving peers who refused to let their friends falter in school. For these students, achievement could be thought of as walking up a crowded staircase. If some students started to underachieve and tried to turn and walk down the staircase, their peers pushed them back up.

When the successful students in the study were compared to a similar group of high-ability students who did not achieve, no relationship was found between socioeconomic level and achievement, between parental divorce and achievement, or between family size and achievement. Students who achieved in school acknowledged the importance of being grouped together in honors and advanced classes for academically talented students. Successful students received support and encouragement from each other and from supportive adults including teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, and mentors. Students who achieved in school also participated in multiple extracurricular activities both after school and during the summer. Several high-achieving females in the study chose not to date to be able to concentrate their energies on their studies. High-achieving students had a strong belief in self and

TABLE 2
Factors That Influence Achievement
in an Urban High School

Development of a strong belief in self
Supportive adults (e.g., teachers, counselors, and coaches)
A network of achieving peers
Extracurricular activities and after-school, summer, and special programs
Appropriately challenging learning experiences (e.g., honors classes)
Personal characteristics (sensitivity, motivation, multicultural appreciation, and inner will)
Resilience to overcome urban problems and adversity
Family support

were resilient to negative aspects of their families and their urban environment. Although parents of students in this study cared deeply about their children, their involvement in their children's high school education was minimal.

All of the participants in this diverse ethnic group acknowledged their abilities and worked to achieve at a level commensurate with their abilities. The factors identified by the data as influencing achievement in these high-ability students are listed above (see Table 2). The factors varied to some degree in importance by gender and cultural group, but all participants, regardless of gender and/or cultural group, identified these factors as contributing to their academic success.

STRONG BELIEF IN SELF

The high-ability achievers all held definite aspirations and believed that they could achieve their goals. The supportive relationships that helped to shape and strengthen their belief in self directed their realistic goals for the future. The development of this strong belief in self was evident in all participants. The oldest participants in the study exhibited the strongest belief in self, possibly indicating that this trait may develop over time as the result of various circumstances and experiences. The students in the study each had a strong sense of self and were confident about who they were, what they wanted to achieve in life, and the directions they would take to realize their goals. This sense of self developed despite the

urban environment that resulted in negative circumstances for these young people, including economic struggles, the pervasive availability of drugs, gang and community violence, and family or peer group problems.

This strong belief in self was exhibited in different ways by the participants in the study. Some were quiet and reserved, whereas some were outspoken and assertive. Toni, an African American student who lived in a housing project, consistently emphasized her belief in herself. She explained that she was different from other girls with whom she used to be friends. The girls, she explained, dated and were sexually active. Toni had a different belief about herself and she knew what she wanted for the future: college, a career, and a different kind of life. She explained,

I have confidence in myself. I believe I can do it. I'll have the house I want, the car I want, if I'm married, the kids I want! If I'm not married, I'll still be okay. I also believe I can help my mother too, moving her away from the project.

Another participant, Matteo, was determined to gain acceptance into the United States Air Force Academy. As a junior, he began to pursue that dream. His strong belief in self can also be seen in the attitude he took in applying to the Academy. He explained:

They give you the whole breakdown. They give you a whole list of names that you acquire before you are a cadet. There are 30 million steps to the application process and all along the ladder there are people saying, "This is a big job. Are you sure you want to do this?" By the time you get there, you are probably asking yourself, "Do I really want to do this?" People want you to think it's impossible. My attitude is if you think it's impossible for me, then I want it. I hate people telling me, "You can't do this. It's impossible." My response is, "Really? Try me!"

SUPPORTIVE ADULTS

All of the participants in this study indicated that the guidance of supportive adults had been essential to their academic success. Each cited teachers at the elementary or secondary school level who had been influential in their school lives and who had an

impact on their current success. One participant commented on an influential sixth-grade teacher, explaining he was grateful for the support he received from this teacher who helped him following his unsuccessful experience with a gifted and talented self-contained classroom. He explained:

It was a rough year. I was transferred out of the gifted and talented class to a regular class. Mr. Mosely knew the caliber of my abilities. Mr. Mosely knew that I could do it and he helped me get organized. He helped with a lot of organizational things—an assignment pad, zero every day without one, a journal, all of those things were out in the open. I found that I flourished under him. Maybe it was because he allowed me to step back and grow a little bit, not academically, but maturity wise. He wanted me to come up to his expectations. He wouldn't stoop down to our level. He did this with all his students. To this day, everyone who goes back to visit him thanks him and ends up loving him.

