

AN EXPLORATION OF THE BELIEFS,
VALUES, AND ATTITUDES OF BLACK STUDENTS IN FAIRFAX COUNTY

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This study was an investigation of the beliefs, values, and attitudes of black students which guide their behavior. The cultural factors investigated included: student occupational and educational aspirations; student academic strategies; and people and forces impacting upon student beliefs.

The purpose was to determine if the characteristics of a caste minority, as defined by Ogbu, were exhibited by the black students in a relatively affluent school district. Ethnographic methods were selected for data collection and analysis. Participants in the study were 46 black students attending a small, intermediate school and their teachers, counselors, parents, peers, and significant others.

Findings indicate that the black students seem to be part of a modified caste system. They had high occupational aspirations but perceived a "secondary job ceiling", requiring them to be better qualified than whites competing for the same job. Few students who aspired to professional

or celebrity careers were aware of the training, discipline, and good fortune needed to achieve their goals, and few of them selected school strategies to promote academic success. Parents spoke of their belief in education but were frequently unable to translate their belief into active support for students. Teachers exhibited a lack of knowledge of the black student culture and attributed black underachievement to cultural deprivation and lack of parental concern.

Educational planners must be aware of the difficulties faced by black students in selecting goals and strategies and need to develop and reorient programs to assist black students in crossing cultural barriers.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Thirty-two years after the Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education desegregation decision to eliminate inequality in American public education, the academic achievement of black students continues to lag behind that of their white counterparts. Reports, such as the 1983 A Nation At Risk, have focused public attention on declining educational standards and student performances and promoted closer scrutiny of differences in black and white student achievement. Recent test results on local and national levels indicate a continuing disparity between the scores of white and black minority students on standardized tests, despite federal and local attempts to provide equal educational opportunities for all students.

Since the initial release of test results by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) in 1982, black students have continued to score 100 points, on a scale of 800 points, below white students on both the verbal and mathematics tests. The report on reading proficiency issued by the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1985 revealed that the scores of black and Hispanic students were significantly below those of the white students. Four times as many black nine-year-olds were reading below the NAEP-designated rudimentary level.

Students reading below this level are considered to be "at risk" for school failure. Similar discrepancies in mathematic skills, knowledge, and applications were found by the NAEP in 1983. Science achievement scores of black students were 14 percentage points below those of white students throughout a five-year investigation by the Science Assessment and Research Project of the University of Minnesota.

Similar differences in black and white achievement have been found in Fairfax County and surrounding school districts. In the Fairfax County school system data was collected on standardized test scores, course grades, school attendance, dropout rate, retention rate, placement in special remedial or advanced programs, and on post-high school expectations. The analysis of this data led to the conclusion that the performance of black and Hispanic students was below that of white and Asian students on every indicator examined.

On the standardized Science Research Associates (SRA) tests the percentage of black Fairfax County students scoring in each decile has remained fairly constant, varying from six to twelve percent. The percentage of white students scoring in each decile showed a sharp increase in the higher deciles; one percent scored in the first decile, six percent in the fifth decile and

thirty-five percent in the last decile.

Another analysis was made of the scores of children who took the Metropolitan Readiness Test (MRT), considered a good predictor of academic success, in kindergarten and the SRA test four years later. For the students in each MRT decile, their SRA composite scores were examined, and the mean test scores for each ethnic group were compared. White and black students scoring in the same MRT percentile (50th - 59th) had a difference of 18.4 points on the SRA tests; white students averaged percentile scores of 64.7, and black students averaged percentile scores of 46.0.

Background

Many explanations for the poor performance of minority students on standardized tests and other achievement indicators have been proposed. These explanations emphasize one or a combination of the following factors: cultural deprivation; cultural conflict; educational inequality; and heredity.

The cultural deprivation theory gained great popularity in the 1960's and provided the philosophical foundation for the federal compensatory education programs. According to this theory children from economically and culturally impoverished backgrounds lag behind in their linguistic, cognitive, and social development and thus do poorly in

school (Bloom, Davis, and Hess, 1965). Data on student achievement and school resources collected by Coleman and his associates (1966) seemed to support the cultural deprivation theory. Coleman concluded that minority achievement is most closely associated with family background and socioeconomic status (SES) rather than school variables. In describing the cultural deficits of lower SES groups which lead to educational deficits Coleman stated: "For most minority groups and most particularly the Negro, schools provide no opportunity at all for them to overcome this initial deficiency" (p. 20).

Coleman's view of the school as a passive conduit of poverty has been challenged by Guthrie (1971), Edmonds and Frederickson (1984), Jones and Spady (1984), and Squires, Huitt, and Segars (1984). They found that school programs characterized by strong leadership, parent involvement, student responsibility and discipline, and skillful teaching do affect pupil performance and suggest that Coleman neglected some important school practices affecting student achievement. In his later research on public and private schools Coleman (1981) did identify characteristics found in private schools that were more likely to encourage academic performance. Many of those characteristics noted by Coleman were the same as those identified by other researchers on effective schools

(Purkey and Smith, 1982).

The release of the SAT scores by the CEEB indicate that SES factors alone do not explain the gap between white and black test scores as suggested by Coleman. In 1982, black students from families with incomes over \$50,000 scored 120 points less on SAT tests than white students in the same income groups (Howard and Hammond, 1985). . These differences have persisted since the original report by the CEEB.

Spradley (1980), a critic of the cultural deprivation theory, suggested that ethnographic research has indicated that so-called culturally deprived children have "elaborate, sophisticated, and adaptive cultures" that simply differ from that espoused by the public school system. He suggested that the theory of cultural deprivation is itself culture-bound, "a way of saying that people are deprived of 'my culture'" (p. 14). Valentine's research on the culture of poverty (1968) led to his view of the cultural deprivation theory as "seductive" rather than "insightful or productive," and his warning that cultural deprivation might become an "alibi for educational neglect" (p. 92). Moreover, Valentine described compensatory education programs as a substitute for the integration of American society by class and race and the sharing of power and wealth which would result in

meaningful social change.

Proponents of the cultural conflict theory assert that black children fail because their values, attitudes, and learning styles differ so significantly from those necessary for success in the public schools and wider society (Inkeles, 1968). Critics of this theory point out that cultural differences do not automatically lead to conflict or to school failure.

Ogbu (1985) cited Gibson's study of the Punjabi Indian immigrants in California which found that Punjabi students, especially males, do well in school despite their cultural and language differences. A minority group doing poorly in the schools in one country may be academically successful in another country; Ogbu (1985) has contrasted the poor performance of the Japanese Buraku students in Japan with their higher achievement in American schools. He has suggested that differences in school performance among minority groups are not due solely to cultural differences, but are related to the ability of the minority group to cross the cultural boundary between school and home. The Buraku as a freely immigrating minority in the United States have transcended the cultural boundary between them and the dominant majority which they were unable to overcome as a caste minority in Japan.

The educational inequality theory, a variant of the cultural deprivation theory, attributes the poor school performance of black students to their lack of access to adequate educational programs to counteract the negative influence of home and community. Educators in Fairfax County and adjoining areas point to their commitment of fiscal and human resources to the educational process. The 1985-86 per pupil expenditure in Fairfax County was \$4300, and 47% of its teachers held advanced degrees. Its locally developed programs, such as English-as-a-Second-Language and elementary science programs, have received broad recognition and served as models for other districts in the United States and developing countries abroad. In addition to its regular curriculum and special programs, Fairfax County has initiated mastery reading programs, sponsored school organizations to improve minority academic achievement and personal coping skills, and set up school programs to identify and help high-risk students. Nonetheless, the gap in school performance between black and white students still exists in Fairfax County as in every region, and within every socioeconomic level in the United States.

The most controversial explanation for the poor performance of black minority students is that of genetic inferiority. Jensen (1969) analyzed the data from Burt's

studies of identical twins who were raised apart and calculated that 80% of a person's IQ score can be attributed to heredity and 20% to environment. According to Jensen, heredity accounts for IQ differences within a population and between populations. He has argued that the white and black populations in the United States belong to separate genetic groups. Noting the high correlation between IQ scores and socioeconomic status, Jensen argued that socioeconomic status is determined primarily by IQ. He also used this argument to explain the higher occupational roles attained by black females compared to black males. Jensen found that black women have higher IQs, higher educational attainment, higher income, and more desirable occupational roles than black men. He concluded that the sex differences between blacks in tests of mental ability and the resulting differences in SES are due to genetic differences between the sexes.

Jensen's research findings were hailed by Shockley, Herrnstein, and eugenicists (Joseph, 1977), but were rejected by other researchers due to their racial overtones. His research has been criticized for both methodological and theoretical errors. Hirsch (1981) cited specific mathematical errors in Jensen's calculations and his unquestioning acceptance of other studies containing methodological flaws. Similarly, Jensen has been accused

of distorting his research results so that they would appear to conform to his basic premise (Hirsch, 1981 and Rabbitt, 1985). He has been criticized by Ogbu (1978) for "interpretive fallacy"--i.e. the assumption that the difference in means between two groups supports the investigator's hypothesis concerning causes of the difference--and for the failure to seek alternate explanations. Theoretically, Jensen has been faulted for questionable assumptions--e.g. that of blacks and whites being a biological rather than a sociological group. Ogbu (1978) suggested that Jensen overlooked an alternative interpretation of black-white IQ differences and differences within blacks. Differences in IQ or "cognitive skill" differences, between groups and within groups, according to Ogbu, may be explained more satisfactorily by differences in the cognitive demands of social and occupational roles than by a genetic or statistical explanation.

Jensen's most recent efforts to account for black-white differences in IQ have focused on a "general intelligence factor," known as Spearman's g, which he describes as the source of individual differences measured on all mental tests (1984). His research efforts to isolate g have been criticized for faulty assumptions and interpretations (Das, 1984; Gustafson, 1984) and

for the failure of his research to yield explanatory insights and to provide direction for future research or theory construction (Borkowski and Maxwell, 1984).

None of the above theories offers adequate and complete explanations for the poor performance of black students in school. Ogbu (1985) has suggested that the way education is perceived and responded to depends upon the economic niche of a particular group, their historical experience or anticipation in using education for personal, economic gain, and their evolved values and cultural frame of reference. That is, each group has its particular "folk theory" of success or status mobility which includes the type of behavior leading to success and the ideal, successful people or role models. When members of a group believe that one must do well in school in order to achieve social mobility, they will select strategies and model their behaviors after those that promote school success. Parents will encourage their children to adopt such behaviors, and the children will act in a manner conducive to academic success. If, however, children and parents do not perceive education as a necessary part of their status mobility system, their achievement motivation and behavior will reflect that view of educational irrelevance for them.

Ogbu studied the segregated school system in

Stockton, California as a cultural institution in the late 1960's and early 1970's. The majority of the black and Hispanic wage earners in Ogbu's study worked as common and farm laborers or as domestic or semi-skilled workers--i.e. in occupations well below the job ceiling perceived by the participants. The limited occupational opportunities of the adults in the community were observed by the adolescents and apparently affected their occupational and educational aspirations. They reported that they believed that education would not enhance or enlarge the occupational opportunities available to them and exhibited school behavior appropriate to scaled-down economic objectives. Ogbu suggested that the school, primarily through teacher and counselor expectations and instructional content and methods, prepared students for jobs below the job ceiling and perpetuated the low expectations-low performance cycle. He concluded that the structure of opportunities available in adult society strongly affect the qualities the schools transmit to their students and the qualities the students strive to possess.

In 1978 Ogbu expanded his status mobility theory to account for differences between "castelike" minorities, forcibly brought to a country, and freely immigrating minorities. Initially the caste minority has primary

(real) differences in style and culture with the dominant group--differences which exist prior to contact between the dominant and minority groups. After contact between the two groups occurs, the inferior political, economic, and ritual roles of the caste are defined and rationalized by the majority. Then, secondary cultural differences of style are developed by the caste minority as a way of coping with exploitation and domination. Thus the caste minority has two sets of cultural differences to be transcended--primary differences due to content and secondary differences in style. In school, for example, the caste minorities have problems crossing cultural boundaries because of their treatment by the schools and because of the way they respond to teaching and learning. Ogbu (1985) maintains that blacks, lacking a cultural frame of reference that encourages school success, experience "persistent mis-match in cognitive styles, communication styles, and interactional etiquettes" (p. 20). Even when blacks accepted education as a part of their status mobility system, Ogbu found that students diverted their efforts into non-academic activities and failed to match aspirations with appropriate school behaviors.

In a more recent study of a group of black high school students in Washington, D.C. Fordham and Ogbu (1986)

discovered that pursuit of academic excellence was perceived as "acting white" and negatively sanctioned by the students. They found that certain forms of behavior, attitudes, activities, and symbols were viewed as those most closely associated with white Americans and were deemed inappropriate for blacks. These "white behaviors" appeared to subtract from or diminish the students' black identity. Students who were academically successful seemed to use strategies such as "clowning" or being in school sports to camouflage their academic goals.

The researchers suggested that this "oppositional frame of reference" was developed by blacks due to their treatment by whites in the economic, political, social, and psychological arenas. Blacks perceived a job ceiling which made them distrustful of the school system and its representatives. Therefore, they failed to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and competencies congruent with those who did well in school.

In summary, alternate theories to account for the gap between black and white school performance have been proposed and rejected as adequate explanations. The cultural deprivation theory would seem to be inoperative in a school district with an affluent, well-educated population such as Fairfax with a median family income of \$54,000 and an educational level of 14.7 years of

schooling. The district has attempted to alleviate cultural conflict by mandating a human relations course for all teachers and offering special training in multicultural counseling for all administrators and guidance counselors. The adequate distribution of educational resources was attempted through an equally high level of commitment of financial and human resources throughout the district and an additional commitment of those resources in schools with high numbers of students considered "at risk." The application of the genetic theory to account for the underachievement of its black students is rejected due to its questionable assumptions, presumptions, interpretations, and methodological errors. Despite the affluence and high educational level of its citizens and the school district's commitment to quality education, the academic gap between black and white students persists in Fairfax County. An alternate explanation of this achievement gap needs to be examined.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if the values, attitudes, and beliefs characteristic of a caste minority, as defined by Ogbu, are exhibited in an affluent suburban school district.

Research Questions

1. How do the black seventh and eighth graders

- in a Fairfax County school view themselves, other people, and the external world?
2. How are these students perceived by their parents, their teachers, and other adult members of their community?
 - a. To what extent do the students experience a conflict between parent, peer, and teacher expectations of their school performance and future occupational roles?
 - b. To what extent do the teachers foster a sense of responsibility for their learning on the part of the students and their families?
 3. What are the school behaviors and strategies chosen by the students and their parents?
 - a. How vigorously do the students compete in an academic setting?
 - b. To what extent do they accept responsibility for their school performance and achievement?
 4. What are the forces that led to the development of the students' attitudes, values, beliefs?

Significance of the Study

This study of black student culture explored the values, attitudes, and beliefs of teachers, parents, peers, and members of the community which generate and guide student behavior. If the findings indicated the presence of a caste minority, as described by Ogbu, in a socioeconomic setting and a time frame different from his original Stockton study, his status mobility theory of expectations based upon job ceiling would be supported and broadened. If the findings indicated the presence of other driving forces in the black student culture, Ogbu's theory would have to be modified. In either case, the findings of the study should assist policy makers in developing and reorienting programs and strategies to enhance the potential and achievement of its black students.

Organization of the Study

In this chapter the background for the study and the research questions it raises were presented. Four theories of minority achievement and their failure to account totally for all the research data were presented. Ogbu's explanation for the poor school performance of black students was presented as a theory worthy of additional research. Chapter Two contains the research methodology including the sampling, data collection, and the analysis of the data. The results of the study are

presented in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four the conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further study are provided.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the beliefs, values, and attitudes of a group of black students in Fairfax County which guide the behavior of these students. The cultural factors investigated included the following: the occupational and educational aspirations of the students; the school-related behaviors and educational strategies devised by the students; the people and forces impacting upon student beliefs and behaviors. In this section the research design, selection of participants, data collection, and analysis of data are described.

