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**EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF INNER CITY  
HISPANIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
IN REGARD TO THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS OR FAILURE**

By

Nance Marie Minnick

A dissertation to be submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

*University of Washington*

*1999*

Program Authorized To Offer Degree: College of Education

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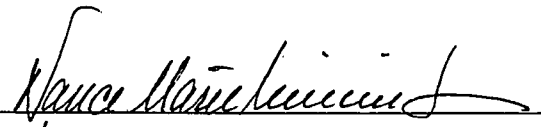
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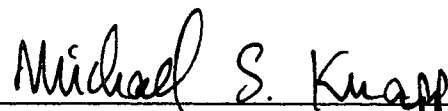
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**ABSTRACT**

**Exploring the Perspectives of  
Inner City Hispanic High School Students  
in Regard to their Academic Success or Failure**

Nance Marie Minnick

*Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:  
Professor Kenneth A. Sirotnik  
College of Education*

Base upon the perspectives of Hispanic inner-city high school students of poverty, this study explored why some students are academically successful and graduate from high school while others from similar circumstances maintain a near-failing or failing grade point average and eventually drop out of school. Data were gathered from eight subjects — four who were academically successful, and four who were academically unsuccessful and dropped out of high school. The subjects were students currently attending Denver Public Schools (DPS), recent graduates, or dropouts from DPS.

The researcher utilized naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research, specifically, a case study approach focusing on the long interview as discussed by McCracken (1989) and personal narratives as suggested by Riessman (1993). These interviews were corroborated by an investigation of school records and other documents as suggested by school counselors.

Three major themes emerged from the research. The factors that most affected the academic success or failure of the students were: 1) the presence or lack of a nurturing environment, particularly the parental influence, 2) the impact of peers, both positive and

negative, and 3) the subjects' resilience or lack thereof, to adverse conditions, including poverty.

A nurturing environment was created by supportive adults, such as teachers and parents, who provided ongoing support, listened to the students, set high expectations, and provided a physically and mentally safe environment. The impact of peers comprised extracurricular activities, the effects of moving on peer involvement and their sense of connectedness, and peer pressure that influenced academic progress. Resilience to adversity was evidenced by self-confidence, efficacy, independence, critical thinking skills, and the ability to learn from successes and failures, as well as a positive view of the future, with a sense of purpose, hope, and humor.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
<b>A Profile of Need .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Dropout Rates Among Hispanic Immigrants .....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Academic Performance of Hispanic Students .....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Family Income .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Employment Among Hispanic Dropouts.....</i>	<i>14</i>
<b>Problematic Gaps in the Literature .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Research Focus.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Study Purpose and Key Questions.....</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Definitions.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>Community Context .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Denver Public Schools Background Information.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<b>Research Significance .....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Conceptual Framework of the Research.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Brief Overview of Study Approach.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Dissertation Plan.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE</b>	
<b>Nurturing Environment.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<i>Definition of Nurturing.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Critical Components of Nurturing.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Expanding the Concepts of Nurturing.....</i>	<i>42</i>
<i>Cooperative Learning as Nurturing .....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>A Constructivist View of Learning.....</i>	<i>53</i>
<i>Parental Involvement.....</i>	<i>54</i>

<i>Minority Theories About Students' Learning</i> .....	64
<i>Effective Schools</i> .....	70
<i>Relevant Schools</i> .....	75
<b>Peer Influences</b> .....	<b>78</b>
<i>Cultural-discontinuities Theory</i> .....	79
<i>School Mobility</i> .....	83
<i>Extracurricular Activities</i> .....	84
<b>Resiliency to Adverse Conditions</b> .....	<b>84</b>
<i>Resiliency</i> .....	84
<i>Adverse Conditions</i> .....	92
<i>Demographics of Poverty</i> .....	94
<i>Trends Contributing to Poverty</i> .....	99
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>103</b>
RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY	
<b>Methodological Issues in Case Study Research</b> .....	<b>103</b>
<i>Qualitative Research</i> .....	105
<i>Definitions of Case Study</i> .....	106
<i>Advantages of the Case Study</i> .....	107
<b>Research Strategy</b> .....	<b>109</b>
<b>Establishing Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research</b> .....	<b>115</b>
<b>Approach to the Present Study</b> .....	<b>116</b>
<i>Sampling: the Case for this Study</i> .....	120
<i>Procedures</i> .....	122
<b>Nutshell Biographies of Each of the Eight Young Adults</b> .....	<b>127</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b> .....	<b>136</b>
NURTURING ENVIRONMENT	
<b>Support</b> .....	<b>138</b>
<i>Support: Being There Unconditionally</i> .....	139
<i>Support: Giving Time, Generously</i> .....	148
<i>Summary of Support</i> .....	154
<b>Listening</b> .....	<b>155</b>
<i>Listening: Conversations with Parents</i> .....	159

<i>Listening: Teachers Being Cognizant of Students' Needs</i> .....	161
<i>Listening: Teacher Attitude</i> .....	167
<i>Listening: Making Connections with Hispanic Teachers</i> .....	170
<i>Summary</i> .....	172
<b>High Expectations</b> .....	<b>173</b>
<i>Personal Motivation and Effort</i> .....	176
<i>High Expectations from Peers</i> .....	180
<i>High Expectations With and Without Viable Support Structures from Teachers and Parents</i> .....	183
<i>Cumulative Impact of Recognition or Lack of Recognition</i> .....	185
<i>Summary of High Expectations</i> .....	187
<b>Safe Environment</b> .....	<b>188</b>
<i>Physically Safe Environment</i> .....	190
<i>Summary of a Physically Safe Environment</i> .....	197
<i>Teaching from a Mentally Safe Perspective</i> .....	199
<i>Summary of a Mentally Safe Environment</i> .....	210
<b>CHAPTER 5</b> .....	<b>212</b>
THE IMPACT OF PEERS	
<b>Extracurricular School Activities/Religious Affiliation Activities</b> .....	<b>214</b>
<i>Academically Successful Subjects</i> .....	214
<i>Academically Unsuccessful Subjects</i> .....	218
<i>Summary of Extracurricular Activities</i> .....	220
<b>The Effects of Moving on Peer Involvement/Influence</b> .....	<b>220</b>
<i>Academically Unsuccessful Subjects</i> .....	221
<i>Academically Successful Subjects</i> .....	225
<i>Summary of the Effects of Moving</i> .....	227
<b>Peer Pressures that Influence Academic Progress</b> .....	<b>228</b>
<i>Peer Perceptions of Intelligence</i> .....	229
<i>Attendance, Ditching, Drinking, Drugs, and Trouble with Police</i> .....	236
<b>Summary of Peer Pressures that Influence Academic Progress</b> .....	<b>243</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6</b> .....	<b>247</b>
RESILIENCE TO ADVERSITY	
<b>Self-confidence, Efficacy and Independence</b> .....	<b>254</b>

<b>Critical Thinking: Learning from Successes and Failures .....</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>Positive View of the Future, Sense of Purpose, Hope .....</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Sense of Humor.....</b>	<b>264</b>
<b>Critical Turning Points for Subjects who Dropped Out .....</b>	<b>266</b>
<b>Overcoming Adversity: Resiliency in Action.....</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>Summary of Resilience to Adversity .....</b>	<b>276</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7 .....</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>Key Questions .....</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>288</b>
<b>Suggestions for Future Research.....</b>	<b>301</b>
<i>Explore the Relationship Between Academic Success and Resiliency .....</i>	<i>301</i>
<i>Examine the Critical Role of Parents.....</i>	<i>302</i>
<i>Broaden the Base of Minority Research.....</i>	<i>303</i>
<i>Explore Benefits of a More Robust Multi-cultural Curriculum.....</i>	<i>303</i>
<i>Explore Strategies to Encourage Dropouts to Return to School.....</i>	<i>304</i>
<i>Study the Need for More Alternative Schools.....</i>	<i>305</i>
<i>Further Examine the Impact of Class Size.....</i>	<i>305</i>
<i>Study Ways to Promote Physically and Mentally Safe School Environments ..</i>	<i>306</i>
<b>Epilogue.....</b>	<b>307</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>309</b>
<b>APPENDIX A — CRITERIA FOR SELECTION .....</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>APPENDIX B — STUDY INTRODUCTORY LETTER .....</b>	<b>322</b>
<b>APPENDIX C — PARENT CONSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>323</b>
<b>APPENDIX D — STUDENT ASSENT FORM.....</b>	<b>324</b>

**APPENDIX E — PROTOCOL/DRAFT..... 325**

**APPENDIX F — DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION..... 328**

**APPENDIX G — SURVEY QUESTIONS/FINAL INTERVIEW..... 332**

**APPENDIX H — CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS..... 336**

**APPENDIX I — PERSONS OF INFLUENCE ..... 337**

**APPENDIX J — RECEIPT ..... 338**

**APPENDIX K — STUDENT INFORMATION FORMS..... 339**

## LIST OF FIGURES

Number		Page
Figure 1.1.	Changing school population	2
Figure 1.2.	Status dropout rates, ages 16-24, by race-ethnicity	5
Figure 1.3.	Status dropout rates for persons aged 16-24	7
Figure 1.4.	Status dropout rates for young adults, 16-24 years old.	7
Figure 1.5.	Percentage of high school graduates who took the SAT	9
Figure 1.6.	Event dropout rates by family income	13
Figure 1.7.	Critical Components of Caring	17
Figure 1.8.	Hispanic American Population in the Continental United States	23
Figure 1.9.	Dynamics that allow for success or lead to failure	28
Figure 2.1.	Percentage of students who fear being attacked at school	69
Figure 2.2.	Percentage of students who fear being attacked on the way	69
Figure 2.3.	Seven principles of effective school-to-work systems	77
Figure 2.4.	Environmental protective factors	93
Figure 2.5.	Internal protective factors	93
Figure 2.6.	Racial-ethnic distribution of students in schools, by urbanicity	95
Figure 3.1.	Ten characteristics of qualitative research	105
Figure 3.2.	Family information, composition	123
Figure 3.3.	Family information, schools attended	124
Figure 3.4.	Biography of Alex	128
Figure 3.5.	Biography of Eloy	129
Figure 3.6.	Biography of Rosa	130
Figure 3.7.	Biography of Maria	131
Figure 3.8.	Biography of Jose	132
Figure 3.9.	Biography of Rene	133
Figure 3.10.	Biography of Stevin	134
Figure 3.11.	Biography of Theo	135
Figure 4.1.	Matrix of key descriptors of nurture	138
Figure 4.2.	Persons of influence	141
Figure 4.3.	Conversations with parents and/or stepparents	158
Figure 4.4.	Influences on academic success/failure	182
Figure 4.5.	Teen violence/weapons/safety in the schools	192
Figure 4.6.	Example of Constructivist Teaching	200
Figure 5.1.	Subject school data	224
Figure 5.2.	Subjects' peer influences on academic success/failure	230
Figure 6.1.	Environmental protective factors	249
Figure 6.2.	Descriptive adjectives	252
Figure 6.3.	Subjects' self-perceptions	253

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Number</u>		<u>Page</u>
Table 1.1.	Rate, number, and distribution of status dropouts, by background	6
Table 1.2.	Average SAT scores of college-bound seniors, by race/ethnicity	10
Table 2.1.	Percentage of parents reported participating in school activities	61
Table 2.2.	Percentage of students who fear being attacked at school	70
Table 2.3.	Percentage of children who live in families below poverty level	97

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I thank you all.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Hispanic Dropout Rate Falls” declared the March 19, 1999 edition of *The Denver Post* (p. 2). A smaller headline acknowledged, “Educators say change too small to celebrate.” The text, attributed to the U.S. Department of Education, noted:

Between 1996 and 1997, the percentage of Hispanics between 18 and 24 years of age who have completed high school crept from 61.9 percent to 66.7 percent. In the same period, the proportion of 16- to 24-year-old Hispanics who said they had dropped out of high school edged downward from 29.4 percent to 25.3 percent. (*The Denver Post*, March 19, 1999, p. 2)

National statistics<sup>1</sup> show an 11% dropout rate among all racial and ethnic groups. Desegregated, the dropout rates are: 7.6% for Whites, 13.4% for Blacks, and 25.3% for Hispanics. Not only are minority students disproportionately represented among the dropout population, their achievement test scores remain disproportionately low. The 1997 young adult Hispanic and Black populations, ages 16 to 24, were similar in size — respectively 14.4% and 14.7% of the total young adult population. Yet, almost twice the number of Hispanics dropped out of school. That means in 1997, 1.2 million Hispanic young adults did not have high school credentials (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 10).

Even more problematic, Hispanic students who drop out tend to do so earlier than Black or White students. According to *Dropout Rates in the United States* (1998), by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), a third of Hispanic young adults have

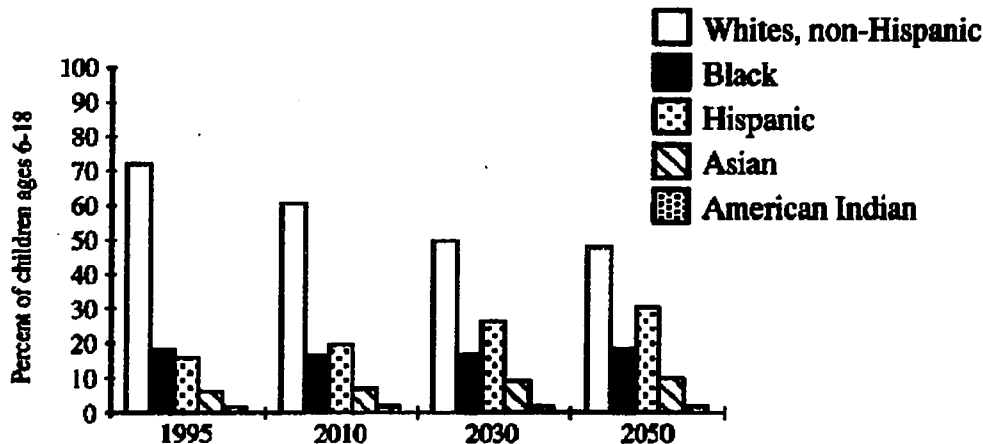
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<sup>1</sup> Using status dropout rates which provide cumulative data on dropouts among all young adults within a specified age range (16-24 year-olds) Source: U.S. Department of Education, *Dropout Rates in the United States*, 1999, p. 11.

less than a 9th-grade education and half did not complete 10th grade. Estimates for White and Black young adults show only 10% of each group has less than a 9th-grade education and approximately 25% did not complete 10th grade (pp. 4-5).

Although Hispanic youths from low- and middle-income families are more apt to drop out than those from high-income families, Hispanic students, regardless of household income, drop out more often than their Black or White counterparts.

The Hispanic population is growing more rapidly than any other racial or ethnic group, up from 6% of the student population in public schools in 1976 to 14% in 1995 (Sable and Stennett, 1998, p. 1). The U.S. Census Bureau notes that by 2050, one in four school-age children will be Hispanic (See Figure 1.1). Given the burgeoning social and economic impact of the Hispanic population these statistics portend, it is appropriate to study why Hispanic students drop out more frequently than other racial and ethnic groups. It is equally important to examine the reasons why some Hispanic youths — especially those



**Figure 1.1. Changing school population.** Projections by the U.S. Bureau of the Census show that by 2050 one in four school-age children will be Hispanic. Note: Percents do not add to 100 because the Hispanic population includes members of several races, including Blacks and Whites. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

who are economically disadvantaged — are academically successful. Such a study may also provide insight into the wider question of why some children of poverty stay in school while others from similar social and economic circumstances change schools on a regular basis, maintain a near-failing or failing GPA average and eventually drop out of school.

The present study focuses on students' personal stories to provide more encompassing, realistic, and intimate points of view on why some Hispanic students succeed while others drop out. The research also examines a variety of explanatory theories and remedies including, but not limited to: parental interaction between home and schools (Clark, 1983, Comer, 1987, 1988, 1990); cultural synchronization (Irvin, 1991); cultural-discontinuities (Ogbu, 1989); nurturing and caring (Noddings, 1988); effective schools for children of poverty (Knapp, 1991); schools that offer work-focused learning (Hoerner and Wehrley, 1995); and gender concerns (Pipher, 1994). Additionally, the research investigates issues in the current adolescent literature, particularly those that address minority children. This approach is designed to provide a broad array of ideas as a foundation for the design and interpretation of student interviews.

Much of the previous research on why some students succeed while others drop out has relied on observation, testing, and surveys of the school culture, teachers, parents, students, and the classroom environment. The present study takes a different approach, examining, on a personal level, the perceptions of eight Hispanic young adults who currently attend or who have attended the Denver Public Schools (DPS). The interviews focus on the subjects' perceptions of why they have or have not been academically successful.

Four of the subjects have completed high school, or express an intent to complete high school and have maintained the requisite GPA. The remaining four subjects dropped out of high school. What these students say and the stories behind their successes and failures constitute the data for this study.

The remainder of this chapter will more thoroughly examine the need for the present study. The case will be made based upon the compelling statistics regarding the educational disadvantages of the dropout population — primarily students of poverty and of color. This will be followed by a brief review of the gaps in the literature regarding the problem and will conclude with how the present study is designed to begin filling these gaps.