Several participants described their bilingual program teacher in Grades 5 and 6 as a role model who enjoyed his students and appreciated what they faced in the projects. Several of the participants mentioned their experiences in the school district's gifted and talented program in elementary school. That program, based on the Enrichment Triad Model (Renzulli, 1977; Renzulli & Reis, 1985), enabled high-ability students to become involved in advanced projects that matched their interests and talents. In addition to elementary teachers, the participants mentioned specific high school teachers, counselors, coaches, mentors from the community, and administrators. Every participant in the study discussed the importance of a group of adults within their high school, and the names of these persons were consistently mentioned. They included: specific honors teachers, several guidance counselors, two coaches, and two administrators. For instance, many participants referred to one popular English teacher whom they felt respected students as individuals and allowed her students to pursue self-selected interests. One student described how she made a real difference:

Mrs. Lowell in freshman English treated you on a personal basis. For some reason, she was the only teacher I ever liked doing assignments for. The only teacher ever! She didn't make you do this one

book. She allowed you to read whichever book you wanted. She let us have choice. That's what made her class fun. It was based on our interests, not someone else's.

Claire, in addition to other participants, found support from a guidance counselor. She described her important relationship with her counselor and spoke of the profound belief her counselor held in Claire's abilities. She explained:

My guidance counselor—that woman adores me! She tells me: “You are honors material.” And I'm like, “But Miss. It's hard.” And she's like, “No, no, no, no. You have to do it. You have to do it. You must do it. You're one of the leaders in the school. You have to do it.” And so you get a lot of pressure to have to do things, and if I don't—one day I decide not to do my homework, everyone would look at me like I'm crazy. Especially in biology. The teacher would say, “You didn't do that? I'm very disappointed in you.” And so, I do it!

Because of the large student caseload assigned to each guidance counselor, counselors consistently indicated that they spent the majority of their time dealing with students with problems. It was a common occurrence to see police, drug enforcement officials, and social workers in the guidance counselors' offices. So much time was spent on unmotivated students and with so many frustrations that some counselors indicated they considered the encouragement of high-ability students as both a responsibility and one of the few real successes they experienced in their work. One guidance counselor, on hearing of one student's acceptance and full scholarship to Brown University, hugged one of the researchers involved in the study and said: “This is the joy of my work!” This sentiment was also expressed in interviews with other teachers and administrators.

Many of the male participants referred to Coach Brogan, a swim coach who nurtured a supportive family-like environment for high-ability achievers (Hébert, 1995). This supportive coach was described by participants as “a father figure to his swimmers” who made sure to talk to his athletes about gang-related issues and other concerns about their well-being. He was known as a coach who did

not want to see his swimmers “make major mistakes” and a man who took the time to listen to his students and “tried to understand.”

A NETWORK OF ACHIEVING PEERS

In addition to the support from adults, participants were also helped by a network of peers who wanted to achieve. The network proved absolutely essential to the achievement of most of the participants in this study, and they acknowledged its existence in a variety of ways. As students became older, the peer network became stronger as they interacted with other high-achieving peers in various extracurricular activities, such as National Honor Society, and through experiences such as summer programs at private or independent schools. At this point in the high school experience, the greatest gap between students who achieved and underachieved became apparent.

Achieving students worked in peer groups on projects or community issues and in honors classes and provided support and encouragement to each other in numerous ways. Several participants in the study were strongly committed to supporting their peers. For example, 2 of the participants approached the researchers in this study with a request that they meet with and consider for inclusion in the sample friends who had been achievers in the past but were currently in danger of underachieving in school because of family problems. The young men and women provided an active network for each other and intervened when problems arose at home or in school, providing help, peer counseling, and the support needed to overcome these problems.