Research Design

Ethnography was chosen for the study because it enables the researcher to examine participants' motives, behaviors, and interactions in their own environments. Rist (1982) has suggested that "qualitative research posits that the most powerful and parsimonious way to understand human beings is to watch, talk, listen, and participate with them in their own natural settings." Qualitative research, as noted by Rist, offers a way of learning about human behavior through experience, empathy, and involvement. Similarly, in describing the

role of ethnography in educational research Spradley (1980) has asserted that any explanation for human behavior which excludes that which humans know about themselves and the way they define their actions "remains a partial explanation that distorts the human situation."

Population

Fairfax County, located in a 400-square-mile area of Northern Virginia, is a part of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Its 1985 population of 668,300 persons consisted of 90% white and 10% blacks, Asians, Hispanics, and other ethnic groups. The occupational distribution of the workforce is shown in Table 2.1.

The school district had a population in 1985 of 125,516 students distributed in 116 elementary schools (K-6), 19 intermediate schools (7-8), 20 high schools (9-12), 3 secondary schools (7-12), and 20 special education centers. The student population consisted of 79.3% whites, 8.6% blacks, 8.4% Asian, 3.5% Hispanics, and .2% American Indians. During the 1984-85 school year 87.1% of the graduating seniors advanced to post-secondary education (69% entered four-year educational institutions), and 2.11% of the students dropped out of school prior to graduation. The district's operating budget in 1985-86 was \$537,401,181 which amounted to a per pupil expenditure of \$3,685 for regular education

Table 2.1 Occupations of Blacks and Whites
in Fairfax County

Type of Occupation	Percentage of each group in occupation	
	Whites	Blacks
Agriculture	.9	.9
Mining and forestry	.1	.1
Construction	6.1	5.6
Manufacturing	5.4	5.2
Transportation	3.6	5.9
Communication	2.6	3.9
Wholesale trade	2.5	1.7
Retail trade	13.8	13.1
Banking	2.9	2.9
Insurance	4.8	3.3
Business and repairs	8.7	8.9
Private households	.5	2.2
Personal services	1.9	2.7
Entertainment and recreation	1.0	.9
Professional and religious	22.3	23.0
Public administration	22.4	19.7
TOTALS	100.	100.

programs and \$4,347 for special education programs. The average teacher's salary was \$28,807 for that school year.

Participants

Participants in the study were 46 black students of one of the smaller intermediate schools in Fairfax County, their peers, teachers, counselors, parents, and others significant in their lives. During the 1986-87 school year the school population consisted of 512 students of whom 60% were whites, 14% were blacks, 7% were Hispanics, and 19% were Asians. With the exception of certain students who were bused in for the English-as-a-Second-Language Program (ESL), the students lived in areas contiguous to the school and walked or rode a bus for a short distance.

The seventh and eighth graders attending the school generally fell within the mid-range of socioeconomic status. Census tract data for 1980 indicated a median worker income of \$17,272 and a mean income of \$21,249. In 1980 blacks in the district had a median income of \$14,172 and a mean income of \$14,112; whites had a median income of \$18,762 and a mean of \$23,650.

A more current determination of student socioeconomic status was based on school records on free or reduced-price lunches. The data for the month of November, 1986 indicated that 79 students, or 15% of the total school

population, qualified for the County's school lunch program. The County allowed parents (or guardians) to apply for the program and used a sliding scale of financial need for determining eligibility. A student from a household of four with a yearly income of \$20,350 qualified for the program; for a household of three the ceiling was \$16,872, and \$13,394 for a household of two. The majority of students--72%--who were eligible for the program were foreign-born, primarily Asian, Afghan, and Hispanic. Approximately 16% of the black students in the school were in the lunch program; they constituted 15% of the students receiving free or reduced-price lunches, and whites made up the remaining 13% of students in the program.

Employment in the various occupations by working members of the school community reflected the occupational distribution of the county as a whole. School data collected in 1981 indicated that 56% of the parents had received some college training; 36% had received formal education ending with high school graduation; and 8% had not graduated from high school. Data collected from interviews with black students indicated that these earlier statistics were valid for the current black population and any changes that had occurred were in higher percentages of parents who had some post-secondary

training.

Slightly less than one half of the students lived with both parents; the remainder lived with one parent, a guardian, or a parent and a step-parent. Students attending the school lived in all of the forms of housing available in Northern Virginia: single family dwellings, high rise and garden apartments, townhouses, and condominiums.

The student mobility rate for the area in which the school was located was relatively high at 19%--i.e. between the first and last day of school in 1986-87 19% of the students moved to another school. Therefore, data collected from current sources, such as the school's lunch program and from personal interviews and conversations, was considered to be the most reliable and valuable information available.

The Participant Observer

The researcher had a dual role at the intermediate school where the study was conducted: the role of seventh and eighth grade science teacher and that of participant observer. After obtaining approval for the study from her principal and area superintendent the researcher contacted the black students and their parents through a letter and usually by telephone to explain the purpose of the study and to elicit their support. Her

interest in the participants in the study and willingness to share the insights gained as a result of her role as participant observer were indicated to the students and their parents. Participants were promised confidentiality, and their names and that of the school were changed in the final report of the findings.

The participant observer was responsible for observing the students and their activities in the school setting and in the community. The degree of involvement with the participants varied from non-participation, as in observation of behavior in the hallways, to complete participation, as in the interaction with students in the classroom or other settings, in and out of the school. Thus, the participant observer functioned as both an insider and an outsider simultaneously. Throughout the study the participant observer kept written records of observations and interviews and of subjective feelings about the experiences of participant observation. The records of observations and interviews, the documented data, and the field journal were important components in the data analysis and comparison, described in the following sections.

Instrumentation/Protocol

The ethnographic research cycle outlined by Spradley (1980) served as the research model for this study. This

cycle consists of the following steps: (a) asking ethnographic questions; (b) collecting ethnographic data; (c) making an ethnographic record; and (d) analyzing ethnographic data. Throughout the cycle interviews, observations, and document research were used to obtain information on each of the research questions.

The students initially chosen for the study were those known to the researcher through her classes or homeroom period. Those students were selected due to the proximity to the researcher and their willingness to participate. Later the group of students was expanded as additional participants were recommended by students previously interviewed and by other faculty members. Also, as events unfolded during the school year, the researcher sought out other students, previously unknown to her.

The final group of 46 students interviewed in the study differed from each other in the relevant categories of academic achievement, socioeconomic status, documented classroom behaviors, and reported values and attitudes. Among those interviewed were the following categories: those on the Honor Roll and those failing and having to attend summer school; those whose families received some form of economic assistance and those whose parents were economically affluent; those who lived with a single parent and those from intact families. Students who

were in "frequent trouble" at the office were interviewed, as were those who were considered behavior models by their teachers. Students who "loved" school and those who "hated" school participated. Those who were popular with their classmates were participants, as were those who were viewed as "regular" by their peers and teachers.

By the end of the school year nearly all of the black students had been observed and/or interviewed. All of the 46 who were interviewed were observed in formal or informal school settings. Two parents refused to allow their daughters to be interviewed due to "personal problems." All of the other parents signed permission forms, and several expressed high interest in the research and kept in contact with the researcher throughout the study.

The researcher compiled a list of specific interview questions on attitudes toward school and teachers, educational and career aspirations, parental and peer support, and academic strategies (Appendix). The interviews began, however, with broad, general questions on school and life experiences, including family, friends, teachers, schools attended, favorite subjects, etc.. Frequently student comments led to the discussion of other topics, not originally envisioned by the researcher. These topics were pursued because they revealed the student's values,

attitudes, and beliefs. Each interview lasted at least one hour, and the researcher returned to certain students considered "key informants" for more information or clarifications. At the end of the year the researcher met separately with a group of five seventh graders and four eighth graders to discuss their year in school, their future plans, and other topics pertinent to the study.

Before and after the interviews the researcher contacted the students' teachers. These interactions with teachers consisted of formal interviews and informal conversations for the purpose of corroborating the researcher's own impressions, gaining new perspectives on students interviewed for the study, and determining teacher attitudes and beliefs about black students. Frequent conversations were held with the two guidance counselors, guidance director, principal, assistant principal and administrative aide. Two teachers from elementary school who had taught many of the students were also interviewed. The school social worker who worked with students and their families discussed his perceptions of his clients and their interactions with the school. Teacher narratives found in student records were used as a data source on teacher evaluation and expectation of student achievement and for information

on student achievement and behavior.

Parents of ten of the students were interviewed either at school, at their work sites, or by telephone. These parents were chosen due to their availability and willingness to participate in the study. They were asked to discuss their school and life experiences, their goals and expectations for the students, and their family and home strategies for academic achievement. They were also asked to describe their perceptions of school and the role of school, teachers, counselors, and administrators in students' lives.

Students were observed formally in the classroom and informally in the school cafeteria and gymnasium, in the hallways, on the bus ramps, and in the parts of the school used for after-school activities. Some students were observed in several different classes or out of class in an effort to determine the effects of other teachers and students upon student behavior. The observations of the students were used to initiate the interviews; frequently questions on the class observations were used to start the interview process.

In each observation the researcher tried to identify the dimensions of a social situation, as defined by Spradley (1980). These components include the following: space, actor, activity, object, act, event, time, goal,

and feeling. The interactions between teachers and students were analyzed for clues to implicit and explicit expectations of student academic achievement. During observations the researcher also focused on student verbal and non-verbal communication patterns, academic strategies, learning styles, and involvement with academic and extracurricular activities. Additional information on student behaviors was obtained from the student's school records and responses of students, parents, and teachers to interview questions.

Documents and records that provided information relevant to the study included the school yearbook, newspaper, and morning announcements made over the public address system. Official school reports to the superintendent provided information on suspensions and disciplinary referrals and student academic progress. Other documents published by the office such as the Honor Roll, the "F list," and daily attendance reports were used. Additional information on academic performance was obtained from the compilation of SRA test scores and the results of other standardized tests given by the reading teachers.

Data Analysis

In summary, the data for the study was obtained from documents, self-reports of the participants, observations of the participants' behaviors and interactions,

and reports by others. The domains which evolved from the research questions included the following: participants' attitudes toward academic achievement; student activities and associations in school and the community; teachers' perceptions and expectations of participants' beliefs as to ways of achieving economic and social rewards; and influences upon student behavior and attitudes.

Once the domains were established, the researcher looked for subsets or attributes and then for elements of contrast or components within the domains. For instance, classroom activities were described or those requiring certain physical, cognitive, and time orientations. Those behaviors were contrasted by the degree of reinforcement given by peers, teachers, and parents and by the consequences produced. Throughout the data collection and analysis the researcher sought to discern students' beliefs and values--as spoken and translated into behaviors--related to school and the role of education in their lives.

Reliability and Validity

The limitations of an ethnographic study such as this one are associated with the researcher's ability to collect and analyze the data. In order to enhance the reliability and validity of the study the researcher

tried to follow the steps outlined by LeCompte and Goetz (1982):

1. Provide careful descriptions of the participants and settings in low-inference terms.
2. Indicate the researcher's role in the group and acknowledge the possible reactive effects.
3. Specify the methods and context of data collection and analysis.
4. Demonstrate that categories of meaning are supported by the data and shared by the participants.

In interviews the researcher attempted to let the participant "take the lead" in describing situations, making their inferences, developing hypotheses, and drawing conclusions. The participant's words were recorded as accurately as possible so that other researchers could examine them to see if they would reach the same conclusion based on their recorded statements. In making observations the researcher attempted to record the actions and interactions within the setting in objective terms of specific actions, words, etc. so that inferences could be freely drawn by another researcher.

The researcher was keenly aware of her role at the school and its possible effect upon the participants. A negative aspect of that role was the possibility of a

student's distortion of behaviors or attitudes during the observation/interview cycle. To compensate for this aspect of her role, the researcher attempted to observe the student in various settings and to use multiple sources of data, including other participants, for comparison or triangulation of the data. One positive aspect of her role was that the researcher could use the rapport developed with students and early participants in the study to enlist the cooperation and involvement of other participants.

Throughout the study the researcher engaged in the self-monitoring process of questioning and re-evaluation of the data to gain some insight into the study of black student values, attitudes, and beliefs and their relationship to academic achievement.

CHAPTER 3

Research Findings

Black Student Academic Performance at Lowell

The academic achievement of black students at Lowell Intermediate School, where the study was conducted, lagged behind that of their white counterparts, as it did in Fairfax County and throughout the nation. The black students scored considerably lower on the standardized SRA tests given in the eighth grade as shown in Table 3.1.

The largest difference between the scores of black students and the other students occurred on the Educational Ability Series (EAS) which is considered to be a general measure of academic ability. The smallest differences in scores occurred in social studies. Analysis of the data by gender shows that in all categories, except science, the females scored from 2-17 percentiles higher than the males; black females scored higher than black males in all categories.

A survey of the semester grades of Lowell students indicated that 14% of all the students appeared on the "F List" due to one or more F grades, and 28% made the A-B Honor Roll. The black students who represent 14% of the Lowell population constituted 28% of those receiving F's and 4% of those getting all A's and B's.

Table 3.1 SRA Achievement Test Scores
in Percentiles

Lowell Intermediate School Grade 8 Spring 1987

Ethnic Group	Reading	Math	Language	Social Studies	Science	Educational Ability Series
White	72	83	75	78	70	79
Black	48	66	53	62	46	50
Hispanic	71	84	80	80	56	81
Asian	71	95	86	81	72	82
Average	68	83	73	76	69	74

Two black seventh graders and three black eighth graders were on the Honor Roll. None of the black students were among the fifteen seventh and eighth graders with all A's.

At the Awards Assembly at the end of school the black students were well represented in those receiving a school letter based upon points earned in school activities and service. They also received awards in music and sports, but none of the academic awards.

The black students were underrepresented in the Gifted/Talented program and overrepresented in the Special Education Program. In the G/T class of 46 students there were two black seventh graders. The special education program enrolled 32 students of whom 26 were black. A group of students designated as potential candidates for the high school vocational program was 50% black. No black students were enrolled in the eighth grade algebra or the advanced English class. The remedial or "slow" English and math classes were disproportionately black; 38% of the English and 32% of the math remedial classes were black. In the foreign language classes the black students were underrepresented, making up 10% of the enrollment of 50 students.

In all measures of academic achievement the black students at Lowell lagged behind their white, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts. When asked to account for this

discrepancy, the answers given by the students, their parents, and their teachers varied widely, as did the academic strategies employed by the students and the support given by their families. These variations in perceptions, strategies, and structure will be described in the following sections.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Black Student Culture
The Old Timers

During the thirty-year period following World War II Fairfax County underwent a period of rapid population growth and economic development. It was transformed from a sleepy agricultural county into a thriving suburban area for federal government workers and military personnel and a center for its own highly technical industry. To accommodate the growing number of school-age children the county built new schools at a fast rate; during the 1960's county planners boasted that a "new classroom opens every day in Fairfax County" (Reston Times, 1975). Lowell Intermediate School was designed in 1966 to accommodate approximately 1600 seventh and eighth graders in a six-square-mile area near the center of Fairfax County.

Four of the staff members of Lowell Intermediate School have taught at the school since its opening in the present site in September, 1967. During the construction

of the building in 1966-67, when the school existed in name only, they taught on a split shift in another intermediate school. During that twenty-year interval since the opening of Lowell, these teachers who refer to themselves as "old-timers" describe numerous changes which have occurred in the composition of the clientele served by the school and in specific attitudes and behaviors of the students.