### **A Profile of Need**

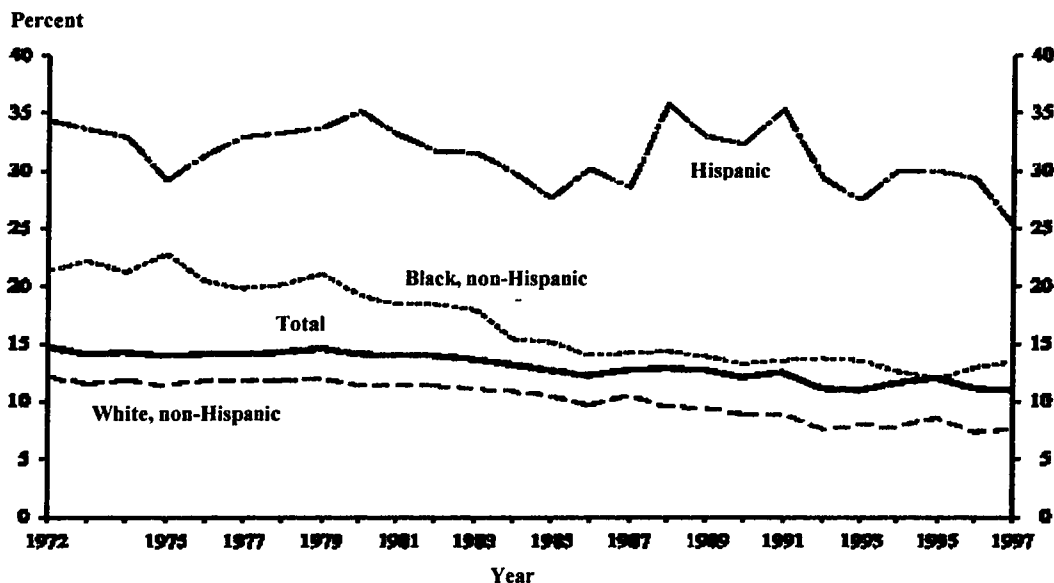
A dismal picture emerges out of the now-familiar array of statistics on educational indicators for success or failure of minority students and economically poor students more generally. Several categories of these statistics follow, focusing particularly on the students who drop out of high school. Chapter 2 presents statistics on students of poverty more generally.

#### ***Dropout Rates Among Hispanic Immigrants***

Each year between 1988 and 1996, more than 3 million young adults in the United States dropped out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 9). Between 1972 and 1997, the percentage of Hispanic youths who left school before graduating declined

but remained higher than that of either Blacks or Whites. Figure 1.2 graphs the dropout rates for these years, and Table 1.1 provides a statistical analysis.

Hispanic origin appears to play some role in how the dropout rate statistics break down. When compared to all 16- to 24-year-old Hispanics, the dropout rates for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans were similar at 36% and 32%, respectively. However the dropout rates for Cubans and others Hispanics, including those whose origins trace back to Central and South America, were much lower (Figure 1.3). In 1989, Mexican Americans represented 64% of the Hispanic population, but made up about 74% of all Hispanic dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Both Figures 1.2 and 1.3 reflect the status dropout rates for young adults, 16-24 years old. While Figure 1.3 shows total populations, Figure 1.4 shows that the high dropout rates among Hispanics are not just a problem associated with recent immigration.



**Figure 1.2.** Status dropout rates, ages 16-24, by race-ethnicity: October 1972 through October 1997. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Current Population Survey, October (various years). Unpublished data.

High Hispanic dropout rates in the United States may be partially attributable to relatively greater dropout rates among Hispanic immigrants. Of Hispanic youths in the United States but born outside the U.S., 38.6% were dropouts, compared with 15.4 percent for first-generation Hispanic immigrants and 17.7 second generation or more (See Table 1.1). Some young adult Hispanic immigrants may have entered the United States searching for employment and consequently may not have enrolled in a U.S. school. Language may also be a factor limiting enrollment.

**Table 1.1. Rate, number, and distribution of status dropouts, ages 16-24, by background characteristics: October 1997. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October 1997.**

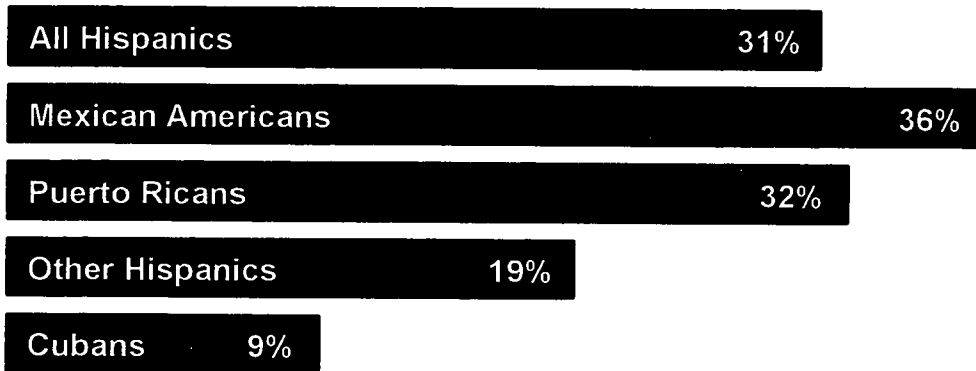
Characteristics	Status dropout rate (percent)	Number of status dropouts (thousands)	Population (thousands)	Percent of all dropouts	Percent of population
Total	11.0	3,624	32,960	100.0	100.0
<b>Race-ethnicity<sup>1</sup></b>					
White, non-Hispanic	7.6	1,656	21,800	45.7	66.1
Black, non-Hispanic	13.4	649	4,847	17.9	14.7
Hispanic	25.3	1,180	4,660	32.6	14.1
<b>Recency of immigration</b>					
<b>Born outside the 50 states and the District of Columbia</b>					
Hispanic	38.6	725	1,877	20.0	5.7
Non-Hispanic	7.8	143	1,826	3.9	5.5
<b>First generation<sup>2</sup></b>					
Hispanic	15.4	250	1,624	6.9	4.9
Non-Hispanic	5.0	87	1,747	2.4	5.3
<b>Second generation or more<sup>3</sup></b>					
Hispanic	17.7	205	1,159	5.7	3.5
Non-Hispanic	9.0	2,214	24,731	61.1	75.0

<sup>1</sup>Due to relatively small sample sizes, American Indian/Alaskan Natives and Asian/Pacific Islanders are included in the total but are not shown separately.

<sup>2</sup>Individuals defined as first generation were born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia and have one or both parents born outside the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

<sup>3</sup>Individuals defined as second generation or more were born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia and have both parents born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia.

NOTE: Because of rounding, details may not add to totals.



**Figure 1.3. Status dropout rates for persons aged 16-24. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1989.**

Still, “during the period when immigration patterns contributed to substantial changes in the size and composition of the Hispanic population, the status dropout rates for Hispanic young adults did not decline” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 10). Smith (1995) notes that “the Hispanic rates are still double those of non-Hispanics when the length of residency in the United States is taken into account” (p. 7).

The bottom line remains constant: regardless of their place of birth, Hispanic youths are more likely to drop out than their non-Hispanic peers. Yet the consequence is the same: “these young adults probably do not have the basic level of education thought to be essential in today’s economy” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 12).

<u>Recency of immigration</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>Non-Hispanic</u>
<i>Total</i>	13%	31%	10%
<i>Born outside the 50 states and Washington, D.C.</i>	29	43	08
<i>First generation</i>	10	17	06
<i>Second generation or more</i>	11	24	11

**Figure 1.4. Status dropout rates for young adults, 16-24 years old. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, 1989.**

### Academic Performance of Hispanic Students

Reading proficiency has always been considered a critical factor in academic success. Limited reading skills can contribute to a student's propensity to drop out. The 1991 and 1993 statistics show that test scores have narrowed in reading, mathematics, and science between Whites and Blacks, and between Whites and Hispanics. Nonetheless, the gap in test score performance "still remains unacceptably large" (Hanushek, 1994, p.41).

Sable and Stennett (1998) traced the beginning of the reading gap by first examining pre-primary education. They noted that quality pre-primary education prepares students for future achievement, providing both socialization and learning skills. In 1996 about 22% of Hispanic 3-year-olds, as compared to 40% of White 3-year-olds, enrolled in Head Start or kindergarten programs. Four-year-olds were enrolled at a rate of 45% for Hispanics and 59% for Whites.

Sable and Stennett also noted that Hispanic children ages of 3 to 5 were less likely to have been read to during the week preceding their investigation. In 1996, 9-year-old Hispanic students had an average reading scale score of 194, while White students scored an average of 220. By age 17, Hispanic youths read at levels similar to White 13-year-olds (pp. 2-4). Also, the writing proficiency of Hispanic 11th-graders was similar to 8th-grade White students (p. 5).

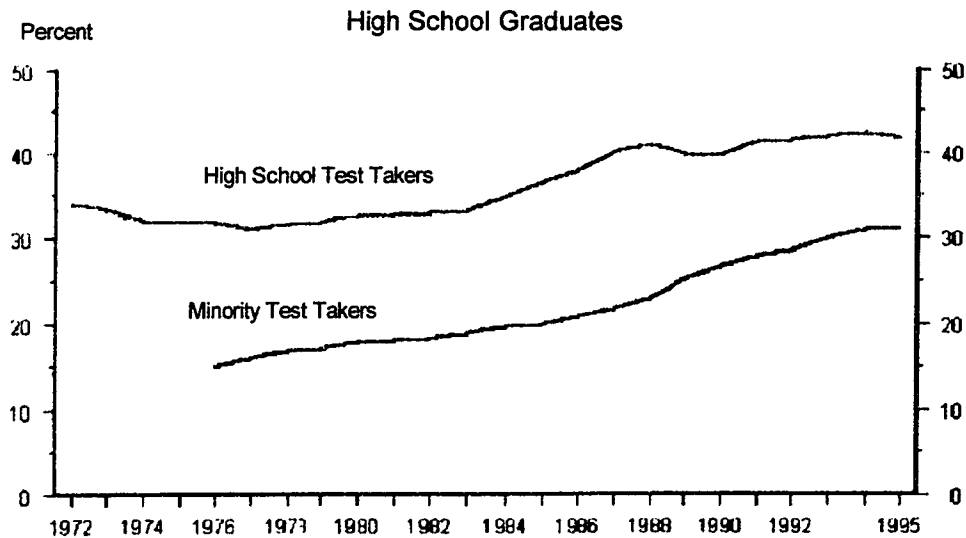
Hispanic enrollment in post-secondary education has increased due to the growth of Hispanics among the total population, but the rate at which Hispanic high school graduates enter college has not changed since the early 1980s. Also, Hispanic young

adults typically enroll in community colleges rather than in 4-year institutions, perhaps because they are less prepared or less qualified (Sable and Stennett, 1998, p. 8-9).

Another indicator of intent to graduate high school and perform post-secondary work is the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Figure 1.5 shows the percentage of high school graduates who took the SAT between 1972 and 1995. Minority SAT participants, although increasing, are still comparatively lower than the total number of test takers.

Table 1.2 shows the average scores of college-bound seniors by race-ethnicity from 1976 to 1995. SAT scores for Hispanic youths of Mexican American or Puerto Rican American origins have improved considerably since 1976, but Hispanic students still lag behind their White peers. In 1995, both Verbal scores and Math scores for Mexican American students were 72 points below White students.

Part of the problem may be that Hispanic youths and other minority students are



less likely than White students to take college-preparatory and prerequisite courses.

Although general or basic courses may satisfy high school graduation requirements, they do little to prepare students for success on the SAT or ACT and for the rigors of a 4-year college. For example, high school students who take remedial or basic math courses through Algebra 1 probably possess less background knowledge than those students who take a sequence including geometry, Algebra 2, trigonometry, and calculus. A lack of chemistry and physics coursework would produce similar difficulties.

Although White high school students were more likely to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes than Hispanic youths between 1984 and 1996, 1996 statistics indicate Hispanic students did exceed their White counterparts in foreign language AP examinations, (Sable and Stennett, 1998, p. 7).

**Table 1.2. Average SAT scores of college-bound seniors, by race/ethnicity: 1976-1995. Source: Condition of Education, 1996/Supplemental.**

Year	White		Black		Mexican American		Puerto Rican	
	Verbal	Math	Verbal	Math	Verbal	Math	Verbal	Math
1976	451	493	332	354	371	410	364	401
1977	448	489	330	357	370	408	355	397
1978	446	485	332	354	370	402	349	388
1979	444	483	330	358	370	410	345	388
1980	442	482	330	360	372	413	350	394
1981	442	483	332	362	373	415	353	398
1982	444	483	341	366	377	416	360	403
1983	443	484	339	369	375	417	358	403
1984	445	487	342	373	376	420	358	405
1985	449	490	346	376	382	426	368	409
1986	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
1987	447	489	351	377	379	424	360	400
1988	445	490	353	384	382	428	355	402
1989	446	491	351	386	381	430	360	406
1990	442	491	352	385	380	429	359	405
1991	441	489	351	385	377	427	361	406
1992	442	491	352	385	372	425	366	406
1993	444	494	353	388	374	428	367	409
1994	443	495	352	388	372	427	367	411
1995	448	498	356	388	376	426	372	411

Research studies funded by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) voice serious concerns over the general-education population of high school students, sometimes labeled the “forgotten half.” About 60% of high school students are classified as “general education students,” with the balance divided between vocational-technical students (8%) and academic students (32%) who fulfill the required academic requirements as measured in Carnegie units. Too often, general education students are unprepared to continue post-secondary education and may be similarly unprepared to move into the labor force. Many experience a transition period of several years described by Klerman and Karoly (1994) as “milling about...with no clear progression toward any career” (p. 31). The School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 states that “the United States lacks a comprehensive and coherent system to help youths acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities, and information about and access to the labor market necessary to make an effective transition from school to career-oriented work or to further education” (103rd Congress, 1994, sec.2, pp. 4-5).

Only 39% of high school graduates attend 4-year institutions. Of this percentage, only 42% actually complete college (*School-to-Work Facts*, NCRVE, 1994, pp. 12-13). Hoerner and Wehrley (1995) note that only 22% of the American population now completes four or more years of college (p. 1). The percentage of Hispanic young adults completing college increased from 13% in 1981 to 18% in 1997, or approximately half the rate of White young adults who complete college (Sable and Stennett, 1998, p. 10).

Rather than focusing on the hard sciences and mathematics, Hispanic students are more likely to study the humanities, behavioral science, computer and information science, engineering, or business management. In contrast White students tend to major in the natural sciences, engineering technologies, education, and the health sciences (Sable and Stennett, 1998, p. 9). As technology continues to grow in importance within the U.S. business community, it becomes increasingly likely that students degreed in the hard sciences will find greater job opportunities.

### Family Income

The U.S. Department of Education (1999) notes that although certainly not all-encompassing, “family income serves as a good indication for the other social and economic factors that are likely to be related to a young adult’s decision to stay in school” (p. 5).

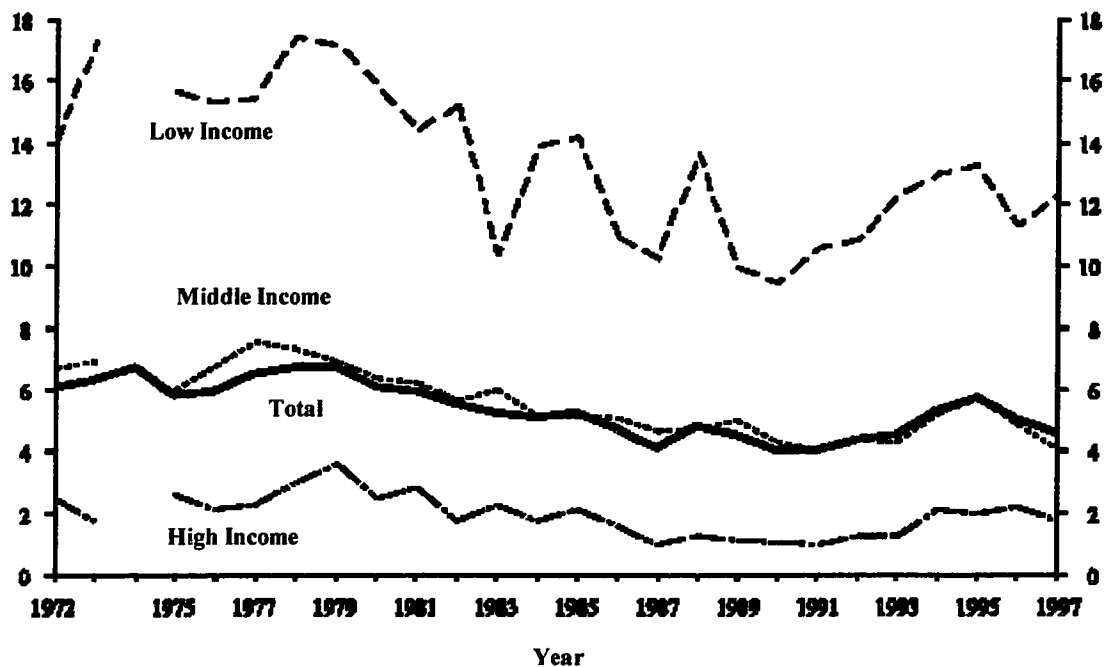
In 1997, 12.3 percent of students from families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution dropped out of high school; by way of comparison 4.1 percent in the middle 60 percent of the income distribution dropped out, and 1.8 percent of students from families with incomes in the top 20 percent dropped out. (p. 5) (See Figure 1.6)

U.S. Department of Education Statistics (1997) offer a more complete explanation of comparable data spanning the last quarter century. The evidence strongly suggests that income and, more likely, the complex social factors affected by income can make a difference in a student’s decision to drop out (p.3).