EXTRACURRICULAR AND AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS, SATURDAY AND SUMMER EXPERIENCES

The student parking lot at South Central High School often appeared deserted directly after the school buses pulled away at 2:15 p.m.; however, inside the school, another day began for many high-achieving students. Within the walls of the high school, dedicated groups of students remained until early evening hours. Football players reported to the gymnasium to lift weights; swimmers

dove into the pool and began their daily practice; National Honor Society members met in a classroom to discuss their upcoming service project; and student council members met again to discuss new ideas to stimulate an apathetic student body.

Most of the achieving students in the study remained at South Central after school to participate in a variety of activities on a daily basis. Many of the participants were involved in more than one sport and all were involved in numerous school clubs and activities, including jazz band, foreign language clubs, service groups, and academic competitions. These extracurricular activities and programs appeared to significantly impact these young people, for they were consistently cited as being extremely influential in the development of the students' ability to excel academically. For example, Wallace, an African American student, was president of the student council, a reporter for the *Student Page* in the local newspaper, and served as class president during his freshman year. Wallace was identified and placed in a gifted program as a seventh grader and had been nominated for an advanced academic program, called High Tops, in junior high school. The program provided students with a series of field trips and seminars with professional architects and city planners who were involved with the design and construction of several modern high-rise buildings in the city. The students were provided with exciting, tangible experiences in math and science through this program designed to raise the aspirations of high-potential urban youth.

Wallace also described his involvement in Upward Bound and how this program impacted his achievement and the development of his intention to achieve academically. In this program, Wallace attended a 6-week residential summer program at a nearby small liberal arts college in the city. The purpose of the program was to strengthen academic skills, provide tutorials throughout high school, provide counseling, and assist students with the college application process. Wallace described this program as another positive aspect of his high school experiences that kept him very busy. He said:

It helps a lot. While you're on campus in the summer, it's intense work all the time. Two and a half hour study halls at night. It's a lot

of fun. You take classes that you'll be taking during the year, like your English classes. There is a mandatory composition class. You have science and math. Whichever course you'll take in the fall, you'll be one step ahead of everyone else. You don't get credit for these courses. If you fail a class during the year, then you take it with Upward Bound at a local private college, but the work is more difficult. Some people I know who graduated from the program said it was more work than they experienced in college!

The special programs helped to expose participants to a different world outside the inner city. Students who participated remarked on how their summer experiences on college campuses helped to raise their aspirations. These experiences enriched the lives of these young people in numerous ways, and in some cases, helped them in their decisions to attend colleges and universities that were in other geographic areas. One participant, for example, initially had problems with her parents when she attended a program an hour from her home for a 3-week summer program. However, after her success in that program, her parents became more supportive of her decision to attend an Ivy league school in a neighboring state.

APPROPRIATELY CHALLENGING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Achieving students involved in this study participated in various appropriately challenging learning experiences in school. Not all classes were found interesting or enjoyable and not all produced high-level learning experiences, but in many cases, students were expected to produce high-quality work. Students indicated that they did their most advanced work in their honors and advanced placement classes. In other classes, students who achieved at lower levels often ridiculed their high-achieving peers. This situation was never encountered in honors or advanced placement classes, and the achieving students appreciated the academic challenge they encountered in their honors level classes.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

A number of common personal characteristics were demonstrated by all of the achieving participants in this study, including:

strong motivation and inner will, appreciation of cultural diversity, heightened sensitivity to each other and the world around them, realistic aspirations, and independence. Numerous examples of these characteristics continually emerged. For example, Wallace provided a compelling example of his compassion and heightened sensitivity when he shared a story from his elementary school years. Wallace had befriended a student who was perceived as a nerd and faced problems with schoolyard bullies. Wallace remained loyal to his buddy and he appointed himself as his friend's bodyguard. Mary described how badly she felt when she saw some of her friends dealing with their parents' abuse of alcohol. She reached out to her friends and provided support by always being available to listen, explaining that some of these experiences influenced her career goal of becoming a social worker.