When asked about the changes he had seen in the Lowell students one "old-timer" stated:

When the school first opened, we took in students from a much larger area--all the way out to Oak View, the Hillmeade area, and Devonshire. Those kids were from upper middle class families, and they were all college-bound. Their parents definitely encouraged them to do well in school so they could go on to college. The biggest change I see now is in attitudes ... these kids don't seem to care as much ... you see it in their language--the things they say to each other, girls as well as boys--and in the way they dress. Also, they don't spend the time at home studying--look at them on the bus ramp, going home without any books.

Another teacher, also present at Lowell since its opening, noted:

The biggest difference I see is in the single-parent families. When we first opened, there were very few students living with one parent only--now we have a majority who do--especially the black students. Also, we didn't have any students on welfare then--now we have a lot more. These parents just don't spend time with their kids ... they [the parents] don't care about school; it isn't important to them.

Changes in Student Population and Teacher Response

Research into the school boundaries for Lowell at the time of its opening indicated that it served a population composed of a large majority of white students from middle to upper class neighborhoods and of a small group of black students. Those black students lived in modest single family homes in a community founded by slaves freed after the Civil War. One teacher described the students in terms of their parents' socioeconomic status defined by their occupation and residential neighborhoods:

We had the colonels and lieutenant colonels in Devonshire; the captains and majors in Hillmeade; the GS 9's and 11's in Southport; and the

descendants of the freed slaves in Lincolntonville. We didn't have any high rises (apartment buildings), garden apartments, or townhouses back then.

When Lowell opened in 1967, the desegregation of Fairfax County Public Schools had been ordered by U.S. District Judge O. R. Lewis two years earlier. Although Virginia's official response to the Brown decision in 1954 was that of massive resistance to school desegregation, the schools in Northern Virginia, including Fairfax County, were never closed as they were in other parts of the state. In September of 1965 the integration of approximately 200 black students into formerly all white schools began. Most of the teachers at the new intermediate school--Lowell--had no experience teaching black students or working with black colleagues. One of the original teachers recalled:

When I first began teaching in Fairfax County, just out of college, everything was separate ... the black teachers taught in their schools, and the white teachers in theirs. The black teachers had their teachers' association, and we had ours. I had never been to school with blacks ... I hadn't taught any of them, and I just didn't know what to expect.

During the 1986-87 school year three blacks were on the Lowell staff: two teachers and one guidance counselor.

In the twenty-year period since its opening the Lowell student body has fluctuated in its size and its racial composition. In 1974 the school reached its maximum enrollment of 1600 students. Later on, as new schools were built, the school boundaries were redrawn, and students from the affluent neighborhoods of Devonshire and Avondale started attending other schools. Many of the families living in the area adjacent to the school saw their children graduate from the public schools and had no immediate, personal interest in the public school system--the situation for 51% of the family units in Fairfax County. Meanwhile, townhouses, high rise apartment buildings, and garden apartments were built on vacant lands or on formerly single family sites. These dwellings, more affordable than single family dwellings, attracted a wide variety of tenants and buyers. They included immigrant families, especially Orientals, Hispanics, and Afghans; professionals in the government, military or private sector, seeking mobility; and a few members of the working poor with subsidized housing.

Those teachers who were associated with Lowell since its opening attributed a decline in student performance to a change in student population and family

support for education. The math teacher described his perceptions of his black students' family backgrounds:

What do you expect of kids who grow up in these homes where there are no books, no magazines, no newspapers? They spend all their time watching TV ... they just don't care about getting an education.

That teacher's perception of black students living in culturally-deprived homes, devoid of any "worthwhile" reading matter, was shared by other Lowell teachers. Research into the reading habits and preferences of Lowell students indicated, however, that such stereotypical perceptions had little basis in reality. A recent survey on reading patterns of Lowell students indicated no significant differences in the responses of its black and white students. In an attempt to determine the magazines and newspapers which could be used by students for homework assignments, one teacher discovered that 90% of her students had a daily newspaper and/or magazine subscriptions. Nearly all of the black households received the Washington Post or the Fairfax Journal, and many of them subscribed to a news magazine (Time or Newsweek). Also, students reported reading a variety of magazines such as Ebony, Jet, and Essence, targeted to a black audience in addition to magazines devoted to

sports, fashion, and teenage interests.

Teacher Perceptions of Black Families

The dual themes of cultural deprivation and lack of parental concern occurred repeatedly in the analysis of student failure and underachievement made by the teachers. The teachers at Lowell, like those observed by Ogbu, believed that they were primarily responsible for the education of Lowell students and expected parents to seek their help and follow their suggestions. When questioned about parental involvement, the teachers indicated that they expected parents to make a phone call, write a note, or request a conference as evidence of their concern about their child's academic progress. Failure by the parents to take any of these steps was seen by the teachers as evidence of lack of parental interest.

One teacher expressed her exasperation with the lack of parental interest when she described Wendall, a black seventh grader who was failing her English class: "His parents just don't care. I keep sending those F-interims [interim quarterly reports] home, and I haven't gotten any response from his parents."

When Wendall's mother was questioned, she described her reluctance to contact his teacher:

I know Wendall and his English teacher don't get along ... but I tell him, you've got to

learn to get along with your teachers. When I was in high school, I had a teacher [black] who didn't like anybody in my family ... she gave my brothers and sisters a fit, but I worked so hard in that class, she had to give me an A. I told Wendall, you can't let a teacher get you down ... but I don't know if talking with her will do any good --- maybe I will though.

Later, Wendall's English teacher said she was "amazed" when Wendall's mother called to request a conference: "She really sounded nice on the telephone--very well-spoken and intelligent."

Elaine's social studies teacher was impressed with Elaine's parents: "They're really involved in school and will give the teacher all kinds of support." This involvement was also deemed worthy of comment by Elaine's sixth grade teacher on her report card notation: "Elaine continues to be interested and enthusiastic ... your continued home support has been a big influence in her success this year."

The teacher in the Learning Disabled Self-Contained (LDSC) program worked closely with parents in developing the Individualized Educational Prescriptions (IEPs) mandated by federal regulation. A majority of the students,

11 of 16, in the LDSC program were black. In describing the students in her program, she commented:

This year is the first year I've gotten any real support from the parents ... Usually the school ends up owning the problem. This year, for the first time I have some parents who place a priority on education ... still a majority of the parents fail to commit the time, energy, and money to support the needs of special kids.

The guidance director cited the lack of adequate home support in her analysis of the overrepresentation of black students in LDSC and LD Resource (LDR) programs. In order to qualify for a special educational program such as LDR or LDSC the student's test results must show a significant discrepancy between achievement potential and measured content knowledge and skill development--i.e. a difference between achievement goals and realities. She suggested:

Many students have these discrepancies--they just learn to compensate for them by getting a lot of help from home. The black students don't get this help at home, so they get placed in LD programs.

A survey of student records indicated that teachers did not always welcome parent involvement, however, especially when it conflicted with their own educational

judgements. Angela's experience in the sixth grade was an example of the teacher's sense of certainty and patronizing attitude toward the parents, described as "clientage mentality" by Ogbu.

Described as a capable and conscientious seventh grader, Angela, according to her records, had experienced some "difficulty in keeping up" in the sixth grade. Angela's mother recalled that she and Angela's teacher agreed to determine Angela's status--as a rising seventh grader or sixth grade repeater--before the end of the school year. Two weeks before the end of school, however, Angela's teacher told her she would be repeating the sixth grade. Angela's mother recalled her feelings and actions:

I was furious! We had an agreement, and that woman [the teacher] ignored it! I sent her a letter, that I typed at work, recounting the procedure that we had agreed on and asking why she had ignored our agreement. I didn't want Angela to fail; she was a big girl. I wanted to get a tutor for her, and I requested the names of all the books she'd been using. I sent a copy of the letter to the principal. Finally the teacher sent me a list of all the things Angela needed help with, and I got a

tutor for the summer, and she moved on to seventh grade. But that whole thing [incident] showed me that you have to fight to get what you want ... you can't just let the school tell you what to do.

The school area (division) social worker suggested that "teachers should call parents before the kid is in trouble. If they [the teachers] wait until it's too late, parents get defensive and hostile. They don't want teachers to tell them what they're doing wrong at home."

Other parents expressed their interest in being informed about their child's school progress and their belief that parents had the most concern about students and that the school could not always be trusted to act in behalf of the student's best interest.

In contrast, conversations with teachers about the black students at Lowell reflected the belief that black parents frequently made the wrong choices for their children and had priorities counter to those of the teachers. The math teacher announced that Lamonde just lost his second math book:

When I told him he'd have to pay for it, he said, "My momma told me she wasn't going to buy any more math books after the first [lost]

one"! I said, "Well, Lamonde, you'll just have to quit wearing those \$49 Adidas [shoes] you've been sporting"!

The other teachers present agreed that Lamonde and his friends were well dressed--with expensive sneakers and the latest in teenager fashions; they could not "imagine" where their parents got the money for those outfits.

Student conversation indicated, however, that careful shopping was a source of pride and accomplishment. One Monday morning three black girls were discussing their weekend activities. Elena told her friends, Kyndria and Maria, that her mother gave her \$50 to go shopping on the previous Saturday. She told them how she took the bus to Landmark Shopping Mall and went to Sears, Hechts, and Woodies (all department stores in the Mall) to look at things. Then she went back and bought a skirt, a blouse, a top, and some hose. She even had enough money to take a taxi home. Her friends were enthusiastic; "You did good, girl--you did real good to get all that for \$50."

A recurring lunch time conversational topic in the teachers' room was that of the welfare mother. One teacher lamented the situation of "the [black] welfare mothers who won't work and keep on having children that I have to pay for." Another teacher warned the group

that "we'll all be paying for the next generation if we don't teach them to do something so they can get a job."

A search of occupational status through school records and interviews with students and staff members confirmed, however, the existence of only two "welfare mothers" who did not work and received assistance through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The social worker affirmed that the parents of the black students work--many at two jobs--so that they can live in Fairfax County and send their children to school in the district. He noted: "It takes a lot of money to live in Fairfax County when a one bedroom apartment goes for \$500 a month." Those Lowell families which were headed by a working mother tended to have lower family incomes than two-parent families or those headed by working fathers. Some of the families qualified for food stamps, subsidized housing, or free or reduced-price school lunches.

The families at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum were considered noteworthy by the teachers. They described different students with comments such as, "Michelle comes from a very affluent family--her father owns a fuel oil company"; "Brent's family owns a beautiful single family house in Ravensworth"; Arthur's dad owns his own company"; "Allison's parents are both doctors." Most teachers, however, seemed to be unaware of the

occupational level of the black students' parents; they assumed that most of them were on a lower socioeconomic level.

Teacher Expectations of Black Academic Achievement

After the issue of the school system's report on minority education and programs in 1984 the board directed school officials to develop policies to promote black and Hispanic academic achievement. One strategy selected by the school system was a course designed to raise teacher expectations and thus promote student achievement. Several of the Lowell staff members took the course during the 1985-86 school year. All of the teachers were told, in general faculty meetings and in content area meetings, of the thrust to promote student achievement through higher teacher expectations.

When questioned about their own expectations, most Lowell teachers insisted that they had the highest expectations for all of their students. Interviews, conversations, and observations indicated, however, that the teachers' expectations were influenced by their perceptions of black culture frequently stereotypical in nature and that teachers were often unaware of the nature of their own perceptions and expectations of black students.

An example of the rigorous defense of teacher expectations occurred at a meeting of the school team,

comprised of the principal, three teachers, a counselor, and a parent--all white. There the issue of minority achievement was raised and one of the teachers responded firmly:

I don't understand this business of teachers' not having high expectations. I'm always telling my black students they can do better. I keep after Tyrell and Lamonde and Kyndria all of the time to work harder and get better grades.

Another teacher interjected:

I'm not sure it's that simple--just to tell students to do better. I suspect we have to do more ... and, as far as our expectations are concerned, I suspect that we do have lower expectations of our black students, based on our prior experience. If you've taught for some time and had very few black students who could perform as well as white students, I think you'd come to expect less of your black students. I just think that's human nature.

The group fell silent after her comments, and she said later that she wasn't sure if they agreed or not--"at any rate, they didn't disagree."

During an interview with a young male teacher, he

stated flatly:

It doesn't do much good to talk about raising teacher expectations when we have teachers who call them "niggers" in private! I hate that ... it makes me furious! My best friend in high school was black ... when people looked at us, they couldn't tell who was black and who was white, we were so much alike. When people use that term, I just walk away!

Another teacher described the perceptions and expectations of blacks that some of her colleagues revealed to her:

When I first came to Lowell I heard a few teachers using the term 'nigger' in the teachers' room and they told racist jokes openly. Then I noticed they stopped saying 'nigger' and told their jokes very quietly to their friends or those people who would appreciate them ... now it's been a couple of years since I've heard them do either one. It's interesting, though ... sometimes I still hear teachers say things like, "Well, the black kids call each other 'nigger'," as if that made it all right ... I believe if you refer to a black kid as a 'nigger'--even if he doesn't hear it, he knows you feel that way inside.

The researcher never heard the term 'nigger' used by any staff member but was told an "AIDS joke" in which two blacks from D.C. were the hapless victims. The terms "us" and "them", however, surfaced frequently in conversations. One day, early in the school year, an interchange was observed between a black eighth grade boy and the school finance secretary. Edward would not be able to get his books until he paid a fine from the previous year. When Edward protested that he had paid the fine, the secretary told him he would have to produce the receipt or pay the fine. As they talked, the secretary's voice grew louder, and Edward's grew softer. Finally, Edward walked out, and the finance secretary confided, "You've got to watch them every second, or they'll take advantage of you. Give them an inch, and they'll take a mile."

Subsequently Edward's social studies teacher offered to pay for the book. She was sure that Edward had paid for the book, but she was not sure that she (the teacher) had given him the receipt the previous school year. Two days later, Edward's mother found her cancelled check, and Edward got his textbooks for all of his classes. Some of his teachers had already given him his books, despite school policy prohibiting the issuance of books to students with unpaid fines. One teacher suggested, "What good

does it do for a kid to sit in class without books?
Besides, Edward's a nice kid, and I trust him anyway."

On occasion teachers' remarks seem to reflect their own ambiguous feelings toward their black students and their expectations for them. One day in the teachers' room during lunch, the math and social studies teachers were discussing Mary and Richard, both straight A students. Mary, born of Ethiopian parents, described herself as black, as did Richard, the son of black-white parents. After discussing the outstanding work of the two students, one teacher said, very quietly to the other, "You know they both call themselves blacks ... and I don't know why. They could pass for whites or foreigners." The other teacher responded, "No, I didn't understand it either." The unspoken implication was: why would anyone call him/herself a black when he/she could pass for white?

One frequently-voiced teacher expectation was that some of the students at Lowell--black and white--would turn out badly--i.e. ending up incarcerated or killed. Teachers who had seen such fates befall their students were more likely to have this expectation. During an observation of students in the cafeteria the researcher asked one of the teachers on cafeteria duty about the students--mostly black and Hispanic--sitting at his table. His response was, "These kids aren't motivated ... some

of them will end up in jail. I've seen it happen too often."

The teachers at Lowell had relatively little contact with black parents and consequently, little knowledge of the families and home lives of their black students. They generally assumed that they, the teachers, knew what educational program was best for their students. Parents were generally believed to be disinterested and uninvolved in the educational experiences of their children or incapable of making appropriate educational decisions for them. Black parents were rarely contacted until the student was in serious trouble--for disciplinary or academic reasons. Most teachers seemed to have limited educational expectations--mostly implicit--for their black students. Conversations with students and observations of their behaviors indicated student awareness of those expectations, as will be described in subsequent sections.