A comparison of the annual dropout rates at each income level suggests that there is a larger gap between the dropout rates for students in the lowest versus the middle income group than there is between the rates for students in the middle and highest income groups. A more detailed examination of these data show that, on

average, the gap between the dropout rates in the highest and lowest income groups is 11.5 percentage points. Two-thirds of this gap is accounted for by differences between students in the lowest compared to the middle income group (a difference, an average of 7.8 percentage points); while the remaining one-third (on average, 3.7 percentage points) is due to the gap in dropout rates between students in the middle and highest income groups. (p. 3)

Income also appears to affect SAT scores. Wirth (1992) compared families having incomes of less than \$10,000 with families whose income was \$70,000 or higher. The comparison yielded a 116-point spread on the verbal portion of the SAT and a similar 113-point differential for the math section, with gradations of scores in between uniformly correlated with income. Wirth (1992) notes, "Some lower scores are due to unequal educational and social opportunities. We do not know how to measure the human effects of poverty, nor do we know how to measure the impact of



**Figure 1.6. Event dropout rates for grades 10-12, ages 15-24, by family income: October 1972 through October 1997. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October, (various years), unpublished data.**

having grown up with a language different from that used in the test” (p. 10).

Despite Wirth’s observations, it is clear that poverty does have a far-reaching impact on children’s likelihood of academic success. The present research focuses on children of poverty and explores the self-perceived effects — both positive and negative — upon their lives.

### *Employment Among Hispanic Dropouts*

In 1992, about 54% of recent Hispanic high school graduates not enrolled in college were employed, whereas only 29% of recent Hispanic dropouts were employed.

Barr and Parrett (1995) define the current crisis among Hispanic youth as:

the under education of a segment of our students presently constituting one out of three students in today’s classrooms. Dominant in this group are the children of poverty: those impacted by economic and cultural disadvantage. They have come to be called youth “at risk” because they are at risk of emerging from school under prepared for further education or the kinds of jobs available. Often they are ready for lives of alienation and dependency. (p.11)

Educational credentials can make a profound difference in earnings. In 1993, Hispanic males with a high school degree earned 27% more than those with just 9 to 11 years of schooling, and those with a bachelor’s degree earned 60% more than their peers with 9 to 11 years of education. Hispanic females with a high school degree earned 30% more than their peers with a high school degree, but earnings among those with a bachelor’s degree jumped to 82% more than the 9- to 11-year group. Still, White male college graduates earned 23% more than Hispanic male graduates, and White female

college graduates earned 14% more than their Hispanic peers (U.S. Department of Education, 1995, p. 20).

Although a number of factors may affect the earning potential of young adults, it seems clear that academic success in high school can make a significant impact upon the ability of Hispanic graduates to increase their income level. Furthermore, an understanding the dynamics behind the success of some students could potentially be applied to increasing the literacy rates of Hispanic students in general, helping bridge the earning gap between Hispanics and their White counterparts.

### **Problematic Gaps in the Literature**

In 1983 Reginald Clark made the still-relevant observation that “a few academically successful poor and near-poor students annually emerge from urban neighborhood schools” (p.13). He continued to ask how “these students manage to achieve what most children in similar social and economic circumstances could not achieve?” (p. 13) His study went on to explore the internal dynamics of 10 Black families, offering valuable insights about the importance of the family process in educational performance and the interface between home and school learning environments. Other researchers explored family interaction, including Comer (1990), Fehrmann (1987), Orland (1990), and Bank, Slavings, and Biddle (1991). Likewise, Davies and Epstein continue to broaden the expanse of knowledge on cooperation between school and home.

Although they found family influence to be a strong component, it remains only one aspect of what creates successful students in seemingly unlikely circumstances.

Many researchers side-step home issues and focus directly on students in the classroom. The effective schools movement began as an equity concern focused on discovering schools that produced successful students from disadvantaged circumstances. The proponents of this movement recognized that if schools are ineffective, only students with outside support are likely to succeed. Effective school pioneers such as Weber and Edmonds also found that schools apparently are the strongest determinant of success among disadvantaged students. Purkey and Smith (1983) found that effective schools are defined by their culture, sense of community (including collegial relations and staff stability), clear elaboration of goals, high expectations, instructional leadership, and order and discipline conducive to an atmosphere of achievement. Effective school traits will be more fully explored in Chapter 2.

While research has begun to illuminate how minority young people and the schools that serve them succeed against long odds, researchers have yet to understand these dynamics for the Hispanic population.

Still some conceptual issues are not well-addressed in the literature regarding the Hispanic population. The primary theoretical work — the institutional-deficiency theory, the developmental-deficiency theory, and the cultural-discontinuities theory (Ogbu, 1991) — primarily focus on Black/White comparisons. These theories seem paramount to understanding minority relationships within the larger society, as does Irvin's (1991)

theory of cultural synchronization, but their implications for particular populations need further study.

It is also important to better understand how schools can be more relevant to students' lives in disenfranchised communities. Students must perceive schools as being meaningful, suggesting that schools of choice and alternative schools are also important. For some students, school-to-work efforts, including apprenticeship programs, integrated and applied learning, and efforts to connect classroom activities to prior personal experience, may provide additional relevancy. Much of the school-to-work literature focuses on constructivism, a belief that "a person gathers, discovers, or creates knowledge in the course of some activity having a purpose" (NCTM, 1989, p. 7).

Theory and research has begun to identify nurturing (used interchangeably with the term "caring" for the purpose of the present study) as an important condition in

### **Mayeroff's Critical Components of Caring**

1. **Knowledge** that promotes assessment and sincere, deep understanding of another's needs; sensitive, empathetic regard, easy rapport
2. **Alternating Rhythms** allow movement between changes in focus — from isolated events to holistic perceptions
3. **Patience** does not wait passively, but participates, perhaps in the form of a quiet presence that listens and allows another time and space
4. **Honesty** generates openness, lack of pretension, acceptance of self and others
5. **Trust** allows risk taking and developmental growth
6. **Humility** involves overcoming pretentiousness; allows careful evaluation of one's strengths and limitations
7. **Hope** provides a reason for commitment to the future
8. **Courage** inspires that continuing growth toward self-actualization; can be linked to high expectations

**Figure 1.7. Critical Components of Caring. Source: Mayeroff, M. (1971) *On Caring*.**

the lives and schooling of students who might drop out. In the present study, nurturing is defined as promoting and fostering growth toward self-actualization, creating an atmosphere of trust, caring, and interconnectedness. It means helping young adults make sense of the world, encouraging their construction of reality and their individual identities — what we can call “their stories.” Noddings (1984), along with Mayeroff’s (1971) *Critical Components of Caring*, most clearly define this topic (See Figure 1.7). Both authors postulate that caring relationships are the quintessence of our existence.

Sirotnik (1990) notes that students often consider the most important characteristic of a good teacher to be something like “A good teacher cares about you, respects you as a person, is someone you can trust” (p. 310). My students add that a good teacher “listens” and “explains things well.” Listening lies at the heart of nurturing, and requires that teachers give students their full attention and adopt a caring posture. Still, caring alone is not enough to ensure success.

Research has also begun to explore how young adults at or below the poverty level develop resilience to adverse conditions and how this serves them. Henderson and Milstein (1996) define resiliency as “the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today’s world” (p.7). Resiliency also includes the motivation to succeed. Such motivation may be related to a variety of correlates including self-esteem, social or ethnic identity, intrinsic values,

personal resourcefulness, and developmental maturity (stage of self-actualization, which may differ according to gender).

Winfield (1991) states that “resilience is conceptualized not as a fixed attribute of the individual but as vulnerability or protective mechanisms that modify the individual’s response to the risk situation and operate at critical turning points during one’s lifetime” (p. 7). She quotes from Rutter (1987):

Protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in the ways in which people deal with life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantageous circumstances. Particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms operating at key turning points in people’s lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path. (pp. 7-8)

An exploration of young adults’ personal stories may provide insights into these “critical turning points” and provide insights into why some students choose to stay in school and succeed despite disadvantaged or stressful experiences.

An investigation of the literature indicates that research on why students drop out is not viewed holistically, but rather, is addressed as separate issues. The present research seeks to combine the results of numerous studies and the insights of the students themselves to provide a more holistic view of the dropout problem. Because of the variations in how adolescents respond, the manifestation of some theories or elements of theories may combine or overlap, offering new insights or even new theories. The structure of the present research may also reveal that some theories are more salient than others.

The literature regarding why some children of poverty succeed academically while others from similar social and economic circumstances are not successful indicates a dearth of research based upon interviews with young adults. It seems logical to ask those most closely associated with the problem — young adults of poverty — for their insights. A qualitative study that focuses on the individual stories of young adults could offer unique and valuable perspectives.

As one of the fastest growing populations in the United States, Hispanic students are a critical student group within our educational system. Although the literature on other minority populations (i.e., Blacks) may provide some helpful insights, there is relatively little literature directly focused on the unique experiences of Hispanic students. Alva (1995) notes, “there is very little empirical research available on Mexican American students who are academically successful or invulnerable to the detrimental conditions and events that place them at risk” (p. 289).

The present investigation offers the potential to provide a wealth of personal experiences unique to Hispanic children that may impact these students’ desire, motivation, and ability to succeed academically.

## **Research Focus**

### **Study Purpose and Key Questions**

Some children of poverty are able to better succeed academically while others from similar social and economic circumstances are not successful. The purpose of this

study is to explore the perspectives of Hispanic high school students at or below the poverty level for their insights into why they are successful or unsuccessful in high school. Student interviews will be used to gain a better understanding of the factors or influences that contribute to students' academic successes or failures.

Main questions to be addressed by this research include:

1. Given the same socioeconomic background, what causes some students to drop out and others to graduate?
2. What creates resiliency to adverse conditions?
3. Are there critical turning points in students' lives that affect their decision to stay in school or drop out?

### Definitions

***Hispanic Americans*** — Often the terms Hispanic or Latino are used interchangeably. For the purpose of this investigation, the term Hispanic was chosen because it is consistent with most government statistical reports, and because the eight students participating in the research gave a variety of terminology preferences. One student chose Hispanic, another Hispanic-Indian; one chose Mexican-American, another Mexican-Indian. Chicano/Chicana was most popular: two chose Chicano, and another two Chicana. Although Chicano appears popular in the Denver area, it is typically used only for Mexican Americans. None of the subjects favored the term Latino.

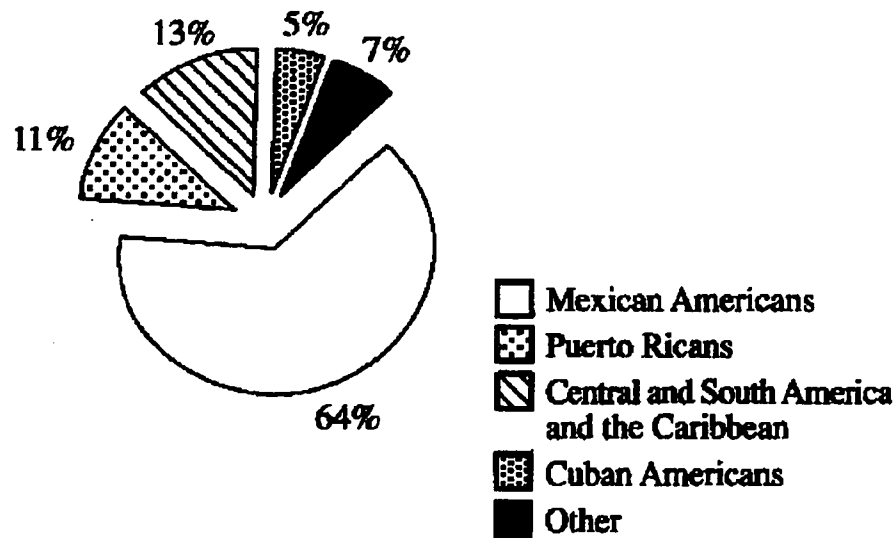
One student noted that he preferred Chicano. “Cause that’s like, well Hispanic, like the white people or whatever, like the label they gave us,” he explains. “And Latino, and that can be anybody of Latin origin, from anywhere, you know there’s a lot of Latin countries. And Chicano, that’s like, our word for Mexican-American” (Jose, p. 1)

Another student was adamant about not using Mexican-American, saying that although the term “has our ethnic background, we live here” (Maria, p. 1). Given that some terms favor a specific group and others appear unpopular for various reasons, this study will use the term that most often appears in the research literature, Hispanic.

Hispanics in the United States comprise Mexican Americans (64%), Puerto Ricans (11%), Central and South American and the Caribbean (13%), Cuban Americans (5%), and a few under the category of “other” (7%) (See Figure 1.8). In 1994, there were 26.4 million Hispanic Americans living in the Continental United States, with an additional 3.7 million living on the island of Puerto Rico. The combined number exceeds 30 million (President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996, p. 23).

In the United States the Hispanics are most heavily concentrated in eight states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, New York, Texas, and Puerto Rico. Because of political unrest the most recent Hispanic immigrants have come from Central and South America.

In the next century, Hispanic Americans will become the largest ethnic group in the United States. Thus far, Hispanic Americans have experienced rapid population growth, nearly doubling in 14 years, from 14.6 million in 1980, to over 30 million in 1994. Despite popular misconceptions, most Hispanics are native born and naturalized citizens or have legal residency status. (President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for the Hispanic American, 1996, p. 26).



**Figure 1.8.** Hispanic American Population in the Continental United States. Source: President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, *Our Nation on the Fault Line: Hispanic American Education*, 1996.

**Dropout** — A dropout is defined in U.S. Educational Department statistics as a young adult between ages 16 and 24, who is no longer in school yet lacks high school credentials. For purposes of this research, a dropout is defined as a young adult between 16 and 24, who has left school for periods of six months or longer, often dropping in and out of a variety of schools, but never attaining high school credentials and a diploma.

**Success** — The definition of success is relative, but for the purpose of this investigation, success is defined by the following criteria:

- (a) The student is academically average or above-average achievement;
- (b) the student remains in school;

- (c) student transcripts show completion of all course work with at least a “C” grade;
- (d) student Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, as available, are average or above average;
- (e) alternative assessments of the student such as portfolios, as available, are average or better;
- (f) the student graduates from high school, as eligible;
- (g) following graduation, the subject immediately obtains employment that offers stability and a comfortable living wage; *or*
- (h) the student demonstrates the potential to continue to post-secondary education or immediately continues to post-secondary education, completing a two-year college or technical, vocational, or trade school, or a four-year college or university degree.

Since the research focuses on students currently in high school or just beginning college, criteria (g) and (h) are hypothetical. They are included because the standards of high school success can be ultimately measured only in terms of the subjects’ post-high school experiences.

***Failure*** — is also relative. For purposes of this study, failure will be defined as:

- (a) the student received lower than average grades; *and*
- (b) the student dropped out of high school.

### **Community Context**

This research will focus on the Denver Public School (DPS) system, which is demographically similar to many public school systems across the nation. Likewise, the performance patterns for the school population as a whole, as well as Denver's major racial subgroups, are fairly consistent with national statistics (Hanushek, 1994; The Piton Foundation, April 1992).

This study focuses on Hispanic "children of poverty." The rate of poverty in the city of Denver far exceeds poverty rates in surrounding communities. Poverty within Denver is geographically concentrated, with seven census tracts reporting 40% of the population below the poverty level. Other negative statistics appear to be correlated. These seven areas also report high 1985 crime rates, a low proportion of high school graduates, and high teenage birth rates (Berman, 1990, pp. 3-4).

Hispanics and Blacks in Denver were more than twice as likely as Whites to be poor, although half of all the poor in Denver were White. Two geographic areas of Denver include particularly high concentrations of poverty: Northeast Denver, comprising the Five Points and Curtis Park neighborhoods, and West Denver, consisting of Auraria, Lincoln Park, and Sun Valley. West Denver has a particularly high concentration of Hispanics.

#### **Denver Public Schools Background Information**

According to the Colorado Department of Education, approximately 64,322 students attended Denver Public Schools during the fall 1995 semester. DPS serves a predominantly

minority population. Demographically, the student population includes 1.3% American Indians, 3.9% Asians, 21.3% Blacks, 27.1% Whites, and 46.4% Hispanics. Approximately 17% of all DPS students are classified as poverty level or below.

*The Insiders Guide to Greater Denver* (1995) describes DPS as “the workhorse school system of Denver’s central city population” (p.286). It also notes that although DPS “has one of Greater Denver’s greatest education challenges...it provides some of Greater Denver’s greatest educational opportunities”(p.286). DPS offers a variety of education options and special programs, including the first International Baccalaureate program to be established in Colorado; the Denver School of the Arts, “one of the most sought-after educational venues among Denver parents” (p.287); a Computer Magnet program known throughout the state; fundamental academies that combine traditional basics with strict behavior standards; a Career-Education School that integrates academics and career-education training; and several charter and other alternative schools.