The aspirations of the young men and women who achieved at South Central High were closely tied to their strong belief in self. They all expressed a desire to graduate from college and pursue a professional career, and most of these intelligent, sensitive young adults knew what they wanted to do in life. They held dreams and definite goals toward which they were striving and these dreams, goals, and career aspirations were closely connected with who they were as people. Their personalities were often reflected in their choices for the future and many of their future aspirations were directly connected to their urban life experiences. For example, several wanted to become doctors, lawyers, and social workers who would work to improve life in urban areas.

RESILIENCE TO OVERCOME URBAN PROBLEMS AND ADVERSITY

Many of the achievers in this study came from homes that had been affected by poverty, family turmoil caused by issues such as alcohol, drugs, and mental illness, and other problems. As one participant indicated, "My family story is filled with eyebrow raisers." Other achievers had relatively calm and peaceful homes. All participants, however, lived in a city plagued by violence, drugs, poverty, and crime. The young people profiled in this study survived in the city and excelled in their school. They ignored drug dealers, turned their backs on gangs, avoided the crime in their

neighborhoods, and went on to become valedictorians, class presidents, star athletes, and scholars. Some went to Ivy League schools, some attended the most selective colleges in the country, and all want to make a contribution to their world. The courage and resilience displayed by these young people seemed remarkable, and yet, in interviews they explained that they simply accepted their circumstances and appreciated the opportunities given to them.

Nikki's family problems might have seemed overwhelming to some young people: persistent family financial problems, her father's constant battle with alcoholism, her parents' divorce, her mother's bitterness, and her own alienation from her family and friends because of her constant need to achieve. Yet, instead of turning to drugs or giving up, she examined her life through her writing, winning a \$10,000 scholarship from a large insurance company for an essay submitted to a writing competition. Her essay, titled *The Stranger*, detailed her troubled relationship with her father and her eventual understanding of his love for her.

Carlos also demonstrated his resilience when he described the feelings of despair and depression he experienced when he returned to his home in the projects after having attended a special summer program on a beautiful private college campus. Although he felt overwhelmed by the poverty in the projects and the growing number of young people in his neighborhood who were "tuned out to education," he attempted to solve a small piece of the problem. He volunteered as a tutor at an elementary school near the projects where he worked with bilingual students, believing he might be able to "relate to these young people who might be having trouble with their reading or learning English."

FAMILY SUPPORT

The majority of the participants in this study appeared to have supportive families that nurtured them in a variety of ways. All but one of the families of students in this study had low socioeconomic status. Most participants had extremely supportive families although some parents could provide only emotional support to their children because of their struggle for economic survival. All participants believed that their parents regarded school and

learning as a very important way to improve their situation in life, but in most cases, the parents of these young people worked long hours and could not dedicate time for involvement in their children's high school experience.

Every participant in the study described the emotional support received from families. For example, Roberto's father had emigrated to the United States with only a third-grade education. His mother had not received much more education. Both parents worked two jobs, and instilled in Roberto the importance of education. He explained:

They really instill the idea that I have to do well in school. They are always telling me this. They didn't have many opportunities for education, and since I was a toddler, I had that message drilled into me. Even today, they constantly say, "Keep working hard!" I realize the sacrifices they've made and how much they love me. It's because of them that I work so hard. Their emotional support has made a difference for me.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

When examining the challenges that young people in urban schools face every day, one realizes that some who reach their goals face greater obstacles than others. Some young people living in urban neighborhoods go to sleep each night with the sounds of drunken neighbors and drive-by shootings outside their bedroom window. What enables these young people to overcome their environment, graduate from high school, attend college, and become productive members of society? Why do other young people who live in more peaceful communities and face fewer hardships in life fail to succeed in school? Why do some succeed and others fail?

The findings of this study indicate that the high school students who achieve have developed personal strategies to overcome environmental adversities. These young people attend public schools and know what it is they want because they know who they are. They have developed a strong belief in self that provides them with the energy, drive, and tools they need to face their challenges. This

strong belief in self is the driving force that allows them to succeed in school and to determine where they want to go in life.