Educational Attitudes and Goals of Black Families

In The Lowell Community

Parents' Educational Background and Expectations

Teachers and staff members at Lowell generally believed that black students did not achieve academically on the same level as their white classmates because their parents did not value education and did not "push" their children to get an education. This belief was accompanied

with the assumption that few of the parents of the black students at Lowell had received more than a minimum (i.e. high school diploma) of education themselves. The data collected from interviews and observations indicates that both assumptions were invalid.

The general educational level of residents in Fairfax County is high--14.7 years of schooling. School data collected in 1981 at Lowell indicated that 56% of all parents had received some form of higher education; 36% had ended their formal education with high school graduation; and 8% had not graduated from high school. A survey of the 46 black students who were interviewed indicated that 60% of their parents had received some form of higher education, and only 7% had failed to graduate from high school; 33% ended their formal education with high school graduation.

The educational experiences and attitudes of the adult black community of Lowell tended to fall into three categories: (a) education as a continuation of family tradition, (b) education as a means of upgrading current occupational status or entering new fields, and (c) education as a means of occupational escape, not previously available to blacks. Their parents' educational attitudes and experiences in all categories were referenced when the black students were asked to describe their own educational

goals and expectations.

The smallest group of parents appeared to be in the first category. They grew up in black professional families who encouraged their children to get an education as preparation for the traditional professions of medicine, law, ministry, or education. These parents noted the high expectations of their parents and the status conferred upon educated blacks by like-minded members of the black community. Several parents spoke of the high regard in which teachers, including whites, were held by the black community: "We have a long history of respecting education and the teacher who has the education." Another adult added the caveat, however, "that respect can be lost when parents don't believe they can trust the teachers anymore."

Students who came from families with a tradition of higher education reported that their grandparents played a significant role in shaping their own educational plans and aspirations. Elaine, a Lowell student, had an older brother Roy who was an outstanding soccer and basketball player. When she was asked about Roy's future plans, she said:

My father and grandfather are taking care of that. They're handling all the calls from the colleges and coaches. They want to make sure

that Roy gets a good offer from a college that has a strong academic program ... and [a school that] makes sure that its athletes graduate. My grandfather is a high school principal, and he knows all about colleges and scholarships.

Tracey, the daughter of a teacher and granddaughter of a dentist described her grandfather as the most important person in her life:

He worked hard to get an education to get where he is now ... he didn't have much money when he was growing up, and he had to work to be a dentist. Then he worked hard to support his family ... he kept on learning after he got out of school--foreign languages and that sort of thing. He tells me, "Strive to be the best you can"! ... My parents say the same thing ... they both want to be something more than they are now.

The majority of the black students interviewed had parents who used education to enter new professions or to advance in their current job situation. These families occupied all levels of the occupational hierarchy and varied widely in socioeconomic status. Mr. Jenkins, friend of student Teddy Miller and his family, explained how

he prepared for a career in computer programming which led to opening his own firm:

When I went to college, the counselors tried to put me in psychology or sociology, like they do all black students. But, I wanted to get into something new with a future, like computers. So I insisted on going into computer science ... it wasn't easy. I had a lot of (white) professors who thought I didn't belong there, but I stuck it out until I got that degree ... that's what I needed to get started.

Mr. Jenkins also spoke of how his peers, black males in their late 20's, were shocked to find that his financial rewards came from his occupational and educational status. He recounted a chance meeting with a former high school acquaintance:

One day I ran into this guy I went to high school with. He saw the Porsche [Mr. Jenkins' car] and said, "What're you doing now"? I told him I was working in computers. He didn't believe me ... he thought I was a pimp, and that's how I got the car. He couldn't believe I worked for it; that I earned it. He kept on saying, "Come on now, who're you

pimping for"?

Edward's father was a garage mechanic who went back to the local community college to learn how to repair cars with computerized control systems. Similarly, Arthur explained how his parents decided to open their own graphic arts business and took courses so they could get started:

My parents worked for a graphics company, somewhere around here. My father decided he wanted to start his own company, but he didn't know enough about the business end of it ... so he and my mom took classes in accounting at NOVA [Northern Virginia Community College] ... now he's the president and my mom is ... executive vice-president, I think it is.

For many students who had parents serving in the military or working in the government sector, additional educational training was just another aspect of their parents' jobs. Esther described her father's situation: "He's always taking courses in the Army, so he just buys me books to review my math and English every time he has to buy books for his courses." Richard's father, now working as a government consultant after his retirement from the Navy, completed his master's degree in business administration while in the service. According to Richard,

his father got a "big promotion" due to his new degree and "now he's all set."

The last category of black parents viewed education as an escape from menial, low-paying jobs in which they had been or were presently engaged. These parents gave their children this message: "You've got an education so you can do better than I have." Some of these parents had been engaged in a long-term struggle to improve their own socioeconomic status.

Mrs. Simpson, the divorced mother of two teenaged daughters who attended Lowell, recounted her efforts to become financially independent. Pregnant when she was 14, Mrs. Simpson left school in a nearby rural county after the seventh grade. The school had no programs for expectant mothers, and her own family "didn't look for any alternatives." Her husband and father of her children worked as a horse trainer on a large estate, and Mrs. Simpson worked as a housekeeper and babysitter for the estate owner and cared for her own three children, as well. After separating from her husband, she moved to Fairfax County where she received subsidized housing and participated in a federally-sponsored MANPOWER program for job training and the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. After the MANPOWER program placed her in Marriott Hotel as a maid and in Bendix

Corporation as a welder, she decided that she needed more training for a better paying, more stimulating job. She found another government-sponsored program at NOVA in secretarial training which she completed.

That training eventually got her a job as a secretary in the Instructional Materials Production Center of the Fairfax County School System. During the interview several important themes emerged from Mrs. Simpson's telling of her life story. Among these themes were her belief in the importance of education as a "key in getting ahead," especially for a woman.

I tell my daughters, school is important ... nobody is going to give you a break, you've got to have the education to get that job ... don't count on a man. Husbands go away--pass away or walk away. A woman needs to be something on her own. You've got to take courses in school, even if you don't like them ... and you've got to do your job well, even if it's just cooking or making beds.

When asked about finding the money to send her daughters to college, Mrs. Simpson replied, "Funds are available. I'll just have to look for them ... maybe talk to the counselors or school people."

The last news the researcher had of Mrs. Simpson was

through her daughter Mary who told me that her mother just finished her word processing course: "Now she's going to be able to move up in her job." Mrs. Simpson's present employer indicated, however, that she had been unable to get a better job outside his office even with his help. He commented that "even though I write her glowing recommendations and set up interviews for her [in the County School System], she can't move up. I think it's because she's black."

Other parents who were unable to show their children that education or training had made any difference in their own socioeconomic status could only tell them that education was important for their generation. Mr. Bartlett, father of Lowell student Robert and his nine brothers and sisters, dropped out of school in Mississippi in the late 1940's to come "north" with his parents to look for work and a better life.

Mr. Bartlett and his parents found work as tenant farmers in Clifton, which was then a rural part of Fairfax County, and Mr. Bartlett worked at an assortment of jobs, mostly low-paying and requiring manual labor. Robert's grandfather eventually saved enough money to buy five acres of farmland in Clifton--an investment of large economic potential since developed residential sites in Clifton sell today for upwards of \$200,000/acre. Several

years ago Robert's father bought a house near Lowell in an enclave of mostly black families and raised his family there. A truck driver for Washington Gas Company for 15 years, he still helped to support three of Robert's sisters who lived at home with their children; one sister was divorced, one was separated, and one was waiting with her husband and child to move into a new townhouse. Mrs. Bartlett, a high school graduate, worked full-time as a government (federal) clerk and part-time as a nursing home aide.

Mr. Bartlett said he regretted that he never had the opportunity to get an education but he wanted his children to finish high school and go further if they could: "I got along okay without a high school diploma, but you can't do that today--even a high school diploma doesn't mean you can get a job."

Mr. Stevens, another dropout and truck driver, said, "I tell Scott [his son] you've got to get an education so you can do better than me ... you don't want to drive a truck all your life."

Other students indicated that their parents held up the example of the dropout as something to be avoided. In describing his parents' attitude, Edward said, "My dad's always talking about somebody who dropped out of school. He says, 'Don't you make that mistake!'"

Tyrell talked about driving through the streets of Washington with his cousin:

He points out those people on the street corners, drinking wine and smoking pot. Brian says, "Don't you be doing that, Tyrell ... there's nothing there for you."

Students reported that their parents passed on another message in regard to preparation for occupational opportunities and economic advancement. That second message, based on their parents' experiences involving discrimination and lack of opportunity, was that blacks must be better trained and better educated--"twice as good"--to get the same job as a white person. Over and over the students repeated this theme; Angela talked about her mother's job with a government agency: "My mother said that when a white person in her office makes a mistake, that's just an error ... but when a black makes a mistake, that's a disaster."

Mr. Jenkins, described his job as the "token black" in a computer firm. He shook his head and smiled as he recalled the situation:

I found out in my old job that when I did good work, which was most of the time, everybody was all smiles and I got handshakes and congratulations. But let me make a mistake ...

just a tiny little mistake, and it was a different story ... a big deal, a really big deal.

Even if their parents or other adults did not verbalize this notion of higher standards for blacks, the students seemed to accept it as a part of their belief system.

As Mary, a straight A student who wants to attend Harvard, Yale, Brown, or Princeton said:

If I'm going up for a job against a white girl and we're both equal and the person hiring us is white, the other girl will get the job. I'll have to be better to get it ... my parents don't believe this, but I do.

Student Educational and Occupational Expectations

Their belief that higher standards would be required for blacks did not prevent the students from having high expectations--educational and occupational--for themselves. Of the 46 students interviewed, 89% indicated that they were interested in getting some form of higher education. Those students who did not state any interest in higher education included those who had "no idea" what they would do after high school--but most of the students had high aspirations. In describing their occupational choices students seemed to be most influenced by the careers they saw portrayed in the media and by those of

their parents or some other figure significant to them. About one quarter of the boys expressed a keen interest in professional sports--either basketball or football. Many of the girls wanted to become actresses or models.

The boys interested in sports seemed confident of their ability to make the professional teams. Arthur's self-confidence was typical. Although his current height was just over five feet, he insisted that he was a "really good basketball player and would grow." This optimism was not shared by the coach and senior physical education teacher at the school. He suggested that very few of his students had the self-discipline or skills necessary for professional status. The coach cited Evan, a tall eighth grade basketball player as an example: "Evan is good, but he doesn't want to take the time to perfect his skills." In a later interview, Evan told me, "I like to shoot baskets ... I don't like to be the guard, like Coach wants me to be ... that's boring."

Some of the students who were interested in sports described the need for another job or career to fall back on in case of injury or something else which might derail their plans. They viewed college athletics as a means of entering professional sports. A few of them spoke of the difficulty of balancing sports and academics in college. Nearly all of them viewed the death of Len Bias,

a University of Maryland player who died of a cocaine overdose just days after signing a professional basketball contract in June of 1986, as a tragedy. Evan summed up their feelings: "It was terrible ... he had it made ... money and the chance to play, and he got stupid."

Modeling was one of the most frequently named career choices of the girls. Some of them had done modeling for church and social organizations; others spoke of trying to persuade their parents to pay for a modeling course. This interest in modeling was reflected in the participation of the black students in Lowell's Spring Fashion Show in which 40% of the participating students were black and all of the male models were black.

Those students who did not opt for the most glamorous careers indicated a broad range of interests: law, medicine, engineering, teaching, journalism, computer science, and business. Other students mentioned members of their family who had found security in working for an organization such as an airline company or the military. Generally the students were quite optimistic about achieving their goals. Trini spoke in highly animated fashion about her future:

Let me see ... there are so many things I could do, I don't know where to start! I could be an actress, a model, an engineer, a

business woman, a doctor. I just want to have a beautiful house, lots of money, get married at 31--you know, live the American dream.

Few of the students who expressed an interest in a particular profession were aware of the educational requirements and training for the job. Richard was an exception. With the goal of becoming an astronaut, he described the course he had charted for himself to the Naval Academy, pilot training, and then astronaut training. Richard's father had a naval career, and Richard indicated that they had explored alternatives to the Naval Academy should he not be accepted. At the beginning of the year when he was initially interviewed, Richard was described as highly capable and strongly motivated by his teachers. Toward the end of the school year, however, his teachers saw his achievement and motivation lagging and speculated that some type of personal identity crisis had caused a change in his behavior. These changes in his behavior will be described more fully in the discussion of student academic strategies.

The aspirations of other students seemed incongruent with their school achievement to date. Marta, whose mother was from the Dominican Republic, expressed a strong desire to return to her country as a doctor and open a clinic. When asked about her failing grades (she failed

the seventh grade) Marta asserted that they "wouldn't affect" her future career goals.

Many of the students interviewed had professional career goals but poor academic records. They spoke of becoming doctors, lawyers, computer experts, and professionals even when their passing to the next grade level was in doubt. "I always thought I'd like to have 'Doctor' in front of my name," said Scott, whose intermediate school grade point average was a 1.4 on a 4.0 scale.

The black students at Lowell had high career expectations for themselves and generally perceived education as the means of achieving their ambitions. Their professed goals, however, were unrealistic based upon their understanding of the academic proficiency and educational training needed for professional careers. Nor did the students exhibit much awareness of the extraordinary talent, discipline, or good fortune needed to achieve success in a "celebrity field" such as athletics, modeling, or entertaining.

Lowell blacks did not appear to perceive a primary limitation on their aspirations or the "job ceiling," described by Ogbu in his Stockton study. They did perceive a "secondary job ceiling," however, which they expressed in the comments on the need for blacks to be better qualified if they were to compete with whites

and other groups for the same jobs.

The types of academic strategies selected by the students which impacted upon their achieving their ambitions are described in the following section.

Black Students' Coping Strategies and
Behaviors in School

Introduction

Although the majority of black students expressed interest in ambitious careers and the requisite education for them, their observed behaviors indicated a failure, for most of them, to select appropriate academic strategies to achieve their goals. They never articulated the notion of a primary job ceiling or a limitation upon their occupational expectations, except for the need for better qualifications by blacks; but they did express, by voice and by action, the belief that academic achievement was primarily associated with whites. The attitude that getting good grades conflicted with the student's black identity surfaced repeatedly in individual interviews and in group discussions.

Students either presented the idea as part of their own value system or as a belief held by other black students. Edward commented, "Yeah, I know what you're talking about ... some people think only white kids can get good grades, but I don't believe that." Edward, with

his C-average, was considered to be a prime example of the underachieving student by his teachers. "He's so pleasant and polite, but he doesn't begin to fulfill his potential" was his seventh grade science teacher's evaluation. All of the students acknowledged that academic achievement, as defined by whites, was either unacceptable or definitely unusual black behavior.

In band the teacher raised the issue of black achievement with his students. The class consisted of nearly equal numbers of black, white, and Asian students. The teacher described a panel discussion he had heard on a Washington, D.C. radio station, WHUR from Howard University, on black attitudes toward school. He asked the students what their ideas were on the subject.

Lester, a seventh grade boy born in Sierra Leone, educated in New York City elementary schools, and self-described as a black American, voiced his opinion quickly and firmly. He stated, "Getting good grades is for white kids ... if a black kid gets good grades, the other kids [black] think he is acting white." The other black students--all boys--agreed: "You can't be black and get good grades."

When the band teacher asked them if they could think of any exceptions to these attitudes and behaviors at Lowell, they grew quiet. Then the names of several black

students--all girls--were mentioned: "They get good grades and they're okay." The teacher said to them:

When I was in high school, some of my best friends were black, because we were into sports and music. None of us thought good grades were important until the end of high school when we had to decide what we were going to do with our lives ... then we wanted to go to college and grades counted. When you get older, you'll change your minds.