Statistics reflect some of the challenges for DPS. The overall graduation rate stands at 62.3%. Desegregated, 73.7% of Asian students, 72.2% of White students, 67.2% of African-Americans students, 51.3% of Hispanic students, and 50% of American Indian students graduate. The overall dropout rate reached 9.9% during the 1994-1995 school year. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) for 1991 showed DPS 10th graders ranked below the national average (a mean percentile of 50). DPS student scores ranked in the 43rd percentile for Math, the 42nd percentile for Language, and the 47th percentile for Reading (*The Denver Post*, September 17, 1995).

### **Research Significance**

If poverty rates among the Hispanic population are to be lowered, if test scores are to be raised, if dropout rates are to be cut, and if graduation rates are to be increased, careful, considered changes must be made.

By examining the perceptions of both successful and unsuccessful students, the present research may offer insights into those programs and methods that are perceived as ineffectual in helping Hispanic students to complete high school and achieve academic success. This research may even identify practices that, although well-meaning, appear detrimental to the success of students.

Equally important, the present research is designed to discover why some current approaches are successful with some students. “One reason that schools find performance so difficult to improve is that they often do not know how well they are doing in the first place,” notes Hanushek (1994, p.xxi).

By taking this two-pronged approach, the present research may generate insights into how school districts can better serve not only Hispanic students, but students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Ultimately, the potential results could even mitigate some of the negative social and economic circumstances associated with high dropout rates and low academic performance in a variety of at-risk populations.

The findings of the present study are limited, since it examines the experiences of just eight Hispanic students from a single city and a single school district. However, this

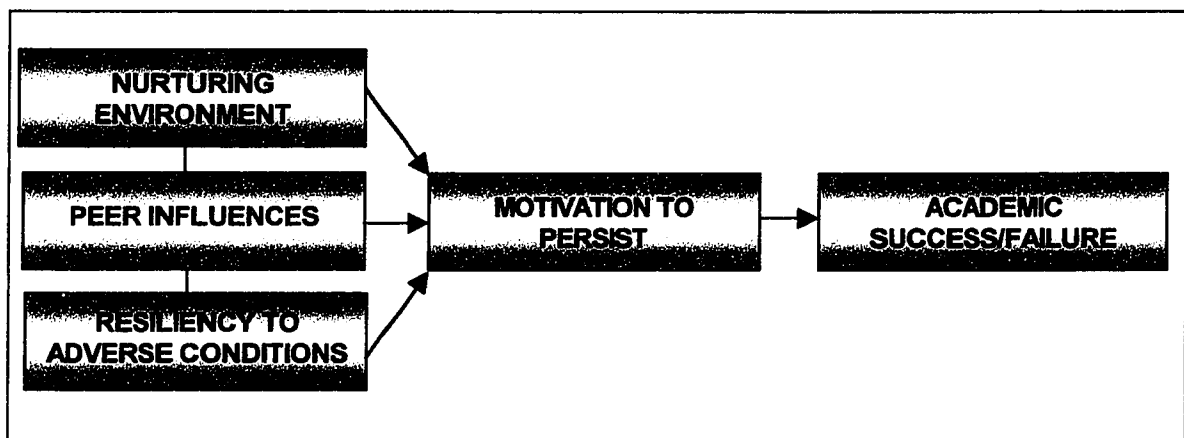
results of the study provide a significant conceptual basis for future research and discussion of the problem.

### Conceptual Framework of the Research

Several critical factors emerge from the educational literature as impacting students success or failure in the high school environment. However, much research points toward three major themes as affecting students' academic performance: a nurturing environment, including caring teachers and parents, and safe, effective schools; peer influences, both positive and negative; and the students' own resiliency to adverse conditions, including poverty.

These themes interact, creating the dynamics that result in motivation to persist and succeed despite economic and social obstacles, or generating the conditions that lead to failure. Figure 1.9 shows a flow-chart of these dynamics.

One of the most crucial themes is a nurturing environment. Nurturing is an



**Figure 1.9.** Dynamics that allow for success or generate conditions that lead to failure.

essential component of academic success, and must be received from at least one source, such as the students' immediate or extended family, educators, teachers, counselors, or other community members. According Mayeroff (1971) caring can be described as having eight critical components (Figure 1.7), with varying degrees of importance, depending upon the individual's situation. Noddings (1984, 1988, 1990, 1992) also adds volumes to the literature on nurturing as do several authors who examine the influences of teachers, parents and extended family members. Nurturing also extends to theories on minority students' learning (the institutional-deficiency theory, the developmental-deficiency theory, and the cultural-discontinuities theory), effective school literature (competent educational leaders in both administrative and teaching positions, who set high expectations, require clear elaboration of educational goals, and help create a safe, well-ordered, and disciplined environment) and alternative schools (including magnets and career schools). Nurturing environments create the opportunities for student success and offer the continuing support to make that success possible.

The second major theme is peer influences, which are dynamic and extremely powerful in the adolescent's world. Peer influences are critical and encourage or hinder a student's ability to stay focused and succeed academically. Grades and study habits are affected by students' acceptance by their peers; sometimes doing too well is perceived as a liability. Excessive moving can also be detrimental to forming supportive relationships. Positive peer influences deal with making connections and often extend to participating in extracurricular activities. Negative impacts involve

students being ostracized from main-stream high school groups. This can lead to poor attendance and habitual ditching, where time away from school is often spent with fellow students — drinking, using drugs, and participating in delinquent activities (i.e., shoplifting, joy-riding in stolen cars, etc.).

A third theme is resiliency to adverse conditions, which recognizes that characteristics fostering resiliency play a substantial role in students' ability to succeed academically, or their inability to do so. Both external and internal protective factors as discussed by Henderson and Milstein (1996), Richardson (1990), Bernard (1991), Winfield (1991), and Rutter (1987), encourage resiliency, and enable a young adult to react positively to adverse conditions, including poverty. Twelve critical traits emerge. Over-arching themes include:

- 1) Feelings of self confidence, self-efficacy and independence;
- 2) Life skills, problem solving: learning from both successes and failures;
- 3) Positive views of the future, offering a sense of purpose and hope;
- 4) Sense of humor;
- 5) Critical turning points; and
- 6) Personal experiences of poverty that motivate students to be resilient, to grasp opportunities and take charge of their own futures.

In summary, three major environmental and personal forces — nurturing environment, positive peer influences, and resiliency to adverse conditions — create the dynamics that motive a student to persist and to succeed academically. Conversely, the

absence or opposite of these forces encourage students to fail academically and drop out of school. These themes provide the conceptual framework for this dissertation, as depicted in Figure 1.9.

### **Brief Overview of Study Approach**

This research will use naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research, specifically case study research, focusing on the long interview. School records and transcripts will be accessed to corroborate and augment the long-interview evidence.

McCracken's (1988) four-step method of inquiry, taken from *The Long Interview, Qualitative Research Methods*, Volume 13, is particularly useful for formulating an overall research strategy. McCracken's *first* step calls for an exhaustive review of the literature. This provides a basis for defining problems, assessing data, expanding the researcher's awareness of relevant theories, and sharpening his or her capacity for surprise. The literature offers guidelines to establish the domain to be explored and the categories, patterns, and relationships that may later help organize the data.

The *second* step of McCracken's plan identifies cultural categories and relationships not considered by the scholarly literature. It focuses on self as the instrument of inquiry and on personal experiences.

The *third* step includes the interview, which usually consists of a carefully constructed questionnaire that begins with biographical questions. These will inform the respondent's subsequent comments and the researcher's later analysis. Opening questions

usually are non-directive and allow a descriptive overview and specific observations that can be explored later. Subsequent questions become more directed, in line with the research focus but always allowing for open conversation and serendipitous discovery of unanticipated insights. Stories are encouraged, since they give shape to disorderly experiences. “Individuals recapitulate and reinterpret their lives through story telling,” explains Riessman (1993, p. vi).

The *fourth* step consists of analyzing and interpreting the results. “The object of analysis is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent’s view of the work in general and the topic in particular” (McCracken, 1988, p. 42). McCracken notes that researchers must be prepared at this point to ignore both the literature and their own perspectives if what takes place in the interview bears no resemblance to their prior expectations yet offers a new glimpse of the world. The fourth step also includes the discovery of analytic categories, analysis, and interpretation, followed by writing the final report. As a narrative analysis, the final report can be viewed as searching for chronological, consequential, or thematic sequencing (Riessman, 1993, p. 17).

### **Dissertation Plan**

Chapter 2 will review literature on nurturing environments, the influences of peers, and resiliency to adverse conditions. Nurturing environments will include research on the influence of teachers, parents and family members, as well theories on minority students’

learning, effective, safe schools, and alternative schooling, both magnets and career schools. Peer influences explores the literature on the effects of student involvement in extracurricular activities; frequent moving, changing schools and/or locations; peer perceptions of grades in terms of minority learning theories; and peer pressures, which in some cases lead to, at the minimum, poor attendance, and the maximum, drinking, substance abuse, and trouble with the police. Resiliency to adverse conditions addresses twelve characteristics of resiliency that focus on feelings of self confidence, self-efficacy and independence; life skills, including problem solving: learning from both successes and failures; positive views of the future, offering a sense of purpose and hope; sense of humor; critical turning points, and personal experiences of poverty that motivate students to be resilient, to grasp opportunities and take charge of their own futures.

Chapter 3 describes both quantitative and qualitative research, and offers a rationale for choosing a qualitative methodology for this study. This chapter also explains how the subjects were selected and how data were collected, organized, coded, and analyzed.

Chapter 4 discusses findings regarding the concept of a nurturing environment in terms of parents, teachers, and effective schools.

Chapter 5 examines findings regarding the impact of peer influences.

Chapter 6 discusses resiliency to adverse conditions, including poverty.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes these findings, offers tentative conclusions, and suggests possible future research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

McCracken (1988) points out that an exhaustive review of literature enables researchers to define problems, assess data, increase their awareness of relevant theories, and sharpen their capacity for surprise. Literature defines parameters that determine the range of ideas to be investigated. It also suggests the categories, patterns, and relationships that may later be used to help organize and assess the data (pp. 24-32).

This review of literature will be presented within the Conceptual Framework of a nurturing environment, peer influences, and resiliency to adverse conditions. Many of the factors involved in these themes tend to overlap. Consequently, it is not unusual to find an aspect of one theme referred to within another theme. Since this research focuses on children affected by poverty, Chapter 2 is framed by the context of poverty.

#### **Nurturing Environment**

Noddings (1984) tells us that everywhere we hear the complaint “nobody cares!” yet she postulates that caring relationships are the quintessence of our existence. If we truly care, perhaps it is time to reflect on the empowering impact of an educational institution clearly focused on nurturing students’ academic and personal growth. This section examines the literature on why nurturing is such an important factor in understanding and improving the public education of minority children (and children of poverty more generally).

### Definition of Nurturing

For the purpose of this study nurturing (or caring, used inter-changeably) is defined as promoting and fostering students' growth toward self-actualization, creating an atmosphere of trust and interconnectedness. It means helping young adults make sense of the world, encouraging their construction of reality and of their individual identities as conveyed by their stories. A nurturing environment, then, creates an atmosphere where such personal development can occur.

This definition of nurturing aligns with Mayeroff's (1971) view of self actualization and growth, seen as part of a person's ability to care for something or someone apart from himself or herself. For Mayeroff, the nature of actualizing growth also requires individuals to become responsive to their own self, their own life. Individuals must create their own person by integrating new experiences and ideas, making decisions responsibly, weighing values carefully, and recognizing connections and opportunities for caring. He elaborates on eight major ingredients of a caring relationship: knowledge, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, courage, and alternating rhythms. These components create an atmosphere of caring, confidence, and interconnectedness that helps students make sense of the world, and encourages their individual stories.

Like Mayeroff, Noddings (1984) sees caring as focusing away from self. "I try to apprehend the reality of the other" (p. 14). Caring, according to Noddings, involves a reception of actual feelings of pain or pleasure, rather than a projection of perceived ones. This feeling is both reflexive and reflective, and goes beyond simply empathy. Rather, it

requires seeing and feeling so closely as to be a duality. Noddings labels this feeling as “engrossment” (p. 176).

Caring is largely reactive and responsive. Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. The one-caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts. Whatever she does for the cared-for is embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and in an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for. (Noddings, p. 19)

She notes that motivational displacement also occurs. This is an affective-receptive mode in which the individual is so engrossed in listening, looking, and feeling that a “motivational shift” (p. 33) occurs, resulting in a heightened awareness.

When I care, when I receive the other. . . there is more than feeling; there is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other and perhaps, although not necessarily, toward his ends. I do not relinquish myself; I cannot excuse myself for what I do. But I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other. It is clear that my vulnerability is potentially increased when I care...but my strength and hope are also increased...(Noddings, p. 33)

Bellah (1991) describes the same notion as conferring our full attention on something, being genuinely attentive in a way that requires all our resources of intellect, feeling, and moral sensitivity. He notes that at such moments we are not absorbed in ourselves but in what or who we are attending; we are open to the other’s experience of reality.

Combining each author’s interpretation, nurturing means “paying attention” as Bellah suggests, and being “engrossed and motivationally displaced,” as Noddings observes. This allows peoples to truly apprehend others’ realities, feeling what they feel as

nearly as possible. It also promotes “another’s growth and self-actualization,” as Mayeroff encourages.

Simply put, nurturing means listening carefully, being alert to the unexpected, intercepting a plea for connection, for a relationship. This relationship must be grounded in a trust that listens carefully, appreciates another’s reality, and encourages, promotes, and accepts others as they wish to be. Listening lies at the heart of nurturing and is possible only within the context of paying full attention, being totally engrossed in another.

### *Critical Components of Nurturing*

To further delineate nurturing and to define essential factors of nurturing educational institutions requires an expansion of Mayeroff’s eight critical components of caring (See Figure 1.7) The first component is knowledge, described by Mayeroff (1971) as explicit, directly-encountered, constructed knowledge, as well as implicit, indirect, non-experiential, inherent knowledge. Mayeroff views knowledge as essential to caring for others, since caring demands an accurate assessment and understanding of another’s needs. He specifically includes both knowledge than can and that cannot be articulated, a comment often echoed by high school students.

Likewise, Lightfoot (1983) sees knowledge as a critical component of good schools. She notes that some high school teachers possess intimate and deep knowledge of adolescents, “fearless and empathic regard,” (p. 342), sensitivity to the adolescent

viewpoint and perspective, quick and accurate interpretations of their needs, sincere understanding, and an “easy rapport” (p. 343).

The deep understandings teachers display I refer to as “empathy” the ability to place oneself in another’s position and vicariously experience what he is feeling and thinking. The empathetic stance is a crucial ingredient of successful interactions between teachers and students. Empathy is not adversarial; it does not accentuate distinctions of power; and it seems to be an expression of fearlessness. By empathy I do not mean something sentimental and soft. As a matter of fact, the empathetic regard of students is often communicated through tough teacher criticism, admonitions, and even punishment. Teacher fearlessness not only comes from deep understanding of students, it also derives from an institutional authority that support their individual encounters with students. (Lightfoot, p. 345)

Also in alignment with this viewpoint is the need to have competent personnel within our educational institutions. This includes both administrators and teachers — capable and knowledgeable educators who delight in learning themselves and can inspire, motivate, and enjoy their students. This aspect of knowledge is most critical in our educational institutions and too often neglected (Bester, 1985, p. 131). More than half of the nation’s math teachers do not meet current professional standards for teaching mathematics; no more than 10 percent of the nation’s elementary teachers meet contemporary standards (NCTM, 1989, p. 28). It is crucial that we reexamine our standard of competence, much less excellence, if we are to be appropriately nurturing.

The second of Mayeroff’s components of caring is patience — a patience that does not wait passively, but rather, gives total participation, perhaps in the form of a quiet presence that listens and allows another time and space. A teacher’s patient, reassuring stance can often allow students a much-needed chance for exploration and self-discovery.

A third caring component is honesty, which includes openness, lack of pretension, and an acceptance of both self and others as they truly are. Students seem especially sensitive to honesty and readily dismiss people who present false facades.

Another factor of caring is trust. Trust is the foundation of any nurturing relationship; mutual trust allows a “deepening and qualitative transformation of the relationship” (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 2). Without trust, a nurturing relationship has no connections, no groundings, and no feasible existence. Trust allows the “engrossment” noted by Noddings to occur; trust allows meaningful conversations and sharing of self; trust allows risk taking and developmental growth; trust fosters learning experiences; trust creates an atmosphere that engenders warm acceptance. Mayeroff (1971) explains that trust allows others to progress in their own time and their own way, allowing mistakes and the chance to learn from them, which provides the students both guidance and growth.

Trust in others to grow is not indiscriminate; it is grounded in actively promoting and safeguarding those conditions that warrant such trust. Caring teachers who trust students to find their own way in pursuing their own projects create a foundation for this trust by providing students with assistance, encouragement, and exposure to relevant and stimulating experiences. (p. 28)

Humility is a fifth component of caring, and like honesty, it involves overcoming pretentiousness. Humility allows a careful evaluation of one’s strengths and weaknesses. It also creates a readiness to embrace new experiences and new chances to learn, both for the one who is “cared for” and the one who is “caring” (Noddings, 1984, p. 4).

Mayeroff concludes his list of ingredients with hope, courage, and alternating rhythms. Hope allows transition and change, a chance for growth and development centered on the belief that the present's plentitude allows for the future's possibilities. Hope offers a reason for commitment to the future.