Several qualities merged to form this strong belief in self within these students. They included heightened sensitivity, a quality that allowed them to appreciate individual differences in people around them, and an inner will or an internal fortitude that helped to provide the strong drive to reach for their realistic aspirations or goals in life. This strong belief in self also incorporated aspirations, for these young people had dreams, goals, and visions of a hopeful future.

This belief in self was reinforced in these high-achieving students in several ways. They created a network of high-achieving peers who encouraged each other to achieve academically and in extracurricular activities. They were supported and nurtured by a variety of adults who provided emotional support, teachers who inspired, a counselor who listened and believed in them, and a coach who thought of them as more than just athletes and cared about them as individuals. These adults helped to shape how these students regarded themselves and whether they would achieve their goals. Along with adults who cared, they had families who believed in them and their abilities.

Along with their strong families and other supportive adults in their lives, they became involved in a variety of experiences that allowed them to develop their talents, exposing them to another world outside their urban communities. The combination of family and peer support, support from significant adults, and experiences in which they began to see themselves as valued individuals enabled their belief in self to become stronger and their resilience to develop. This resilience enabled this group of students to achieve despite the various problems their families faced, the poverty with which many lived, and the problems they faced growing up in an urban environment.

The findings of this study have implications for urban educators. The support system created by the achievers in this study should convince educators of the importance of strengthening peer counseling programs in urban high schools as noted by Diver-Stamnes (1991). High-ability students would benefit from discussions with

other teenagers providing empathy and encouragement in their efforts to navigate the challenges of their urban environment.

In addition, the significance of the relationships between several of the participants and adults such as the coach, the guidance counselor, or an important freshman English teacher, indicates the powerful impact same-gender mentors may have on high-ability students in urban schools. Torrance, Goff, and Satterfield (1998) proposed multicultural mentoring strategies appropriate for nurturing the talents of young people from economically disadvantaged environments. An ongoing relationship with a caring adult or mentor has great potential for changing the lives of intelligent young adults. Urban schools may want to consider implementing such mentor programs in which successful urban community leaders assist public school educators in nurturing the talents of high-ability students.

Olenchak (1998) reported that a majority of parents of high-ability students would benefit from networking with parents of other high-ability youngsters. Parents of culturally diverse students would benefit from discussion groups held in private homes on topics that would assist them in supporting their sons and daughters in their academic achievement. These sessions would be initiated by school counselors and led by successful parents and could provide a strong sense of community within the families of the high-ability achievers.

The participants in the study consistently acknowledged the importance of advanced placement and honors classes in which they found more intellectual stimulation. They indicated that these classes provided students who wanted to achieve the opportunity to be in classes together and to be challenged. These classes also enabled the high-achieving students to work in an environment in which teachers and other students could concentrate on academics and doing one's best. Without these classes, the students believed they would not have learned at the same level, the same depth, or the same pace. The experiences of the participants in this study remind urban high school administrators of the importance of strengthening advanced placement opportunities and honors courses for high-ability students.

The experiences of the achievers beyond their school day highlight the need for urban school systems to continue to provide strong after-school extracurricular and athletic programs to nurture the special interests and talents of high-ability youth. Continuation of programs such as Upward Bound, summer enrichment programs associated with private colleges and state universities, and community-based programs whereby teenagers are provided opportunities to investigate and address the problems of their urban communities through a proactive approach should be emphasized and strengthened. As noted by Heath and McLaughlin (1993), such successful experiences, under the guidance of adults who care and support their psychosocial development as young adults, help to shape their belief in self.

SUMMARY

Rather than becoming alienated and underachieving in school, the young people involved in this study created a community of achievement within their high school. Some of their teachers, coaches, and parents were an integral part of this community and all were partially responsible for the eventual academic successes achieved by the participants in this study. Despite family problems and all of the difficulties faced in their urban high school, including gangs, violence, and drugs, the achievement ideology remained intact for the young people in this study. The community of achievement they created both developed and protected this ideology, providing them with a haven in which their accomplishments were both valued and protected.

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