Throughout the discussion the white students and the Asian students kept silent. The band teacher later reflected that the white and the Asian students either "hadn't thought about the question, agreed with the black kids, or were too intimidated by them to disagree." He added, "I think kids think about these things and want to talk about them. Most teachers are so locked into their schedules, they don't take the time ... but I think it's important to discuss these things."

David, a black eighth grader who scored in the 99th percentile on all of his SRA tests said, "You [a black male] can't get good grades unless you're strong." When asked to explain his comments, he shook his head and spoke very softly:

I mean you've got to be strong, like good in

sports or lifting weights or something like that ... if you're an athlete it's okay, but if you're just an ordinary kid, you can't survive. If you get good grades, the other kids'll just 'kill you' ... your life will be awful.

In all of his classes, despite his measured academic potential, David maintained a very low profile and achieved modest academic success with a B-C average.

The conflict between academic achievement and black student identity was exemplified in Richard's behavior and the changes in it during the school year. Richard, a handsome, alert, athletic seventh grader was born of black and white parents and adopted as an infant by a white couple. He had three adopted siblings who were also of racially mixed backgrounds. Since his father was a naval officer, Richard and his family moved frequently and Richard "adapted beautifully and made friends everywhere," according to his parents. He attended a Fairfax County elementary school that had a vast majority of white students for two years and entered Lowell as a seventh grader in the fall of 1986; in both schools he was placed in the Gifted/Talented Program.

Early in the year Richard's teachers at Lowell lauded his virtues: enthusiasm; ability; rapport with the

students and teachers; and general interest in people, places, and things beyond the realm of the narrow range of the textbook. His aims were high; he wanted to attend the Naval Academy at Annapolis, become a naval pilot, and eventually train to be an astronaut. Most of Richard's friends, white and Oriental students, had similarly lofty ambitions.

By February, however, Richard's behavior, in and out of school, had changed drastically. His work habits deteriorated: he forgot his books and papers; he did homework assignments and research papers, but did not turn them in; when asked about his work, his response was, "I don't care." His behavior in class also changed; he talked "constantly," interrupted the teacher and his classmates, and asked to leave the classroom frequently. His English teacher observed that in her class, he had new black friends, Scott and Joey, whom she considered to be a "bad influence" on anyone. When questioned about his behavior, Richard's responses to his teachers were, "It's my business," and "I don't care."

When Richard's teachers contacted his mother, she agreed that his behavior at home had changed also: "he's driving me crazy, too." She described his new interest in rapping [a type of black street music played by groups such as RUN DMC and The Fat Boys popular among Lowell

black students that year] and chance comments from Richard such as "Black is best," or "Black is number one."

Richard's parents came to school for a conference with his teachers and expressed their bewilderment with the "new Richard," His mother, obviously concerned, said:

I just don't understand this new behavior ... we've always taught Richard that color isn't important. It's the kind of person you are inside that matters ... he never paid any attention to color before, and we've lived all over the United States. I just don't know what's happened to him.

Richard's teachers and counselors, one of whom was black, suggested that Richard was going through a search for identity, typical of all adolescents. His counselor told his parents:

In Richard's case that search is compounded by his being black ... and he is black according to the laws of out state ... we don't live in a colorless society ... he has to come to terms with that [being black] and decide what being black means to him. Then he'll be ready to get on with his life.

Later Richard's counselor confided, "Richard will probably 'make it'. He's light-skinned, and that will

be in his favor with other blacks, especially if he's an achiever."

When the school year ended, Richard's grades had dropped from A's to C's, giving him a B average. He had chosen not to participate in the G/T program next year. His band teacher had arranged for Richard to take private lessons from a black musician, a friend of the teacher's. His teachers agreed with his counselor's evaluation: "Right now his life is on hold; we've just got to wait to see what happens."

Both male and female students agreed that it was more acceptable for a black female to strive for and receive good grades. When eighth graders were asked to describe the "most popular," the "best all-around," and the "most likely to succeed" students, the same girls were frequently mentioned: Elaine, Allison, and Toni. These girls were the only black girls who made the A/B Honor Roll. Of the boys named to the "list," only John, a student new to the school in the eighth grade, appeared on the Honor Roll. And, neither the girls nor the boys cited as most popular were immune from peer criticism.

When Allison presented her science project to the class, all of the classmates listened attentively--all, except Darrell. A large, 15-year-old eighth grader, Darrell was described as very "powerful and manipulative"

by his teachers. He interrupted Allison's report by making noises, trying to engage other students in conversation, and asking Allison numerous questions, unrelated to her report. The teacher sent Darrell from the room so that Allison, who had become by then quite disconcerted, could finish her report. Later the teacher asked Darrell to explain his behavior. He spoke freely to his teacher:

I hate that bitch! She's such a goody-goody!
She thinks she's so smart ... she's always
running around, talking about school and her
grades and classes and all that ... she tries
to suck up to her teachers. I hate her!

Although it was not stated in such violent terms, Elaine received similar criticism from her peer group. During a discussion with the black students in an eighth grade math class, the topics of student behavior and achievement were raised. Trini, a highly articulate and socially perceptive student turned to Elaine: "You know, Elaine, from the way you talk and dress and act, some people think you might as well be white. Now, I don't believe that but I'm just telling you what people say about you." Elaine replied, "I know that, but that's not my problem ... that's their problem. I'm going to do what I have to do for me." Trini backed off: "Well I know that ... and I didn't say that I thought you acted

white ... just that other [black] kids said it."

Thus, black students had the perception, based on their experience, that academic achievement for black students would elicit criticism from many of their peers, especially the males. Students either accepted the belief that academic achievement was at odds with their culture, rejected the belief, or reached some compromise with it. Their decision of how to deal with that important aspect of the black student value system was reflected in the behaviors and coping strategies they used in and out of the social setting.

About one-fourth of the students chose strategies of active involvement with the academic process which promoted conventional academic success. A smaller number chose strategies allowing for total disengagement with the academic process and academic failure. The third group--the majority of black students--showed neutral coping behaviors which were between these extremes of traditional school involvement with the subsequent varying degrees of academic success. In the following pages these different student behaviors and coping strategies will be described.

Attendance

One of the simplest academic strategies used by any student is to attend class. When asked if there were any differences in attendance patterns of black and white

students at Lowell the assistant principal reflected the general administrative opinion:

No, I don't think so ... I don't think the blacks have any poorer attendance records than the whites, although both groups have more absences than the Asians. We only took two kids to court this year. One was Mohammed X [a black seventh grader in the Physically Handicapped Program] who had a lot of medical problems ... his parents just wouldn't or couldn't change his bandages so he could come to school. The other student was Donna [a white eighth grader] ... she had so many emotional problems. The courts can't really do too much, but sending students and their parents to court does get their attention ... we've never had any big problem in getting our students to come to school.

A student's absence was considered an excused absence when the student was ill, had a death in the family, celebrated a religious holiday, or when a parent arranged in advance for a student to be out on a family trip or for a similar event. The parent had to contact the school by telephone or in writing to confirm that the student's absence should be excused. If the parent did not contact

the school on the day of the absence, the attendance secretary tried to reach the parent. Students whose absences were excused were allowed to make up any school work they have missed. Teachers were required, by county school regulations, to provide assignments for students who were on Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) or are in an Alternate Learning Program (ALP), the in-school suspension program.

At the intermediate level the principal had more discretionary power to determine the impact of absenteeism upon a student's grade. At Lowell student absenteeism was considered to be excessive when it exceeded ten percent of the 180 days of school attendance required by the state. Mohammed X and Donna, who were referred to the juvenile court system, had missed 53 and 47 days, respectively.

The average Lowell student missed 7.2 days of school during the 1986-87 school year. A survey of attendance records indicated that black students (14% of the student body) were proportionately represented in the groups of students having average or below average absenteeism and in the group who had excessive absenteeism. Data on excessive absenteeism, 18 days or more, showed that 17% were black; 75% were white; 4% were Asian; and 4% were Hispanic.

Three of the students with excessive absences had

health and/or psychological problems, or family problems, according to the assistant principal. Two of those students were enrolled in the Physically Handicapped Program, and the absences of one were considered legitimate by the administration. The other student and his parents were taken to court because the attendance officer and administration believed his 52 days of absence to be excessive and unreasonable. The third student was referred to a drug treatment program and was finally placed in a court-sponsored program designed to avoid incarceration of juveniles.

Of the total black population at Lowell, 7% had an excessive number of absences; 22% had an above-average rate of absenteeism; and 71% had an average or below-average rate of absenteeism. An analysis of the data on tardiness indicates, however, that black students were overrepresented in unexcused tardies and slightly underrepresented in the excused tardies. Most unexcused tardies were due to a student's oversleeping or missing the school bus. The black students constituted 42% of the unexcused tardies and 11% of the excused tardies.

Although the black students were overrepresented in the number of unexcused tardies, only a small number of eight students were involved; they were the "frequent offenders" and had a variety of reasons for being late.

The most frequent reason cited was oversleeping. Lamonde said:

My mother leaves for work at 6:30, and I'm supposed to get up at 7:15 when my clock goes off, but sometimes I just roll over and turn it off. The next thing I know it's 9:30, and I have to walk to school ... and I don't get here 'til 10:30 and I've missed the first two periods [math and physical education class].

Kyndria, a seventh grade girl who was in Lamonde's math class agreed: "It's hard to make yourself get up when everybody's gone."

Most of the students who were frequently tardy came to school on their own and managed to do their work.

Typical of this group was Michelle who stated emphatically:

My mother'll kill me if I stay out of school ... so when I wake up late, I try to hurry up and go on in. It's better to be late than to miss a whole day. Besides, it's boring at home with nothing to do but watch TV and the soaps ... you don't know what's going on and you miss out on everything.

Some of the black students at Lowell used frequent tardiness and absenteeism as effective strategies to avoid engagement with the traditional learning process.

Two of the students who were frequently absent--Darrell and Scott--were also frequently tardy without a valid excuse. When they were in school, Darrell and Scott, who were slightly older and more physically mature than the other students, were described as "disruptive" and "troublesome" by their teachers. Consequently, both boys were frequently sent to the office and suspended, either in the ALP or OSS programs.

When either of the boys was absent for any reason their teachers were delighted. "Thank God!" was the most frequent response to the news of either's absence, as the news traveled from one teacher to another. Even their classmates joined in the spirit of the occasion by bringing advance notice to the teacher, "Ms. Brown, do I have good news for you! Darrell's [or Scott's] absent today"! Also obvious was the relief that some students felt when Darrell or Scott was absent, because of the bullying strategies they used when they were present.

When asked about his frequent absences, Scott answered:

My Daddy is always telling me how important school is ... he doesn't want me to grow up like he did, with no education ... but, I don't know ... school's just not the place for me ... it's boring.

The school administrators and counselors considered Scott to be a "bright kid with lots of potential, but a lot of emotional problems." After the first quarter in which Scott had been referred to the office and suspended for fighting and intimidating other students, the administration referred him for placement in a county program for the emotionally disturbed. He was not accepted. The school then sought to place him in the school-based Learning Disabled Self-Contained (LDSC) program for which he was found eligible in May. After placement in the LDSC program Scott's attendance and promptness to class improved slightly, and the behavioral disturbances in which he was involved declined slightly. The assistant principal who had worked with Scott and his father reflected upon the case:

Scott is just a good example of a kid that gets lost in the public school system. We just don't have a place for him. He's not crazy enough for the ED program and for years they said he was too bright for the LD program. He has problems, and we can't help him ... there's no place for kids like Scott in our system.

When asked if he thought more black students had problems like Scott's the assistant principal responded affirmatively: "We have more black males with severe behavior and

emotional problems than any other group." Darrell also echoed Scott's dislike of school:

I hate school--man, I hate it. You have to sit in a desk, listen to some "Johnson" [Darrell's way of referring to his teachers, out of their hearing, usually] tell you what to do ... and then they make you do work, write with a pencil and do stuff ... it makes my brain hurt! I'm not kidding you. I get headaches when I have to come to school! My brain can't take all that work!

Darrell and Scott used absenteeism, tardiness, and disruptive behavior very effectively to manipulate their educational experiences. Through absences, late arrivals, and suspensions each managed to reduce the amount of time spent in the classroom by one-fourth or one-fifth of the 180 days of attendance required by the state--a record unmatched by any other students in the school.

Classroom Behaviors

School Expectations

At the beginning of the school year students were given an orientation assembly on the first day of school. They were reminded that education is "serious business" at Lowell and they were expected to conform to certain guidelines of behavior. These guidelines included the

following: come to class promptly and with the necessary materials; behave responsibly by doing classwork and homework; respect the rights of others, including teachers and students. Students were also exhorted to get involved in extracurricular activities and in service projects for Lowell and the Lowell community. Later these guidelines, set forth in a Student Handbook of Rights and Responsibilities, were discussed in a homeroom period. The students were required to sign a statement, kept on file in the office, that they understood their rights and responsibilities. Every teacher was told by the administrative staff that it was the teacher's responsibility to explain his/her grading policy, class rules, and general behavioral and academic expectations during the first week of school.

Promptness and Materials

Lowell students had three minutes to change classes and were expected to be seated when the tardy bell rang. After a student had been tardy, without a pass from the office or a teacher, the student was given a detention--during lunch or after school. Relatively few students--black or white--were habitually late to class. The black students who were frequently tardy to class were those who were also frequently absent or late to school in the mornings, such as Scott, Darrell, or Robert.

A more frequently used strategy to avoid work in

the class was that of coming to class without materials. Robert used this strategy in every class, including health and physical education. Typically he came to class on time, but without his textbook and/or notebook or gym suit and asked the teacher to let him go back to his locker, the cafeteria, previous classroom, or wherever he had left the item. If the teacher gave Robert permission to "take the pass," he left and returned 10-15 minutes later--sometimes with the item and sometimes not. When he returned with the materials necessary for class, Robert started to work--some 20 minutes behind his classmates--and rarely completed his class assignments. Some of Robert's teachers got disgusted with his forgetfulness and refused to let him leave the room. When that happened, Robert either did nothing or spent 10-15 minutes trying to borrow materials from his classmates. And that also disgusted his teachers.

Teddy used a similar strategem to avoid participation in the 20-minute Sustained Silent Reading program which occurred daily at the beginning of second period. At least twice a week he came without his book and asked to go to his locker to get it. He used that strategy very successfully until the principal discovered Teddy's "fooling around in the hall" and told all of his teachers not to let him out of class. Later Teddy discovered the

magazines his teacher brought in for Silent Reading and usually read The New Yorker or Travel and Leisure.

These strategies of not bringing classroom materials were not used solely by black students, but the black students were overrepresented in the group using these strategies, especially black males. These students, like Robert and Teddy, were not perceived as rude, threatening, or hostile or as major behavior problems by their teachers or other students. Neither were they viewed as successful students; rather they were judged to be working below their potential, close to failure, disinterested, and minor disturbances in the classroom. Their English teacher remarked sardonically: "If Robert and Teddy put as much effort into doing their work as they do in getting out of their work they'd be A students." The other students, black and white, variously described their behavior as "foolish," "weird," "crazy," or "Teddy, just being Teddy."

Classroom Interactions with Teachers and Students

The black students at Lowell who were most academically successful were observed to take responsibility for their learning and to seek the help and support of others-- teachers, parents, friends, and peers--when they thought it was needed. These students adopted strategies of active engagement with the academic process; they were

quiet and attentive in class; they did their homework and classwork; they were polite and pleasant to their teachers and classmates; and they never caused any trouble.

Elaine was an academically successful eighth grader who used her self-discipline and coping strategies to achieve her goals, in and out of school. In class she did all of the things which elicited positive teacher response, but, more significantly, she was one of the few students to ask for help or clarification from the teacher. In her math class she was observed making notes while her teacher explained a point. At first the observer thought she was writing a note to another student because voluntary note-taking was a rare occurrence in classrooms at Lowell. Later Elaine asked the teacher to work another sample problem for additional practice, so that she could "get the idea better."