Courage inspires that continuing growth because future realizations demand courage to face the unknown. Such courage is informed by insights from the past and is bolstered by sensitivity to the present. In an educational setting, hope and courage might be linked to high expectations for children's achievements. In reviewing effective school literature, Purkey and Smith (1983) identified the importance of high expectations as a constant. John Gardner made a similar observation in 1961 when he noted that "high performance, particularly where children are concerned, takes place in a framework of expectation" (p. 101).

Finally, Mayeroff specifies alternating rhythms — which allow movement between changes in focus, from isolated event to holistic perceptions — as a critical component of nurturing. Alternating rhythms is defined as knowing when another's conduct is an isolated incident or a continuing pattern. For teachers, parents, and counselors, such knowledge is essential to perceptive caring.

To Mayeroff's list of critical components of nurture, I would add: support; generosity of time; attention to another's story; adoption of a constructivist perspective; and within all our institutions, creation of a safe environment that offers protection, solace, a sense of belonging, and a chance to make connections.

The *support* of adults to young people is grounded by the sense of worth experienced by a person who cares for another. It offers consistency, stability, and a feeling of “being there” for another over time and without ambivalence. It allows growth and mutual respect. Generosity of time is a given in a truly committed, nurturing relationship. Time must be viewed as a gift, a treasure of one’s self, dispensed generously but never too widely distributed so as to be fragmented. It is always centered, always valued, and never taken for granted.

*Generosity of time* allows us an opportunity to pay *attention to others’ stories*. Listening to others’ stories provides a holistic view of their life and creates connections to the larger society. Bellah (1991) suggests “that each person’s story is part of ‘our story’ told within a community, a story of the social world we share, and the social institutions, relations, and practices that enable or frustrate our flourishing” (p.209). Witherell and Noddings (1991) see the power of the stories and narrative as contributing to reflective awareness. They add that stories provide opportunities for deepening relations with others, make the abstract concrete and accessible, and offer meaning and belonging in our own lives. Lightfoot (1991) sees tremendous power in the narrative. She views it as a tool in know others in a time when too many people remain invisible, lost within our institutions. She suggests that we focus on the whole developing story and listen for the inner stories of our students. Coles (1989), Witherell and Noddings (1991), Gilligan et al. (1990), and Tappan and Brown (1991) offer more insights on the role narratives play in nurturing.

*Adoption of a constructivist perspective* of learning serves as a critical component of caring by allowing one's listening, responding, and interacting skills to be more focused on the other's vision of reality. Essentially the constructivist view of learning recognizes that even the youngest children are continually constructing their own reality, assimilating learning based on prior knowledge, and accepting new ideas only when their old ideas do not work or are found inefficient. This view is consistent with the ideas of the 16th century educator Pestalozzi (Ulich, 1975), as well as Boyd (1991), Dewey (1959), Noddings (1992), and Gardner (1991).

A final component to nurturing involves *creation of a safe environment*. Such an environment must offer protection and solace, with rules that are clear and explicit. It must also provide visible symbols of order and structure that promote stability and security in a student's fragile, fluctuating world. Lightfoot (1983) notes that "these institutional frameworks and structures are critical for adolescents, whose uncertainty and vulnerability call for external boundary setting" (p.350). It is also crucial that this safe environment offers a sense of belonging, a chance to make connections, and an opportunity for intellectual play and personal development.

### *Expanding the Concepts of Nurturing*

Historically, families, communities, churches, the economy and corresponding job market, and governmental assistance programs have all formed a framework for nurturing relationships between children and adults. However, fundamental changes in these

institutions, and our interactions with these institutions, have reduced the opportunities for children to have close, stable relationships with caring adults. It appears that we are experiencing a major crisis in caring, a crisis that cuts across all class and ethnic categories, and shows no signs of abating. Schools are left to remedy the situations as best they can, to become nurturing institutions and caring communities. Schaps and Solomon (1990) suggest that if schools become nurturing communities they will be “measurably more effective in promoting all aspects of children’s development — intellectual, social, and moral” (p.42). Giving children a chance to belong, to contribute, and to make connections is often “the missing variable in the school improvement equation” (Schaps and Solomon, 1990, p. 42). Nurturing is an intrinsic part of teaching which can create a classroom learning environment that works for all children.

Noddings (1992) believes that “caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and that contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light” (p. 27). Her book, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, envisions an educational system predicated on caring. The main goal of such a system is “to produce competent, caring, loving and loveable people” (Noddings, 1992, p. 174). Her stated purpose of education echoes that of Mayeroff, who finds happiness in caring for others. Mayeroff (1971) says that it is “through caring for certain others, by serving them through caring, that a man lives the meaning of his own life” (p. 2). Schaps and Solomon (1990) concur. They explain that systematic attention to human needs allows both children and adults to thrive and develop.

Noddings' educational ideas are germane for all students, but perhaps all the more critical for those students who receive minimal nurturing from home or from the community. Much of what Noddings offers is enlightening, with views grounded in common sense, feministic thinking, mathematical literacy, and teaching experience. She does not presume that schools are currently organized to achieve excellence. In fact, she feels that the societal demands placed on schools have so proliferated that schools are indeed burdened. Schools confront desegregation and busing in a society that does not face its racial prejudice; schools offer classes such as sex education and assemblies on AIDS in a community unwilling to discuss love, commitment, and responsibility with its adolescents. Schools bring in speakers on gang awareness. These forums are meant to inform and protect students, and offer alternatives to short-term feelings of belonging. But they are provided by a society that fails to offer its children ways of connecting or hopes and dreams to make their own.

Noddings insinuates that our focus is wrong. She believes that a capacity to care might be as valuable as our current emphasis on verbal and analytical skills. A traditional liberal arts curriculum may not be the ideal; it is, after all, "largely a celebration of male life" (Noddings, 1992, p. 43). Her vision does not see the same education for all children as being equitable. Like Gardner (1983), she acknowledges and appreciates multi-intelligences, but expects the list to flow well beyond seven types. Using examples of mathematics and art, Noddings argues that schools need to create an atmosphere for students to become passionately engrossed in ideas. She adds, "This level of interest

cannot be demanded, and students whose interest lie elsewhere should be respected and encouraged to choose what is useful for them in each subject” (Noddings, 1992, pp.150-172).

Noddings (1984) explains that when a question is posed in class and a student responds, the teacher receives not just the “response” but the student. The effective teacher is engrossed, undergoing a motivational displacement that now focuses on the student. As Mayeroff (1971) suggests, such teachers seek involvement with the student; they probe for clarification, interpretation, and contribution, and meet the student directly, as a duality. In this inclusion, teachers accept students’ feelings toward the subject matter and their motives. Teachers encourages students to stand by their convictions. They are committed to two major tasks: stretching students’ reality by presenting an effective selection of the world, and working cooperatively with students as they strive toward competence in that world (Noddings, 1992, pp. 175-180).

Knowledge is a critical component of nurturing, since such caring demands an accurate assessment and understanding of another’s needs. Constructivist thinking asks that we appreciate divergent ways of knowing. It allows students to continue constructing their own worlds with guidance and support from teachers. This scaffolding serves to connect students’ prior knowledge to academic learning. Making such connections moves us beyond simply teaching the basics in an attempt to remedy deficiencies. Advanced skills can be taught. Knapp (1991) states that “recent research on children’s understanding of math concepts shows that, using modeling and counting, first-graders can solve a wide

variety of math problems before they have memorized the computational algorithms that are traditionally regarded as prerequisites” (p. 284).

Current classroom research documents the fact that disadvantaged children receive less instruction in conceptual thinking skills than their more advantaged classmates. Teaching tends to reinforce discrete-skill instruction, offering few chances for students to integrate and apply their learning. Consequently, such learning lacks meaning and coherence. We postpone the more interesting and more integrated work. Knapp (1991) reports,

despite years of back-to-basics curricula, minimum competency testing, and compensatory education, the majority of educational disadvantaged children appear to fall ever farther behind their more advantaged peers as they progress through school and as the emphasis increases on advanced skills in comprehension, problem solving, and reasoning (p. 283).

Knapp (1991) repeatedly asks if we are underestimating what students are capable of learning, and suggests that it is time to readjust our thinking and our curriculum.

By discarding assumptions about skill hierarchies and by attempting to understand children’s competencies as constructed and evolving both within and outside of school, researchers are developing models of intervention that start with what children know and expose them to explicit applications of what has traditionally been thought of as higher-order thinking. (p. 283).

...students regarded as educationally disadvantaged *can* profit from instruction in comprehension, composition, and mathematical reasoning from the very beginning of their education. (p. 283).

McLaughlin and Talbert (1990) present a portrait of Nodding’s vision when they describe three California alternative schools that make personalization their most important feature. Each was founded on the belief that for students of all degrees of

academic involvement, personal bonds with adults promote students' commitment to school and their engagement in learning. These schools emphasized deep understanding of individuals, their learning styles, and their current knowledge and understanding. Such knowledge fostered personalized classrooms with individualized instruction, ongoing support, and connections that felt like family.

McLaughlin and Talbert note that while the personal affirmation and accountability associated with a personalized school environment is important for all adolescents, it was especially critical for students who were at risk. They point out that the "lack of belonging or personal connection in school is mirrored in their out-of-school lives, thereby amplifying the importance of personal relationships in school" (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1990, p. 231). Ibsen, an inner-city public performing arts magnet school, had one of the largest minority populations in the district. Yet, it boasted the lowest dropout rate, and 80% of its graduates went on to college. All of its students rated above the district's proficiency norms, and enjoyed a reputation for excellence in dance, theater, and chorus.

Kohn (1991) argues against the belief that the darker side of our nature is more pervasive. As possible evidence of an innate sense of caring, he presents a study of infants ranging in age from 18 to 72 hours who actively registered distress at hearing another infant cry. He cites other observations of pre-school children regularly comforting, sharing, and helping one another. When these children were questioned, their responses were most altruistic: they gave because the other needed. Kohn also discusses the Child Development Project (CDP) devoted specifically to helping children become more caring

and responsible. Schaps and Solomon (1990) described the CDP as an extremely powerful community that engendered cooperating and caring much like a large family. Pro-social behavior transferred positively to classrooms, and improved the children's social competence, interpersonal behavior, democratic values, and higher-level reading comprehension. Probably most significant, the children reported themselves to be significantly less lonely and less socially anxious (p. 40).

Kohn also constructs several critical points in regard to nurturing. First, he notes that a teacher's expectations about a child's intellectual potential can affect that child's performance. He does not, however, limit this self-fulfilling prophecy to academics, noting that a teacher's assumptions also act powerfully on a child's actions and values. Second, he asserts that just as children rarely react aggressively to rules that have been rationally explained, they also need to feel that pro-social behaviors are not a matter of compliance but of choice, representing a reflection of themselves. Third, he cautions that teachers set powerful examples in their caring behavior. Fourth, he observes that "children whose parents are interested in and supportive of them usually distinguish themselves as socially competent and psychologically healthy on a range of measures, and there is no reason to think that a teacher/student relationship is any different" (Kohn, 1991, p. 503). Perhaps this last point is most critical. If the child has been consistently nurtured, the teacher's nurturing is a natural complement; if the child has been minimally nurtured, this is an opportunity to offer that nurturing.

### Cooperative Learning as Nurturing

Kohn stresses peer interaction and sees cooperative learning as a way to continually encourage pro-social behavior. He particularly notes its value in promoting greater acceptance of diversity (both in ethnicity and ability level). Glasser (1990) also perceives value in cooperative learning. He notes that students generally feel most important during extracurricular activities such as sports, music, or drama. He attributes this sense of power to the opportunities such activities provide to work as a team, accomplishing more while having fun.

Slavin (1990) contends that successful forms of cooperative learning provide structure and recognition based on group performance. Schultz (1990) notes the importance of monitoring team involvement and developing students' interpersonal skills over time. He observed students' gradually changing attitudes toward learning and their willingness to share ideas. Control was no longer an issue; his students regarded him not as being "in authority" but as being "an authority" (Schultz, 1990, p.45).

Vasquez (1988) noted that cooperation rather than competition promotes higher achievement, especially in minority students. He also recognized that minority students are often characterized by an external locus of control; experiences of poverty and failure usurp their sense of responsibility and diminish their ability to excel academically. To remedy this dilemma, Vasquez advocates nurturing. He contends that student's perceptions of teacher's care affect both academic performance and behavior. Vasquez adds that teachers must have high expectations for their students (Vasquez, 1988; Knapp

and Shields, 1990), but stresses the importance of realistic aspirations. Noddings (1984, 1988) also advocates tailoring expectations in alignment with a students' interests. Caring teachers do not hesitate to teach what they think students should know, but they also accept students' attitudes toward the subject. Moreover, they adjust requirements based on students' abilities and interests. Noddings continually reiterates that she believes the student is more valuable than the subject.

Knapp and Shields (1990) suspect that children of poverty are taught less than they are capable of learning. They note three important principles to consider. First is the need to maximize time-on-task, avoiding distractions and fragmentation, and emphasizing conceptual understanding. Teaching disadvantaged students tends to reinforce discrete-skills instruction, offering little chance for students to integrate and apply their learning. Consequently such learning lacks meaning and coherence. Second, Knapp and Shields also cite the importance of establishing high expectations and a school climate that supports academic learning. Third is the need to strengthen parental involvement in supporting instruction. They note that too many minority children have well-honed skills and strategies in written and oral communication that allow for easy grace of expression in their own communities, but are repudiated in the mainstream culture. From this perspective, disadvantaged students face two dilemmas: they are ill-equipped to function appropriately in a school setting, and they are not recognized by their teachers; their strengths remain ignored. Over time this negative cycle generates unfortunate repercussions.

McCollum (1990) observes that instruction in classrooms serving disadvantaged students tends to involve differential treatment of student differences and focuses less on the academic curriculum. Although having high expectations is regarded as important, teachers tend to act disparately with low-achieving students. The nature of their responses limits instructional experiences for students. Too much adjustment of the curriculum to accommodate special needs or personalities can invite stereotypes.

Ability grouping appears dysfunctional for many, although it may facilitate the teaching of higher-achieving students. Goodlad (1990) decries “tracking” and notes that students “in the lowest tracts and the vocationally oriented curriculum are disproportionately poor and disproportionately from racial minority groups” (p. 14). Oakes (1990) perceives tracking as a structural barrier to access and accomplishment. McCollum (1990) finds answers for some of these problems in personalizing teaching. She encourages care and respect for a student’s cultural background.

Irvin (1990), writing on teacher expectations, concludes that White teachers are apt to hold negative expectations and are more likely than teachers of color to be out of cultural sync with the Black students they teach. She adds, “It does not appear that Black children are particularly susceptible to negative teacher expectation because they differ from most teachers who are White and middle-class...” (p. 61). Irvin offers several ideas for effective teachers of Black students, and it seems apparent that these recommendations have applicability to the Hispanic school population, as well. She recommends having high expectations, optimizing academic time, organizing instructional objectives that

thoroughly match a student's ability, using active (verve inducement and high sensate-stimulation) teaching methods, and finally, maintaining an amicable, enthusiastic, responsive, yet orderly atmosphere (Irvin, 1990, p. 95-96).

Deiro (1996), in *Teaching With Heart*, says it is essential for teachers to create healthy connections with students. "Educational theorist argue for teachers to take a more active role in nurturing students. They content that school success is as dependent on caring and nurturing students as it is on promoting academic achievement" (p.8). She further notes that "research bears out that when students' emotional and social needs are met they learn better" (Deiro, 1996, p.8).

Deiro's book focuses on the behavior of six secondary teachers. She observers six strategies these teachers use to make those healthy connections: "creating one-to-one time with students; using appropriate self-disclosure; having high expectations of students while conveying a belief in their capabilities; networking with parents, family members, friends, and neighbors of students; building a sense of community within the classroom; and finally using rituals and traditions within the classroom" (Diero, 1996, p. 22-21). The first three, she notes, were the primary ways that teachers bond with their students. She also concluded that one pervasive skill common to all six teachers was effective communication skills, including "listening, paraphrasing, summarizing, reflecting, and clarifying" (Diero, 1996, p. 99). Her six teachers were good listeners. "They value listening and know how important listening is for validating the other person and making

effective connections with students” (Diero, 1996, p.99). These features overlap considerably with the many attributes of caring and nurturing already discussed.

### *A Constructivist View of Learning*

Ogbu suggests building relationships through discourse and a chance for discussion that clarifies, listens carefully, and is attentive to another’s view of reality. Gardner (1991) adds to this concept by offering a framework for restructuring our approach to making such connections. Gardner addresses the dichotomy between intuitive, common-sense knowledge of a child and the scholastic and disciplinary way of knowing. It is in connecting the two disparate views that we create our vision of reality. In an educational setting, the new knowledge is frequently not synthesized with a child’s earlier ideas. No scaffolding connects seemingly disparate concepts, and the new ideas remain unconnected or in conflict with the child’s previously formed conceptions. If educators do not “ask students to try to reconcile their earlier partial forms of understanding with the notions and concepts of school, genuine understanding cannot be realized” (Gardner, 1991, p. 149-150). Without this essential connection, many beliefs and ways of thinking remain trapped within minds that are essentially incapable of participating in our complicated technological society. For too many minority students, this entrapment as defined by Gardner is very real.