In social studies class Elaine "ran into" economics in the spring and "didn't know what hit her." She went to her counselor for help and asked him to set up a conference with her mother and social studies teacher. Afterwards Elaine analyzed her encounter with economics:

Well, you know black kids just don't have experience with economics like white kids do ... we don't sit around and listen to our parents talk about buying stocks and bonds. We'd

never talked like that in my family ... so I had to get my teacher to give me some extra help with it. I still think it's boring, but she let me make up the first test [that] I failed ... so I got a C+ on the unit.

Elaine's guidance counselor discussed her willingness to seek--even demand--help:

Elaine is really an unusual case ... I have such a hard time getting kids to go to their teachers for help ... even to talk to them. And most of the time it's the student and the teacher who need to be talking to each other ... I don't need to be involved.

The willingness of students to seek additional help or to take responsibility for their own learning was not, however, always appreciated by their teachers. These students were sometimes viewed as "coming on too strong" by their teachers. Elaine's social studies teacher confided that she was "peeved" that Elaine had set up a conference to discuss her grade on the economics unit; "she [Elaine] shouldn't expect to make good grades on everything."

Mary, a tall, self-assured seventh grader, had elicited a similar reaction when she transferred from one suburban school district to another in elementary school.

In her "old school" she was placed in advanced classes in math and English. Her "new school" did not offer that type of program for a Gifted/Talented (G/T) student. Her sixth grade teacher recalled:

When Mary transferred, she came on like gangbusters! She thought we should set up advanced classes just for her ... but, she finally settled down and did a good job. You should have read the 85-page report she did ... it was beautiful.

When Mary moved to Lowell, she was placed in the G/T program which had special offerings in science, humanities, and social studies. Although she would have taken algebra in seventh grade in her "old school" district, Mary was placed in an advanced general math class at Lowell and scheduled for algebra in the eighth grade. When asked about Mary's placement, her math teacher recalled:

We just never thought to give her the [qualifying] test for algebra. She is a good student, but I'm not sure she was really ready for algebra ... and it would have thrown her whole eighth grade program off. She'll be able to take it next year.

In seeking academic achievement both Elaine and Mary

had to cope with overt and covert criticism from their black peers who perceived academic achievement as conflicting with a student's black identity. Elaine described the pressure from students that she encountered: "Some of them tell me that I talk white, I dress white, I live in a white neighborhood, and I hang out with whites, so I might as well be white."

Elaine countered negative peer pressure by using a network of peer, family, and adult support for her interests in and out of school. Her closest black friends, Allison and Toni, lived in her mostly white, townhouse neighborhood, and their families were friendly and socialized with each other. The three girls had similar academic and educational goals, and they were seen together throughout the school day. After school they did their homework and studying together.

Elaine's brother, Ray, a handsome, popular, high school athlete frequently brought his friends home, and the two groups watched TV, ate, or just "hung out" together under the parents' supervision. Elaine's interest in dance and gymnastics was fostered, initially by her parents, and later by the owners of the dance/gymnastics studio where she studied. The white owners hired Elaine to teach some of the younger students in exchange for her advanced lessons. Thus, Elaine had a

strong support system of family, peers, and friends to help her cope with the negative pressures associated with academic excellence.

Mary had a similar network, except that her closest friends in Lowell, as well as from her old school, were white. When asked about this, she said:

I hang around people who are interested in the same thing I am ... and they just happen to be white. I don't know any black kids [seventh graders] in this school who are interested in academics ... they don't seem to care about grades. Some of them [the blacks] may look down on me, but I can't help it.

Mary had definite educational and career goals, with plans to apply to Harvard, Brown and Princeton and go into medicine "because I've always wanted to help people." When asked about her strengths and weaknesses, Mary replied, "Being black is a disadvantage, but being smart is an advantage." She explained, "I can't control my color, but I can control what I want to do with my life."

At the other end of the behavioral spectrum were those students who actively sought to avoid engagement in the traditional learning process in the classroom. Some of the tactics used by these students included ignoring

the teacher's instructions, attempting to gain peer attention, or acting to stop the instructional process or "disruptive" behavior. These strategies usually resulted in teacher disapproval and disciplinary action. These disengagement strategies were used by males and females, but were observed more frequently in males and more frequently by black students.

In science class while the teacher was reviewing for the final exam, Stephan was observed to be lying across a lab table with his eyes closed. When two of his classmates saw the observer looking at Stephan, they burst out laughing: "Man, that Stephan's fast asleep ... he's really going to get a good grade on this exam. He's learning while he's sleeping ... getting it [the information] in his dreams"! Stephan stirred slightly, but kept his eyes closed. Later his science teacher described Stephan as "capable, but totally unmotivated ... won't do anything. Today I told the students to leave him alone, just let him sleep."

Other students were observed to be disengaged from the instructional process, although they rarely slept in class. Usually the girls wrote notes or read; the boys usually read. Some teachers attempted to involve them in classroom activity by calling on them; other teachers had adopted the attitude that a student has the right to

fail. Frequently the students attempted to engage the other students in conversation.

Marta had the reputation of being a constant talker who prevented other students from doing their work. Her science teacher placed her with various lab partners, each of whom complained about Marta's inattentiveness and talking. Finally the teacher placed Marta at a table where she sat without a lab partner. When Marta complained, the teacher, who knew Marta was an accomplished cellist in the school orchestra, explained:

Marta, when you're playing in an orchestra you have to follow the music and the conductor's directions. You can't do your own thing and play just when you feel like it. It's the same thing in this class ... you have to stop doing your own thing and follow directions.

Marta smiled and said she understood; her behavior as reported by her teacher, however, was not noticeably different throughout the rest of the year. She continued to talk to other members of the class from her solitary position at the lab table, and she continued to turn in papers that were incomplete and get failing marks on her tests.

Robert, known as "Junior" by his peers, was Marta's male counterpart in attempting to avoid involvement with

classroom instruction. His tactics involved conversation with his classmates and "horseplay" with the male students in his classes. In his vocational technology class Junior, a cheerful, energetic eighth grader, began the period by walking around the classroom giving the "glad hand" to several male members of the class, black and white, with comments such as, "'What's happening, man?" and "What's going down, dude?". When the bell rang and the teacher started giving directions for the day's work on individual projects, Junior was quiet. When the teacher told the students to get to work, Junior walked over to a group of boys and started talking about a program on TV the night before. The teacher looked over at Junior who moved on to talk with another male student. After a few minutes Junior and that student were circling around each other, fists in a raised position, as if preparing for a boxing match; both boys were laughing and taunting each other in a good-natured way. The teacher looked over at them and said calmly, "Boys, get to work or get out." One of Junior's classmates [black] who had been working on his project spoke up:

Junior, you're just fooling around! Ten years from now I'll be working and driving a new car ... you'll still be in eighth grade, waiting for your kids to catch up to you. Yeah, you and your

kids'll all be in the eighth grade!

The other students and the teacher responded to his remarks with laughter; Junior grinned and said nothing.

Junior's strategies were generally viewed by his teachers and the students as good-natured, mildly disruptive tactics. More troublesome from the teachers' and administrators' viewpoints were the efforts of students like Teddy to gain their peers' attention. In class Teddy's behavior frequently consisted of talking to students, laughing, humming, snapping his fingers, and tapping his feet. His response to his teacher's content-oriented questions was usually a "nonsensical" reply which elicited laughs from his peers. One day his social studies teacher took Teddy aside to talk about his behavior and accused him of being a modern day "Uncle Tom." The teacher explained her notion of "Uncle Tomming" to Teddy as a way of avoiding responsibility; she reported that Teddy listened intently. After she had finished, she asked him why he acted that way. Teddy laughed and said, "I don't know, Boss, I don't know."

Teddy's efforts to get the attention of his peers and the faculty reached their height during the absence of the regular teacher in his science class. According to reports of his classmates, Teddy walked up to the substitute, ostensibly to ask a question, and "mooned" the class

(dropped his pants to reveal his bare buttocks) three times. The teacher, positioned behind a high lab table, saw nothing but heard the titters and gasps of Teddy's classmates. Later, as rumors of the "mooning" circulated around the school, the administrators questioned his classmates and confirmed the story.

The reactions of Teddy's classmates varied from amusement and surprise to shock and disgust. Several students indicated that the mooning incident was one in a series of "foolish behavior." Tracey's comments reflected that attitude:

I don't know what's wrong with that boy. He acts like a fool, so he can get everybody's attention and won't have to do his work ... he's just senseless ... weird.

The reaction of the administration was to suspend Teddy from school for three days. It also strengthened Teddy's general reputation as an unreliable, disruptive student. This negative perception of Teddy's behavior affected the administration's response to another incident --the "Cherry Cola Case"--involving Teddy at about the same time.

Two days prior to the "mooning" incident, Teddy was suspected and accused by the physical education teacher of taking a teacher's soft drink, a cherry cola, from a

refrigerator in the physical education office. Teddy denied taking the cherry cola but could not give an explanation of where he got the soda that satisfied the teacher. The administrative aide, after questioning Teddy, was convinced of Teddy's guilt and told him that he would be on an in-school suspension for one day.

Teddy's mother and their family friend Mr. Jenkins, a black male in his late twenties, protested and suggested that they might have given Teddy the cherry cola. The aide agreed to forget the suspension, but unknown to him, the suspension letter had already been sent home.

When Teddy's mother received the letter, she called the Area Superintendent to complain. The Area Superintendent called the principal and asked him to investigate the matter. The principal arranged to meet with Teddy's mother and Mr. Jenkins the next morning.

At the conference, it was agreed that Teddy would not be suspended, but none of those involved in the incident were satisfied. According to Mr. Jenkins, he and Teddy's mother were "furious that Teddy would be suspended on such flimsy evidence." He stated that such actions confirmed his suspicions that black students would be treated differently than white students in Fairfax County: "I won't say anything until Teddy is out of this school, but then I'll have plenty to say"!

The aide felt that an honest mistake had been made --i.e. the secretary sent the suspension letter, according to his original instructions. When he told Mr. Jenkins the matter would be forgotten, it was too late; the letter was in the mail. Teddy's family, he stated, should have been willing to accept the error and forget the whole thing. The aide said that Teddy's color had nothing to do with his recommended punishment of suspension--which was later revoked by the principal.

Teddy's counselor, convinced he had taken the cherry cola, thought that Teddy was "getting away with" dishonesty and not having to take responsibility for his actions. She commented:

I just think Teddy should learn the importance of telling the truth and being responsible for his behavior before it's too late. It's better to learn this in the eighth grade and get suspended than to find out later on and get sent to jail.

The physical education teacher resented Mr. Jenkins' implied accusation "that he was picking on" Teddy. He commented:

Teddy couldn't come up with a straight story when I asked him where he got the cherry cola. He kept on changing his story ... I told him,

"Teddy, if you act like a pile of crap, people are going to treat you that way."

Teddy maintained his innocence and described himself as a victim of racial prejudice. He confided, "My friend told me that teachers in this school call black kids 'niggers', and I believe it." When asked if he had heard teachers use the term, Teddy said, "No, but after what happened to me, I believe it [could happen]."

The principal shook his head ruefully when asked about the cherry cola incident. "I spent hours on that thing and nothing was ever resolved. I still think Teddy took the cherry cola, and Mr. Jenkins was trying to cover for him ... it came out in the conference that Teddy is a manipulator and sometimes does things to make his mother think he is guilty [of wrongdoing] even when he isn't. I don't know if this was one of those cases ... but I do know that I spent hours trying to find out what really happened, and we'll never know."

The day after the principal's conference with Teddy's mother and Mr. Jenkins, the "mooning" incident occurred. After Teddy admitted his actions to the assistant principal, the notice of his suspension was sent--and received--without protest. Regarding the incident, Mr. Jenkins later stated, "I could have killed him! We got one thing settled, and then another comes up. I just don't know

what to do."

Although the cherry cola and the mooning incidents were separate events, they were viewed by the faculty and staff as parts of an overall disruptive behavior pattern, more typical of black students. Teddy's actions and the school's response caught the attention of his family, his peers, and the Lowell staff, through the hierarchy up to the Area Superintendent. Through incidents such as these, the attention of Teddy's family and the school staff was diverted from Teddy's academic difficulties to his social interactions. The mooning incident occurred so quickly after the cherry cola incident that the issues and implications of neither case were examined fully by the staff, Teddy's family, or Teddy. All of the participants indicated they were operating with the best of intentions, but suspected the others of acting with a certain amount of deception and ill-will. Teddy and his family were reinforced in their beliefs that the school staff made hasty, racially-inspired judgements. The school staff's belief that such unreliable, foolish behavior was typical of many black students and their parents wanted to cover for them, was confirmed for them by the Cherry Cola Case.

Other disengaged students, such as Scott and Darrell, also used disruptive, defiant tactics to divert attention from academic matters to social interactions. In the

process they managed to intimidate, psychologically and physically, teachers and students. Consequently, the two boys, especially Darrell, were perceived as very powerful figures in the school who exerted an enormous amount of influence.

The teachers complained that Darrell "did his own thing" in class and was not amenable to teacher suggestion or correction. "You have to treat him with kid gloves," said his science teacher. He frequently came to class late and without any necessary supplies. Throughout the year Darrell continued to bring his Walkman radio to class so that he could listen to "his tunes" in school, although his teachers continued to send him to the office for violating school rules. When he returned to class, without the Walkman, Darrell frequently sat at his desk, moving his head and drumming his fingers "to the beat" as if he were still listening to the music.

In his classes such as science and art where some freedom of movement was allowed, Darrell was observed to move from one group of students to another talking to each group about people and events outside the classroom. Darrell prided himself on knowing what was going on in school and knowing the latest rumors about students and teachers. He knew who was "going together" and who was getting ready for a fight and who said what to whom. In

moving around, Darrell avoided a few groups, the "jerks", as he described them, although he was heard to make derogatory remarks about them to other students, e.g. he constantly needled Helen, a white, overweight, shy eighth grader by referring to her as "Heifer Helen."

When students were required to perform in class by presenting a project or a report, working a problem on the board, or playing a solo in band, Darrell's sarcastic remarks produced embarrassment, confusion, or even tears from the recipient of his jibes. Helen's mother called the counselor to complain about Darrell's remarks about Helen. The only reason the counselor could discover for Darrell's displeasure was that Helen was a conscientious student who got good grades; Darrell labeled her a "goody-goody," as he did all students, black or white, who were academically successful.

Both in and out of class the teachers and administrators suspected Darrell of threatening other students for extra money. Although the students did not report him for his "shake-down tactics," other students did confirm the staff's suspicion about Darrell's "panhandling," threatening tactics. Arthur, a small, mild-mannered eighth grade newcomer to Lowell described his encounter with Darrell:

At first, when he asked me for a quarter, I

just thought he wanted a loan, so I gave it to him. Then when I asked for it back, he said, "What quarter? I don't owe you a quarter." So then I didn't give him any more money. When he asked me for money, I just said I don't have any, and then he stopped asking me and went on to somebody else.

Darrell was reported to be more successful in getting money from white male students than from other groups at Lowell.

Darrell appeared to ignore his teachers as much as possible and interacted directly with his peers. The teachers responded by ignoring Darrell until his behavior triggered an outburst from another student which the teacher could not overlook. Then Darrell was sent to the office for disciplinary purposes; the math teacher kept a stack of office passes filled in with Darrell's name, class period, and offense, i.e. "disrupting the class," so that "as little class time as possible" would be lost in sending Darrell to the office. Darrell's first science teacher asked to have him transferred; she referred to his laziness and disruption, but the guidance director suspected that the teacher was intimidated by Darrell's size.

Darrell and Scott were the most frequently suspended students--each averaging over 15 days of class absence due to suspensions. The assistant principal suggested that

students such as Scott and Darrell who were repeatedly suspended were responsible for the disproportionate number of black students on the yearly suspension report.

In its bi-yearly report to the superintendent, the Lowell administrators acknowledged that "we have not yet succeeded in our goal of reducing the suspension and lunch referrals for minority students to a level that is proportionate to the minority student body." The black students (14% of the student body) constituted 52% of the suspensions and 28% of the lunch referrals; the whites (60% of the student body) were 33% of the suspensions and 28% of the lunch referrals; Hispanics were slightly overrepresented on the list; and Asians were underrepresented. The statistics on suspensions and referrals revealed a pattern similar to those on tardiness; a few students appeared frequently on the list and blacks were overrepresented. Disruptive behavior, resulting in exclusion from classroom learning activities, seemed to be an academic strategy selected by a disproportionate number of black males at Lowell during the 1986-87 school year.

Students such as Darrell and Scott, and to a lesser extent, Junior, were perceived by the school staff as "difficult, disruptive" students who demanded and received an inordinate amount of time and negative attention. The

achievers such as Mary and Elaine also received a large amount of time and positive attention from their teachers because they demanded it. The majority of the black students, regardless of their innate abilities, did not demand, nor did they receive, such attention.

Their strategy for coping with academic demands was that of moderate to slight engagement in the traditional instructional process. In keeping a low profile, they maintained a passive, as opposed to an active, stance in regard to their teachers and classroom instruction. These students were observed to come to class on time with the necessary supplies; to listen, to do their classwork, if not their homework; and to cause little trouble. They never volunteered to answer questions, nor did they ask their teachers for any clarification or extra help; they responded to the teacher only when called upon. Instead, these students were observed to try to conceal from the class at large, their understanding or lack of understanding of the instructional content of the class. Their grades were usually average--C's and B's.

In many classes such lack of student "participation" was perceived by teachers as lack of interest or for lack of ability. David, an eighth grader who scored in the 99th percentile on all of his SRA tests, was viewed as a very able, but disinterested student by most of his

teachers. In classes where he had his choice of seats David sat near the back of the room. In science class where seats were assigned by the teacher David was placed at the front of the class, close to the teacher. Due to his proximity to the teacher, David had more interaction with his science teacher than any other.

During class discussions David never volunteered by raising his hand; frequently he spoke the answer, so softly that it was audible only to the teacher and the classmates in his immediate range. When the teacher asked him to repeat the answer for the whole class, he answered in a louder tone, but the teacher usually repeated his remarks so they could be heard by all his classmates. David said that he loved science and math and read a lot in science. He frequently asked the teacher questions or brought up topics of interest to him--but always so quietly that other students could not hear. The teacher responded in an equally quiet tone. "Otherwise," she said, "David won't ask questions, if he thinks the whole class is going to be involved."

Impressed with David's critical thinking skills, his teacher suggested that she would like to recommend him for the G/T program. When he told her that he wasn't sure he wanted to be in G/T, the teacher contacted David's mother. His mother indicated that she would like for David

to be in a Gifted program, but he did not think he could be comfortable there and she did not want to push him.

In November David applied for admission to the Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology--Fairfax County's "High Tech" school--and his teacher wrote him a highly positive recommendation. The guidance director and his science teacher were confident of David's acceptance due to his natural ability. The guidance director observed, however, that David was late in turning in the paperwork and thought he seemed "less than enthusiastic." After the entrance tests and personal interviews in the spring, the names of those accepted into "High Tech" were announced; David's name was not on the list.

Near the end of school, when they were alone, his science teacher asked: "David, did you deliberately mess up on the qualifying exam for High Tech? Did you try to sabotage yourself so you wouldn't have to go?" He answered in his usual quiet fashion: "Maybe ... maybe I did."

The school staff was alerted to possible harassment of David by other male students by David's mother. She called the assistant principal to express her concern about David's nervousness and sensitivity to touch. His mother suspected that other students were "bumping" up

against him, but David would not discuss it with his family or the school staff. Outside of the classroom David was observed to interact with other students, black and white. In class he did his work quietly; except for math and science, his grades were average--C's in all other subjects. That type of withdrawal from active academic competition in school was the academic strategy selected by the majority of his black classmates with the result of average or below-average grades.

Student Interactions Outside the Classroom
Extracurricular Activities at School

The general unwillingness of the black students to engage in academic competition was also evident in their participation in extracurricular activities at Lowell. They were underrepresented in activities with an academic thrust, but chose to participate in intramural sports and clubs and organizations, such as Drama Club, Student Government Association (SGA), and the school newspaper and yearbook.

The black students were represented proportionately or better among the students staying for intramurals (20% were black), make-up work (29%), and extra help (18%). They constituted 16% of the delegates elected by homerooms to the SGA, and one of them was the secretary, an officer elected by the student body. They were well represented

in the school newspaper, yearbook, chorus, orchestra, and Thespian Society. The black students were active in the Drama Club, trying out for and getting roles in school plays, which frequently involved over 100 students in all aspects of dramatic productions.

The black female students tried out in large numbers for modeling positions in the school fashion show, as did the white females, and were successful. Thirty percent of the female participants were black, and all eight of the male participants were black. Both male and female models were received enthusiastically by the Lowell student body, with cheers, applause, and appreciative whistles as they walked down the runway. Not all of the teachers were so enthusiastic, however. When the topic was raised at the school team meeting, the guidance counselor and fashion show coordinator defended the boys' participation: "They wanted to do it. They arranged for their clothes with the store owner and set up everything ... none of the white boys volunteered." Another team member countered, "Well, it made some of us uncomfortable. The boys looked wonderful, and the students loved it, but I really wonder if we want to encourage that image with our black boys."

The black females were also enthusiastic about cheerleading, and large numbers of them performed on the

Pep Team for school athletic events. Both male and female blacks participated in the Lowell Talent Show. Five of the fourteen "acts," which were mostly musical numbers, involved black students. The winners of the Talent Show, Darrell, Alan, and John performed a "rap number," to the enthusiastic applause of the audience.

The black students did not turn out in any significant numbers for the extracurricular activities with an academic thrust. They were not represented in the Math or Computer Club. Two students--Mary and Richard--were the only blacks participating in the county-wide English and math competitions. Similarly blacks were underrepresented in the ranks of students involved in the social studies competition and the school science fair. When asked about their lack of participation in such events many of the students indicated interest in other things or responsibilities at home. Only a few of them, who were academically successful, indicated any awareness that involvement in certain extracurricular activities could enhance their academic performance in the classroom.

Interactions and fights in the neighborhood

Students reported that they were most likely to "get in trouble" between the time school was out and the time their parents returned home from work. Most of the fights that occurred between Lowell students took place

after school and in the student's neighborhood after the student got off the school bus. More than half the fights involved black students from Lowell fighting other blacks from Lowell; in the other cases the blacks from Lowell were involved with groups of blacks from the adjoining school district of Alexandria.

In most of the fights a few males were the main participants, and the issue for them seemed to involve proving one's toughness or "who's going to be the biggest man," as described by Darrell. Students also fought over rumored insults and contested objects, such as tapes, bicycle parts, or other personal items. The students used their fists as weapons although threats were made to bring in "burners" (guns) or other weapons such as bats or sticks. The same students were involved in many of the fights; Lamarquise's tendency to "take on" a whole gang like the Little Rascals from Alexandria was one factor in the school's getting him admitted to a program for the emotionally disturbed. Most of the students acted as observers and a few like Darrell saw themselves as entrepreneurs, setting up times and places, or negotiators who could "cool things off," especially in school.

Occasionally females were also involved; their fights usually revolved around boyfriends and/or rumors that were being circulated about them. Their fighting techniques

involved punching, slapping, and hair pulling. In all of the fights involving females, boys were involved as observers and as possible "back-ups" for the participants. One of the most talked about fights involved Ruby, a large Hispanic student, and Melanie, a slight black student. The reason for their fight, according to Darrell, was to decide who had the right to be Tyrell's girlfriend. Ruby, who outweighed her opponent by 50-75 pounds, produced bruises and cuts which required Melanie to have stitches. Melanie's parents, with the school's encouragement, had Ruby charged with assault and battery, and Ruby was placed on probation by the juvenile court.

Such violent fighting was unusual, but more prevalent among black students, according to school administrators. More typical was the situation described by Keshia, a student who transferred to Lowell in February. One day after school she found that "about 20 black girls" were outside her apartment telling her "to come on outside and they'd kick my butt. They were angry over a rumor they thought I started about somebody having sexual relationships." Keshia called her parents for advice; she lived with her father, and her mother lived in Washington. Her mother offered to send her big brothers over for protection, an offer which she rejected. Keshia's father told her to "stay put" until he got home

which she did. The girls eventually left, and Keshia said that she learned to keep "her big mouth shut."

Sometimes arguments that were begun at home continued in the school. Several times students were suspended for fighting in school, and the administrators were convinced that the fights began in the home neighborhood. Stories of the fights spread among the students and were exaggerated in the repeating, according to the administrators. Teachers and administrators reported that they received questions from parents about the "fights at Lowell"; their questions seemed to reflect anxiety and concern about the safety of the students.

Mrs. Jones, one of the black parents who was a teacher in another school system, wrote a letter to her son's counselor and LDSC teacher voicing her concern about the fights among the students and their impact on student achievement:

I am becoming increasingly concerned about the inappropriate behavior exhibited by some of our young Black men at Lowell. The fights and fracas are certainly not indicative of the normal characteristics that occur during this period of adolescence. This behavior is disruptive and can lead to the destruction (or at least the delay) of the educational

achievements and the proper social interactions we desire them to attain.

Mrs. Jones' concern was echoed by Lowell guidance counselors and administrators who felt that students wasted their time and energy in inter-group squabbles and arguments. The black counselor stated: "These students try so hard to be macho and tough ... if only they'd put that energy into their school work, instead of wasting their time, and ours, on fights and arguments that start at home."

Structure of Home Activities and Responsibilities

The amount of structure in their home lives and family support for academic achievement varied for the Lowell students. In some households students adhered to a schedule with military precision. In other households there appeared to be no enforceable rules and students were, by their own admission, nearly beyond the control of their parents. In all households, students were given some duties and responsibilities by their parents. The jobs most frequently assigned were babysitting, cleaning, and cooking.

When there were younger brothers and sisters, the Lowell student was usually expected to look after them after they got home from elementary school or, if younger, to pick them up from the babysitter. Some students who

were part of an extended family system babysat for cousins, nieces, or nephews. Teddy, Delly, and Alan had older sisters with children and they were part of an elaborate babysitting system that allowed the young mothers to attend high school classes while their mothers babysat, then go to work while their brothers babysat and their mothers went off to work. The boys boasted of their ability to change diapers and give bottles, "just like their sisters."

Some of the students described their desire for more privacy and fewer responsibilities. Delly lived with her mother, two sisters, sister's baby, grandmother, and uncle in a three bedroom apartment. After school she cared for her sister's baby while her sister worked. Every night Delly washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen, and on Saturdays she cleaned the apartment, because, she said, "I get embarrassed when the house isn't clean." When talking about her future plans, Delly spoke emphatically of the need "to avoid my family's mistakes." She commented wistfully:

I don't have any place where I can go [to]
be by myself ... somebody else is always
around. When I get out of school, I just
want to work and have fun ... I don't want to
have a family ... not for a long, long time.

Tyrell was responsible for his six-year-old brother Maurice as soon as he got home from school. His mother had to take Maurice away from his adult babysitter after Maurice picked up marijuana cigarettes from the sitter's house and passed them out to his first grade classmates. Tyrell described his attitudes toward his responsibilities:

My mother says it's hard to find somebody reliable to take care of Maurice. She said she'd give me extra money for clothes and things if I'd take care of him. I like the clothes and all ... but sometimes she asks me to take [care of] him so she can go out, and I'd like to go out. I don't know about that.

Some students, however, expressed pleasure in their responsibilities. Andre's job was to cook dinner for his mother and twin brother Carey and he enjoyed it:

I love to cook. I just throw in a little bit of this and a bit of that and let Carey taste it. When my mother comes in, she says, "What have you got for us tonight"? I say, "Come on in and see." It's fun to try new things.

Some students, such as Elaine, had a time for homework built into a highly structured schedule of activities. Each day after school Elaine went to the dance/gymnastics studio where she taught younger students in exchange for

her own advanced lessons. After teaching she had her lesson and a practice session. At seven o'clock she came home for a quick dinner, "something I put in the microwave," and then studied until 9:30 or later. Elaine refused, first at her parents' insistence and then by her own choice, to accept any telephone calls, except from 9:30 to 10:00. She said if she was "too busy" she would not take any telephone calls. After 10:00 Elaine's mother came home from her second job and checked Elaine's homework. Her father, who managed an athletic supply store in an upscale shopping center, also returned home about the same time and was available for help. When asked about the rigor of her schedule Elaine said, "Yes, my whole family is workaholics ... my mother works two jobs, and my father manages the store and runs 50 to 100 miles a week. Everybody is expected to keep busy ... it just runs in the family." Weekends were more unstructured; Elaine explained:

That's the time our family has to be together.

We go to my brother's soccer games and to my gymnastics competitions, if there is one.

We all sit down to dinner together on Saturday and Sunday ... then we have a chance to find out what everybody has been doing and if anybody is having problems. On Sundays we have our

friends over ... everybody brings a friend for dinner.

Other students who had less-structured home lives also spoke of the importance of adult supervision and encouragement with school work. Delly started on her homework soon after she got home. First she had to check on her sister's baby whom she cared for while her sister worked. Then while the baby napped, Delly did her homework. She said she looked forward to her uncle's coming home from work, because he was interested in her school work: "I like to show him my good papers--he gets real excited when I've gotten a good grade, and if I need help, he can give it to me."

Yvette lived with her mother, but she called her father every day. She reported that he asked about her school work and gave help and encouragement over the telephone. On the weekends, when she stayed with him, he checked through all of her papers for the preceding week. Sometimes he took her to the library to work on reports, and sometimes they went to the bookstore together. She commented, "My father takes my school work very, very seriously--and I'd better, or else"!

Some students reported that they had to go outside their family when they needed some help beyond active encouragement. Then they turned to their friends or adult

members of the community. John described getting help from his friend Mark and Mark's older brother Louis who are Korean neighbors: "My mother just can't help me with math. She wants to, but she just doesn't know how to do it, so I go to Mark. If Mark can't help, I ask Louis. Louis is pretty smart ... he wants to go to the Naval Academy next year ... and he shows me how to do it."

The majority of the students reported that their parents either checked their homework or inquired if they had finished it. Some students like Wendall, whose parents did not check his work, always assured them that it was done, whether it was or not. Wendall's parents realized that he was not doing his homework after a telephone call from his homeroom teacher. The teacher called to alert Wendall's parents to several failing grades on his interim report card. His mother was quite surprised, especially since Wendall had not shown her the interim report. She commented, "But I always ask Wendall if he's done his homework, and he always says he has ... I don't understand it." The teacher suggested that Wendall's mother call his teachers and also commented: "Tell Wendall you want to see what he's done."

A few students rarely exchanged information about school with their parents and had no time for homework built into their schedules. Darrell said that he got up

in the morning after his mother left to catch her commuter bus to work. When he got home from school, he played with his friends. Usually he and his older brother fixed dinner and ate together. Darrell never brought books home or did any school work at home. Sometimes he went back out to visit a friend or go to a movie. Darrell's mother tried to set a curfew of 10 o'clock on weeknights, but Darrell said he frequently stayed out past his curfew. When asked what his mother did when he was late, Darrell said, "What can she do? She isn't going to hit me. I'm a lot bigger than she is. She just yells at me and tells me to get home on time." Darrell was frequently described by his classmates as "doing what he wants to do. His mother can't do anything with him."