Much of the constructivist thinking described by Gardner and presented by Dewey and Colburn has been adopted by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics

(NCTM). Noddings (1990), who has studied extensively the ethics of “caring,” has also edited a mathematics monograph presenting the basic concepts of constructivism. Used as a methodology in regular mathematics classrooms, constructivist teaching relies less upon direct instruction and focuses more on monitoring students’ performance. This is accomplished through well-planned problems and practical situations requiring mathematical solutions. Discourse and cooperative learning becomes the norm. Students discuss how to “frame” problems fruitfully and debate the advantages of alternative solutions rather than relying on the “right answers.” Teaching shifts from the authoritarian model based on “transmission of knowledge” and “drill and practice” to student-centered models focussing on “stimulation of learning” and “active exploration” (Mathematical Sciences Educational Board, National Research Council, 1991). Constructivism, both in listening skills and in manipulating constructs, offers students a chance to learn mathematics well, and inevitably lets both students and teachers feel nurtured in their interactions with one another.

### Parental Involvement

Parental involvement also fits under the general rubric of nurturing. It is crucial for teachers to be cognizant of the continuous yet delicate connection between school and home. The home is a vital part of a student’s life, but all too often, misconceptions prevent teachers and parents from talking (Comer, 1990; Irvine, 1991). It is possible that this

interrelationship fails when the adults involved are not able to care sufficiently for this connection.

Among the most frequently quoted sources on parental involvement is James Comer (1988, 1990), director of the School Development Program of the Yale Child Study Center, Yale University. Many of his articles discuss the difficulties in relationships between home and school, the importance of social networks, and the potential barriers that interfere with academic learning. He believes strongly in a nurturing, sensitive, and understanding environment that allows children to learn mainstream behaviors that lead to academic success. His pioneering work with the New Haven project provided a working model for positive, home-school interrelationships.

Clark (1983) designed one of the most persuasive studies on the empowering effects of parental nurturing. For six months he questioned and observed families, students, and teachers. Using ethnographic techniques, Clark interviewed 10 Black families of similar cultural and socioeconomic background. He concluded that students' success in school depends upon: parents' liberal nurturing and support; a chance for caring conversations; regular home-school interactions; optimistic attitudes; explicit achievement-centered rules and norms with implicit achievement-training activities; firm, consistent behavior monitoring and rules enforcement; clearly established role boundaries and status structure with parents as the dominant authority; and siblings interacting as an organized subgroup (p.200). Rather than the family composition or status, Clark stresses the quality of family lifestyle and parents' high expectations as keys to children's school success and

future college plans. In contrast, he cites family disorganization as leading to poor academic achievement. Such disorganization is characterized by blurred role boundaries and status structures, inadequate monitoring of children's time and space, low expectations, lack of parent-school interaction, and parental feelings of powerlessness and a sense of hopelessness.

Jackson and Cooper (1989) refer to parent involvement in education as the crucial "wild card" in school reform, with nearly everyone recognizing the vital role that families play. There seems to be common agreement that parental (or significant caretaker) involvement is an important influence on academic success. Fehrmann (1987), Benbow (1990), Hanson and Ginsburg (1988), Comer (1988), Clark (1983), Jackson (1989), Bank, Slavings, and Biddle (1990) all studied the effects of peer, faculty, and parental influences on students' persistence. They concluded that parents and peers are strong influences.

This fact is consistent with many of the studies involving cooperative learning in the classroom. Banks, Slaving, and Biddle (1990) note that children take their parents' expectations and behaviors into account when formulating their own educational goals. They also found that American parents were more likely to influence their children by articulating norms than by modeling relevant behaviors.

In contrast, Noddings (1992) chose "modeling" as a major component in her vision of moral education. "Moral education forms the perspective of an ethics of caring has four major components: modeling dialogue, practice, and confirmation" (p. 22). She felt that by modeling, a teacher nurtures a student's "ethical ideal." (i.e. "We do not tell our students

to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them” (p. 22) Along with modeling, dialogue (listening, talking, sharing, and responding), practice (caring apprenticeships), and confirmation (with reflection and commitment) serve as the four main factors embedded in relationships.

Dunham, Kidwell, and Portes (1988) examined the effects of parent-adolescent interaction. They noted that families of successful adolescents have a style of interaction that facilitates information exchange and allows resolution of difficulties. They also found a shift in conversational style from a relatively parent-centered influence in pre-adolescence to a more child-centered influence at adolescence.

Barrozo (1987) studied Asian-American minorities who typically perform well in math. He was concerned that low verbal scores were often masked by higher-than-average math scores and high GPAs. He attributes success in math to qualified teachers and administrators. Moreover, he credits Asian parents for their support and also for emphasizing a culture that promotes attitudes, habits, and motivational levels that lead to achievement.

Divoky (1988) also studied Asian-American students, noting that family support is a two-edged sword. While successful Asian-American students credit their families for making major sacrifices for their future, others resent of the pressure they felt to fulfill parents’ wishes. She notes that more than a quarter of the students who drop out in New York City are Asian-Americans.

Irvine (1991) says all parents value education for their children, but describes Black parents' educational aspirations as compelling and passionate. "Black parents understand that the only way out of poverty is through education, and consequently they have more emotional involvement in their schools because schools have been concrete representations of Black people's hopes and dreams" (Irvine, 1991, p. 106).

With such unbridled enthusiasm, why are there so many disappointments? Irvine postulates that the dissonance lies not in conflicting values of education, but in lack of "cultural synchronization" between Black families and schools. She states that some teachers do believe that Black families are culturally deficient and that the home environment is antithetical to that of the school. With sensitivity, time, serious dialogue, and mutual nurturing, such misconceptions, created by both historical and contemporary conditions, can begin to change.

Hanson and Ginsburg (1988) used High School and Beyond data to examine the relationship between a wide range of values that correlate responsibility with high school students' achievement test scores and grades. Results show that parents can affect their children's achievement by placing importance on education and a work ethic, and by guiding behavior that contributes to success in school. When students and their parents believe in the values and accompanying behaviors that stress responsibility, students have a better chance of achieving success in the school environment. Hanson and Ginsburg (1988) also found that the effect of values as a whole was consistently larger than the effect of socioeconomic status as a predictor of students' performance.

Orland (1990) made a similar observation about family socioeconomic status. He noted that parental income levels, education, or occupations are of limited value in explaining the variations in student achievement. Rather, the atmosphere of the home, parental expectations, the amount of reading material, and, in general, the family's attitude toward education play more pivotal roles in academic achievement. His study was consistent with the findings of Clark (1983).

Gerig (1988) studied gender differences in mathematical achievement and reviewed several articles covering student attitudes, teacher-student interactions, and parental attitudes. He notes that students' self-assessment of and attitude toward math may be more strongly related to their parents' perceptions of their abilities and attitudes than the students' own performance. For girls more so than boys, positive influences of parents, teachers, and counselors appear to be critical. Girls seem more likely to attribute their success in math achievement to effort, while boys are more likely to attribute their success to ability. Gerig also notes that the father's educational expectations contributed strongly to a girl's continuation in higher-level math classes. Other studies (Pederson, 1985, Rimm and Rimm, (1989) reinforced Gerig's findings.

Wigfield (1983) investigated parental influence by examining which factors most impacted children's math achievement: parents' behaviors and beliefs, or their interpretations of their children's behaviors. He discovered that parents' achievement and beliefs concerning about their own math background were related. However, parents' beliefs about their children — particularly perceptions of their children's

math ability, task difficulty inferences, and their expectations for future success — related to the children’s own beliefs, and served as critical influences on math performance and choice. Parents and teachers can, therefore, influence their children through the messages they provide.

Alva (1995) sees a network of family members, friends, neighbors, and teachers as contributing to academically successful students. In reviewing research of successful Mexican American professionals by Gandara, Alva notes that 93% of professionals surveyed indicate that “the educational support received from their parents was the single most important factor affecting their high academic goals and expectations” (Alva, 1995, p. 290).

Rumberger and Larson (1994) also note the importance of parental values and attitudes in affecting students’ academic achievement. They state that “parental monitoring of students’ behavior, in particular, may have a positive impact on grades and homework completion” (p. 145). They also note that “lower-class parents, however, are likely to attend fewer school events. . . .Hispanic parents interact significantly less than non-Hispanic parents with teachers and school personnel” (p. 145). Hispanic parents attended school events 55% of the time. 31% of Hispanic parents helped with homework once or twice a week (See Table 2.1).

This is not because these parents don’t value education, but rather because Hispanic parents often may be confused about the roles they are expected to play in their children’s education or they may lack the confidence and skills to interact with teachers and school staff. (p. 145)

**Table 2.1. Percentage of students grades primary-12 whose parents reported participating in their child's school activities and helping their child with homework, by race/ethnicity. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996, Cited by The Condition of Education, 1998, *Involvement in School-related Activities*.**

Selected Characteristics	<u>Participated in school activities</u>			<u>Helped with homework</u>		
	Attended general meeting	Attended scheduled meeting with teacher	Attended school events	Acted as a volunteer or served on a committee	Never or less than once a week	1-2 times a week
<b>Total</b>	87.8	84.8	66.1	39.6	26.7	35.2
<b>White</b>	88.2	83.0	70.9	44.5	28.2	37.0
<b>Black</b>	86.3	86.5	56.0	29.5	21.9	30.0
<b>Hispanic</b>	87.3	85.1	54.8	27.7	25.5	31.2

Taylor (1991) notes that in research on Black and Hispanic low-income children from urban kindergarten programs, "Parental involvement was found to have consistent and direct positive effects on the children's reading and mathematics achievement and social maturity in the first grade" (Taylor, 1991, p.20). Such parental involvement includes taking an active part in homework, activities, and parent-teacher interactions. Children with pre-kindergarten experiences such as Head Start had an additional advantage. Taylor notes that "participating families made significant improvements in family cohesion and adaptability" (Taylor, 1991, p.21).

Family dysfunction has been implicated as a risk factor for school failure because of its association with social-emotional problems and antisocial behavior in children. Early education programs that contribute to improved family functioning are likely to have positive effects on the young child's initial orientation toward schooling. (p.21)

Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) see the family as the "most important source of support for students" (p.47). They note that Black adolescents cared more about their

parents' opinion of their academic ability than about their peers' input. Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) noted that the family provides more than just sustenance. It may also be a "source of vulnerability if family patterns do not reinforce skills necessary for Black students to do well in school" (p.48).

Maxine Clark (1991) states that the social identity of Black adolescents is dependent upon their parents' socialization goals and response to mainstream society. If family values conflict with the values reinforced in school, or if students have not been exposed to parental expectations, students become more vulnerable to other academic performance risk factors. "The apparent contextual dissonance between school and home behavioral patterns may cause considerable stress for African-American adolescents, because schools may attempt to acculturate these students by eliminating their cultural differences" (Clark, 1991, p.44).

Reyes and Valencia (1995) voice a similar concern. They see a need for teachers who understand students, parents, and their communities. Reyes and Valencia note that Hispanic students often "feel detached from the enterprise of schooling" (p.322). They attribute this detachment to the fact that school curriculums are often based on middle class White values emphasizing individualism and competition. These values rarely acknowledge Hispanic culture, Hispanic authors, and the achievements of people of color in general.

Perhaps even more pivotal is the issue of acculturation. By encouraging over-dependence, Hispanic families hinder acculturation. The research on this subject conflicts, however. One view assumes that total assimilation into mainstream U.S. society is a

necessary prerequisite for successful adjustment and acceptance. The other perspective, presented by Rueschenberg and Buriel (1995), states that while family obligations and the family as referent decreases with acculturation, support does not. Studies found that the support of Mexican American extended families did not decline despite decreasing cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty (p.22-24).

Dill (1995) also discusses the extended family network and its importance in conserving Chicano culture. She stresses the important position of godparents, who act as guardians. They also serve as links between family and community as respected friends and persons of authority. Dill quotes research suggesting that children who live in extended families have higher literacy rates than those who live in nuclear families. Likewise, those in larger families were better off economically, and experienced less downward mobility. (Dill, 1995, p. 254-255).

While having a positive bonding experience with one's family is ideal, it is not always the norm. Some families are dysfunctional; some family values are incongruent with school values. Consequently, developing resilient behavior becomes essential. Much in tune with the literature on nurturing, Henderson and Milstein (1996) state that "the most critical resiliency builder for every student is a basic trusting relationship, even with just one adult, within the family or without" (p.18).

*Minority Theories About Students' Learning*

A nurturing environment can only be achieved when students' individuality is recognized, but all are treated with equality. Much of the literature associated with educating the disadvantaged is subsumed into three categories proposed by Ogbu and quoted by Boyd (1991): the developmental-deficiency theory, the institutional-deficiency theory, and the cultural-discontinuities theory. Cultural-discontinuities theory will be discussed in detail under Peer Influences.

Offering an historical perspective, Deloria, quoted in *From Different Shores* (1994), sees the educational thrust of the 1964 social unrest as problematic. He suggests, "the outmoded liberalism of the past that saw education as the key to full citizenship" (p.98). Consequently money was funneled into educational services. Such a strategy was destined to fail because it overlooked an essential element: what was most needed and ignored was a redistribution of the nation's wealth. As a consequence, the *developmental-deficiency theory* emerged.

Minority participation in the new programs [President Johnson's War on Poverty, 1964] involved an articulation of poverty statistics that presented a negative image of minority groups and phrased their condition as a deprivation of White values and practices. Thus education was seen as an immense problem area and not as a natural part of the community's life.

The path to educational parity was interpreted as conformity to majority values, which were presumed to be the universal norm. Statistical data assumed Western civilization as the cultural context, and minorities became subgroups that lacked critical attributes. (Deloria, 1994, p.98)

Essentially, the developmental-deficiency theory claims that children of poverty fail in school because their parents have not adequately provided them with mainstream

competencies. Boyd (1991) labels the “cultural deprivation theory” of the 1960s an anthropological oxymoron at best and a racist concept at worst. Since schools are basically middle-class institutions, disadvantaged children must make major adjustments. Whether these are deficiencies, cultural differences, or the results of poverty, children actually experience distinctive background differences in linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and social development (p. 345).

The developmental-deficiency theory focuses on cultural differences the lack of adequate preparation for educational institutions experienced by children of poverty. Disadvantaged children must cope with major adjustments at school, experiencing distinctive background differences in linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and social development. Knapp (1991) observes that children from impoverished and linguistic-minority backgrounds often perform poorly on basic skills assessment tests. He notes that decontextualized measurements of discrete skills do not allow the students to connect new information with past experiences.

Working within a framework of effective schools, Knapp suggests that curricula and instructional methods be redesigned to build upon prior learning and to complement, rather than contradict, students’ earlier experiences (Knapp, 1991, p. 284-286). Instead of accepting a deficit view of educationally disadvantaged learners, teachers could focus on the strengths and talents of their students. Levin (1987) also argues that teachers often overlook the strengths of culturally different children on the basis that they lack the characteristics of middle-class students. These teachers fail to realize that children of

poverty have their own unusual assets — assets that can be used to accelerate the learning process. Haberman (1991) says the way urban schools narrowly restrict the role of the teacher and the contents taught all too frequently repudiates the students and their home lives.

A different look at cultural diversity may require redefining cultural differences as “cultural capital.” This capital comprises general cultural background knowledge, disposition, and skills that are transferred to successive generations. Unlike the cultural-difference model, the cultural-capital model places the stigma for rationalizing different outcomes upon individuals of a particular society. This model is defined by economics and politics, on the students’ unique access to the elements of a class culture rather than on their ethnic or racial background.

Contemporary research also documents that there is more variation in the quality of family life within social class and ethnic groupings than once considered. Clark’s (1983) study of 10 Black families found that within the confines of one narrowly restricted cultural niche, poor urban Black families differ substantially in the quality of family life they are able to provide. Furthermore, these differences determine whether or not the children were prepared to be academically competent in the classroom. Clark’s findings suggest systematic efforts that encourage parents to learn how to support their children’s success in school could be very beneficial — a point strongly supported in the effective-school research. Boyd also notes that if Clark is accurate, cultural capital may be more accessible than previously considered. Certainly

programs like Head Start and Chapter I (Title I) offer opportunities to test this theory. Such programs take nurturing directly into the community.

Comer (1987, 1988, 1990), working with the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, strongly encourages bonding between school and community. He supports a positive resolution of the developmental-deficiency theory and believes that “motivated, empowered, more confident and competent parents are better able to support the development of their children and, in turn, academic learning” (Comer, 1990, p. 40). His elaborately organized program stresses the importance of human relationships in educational institutions, as well as the need to work collaboratively and to surmount misconceptions that created barriers between schools and parents in the past.

*Institutional-deficiency theory* focuses on problems within the school system. Within this theoretical framework, some critics “stress the dysfunctional organizational arrangements in the workplace, while others claim that the problem goes deeper, that fundamental features of the governance and incentive structures of public schools are dysfunctional” (p. 334). Workplace critics cite a “pervasive disengagement” of both student and teachers from learning. This phenomenon occurs in a setting constrained by the need to maintain order and teach unappealing content, leading to coercion, bargaining, and lowered standards. Critics of incentive theories believe that significant changes in the authority, control, and incentive strategies within the public schools are necessary. Hanushek (1994) proposed a plan to do just that by suggesting incentives to encourage high student performance and a process of decision making involving all participants.

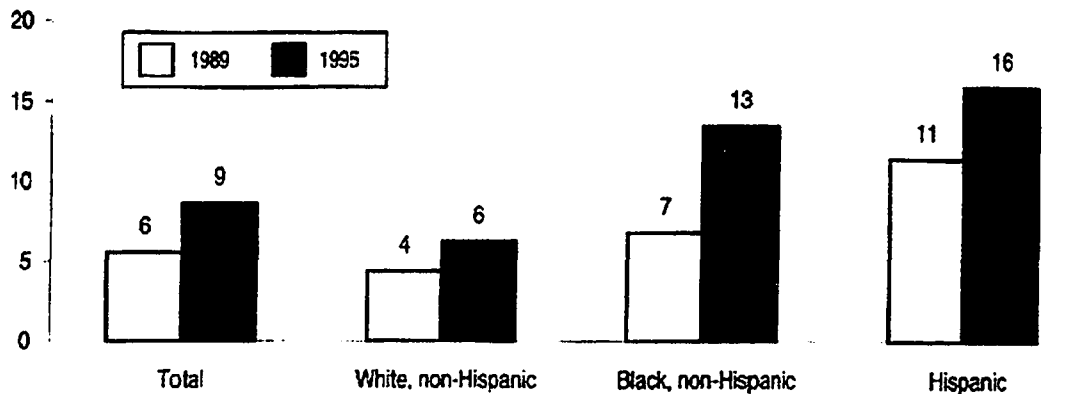
Deborah Meier, principal of Central Park East Secondary School, New York, says “If we had invented schools purposely to increase the attraction of the streets, to promote peer isolation, to undermine adult authority, and to make kids sneer at ‘culture,’ they would look like American’s junior and senior high schools today” (Boyd, 1991, p. 342).

Urban schools have many problems. “One of the most disturbing changes affecting urban school systems is the escalation of violent crime and teenage gang activity, often associated with the exploding problems of illegal drugs” (Boyd, 1991, p. 338). In terms of a safe, orderly environment, the availability of drugs and alcohol is an issue of concern for most young adults and school personnel.

Even more critical, however is the issue of violence. “Between 1989 and 1995, there were increases in the percentages of students feeling unsafe while they were at school and while they were going to and from school” (Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998, p. 30) (Figures 2.1 and 2.2, and Table 2.2). While White students did fear being attacked or harmed, Black and Hispanic students were more frequently afraid of being attacked.

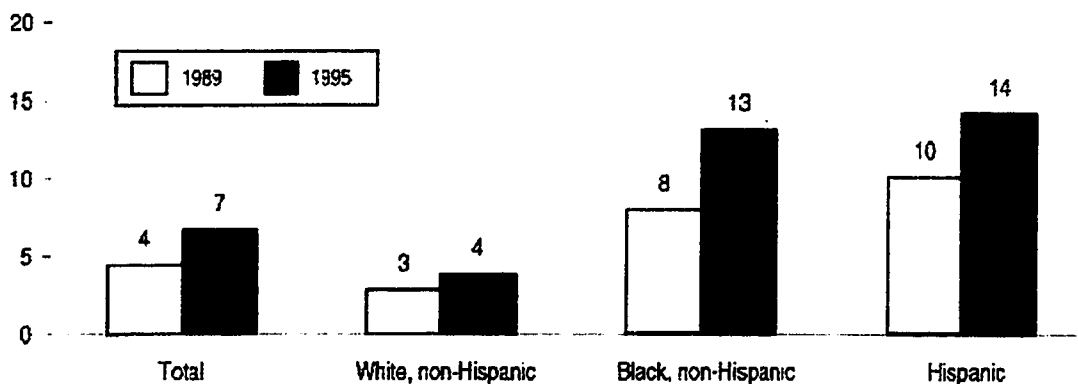
Another change, observed by Wilson (1987) is the increasing isolation and vulnerability of the inner city communities. The out-migration of working- and middle-class Blacks to the suburbs has impoverished once-stable social and economic structures, leaving acutely disadvantaged families and individuals in deteriorating neighborhoods. Boyd (1991) quotes Wacquant as saying, “one of the most worrisome implications of the increasing isolation of the ghetto is that the Black English vernacular spoken in inner cities

is growing more different from standard English” (p. 340). Sociolinguist William Lobov, views this as the “linguistic correlate of the formation of what has been called ‘a permanent underclass’” (Boyd, 1991, p. 340).



NOTE: Includes students who reported that they sometimes or most of the time feared being victimized in this way. "At school" means in the school building, on the school grounds, or on a school bus.

**Figure 2.1.** Percentage of students ages 12 through 19 who reported fearing being attacked or harmed at school, by race-ethnicity: 1989 and 1995. Source: U.S. Department of Education *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998*.



NOTE: Includes students who reported that they sometimes or most of the time feared being victimized in this way.

**Figure 2.2.** Percentage of students ages 12 through 19 who reported fearing being attacked or harmed on the way to and from school, by race-ethnicity: 1989 and 1995. Source: U.S. Department of Education *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998*.

### Effective Schools

Advocates of the effective school movement, disregard any inherently dysfunctional problems and instead focus on attributes that seem to work. The effective school movement began as an equity concern. It focused on discovering schools that were successful for disadvantaged children, recognizing the fact that if schools are ineffective, only students with outside support are likely to succeed. Beginning with pioneering work by Weber, followed by Edmonds, the effective school movement found that not only do schools matter, but they seem to matter the most for disadvantaged students. Effective school literature usually mentions the importance of having high expectations for students. Many findings about effective schools are consistent with aspects of nurturing. Purkey and Smith's (1983) overview and review of effective school literature found effective schools are distinguished by their culture and sense of community, including collegial relations and staff stability, clear elaboration of goals, high expectations, instructional leadership, and order and discipline conducive to an atmosphere of achievement.

**Table 2.2. Percentage of students ages 12 through 19 who reported fearing being attacked or harmed at school or on the way to and from school, by selected characteristics: 1989 and 1995. Source: U.S. Department of Education *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998*.**

Student characteristics	Feared attack or harm at school*								Feared attack or harm on the way to and from school*								
	1989				1995				1989				1995				
	Total	Urban	Sub-urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Sub-urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Sub-urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Sub-urban	Rural	
Total	5.5	7.5	4.8	4.8	8.6	12.3	7.5	7.1	4.4	8.2	3.5	2.3	6.7	11.7	5.3	4.1	
Sex																	
Male	5.7	7.8	5.1	4.6	8.3	11.1	7.4	7.2	3.8	6.5	3.4	1.9	5.4	9.6	4.3	3.1	
Female	5.4	7.2	4.5	5.0	9.0	13.5	7.5	7.0	5.1	9.8	3.6	2.6	8.0	13.9	6.4	5.1	
Race-ethnicity																	
White, non-Hispanic	4.4	5.7	4.1	4.1	6.2	8.7	5.7	5.7	2.8	4.7	2.7	1.9	3.8	7.5	3.0	3.1	
Black, non-Hispanic	6.8	7.3	6.0	6.5	13.4	14.7	11.2	13.4	7.9	11.4	5.7	2.8	13.1	14.7	15.6	5.5	
Hispanic	11.4	13.5	10.2	7.6	15.9	16.3	17.1	11.9	10.1	13.0	7.8	6.3	14.1	15.8	13.1	11.9	
Other, non-Hispanic	8.0	6.3	7.7	12.5	9.3	12.0	9.2	3.7	6.0	6.7	6.2	4.0	8.1	14.0	5.6	5.4	

\*Includes students who reported that they sometimes or most of the time feared being victimized in this way.

NOTE: "At school" means in the school building, on the school grounds, or on a school bus. Population sizes are 21,554,000 students ages 12 through 19 in 1989 and 23,933,000 in 1995.

Boyd (1991) quotes a legislative definition of an effective-school program that summarizes the following effective school traits: strong and effective leadership, consensus on instructional goals, an emphasis on basic and higher-order thinking, a safe and orderly school environment, “an expectation that virtually all children can learn under appropriate conditions,” (Boyd, 1991, p. 341) and a continuous assessment of students and the program. Although legislators may think such a program can be mandated, Boyd cautions that implementation of effective school recommendations needs time and careful planning.

Lightfoot (1983) supplements effective school research with a slightly different vantage point. She observes that the search for effective schools, or “good schools” as she labels them, are characterized by standards “much like social expectations of a good mother, enduring qualities of nurturance, kindness, stimulation, and stability” (p. 311). Lightfoot vocalizes the importance of a safe, stable environment, that offers a sense of community and sense of belonging. Teachers help make connections beyond the classrooms. They are aware of constructive, positive conversations that are patient and attentive to emotion. They initiate an attitude of respect and goodwill.

Lightfoot applauds teachers who are competent, inspired, and deeply motivating. Such teachers offer students a chance to play with ideas and enjoy learning. They also support the talents of their students, building their self-images. Lightfoot reflects on the boundless energy, generosity, and commitment to students that she saw in many teachers.

She observes teachers' "fearless and empathetic regard of their students" (p. 342), as well as their intimate knowledge of adolescents.

Lightfoot recognizes that adolescents appreciate adults who behave with confidence and authority. Such adults "define the traditions and standards of the institution" (p. 351). These adults are capable of reaching out to students without trying "to join their fragile and changing world" (p. 351).

If students face academic distractions, it is often because "high schools always seem poised toward the future" (Lightfoot, 1983, p.356). Students are distracted from their present experience. This is compounded by a misconstrued purpose, ambiguities of agenda, shifting cultural priorities, and an incoherent array of courses.

In contrast, Dewey (1959) consistently stressed the joining of theory and practice as a goal of education. He noted the need for related, integrated, and coherent activities that provide the opportunity and the content to build organized subject matter. Throughout his writing, Dewey emphasized experiential learning. He observed that schools were treated as isolated places where certain lessons were studied and certain habits were formed. Values remained as preparations for a remote future, disconnected from the present. "As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative" (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 24).

Lightfoot notes that "good schools" try to rectify the tension these adolescents feel and attempt to create an environment that connects these students with the real world. At

the same time, good schools seek to protect high school student from the world, giving them a chance to grow and develop their unique disposition.

McLaughlin (1990) offers examples of three effective alternative schools in California. These schools made “personalization” their most important feature. The schools personalize their relationships with students by decreasing enrollments and by emphasizing face-to-face relationships between teachers and students. Like Noddings, who suggests teachers stay with the same students for a period of three years, Wehlage sees the advantage of extended roles for teachers that allow more in-depth, less-fragmented experiences. McLaughlin also gives examples of time sharing, time adjustments, and time options that allow students and teachers to work successfully together.

Deiro (1996) feels that “the bottom line is to treat students with dignity and respect” (p. 138). She refers to “referent power” within the classroom, a power based on the students’ respect for the teacher, with the teacher frequently identified as a role model.

These teachers are not dependent on the legitimate power granted to them by virtue of their position as teachers. Nor do they motivate behavioral change by dangling possible rewards or threatening punishment with students, the key sources of power associated with coercive and reward power bases. These teachers’ power is based on a student’s admiration and respect for the teacher. It is called *referent power* .... They are willing to adjust their behavior so as not to lose the love and respect of the teacher. (p. 139-140)

McCollum (1990) states that maintaining order relies on establishing order initially and creating engaging academic activities for students. She maintains the perceived

difficulty of academic tasks can cause students to view the learning experience as challenging or as problematic; this may lead to disruptions.

Knapp and Shields (1990) also appreciate the value of classrooms when reflecting upon the nature of the academic task, including supplemental instructional arrangements, discussions, project-based or team-learning activities, and cooperative learning. They contend that such skills must be systematically taught; students assume responsibility, gradually directing their own learning. Consequently, teachers must offer that chance to grow with reasonable discipline rather than invariable authoritarian control.

Irvine (1991) recommends a safe, orderly environment, which is never rigid or oppressive. She states that principals are often recruited to their positions because of crowd-control abilities and disciplining skills with Black males. Consequently secondary principals are over-represented with former male coaches, band directors, and veterans.

Haberman (1991) expresses the difficulty of maintaining control and discipline in urban schools. He sees glimmers of hope in teachers who maintain control by establishing trust and involving students in meaningful activities, in issues of vital concern to students, and in thoughtful activities demanding analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and reflection. Haberman, reminiscent of Dewey, sees the utility of knowledge and the relevance of connecting students' classroom education to their prior personal experiences. This thinking is consistent with the school-to-career literature.

### Relevant Schools

School-to-career literature is a major part of relevant school literature. It emphasizes learning situations that provide meaningful contexts and encourage higher-order thinking skills, communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and greater independence of students. This theory is in keeping with Dewey's ideas about education (*Democracy and Education*, 1944):

An occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose. Education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method. It calls instinct and habits into play; it is a foe to passive receptivity. It has an end in view; results are to be accomplished. Hence it appeals to thought; it demands that an idea of an end be steadily maintained, so that activity cannot be either routine or capricious. Since the movement of activity must be progressive, leading from one stage to another, observation and ingenuity are required at each stage to overcome obstacles and to discover and readapt means of execution. (p. 309)

Much has been written of particular interest to high school students on the "new vocationalism." One of the leading proponents of this vocational literature is the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE). NCRVE-sponsored research adds to a growing body of information about the value, worth, success, and limitations of much of the school-to-work opportunities occurring within secondary-level classrooms.

To further clarify and define this topic, Grubb (1996) in his article "The New Vocationalism," succinctly describes five current versions of the new vocationalism and addresses their attributes and flaws within a pedagogical framework. He feels that the first three strands change, at most, the methods of instruction, not content. The third strand specifically addresses deficiencies in traditional vocational education. The fourth strand

adds a work-based component, an element that is “more contextualized and constructivist” (p.538).

The fifth strand attempts to integrate academic and vocational education. Often this occurs within career academies, clusters (career paths), and/or occupational high schools or magnet schools. This strand offers the most potential for positive change by stressing “higher-order skills, the efforts to integrate academic and vocational education and to connect secondary and post-secondary education, and the potential link with employers through work-based learning” (p.540). Perhaps most important, it “seeks to minimize the differences between college-bound and the non-college-bound. Thus in its broadest and most Deweyan form, ‘education through occupations’ can incorporate the entire range of political and moral purposes, rather than simply assume that the needs of employers are paramount” (Brubb, 1996, p.540).

In regard to school-to-work systems, Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) postulate that work-based learning could be a promising complement to conventional school-based learning. Their comments are in keeping with Grubb’s fifth strand, which attempts to integrate academic and vocational learning. To ensure excellence Hamilton and Hamilton advocate seven principles (1997, pp. 683-688):

The above literature focuses on the career schools that are a vital part of relevant schooling. Other types of alternative schools are equally important to students. Often magnets schools such as the International Baccalaureate, which reaches the highly motivated academic student; the Computer Magnets, which specialize in technology;

schools that specialize in science curriculums or math concentrations; or schools that challenge artistic students (visual arts, vocal or instrumental music, or dance); may each with their own venues attract and motivate students not typically drawn to “regular schools.” Such schools offer compelling reasons for students to stay in school. They also provide the incentive for students to dream and because of their in-depth specialization, they can often provide the career foundations to make such dreams, realities.

In addition to the magnet schools mentioned above, alternative schools offer another much needed focus. They often have individualized programs and cater to at-risk students who have dropped out of school, students who are pregnant, or student who, for whatever reason, do not function best at “regular schools.” Alternative school address the students who did not make it the first time, but are ready for a second chance.

1. Youths gain both basic and high-level competence through challenging work.
2. Youths gain broad technical competence and understand all aspects of the industry through rotation and projects.
3. Youths gain personal and social competence in the workplace.
4. Workplace teachers convey clear expectations to youths and assess progress toward achieving them with consistent feedback.
5. Youths learn from adults with formally assigned teaching roles, preferable paired off one-to-one as apprentices historically were with independent master craftsmen.
6. Youths achieve high academic standards. “Jobs that pay well increasingly require a combination of knowledge, communication, problem solving, and technical skills that should like a classic definition of the well-educated person” ( p. 687).
7. Youths identify and follow career paths. The authors point out that a path is not a track, since “a good career path provides a sense of direction and a purpose for academic achievement so that a young person is well prepared even if he or she later chooses a different path”

**Figure 2.3. Seven principles of effective school-to-work systems. Source: Hamilton and Hamilton (1997, p. 688).**

### **Peer Influences**

There is some data to suggest peers do influence academic achievement. Unfortunately, much of that data present the negative aspects of peer influence, i.e., earning high grades is often a liability for gaining acceptance and approval (Ogbu, 1989). Like Ogbu, Gandara (1994) noted that many Hispanic students do succumb to peer pressures. However, she also found that a sample of high-achieving Chicano students managed “to avoid the potentially negative effects of peer pressure” (p. 25). This group of individuals “maintained two peer groups, one at school, and one from the neighborhood” (p. 26).

Because they were so segregated by classes at school, it was easy to keep the two separate. At school, they were free to compete academically in the classroom, and when they went home in the afternoon they would assume a very different posture. (p. 26)

By the time they had graduated from high school the subjects had excellent training in moving between two cultures. They know now to handle themselves with high-achieving Anglos, and they were still equally comfortable in the company of friends who would never leave the fields, the barrios, or go to college. (p. 26)

McPartland (1994) notes that “much previous research has focussed solely on profiles of the dropout student populations rather than on analysis of the interrelationships of school efforts at dropout prevention and learner needs” (p. 256). He also states that “peer acceptance emerges as another dominant factor as students move into early adolescence and adolescence” (p. 260).