Darrell openly acknowledged that "I had a problem with drugs, but now I'm trying to straighten up" in his interview. When asked about his goals, he referred to it again: "I'd like to be a football star with three or four kids, if I don't die of an overdose." At the urging of Darrell's counselors his mother placed him in an in-patient drug treatment program. He recalled that he "hated" being told what to do and not having any "freedom." After two weeks he was dismissed from the program for "attacking" a counselor, a charge which Darrell vehemently denied. Darrell's teachers occasionally reported that he

appeared to be "stoned," but he was never caught using or possessing drugs at school.

According to the guidance counselors who worked with Darrell, his father's absence was a "central issue" in Darrell's life. They described Darrell's attempts to establish contact with his father during the past year and his father's refusal to talk with Darrell. "He was just devastated," said his counselor, adding "He broke down in our office and sobbed. It was terrible, it was so sad."

Mr. Jenkins, who played the role of "significant other" in Teddy's life described the impact of his father's absence upon Teddy:

He has a hard time accepting the fact that his father doesn't want to acknowledge him as his son. Teddy hasn't been able to come to terms with that, and I think he will have to, if he's going to get on with his life.

When asked about his father in an interview, Teddy said, "I have no idea where he is ... he could be in Alaska for all I know."

Andre also spoke of the pain he experienced over his absent father. Andre and his twin Carey were born in England where his father was stationed at a U.S. Army base. Later when his father was transferred back to the

United States, the family split up. Andre and Carey moved with their mother to Virginia, and his father moved back to his original home in New Jersey. Later Andre's father was shot in a street fight over drugs in New Jersey, according to Andre. He reported that his mother did not let him and his twin visit his family's relatives in New Jersey because "they move too fast up there." He spoke wistfully about his deceased father:

Sometimes I just wish I could see him and talk to him. I wonder if he'd be surprised at how big I've gotten ... I'll bet I might be taller than he is now. I miss him, yeah, I miss him a lot.

A slight majority--54%--of the black Lowell students who were interviewed lived with both parents, a parent and step-parent or father only. Nearly half of the students (46%) who lived with their mothers had no contact with their fathers and for some of these students the absence of a father appeared to be a major life issue. In describing their family situations these students frequently expressed sadness or anger. When asked about her father, Allison commented vehemently: "There is no Mr. Dickerson, as far as I'm concerned."

Some of the students in households headed by their mothers reported the presence of a male figure who played

a dominant role in offering career and educational advice and specific help with school projects. The students with step-fathers frequently expressed admiration and respect for their step-fathers. Evan confided that his "step-dad" was taking special courses so he could get a "big promotion with a lot more money." Those students from divorced or separated parents who stayed in contact with their fathers viewed their fathers as significant people in their lives. Sharon described the important role her father played in her selection of her high school courses, "He helped me plan my whole high school program so I'll have the right courses to get in school."

Most of the students interviewed described being part of an extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, and almost always, a grandmother. The movement pattern most frequently reported was that of relatives who moved to Northern Virginia, found employment and housing, and encouraged other family members to join them. John, an eighth grader, popular with students and faculty, described his family's move to Virginia:

Back in West Virginia my dad worked in the coal mines, but then he couldn't get work, anywhere ... there just weren't any jobs. My aunt had already come up here. She had a job and a place to live, and she told us to come

here. So my dad came and found a job and sent for us, and now he has a job, and my mom works two jobs. My aunt helped us out a lot when we first came, showing us where things were and all that.

Since moving to Northern Virginia, John's parents separated, and he and his sister chose to stay with their mother. John, however, stayed in close contact with his father, talking with him daily and seeing him several times a week.

The measures that parents took to influence student grades appeared to be independent of family structure, just as the structuring of home responsibilities including homework sessions. Some parents offered positive, tangible rewards for good grades. Leticia was given \$5 for every A and \$2 for a B on her report cards; Allison got a trip to King's Dominion for her A-B report cards.

Students who got poor grades or failing grades reported that their parents' response was to give them some tutorial assistance, give verbal encouragement or reprimands, withdraw personal privileges, or contact the school. Tutors were hired, not only to help students who were failing a subject, but also to help those whose grades were satisfactory. When Mary transferred to Fairfax County from another school system, her mother was not satisfied

with the rigor of the courses offered in Mary's new school. She hired a tutor for Mary so that "she wouldn't be losing ground" in comparison to her performance in her old school.

The punishments most frequently imposed for poor grades were restriction of TV and telephone privileges and "being grounded" or not being allowed to leave the house and see their friends. The students who had been grounded or "on restriction" agreed that it was painful. Keshia described her father's response: "My Dad took away everything ... TV, telephone, radio ... everything except my alarm clock! It lasted a whole month ... I thought I'd die until interims [reports] came out, and I got off of restriction."

Trini and Elaine described their parents' anger when they got bad grades. Trini said, with fervor, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my mother when she's angry"! Elaine added, "You know it! There's nothing like a black mother when she gets on your case. After my mother gives you the lecture and puts you on restriction, you'd do anything to get off [of restriction]!"

Students agreed that parental inconsistency in enforcing punishments or merely verbal reprimands "didn't do any good." Teddy admitted that "after I bring home bad grades, my Mom puts me on restriction. Then two or

three days later she forgets about it, and so do I." In discussing other students who got bad grades, Evan said, "His mom just tells him to do better ... that doesn't do anything ... she can't make him do anything." Scott admitted, "My Mom just tells me to try harder and do my work when I get bad grades." When asked if her comments affected him, Scott said, "No, it doesn't make any difference."

Few of the students or their parents indicated that they contacted the student's teacher when the student brought home a poor or failing grade. It was observed that teachers were more likely to initiate contacts with parents about poor student performance. Sometimes one teacher would call a parent and suggest the parent contact their child's other teachers. Wendall's homeroom teacher called his mother to tell her of several failing grades Wendall had received on an interim report. The teacher suggested that Wendall's mother call his teachers to get specific information on his performance and to show her (parental) concern. His mother appeared to be reluctant, but agreed to make the calls, at the urging of the homeroom teacher.

Other teachers and counselors reported that they encountered a similar reluctance among other parents to contact teachers. The guidance director commented:

I don't know what it is, that these parents don't want to talk with teachers. That would seem to be the most basic step to take if your child is failing, but a lot of these parents don't seem to want to do it. I don't think it's because they don't care ... they just don't know how important it is.

The out-of-school interests of black students at Lowell seemed to fall into general categories. Most of the students listed watching television, going to movies, and being with friends and family as special interests. The females also mentioned shopping for clothes, and the males were nearly unanimously interested in sports. The majority of the boys played some sport, either on an intramural team, a community team, or in a casual neighborhood setting. They watched sports events on TV and read about athletes and their achievements in newspapers and magazines.

Junior, known for his forgetfulness of books and supplies at school, kept his gym bag packed with his uniform and equipment for basketball practice after school in the winter and football practice in the fall. Teddy, who was considered to be totally lacking in self-discipline by his teachers, was an active member of the community soccer team, arranging rides for himself to

practices and games all over the suburban area. Tyrell took his younger brother with him to basketball practice after school, so he would be eligible for the basketball games. Evan admitted that concern about losing his position on the basketball team, if his grades slipped, forced him to work "to keep up in school."

Another activity, reported by both males and females, was that of attending church. Nearly half of the students interviewed reported that they attended church with a parent or family member, frequently an aunt or a grandmother. Rarely was the church located in the immediate neighborhood; it was often a church in another area where a family member had old ties. The students reported on numerous activities sponsored by their churches which offered opportunities to be with other students. Teddy's comments seemed to reflect the socialization aspects of church attendance. He said he didn't go to church, but one of his friends did, "I haven't noticed that George has gotten any better since he started going [to church], but he says it's a good place to meet girls." Several of the parents interviewed cited church as a "strong influence in the black community." Mr. Davidson commented:

We live in such a transient society ... there's so much moving around up here, it's hard for

kids to know what their values are, or their parents, for that matter. But I want my girls to know what's really important and to care about other people and not just focus on themselves.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and behaviors of a group of black students in an intermediate school in Fairfax County. Findings indicate the presence of a modified caste system which prevents the majority of black students from crossing cultural boundaries and achieving academic success. Many of Ogbu's findings in his Stockton study and subsequent research were corroborated in Fairfax.

Although students generally voiced high educational and occupational aspirations for themselves, an inordinately large number of them aspired to careers in sports and entertainment. The researcher concluded that those choices resulted from historical limitations experienced by blacks in occupational choices which still affect black youth. Based on their academic performance and school behaviors, their job aspirations frequently seemed unrealistic and unlikely to be achieved.

Many of those who had lofty occupational goals failed to translate their expectations in appropriate school behaviors. In Fairfax many black students showed the same "mismatch in communication, interactional etiquette, and cognitive styles" that Ogbu found in Stockton. They also operated from the same oppositional

frame of reference found by Fordham and Ogbu in Washington, D. C.. Underlying the unwillingness of most black students to engage in academic competition was the perception of getting good grades as "acting white" and therefore as inappropriate behavior for black students. Consciously, or not, most black students tailored their academic performance to the scaled-down expectations of others, including themselves.

In describing job goals and opportunities for themselves the students repeated their parents' perceptions of a secondary, as opposed to a primary, job ceiling. Students in Fairfax did not perceive themselves locked out of certain professions or subject to a primary job ceiling as did those in Stockton. They did, however, describe occupational limitations or a secondary job ceiling.

That secondary job ceiling was seen as part of a system which required blacks to be better qualified in order to compete with their white counterparts. The system was also viewed as limiting the continued advancement of blacks once they reached a certain occupational level and of providing greater penalties for blacks who made errors in their work, similar to those of their white co-workers.

Parents in the study voiced high expectations for

their students and a belief in the value of education. They were definitely interested in their students' academic progress, but were frequently unable to translate their interest into meaningful support. Often the black parents failed to understand the type of communication and response expected by the school, and their lack of know-how was perceived as lack of interest by the school staff. Many of the parents were unable to give their children any concrete information on the employers' expectations of a worker, on the training required for certain occupations, or the educational institutions providing such training. During the school year only a few of the parents set up and monitored a structured study time for the students at home; most offered verbal support or threats that were not carried out.

The data suggests that the teachers' perceptions of their black students were molded by their own cultural perspectives and historical experiences. The black students and their parents were generally viewed in terms of their birth-ascribed status, as opposed to their achieved status, which supported the theory of a caste minority in Fairfax. Teachers generally attributed the underachievement of their black students to cultural deprivation and lack of parental concern. Convinced of their own expertise, Fairfax teachers exhibited the

same patronizing attitude toward students as the Stockton teachers observed by Ogbu. They had limited knowledge and understanding of the black students and their families. Communication with parents rarely occurred before the student was having difficulty in school, due to the teachers' low expectations of parental interest and the tendency of black parents to avoid communication with the teacher. Consequently, when communication occurred, it was often marred by feelings of mistrust by both parents and teachers.

A few of the students competed vigorously in the academic setting. These achievers successfully crossed the cultural barriers and performed well in school. Those students acknowledged the "conflict between their black identity" and academic excellence. They used their peers and family for support in and out of school. The achievers exhibited a sense of responsibility for their education and demanded help and support from the school.

A few students engaged in active oppositional strategies in school. but the majority maintained a passive posture in regard to academic engagement. They failed to recognize a relationship between the choice of extracurricular activities and academic success. Some of the students used their time after school to

participate in activities which promoted conflict within the community and diverted themselves even further from academic pursuits.

Findings from the study have implications for teachers, students, parents, and educational planners. All persons interested in educating our youth must be aware of the hard choices that black students must make in school. The decision to seek academic excellence at the expense of their own cultural identity is one that is unique to black students and aptly explained by Ogbu's theory of castelike minorities. Black students who are confronted with that dilemma need support from school and home.

Recommendations

Specific researcher recommendations to ease the black students' crossing of cultural barriers at Lowell include the following: establishment of peer counseling groups for students; expanding the career education program with the introduction of black role models; setting up a black parent support group; initiating a small-scale teacher-advisor program; and presenting inservice activities for teachers.

The counselors already work with student groups, and need to help black students address the issue of academic achievement as acting white. The counselors also need to give students more information about occupational

opportunities and educational requirements and the advantages and disadvantages of different jobs. The black students need to be put in contact with blacks who have been successful in fields other than sports and entertainment.

Parents, such as Mrs. Jackson, who wanted to start a Black Parent Support Group, should be encouraged and their plans facilitated by the school. The black parents need to be aware of the school's expectations of behavior from concerned parents. They need to take a pro-active stance in regard to the educational system and learn to use their own expertise in the educational process. Parents know their children better than any educational experts and care the most about them. The schools need to welcome and use their expertise.

The teachers who have rapport with their black students and are concerned about them should be encouraged to work with two or three underachieving students to discuss effective school strategies and appropriate behaviors. Students need to be aware of the kinds of school behaviors that are congruent with their own high expectations. Counselors and teachers must educate black students to take responsibility for their own learning and must provide some immediate and tangible rewards for such behavior.

Teachers must be aware of the impact of their cultural perspective upon their perceptions of their black students and their interactions with them. Their ideas about culturally impoverished black youth and disinterested parents at Lowell need to be replaced by a realistic understanding of black students and their culture. This could be achieved by inservice programs to heighten teacher awareness and sensitivity and by increased communication with parents and the guidance staff. The administration should provide teachers with opportunities to relinquish the patron-client relationship with parents and develop a new relationship of joint responsibility for educational experiences for students.

Fairfax County is to be commended for its recognition of the problem posed to society when a sizeable minority of the population fails to develop its full potential. One way to address the problem of minority underachievement is to become familiar with the students who constitute the minority, to know their families and friends, to listen to their dreams, their hopes, and fears. Black people in the United States have a great respect for education, as evidenced by their long efforts in the courts to gain access to equal education. Those people who are concerned about the education of all of America's children must not lose sight of that black reverence for

education and use it to develop the human potential of all Americans.

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The bibliography has two sections: the first part is a listing of all references cited in the study. The second part is a listing of references on the topics of minority achievement and ethnographic studies, recommended for further reading.

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Appendix

Some Sample Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your elementary school experiences.

Where did you go to school?

What did you like about the school? ... dislike about it?

Describe for me your best teacher ... your worst teacher.

Who were your best friends in school?

What things did you like to do together?

2. Tell me about this school year.

What are your best subjects and/or classes? ... your worst ones?

What makes a class interesting? ... boring?

What makes a good teacher? ... a bad one?

What extra-curricular activities do you stay for?

Have you ever felt uncomfortable staying after school?

How often do you ask your teachers for help after school?

How would your teachers describe you?

3. Tell me what you do after you leave school.

What are your responsibilities at home?

When and where do you do your homework?

How much time do you spend on school work at home?

Whom do you ask for help on your homework?

What do you like to do on the weekends?

How do you spend your free time?

What do you like to do with your friends?

How do they feel about school?

How would your friends describe you? ... you describe yourself?

4. Tell me about your family.

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Who lives at your house?

Which other family members do you like to spend some time with?

Where do your parents work?

How do they like their jobs?

Describe your parents' educational background.

Who are the most important people in your life?

What kinds of grades do your parents expect you to get? ... your teachers?

What do your parents do when your grades go down? ... your friends' parents?

5. What would you like to do after you get out of high school?

What are your parents' goals, educational and occupational, for you?

What kind of education or training do you think you

will need for your job?

Where would you go to get such training, or information about it?

Can you think of any reasons why you couldn't have any career you wanted?

What would you like your life to be like ten years from now? ... twenty years?

What is the "good life" like in the United States today?

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