### Cultural-discontinuities Theory

Cultural-discontinuities theory argues that minority children tend to fail because of conflicts between the child's culture and the culture of the school and larger society. Ogbu explains that involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, developed survival strategies that did not encourage academic learning and perseverance.

The coping mechanisms...developed by non-immigrant minorities, together with their collective oppositional identity, led them to develop a cultural frame of reference that is in opposition to the White cultural frame of reference. In the minorities' cultural frame of reference, school rules, standard practices, and even academic success are defined as "White" or "acting White." And because they are so defined, they are not socially acceptable — at least not without some social and personal costs. (p. 347)

Ogbu (quoted by Boyd, 1991) sees two major problems with the rehabilitation strategies. First, the "proponents of the rehabilitation strategies" have failed to explore how the individual "might have been shaped by the collective historical and structural experience of Black people." Second, "children develop their competencies as enduring attributes not merely because their parents or any one else stimulated them sufficiently, but because the competencies are functional in their particular cultural-ecological niche" (p. 347).

To support his theory, Ogbu (1989) offers substantive research findings from Stockton, California. The research notes that immigrant minorities do better in school than nonimmigrants. Two examples illustrate these findings: students from Mexico are more successful in public schools than native-born Chicanos; and when Japanese Baraku outcasts — children who massively under-perform when compared to the dominant Ippan

children in Japan — are treated equally in U.S. public schools, they do as well as other Japanese Americans. Ogbu (1989) concludes that

it is not the type or quality of school that African Americans attend or the fact that they are a minority group that causes their performance problems, but rather the type of minority group they are and how they have been treated by, and respond to, the dominant White American society. He consequently urges that we look more deeply into the reasons why different minorities in ghetto schools and ghetto-like schools perform differently.

Ogbu's analysis may help explain patterns of irrational decisions in which individuals act against their own long-term best interests. For example, fear of "acting White" keeps some Blacks from succeeding academically.

Ogbu (1989) also argues that it is important to distinguish between the history and adaptive behaviors of immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities, such as African Americans. Immigrants tend to interpret the economic, political, and social barriers against them as more or less temporary problems that can be overcome with time, work, and education. Conversely, involuntary minorities interpret the same barriers as discrimination that is more or less permanent and institutionalized. They do not have the same faith in hard work and education.

Blacks see their collective identity as more or less in opposition to the collective identity of Whites. Survival strategies may cause young Blacks to channel their time and energy into nonacademic activities that the media seems to portray as more lucrative, activities such as athletics and entertainment.

Ogbu feels that the barriers to academic success for Black children are much wider than either institutional-deficiency theorists or developmental-deficiency

theorists recognize. He recommends efforts to teach non-immigrant minority students “how to go to school” and to adopt an “accommodation without assimilation” cultural model than has been successful for immigrants. He advocates major efforts to create more trusting relationships between mainstream and minority Americans. Ogbu also recommends efforts to reduce the cultural gap currently felt in schools, and to convince Black children that the social and economic opportunities are actually available with appropriate education.

Ogbu (1990) explains that years of oppression and lack of access to White culture has resulted in the development of an opposition culture among Blacks, and some of his articles mention Hispanics. Deep distrusts make acceptances of school rules problematic; Blacks do not view differences as barriers to be overcome, but as symbols to be maintained. Those adopting an “oppositional identity” may resist academic achievement because of the association with White culture.

Clark (1991) also describes a “raceless or bicultural identity” among some minority students. While such groups may be more successful academically, they may also be alienated from their peers. Those with a “diffused identity” tend to have low self-esteem and remain alienated from both Black and mainstream society (pp. 10,44).

Neufeld (1990) quoting Erickson and Comer stresses cultural differences that exist between minority children and mainstream culture, drawing attention to the fact that minority children have difficulty making sense of school demands. Adults in the school situation feel the negative impact of students’ lack of understanding. Unfortunately,

minority families lack skills to bridge the widening gap. Students then find themselves more estranged from their homes, less successful at school, and overwhelmed by academic goals that are unattainable and inappropriate.

Ogbu (1978, 1989, 1990) notes that the poorer segment of the Black population is not different or pathological, but they have neither made the connections nor have they been given the same assistance as some middle-class Blacks. He recommends eliminating barriers and establishing programs to promote trust. He predicts that such trusting relationships will increase through discourse between middle-class Blacks and low-income Blacks. Through discussions of differences, as well as areas of common agreement, both groups will become more aware of educational needs. All Blacks need to take responsibility and work together.

Cary (1991) writes of adolescence at the elite Saint Paul's School in New Hampshire, a unique experience for a Black Philadelphia teenager. Her reflections offer insights into Ogbu's theory, and the ambiguous position of being Black and popular in a White school. When asked what attracted her most to St. Paul's, she answers, "I guess what I would look forward to most is being somewhere where all the students want to learn. In my school, if you get a really good report card, you feel like you better hide it on the way home" (Cary, 1991, p. 26).

### School Mobility

Lippman, Burns and McArthur (1996) provide a list of characteristics that may contribute to some poor, urban students' difficulties in school. Among these characteristics is a higher incidence of school mobility (changing schools). Students who attend urban, high-poverty schools are more likely to have changed schools two or more times than students who attend high-poverty suburban or rural schools. "Forty-six percent of these students changed schools this often, compared with 37 percent of suburban and 29 percent of rural students in similar schools."

The research points to a strong correlation between frequent moves requiring a change of schools and increased academic and disciplinary problems in school (Haveman, Wolfe, and Spaulding, 1991, Straits, 1987, Long, 1975).

High rates of school mobility not only result in a lack of curricular consistency, say Lippman, Burns and McArthur (1996). It may also create a peer deficit that may translate into a lower desire to learn:

The negative impact of mobility upon schooling can be explained by a number of factors, for example, differences across schools or districts in academic requirements. Another explanation could be that students who frequently change schools may have difficulty becoming attached to a new school, which might decrease their motivation to learn. A student's likelihood of changing school is also linked to the likelihood of being victimized at school (Bastian and Taylor, 1991)." (p. 60).

Such students may feel a sense of isolation. Rather than enjoying a support structure among peers, they may feel alienated or even threatened by peers within the new school.

### Extracurricular Activities

The positive interactions with peers, sense of teamwork, and feelings of accomplishment provided by extracurricular activities may provide additional incentive for students to stay in school and achieve academically. Such activities appear to set up an environment of achievement and success that translates to the classroom.

Newman (1992), points out that participation in after-school activities may pique students' interest in school in general. Quoted in Lippman, Burns, and McArthur, Newman explains, "Students who participate in school-sponsored sports activities (and academic clubs) seem to have better grades, spend more time on homework, and have higher school aspirations (Newman, 1992). Moreover, after school activities may enable students to use their time more constructively, thus decreasing their likelihood of getting into trouble in school or elsewhere." (p. 67).

## **Resiliency to Adverse Conditions**

### Resiliency

Henderson and Milstein (1996) state that there is no universally accepted definition of *resiliency* and then quote several definitions, with notable similarity, from a variety of authors. The first author quoted is Richardson, who describes resiliency as "the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event" (p. 7). Next, Higgins describes resiliency as the "process of self-

righting and growth” (p. 7). Rirkin and Hoopman define resiliency as “the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity, and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to stress or simply to the stress that is inherent in today’s world” (p. 7).

Bernard sees resilient children as socially adept, with life skills including problem solving, critical thinking, and the verve to take the initiative. Their sense of purpose allows them to foresee a positive future. “They have special interests, goal directedness and motivation to achieve in school and life” (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p. 8). Wolins notes seven internal characteristics typically found in resilient children: “initiative, independence, insight, relationship, humor, creativity, and morality” (Henderson and Milstein, 1996, p.8).

Deiro (1996) observes that teachers hold certain characteristics in common with resilient children, including androgyny. She defines this as a balance between the feminine side of the personality, which is sensitive and nurturing, and the masculine side, which is assertive, independent, nonconforming, and risk-taking. Other characteristics include the inner locus of control, sense of humor, enthusiasm, and social skills such as communication, problem-solving, resolving conflicts, and accountability skills (Judith Deiro, 1996, p. 89-99).

Henderson and Milstein (1996) posit that *risk research* is fundamentally different than *resiliency research*. They note that risk research “contributed extensively to the

deficit, pathology-focused model [focusing on] individuals who are already having problems such as drug abuse, school failure, and crime involvement” (p. 4).

Once these troubled individuals are identified, risk researchers look at their personal histories, examine their current environmental conditions, and find specific *correlates* that exist in their lives. These correlates, referred to as “risk factors,” are well known by most school and staff and include family addiction, poverty, neglect, negative school climate, community disorganization, and lack of access to basic human needs.

Risk research is limited, however, because it does not clearly show cause versus effect. For example, were the circumstances and characteristics of people who developed addiction or experienced school failure or became involved in criminal behavior the cause or the result of their problems?

Although a certain percentage of these high-risk children developed various problems (a percentage higher than in the normal population), a greater percentage of the children became healthy, competent young adults...

Many, if not most, children identified as “high risk” *do not* develop the litany of problems educators have come to expect. They are from high-risk circumstance but they are “resilient.” (p. 4-5)

Henderson and Milstein, (1996) quoting Werner and Smith (1992, p. 202) add “clearly, we need ‘a corrective lens — an awareness of the self-righting tendencies that move children toward normal adult development under all but the most adverse circumstances’” (p. 5). They feel too often “deficit labels” have become “self-fulfilling prophecies” and suggest instead a focus on “people-to people interactions rather than programs” of prevention and intervention (p. 20). Based in part on risk-factor research, they have developed six steps that they believe will foster resiliency in students, teachers, and school environments. These six themes become the foundation of their presentation which moves from students, teachers and schools needing “resiliency improvement” to strategies for “resiliency building” (pp. 64-66).

The core elements, or six themes are:

1. Increased prosocial bonding;
2. Setting clear and consistent boundaries in terms of school policies and procedures;
3. Teaching life skills, including cooperation, healthy conflict resolution, communication skills, problem solving and decision-making skills, and healthy stress management;
4. Providing caring and support;
5. Setting and communicating high, yet realistic expectations; and
6. Providing opportunities for meaningful participation (Henderson and Miles, 1996, pp. 11-14).

Winfield (1991) edited a special edition of *Education and Urban Society* entitled "Resilience, School and Development in African-American Youth." She states that "resilience is conceptualized not as a fixed attribute of the individual but as vulnerability or protective mechanisms that modify the individual's response to the risk situation and operate at critical turning points during one's lifetime" (p. 7). She quotes from Rutter:

Protection does not reside in the psychological chemistry of the moment but in the ways in which people deal with life changes and in what they do about their stressful or disadvantageous circumstances. Particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms operating at key turning points in people's lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path. (pp. 7-8)

Winfield cites four mechanisms or processes identified by Rutter that help an individual arbitrate adversarial situations:

1. reduce the impact of risk by either altering the risk or the exposure to risk;
2. reduce the potential of negative chain reactions associated with exposure to risk;
3. establish and maintain self-esteem and self-efficacy; and
4. create new opportunities for success (Winfield, 1991 adapted from Rutter, p. 8)

The articles that follow expound in varying degrees on each of these four processes.

Taylor (1991) discusses the “goodness-of-fit” and notices that children labeled at-risk engage in disruptive and negative-deviant behavior, act socially inappropriate, and face peer rejections, which is predictive of school adjustment problems. A growing number of “parents with young children are experiencing chronic economic hardship and social isolation from extended family networks, stress factors that seriously undermine parenting and family functioning. Such parental stress and family dysfunction in turn contribute to the child’s risk for school failure...” (Taylor, 1991, p. 18) She advocates parental involvement with early preschool programs, as well as culturally compatible classrooms. Taylor also notes that “African-American children responded with more emotional expressiveness and more active coping strategies than Mexican American children. On the other hand, Mexican American children gave responses that emphasized sharing, cooperation, and affiliation more than African-American children” (Taylor, 1991, pp. 18-19).

Nelson-LeGall and Jones (1991) discuss the role of help-seeking behaviors as strategies for coping with difficult tasks. Braddock, Royster, Winfield, and Hawkins, (1991) examine sports and academic resilience, stressing positive traits such as working for common goals, persistence, and the ability to regroup, re-strategize, and practice in order to succeed. They note that athletics can enhance self-esteem and build self-efficacy. Athletes are more likely to express college ambitions, are less involved in social misconduct problems, and have positive peer relations. Clarke (1991) reflects on friendships, noting that those whose peers place a high value on achievement were more successful academically than were those whose friends did not value academic effort. In this context, academic effort is defined as time spent on homework, completion of that homework, school absences or tardiness, and missing classes with appropriate permission.

While Lee, Winfield, and Wilson (1991) focus on African-Americans, their comments on Black's low status with the American society also applies to Hispanic. This low status contributes to, or is often the source of low school performance. These authors cite denial of access to desirable jobs, job ceilings, and the cultural bias of tests as contributors to low scores. They also see a decline in academic course enrollment as problematic, noting that math achievement scores increased for females who have taken more math courses. Overall they found that individual's attitude toward school and the time devoted to academic task affect achievement.

Lee, Winfield, and Wilson also focused on the importance of being better prepared academically. More specifically, they note the importance of getting good grades,

studying, doing homework, watching slightly less television, reading considerably more, cooperating with teachers, and having positive peers. Other school factors affecting achievement were also distinguished: smaller class size, a required curriculum, fairness in discipline, and student integration into school activities. They also discussed the usual effective school themes such as a safe and orderly school environment, strong instructional leadership from the principal, closely monitored student programs, high expectations, and clearly established goals.

It is our conclusion that process variables connected with schooling rather than family background explain important differences in students academic behaviors, magnify differences in achievement, and account for differences in the academic behavior among African-American students who are high and low achievers. Moreover, these processes facilitate resilience among students by increasing self-efficacy as well as opening up opportunities for future successes in school. (Lee, Infield, and Wilson, 1991, p. 83)

Reyes and Valencia (1995) review educational reforms and the consequences for Hispanics. They note that in raising academic standards, schools tend to further alienate students that are labeled "at risk." This increases dropout rates and other related school problems. Students with relatively low grade point averages are not apt to pursue a more demanding sequence of basic courses that serves as prerequisites for college entrance. "For Latino students who have had a hard time coping with the original set of curricular requirements — due to academic or personal problems — the raising of the ante in the middle of the game may be a strong inducement to simply give up and pursue other interests or avenues of mobility" (Reyes and Valencia, 1995, pp. 312-313).

A substantial number of Hispanic students see little connection between the present curriculum and their immediate reality. This echoes Swanson and Spencer's (1991) comment that poor children fail because of a lack of continuity between experiences at home and experiences at school (p. 154). What Reyes and Valencia (1995) suggest is a restructuring, "not to eliminate the concepts taught, but rather to immerse those concepts in the context of cultural diversity" (p. 324).

Another concern of Reyes and Valencia (1995) is curriculum reform that results in a single set of core courses to be taken by all students. Greater stratification will occur as lower-performing students compete with higher-performing students. This will result in "lower teacher and peer evaluations, lower self-evaluations, and ultimately lower performance" (Reyes and Valencia, 1995, p. 314). Low-level academic performance as measured by grades and other characteristics that serve as "at risk" predictors. Repeating one or more grades, being limited-English proficient, having disciplinary problems at school, and having irregular attendance patterns (excessive tardiness and unexcused absences) all lead potentially to dropout status (Reyes and Valencia, 1995, p. 314). Certainly, such situations are in direct opposition to Rutter's proposed mechanism for mediating adverse circumstances and creating resiliency.

Swanson and Spencer (1991) also examine implications of youth policy along with poverty issues, noting that social environments can significantly affect how adolescents view themselves. While all adolescents are potentially vulnerable, high-risk environments may guarantee that vulnerability. Structural conditions linked to poverty, race, and

ethnicity create a hostile milieu and promote the likelihood of adverse outcomes.

“Resources for overcoming obstacles (i.e. poverty, crime ridden environments, poor schools) are fewer today, more difficult to locate, and even harder to obtain” (Swanson and Spencer, 1991, p. 155). Supportive youth policies and youth employment opportunities could make a critical difference.

In summary, twelve critical characteristics of resiliency emerge. Beginning with the resiliency model proposed by Richardson (1990) and adapted by Milstein and Henderson (1996), the following lists of external traits (families, schools, communities, and peer groups traits) tend to encourage resiliency. Essentially the twelve characteristics listed in Figure 2.4 promote a “reduction of negative outcomes by altering the risk or the child’s exposure to the risk” and “a reduction of the negative chain reaction following risk exposure” (Rutter, quoted by Windfield, 1991, p. 8). These characteristics define external behaviors (influences of families, schools, and peer groups) that foster resiliency in youngsters. Figure 2.5 summarizes internally protective characteristics — individual traits that create and define resilient youngsters. Combined, the two lists offer a framework or blueprint from which to view and discuss resiliency.

### *Adverse Conditions*

Among the societal factors associated with high dropout rates among Hispanic Americans, poverty and the challenges associated with being poor appear to play a pivotal role in the poor academic performance of many students, and ultimately, their decision to

leave school prematurely. Although much of the literature on poverty focuses on Black children of poverty or on aggregate minority populations, many of the effects cross racial boundaries. Such literature is therefore relevant to the present research.

1. Promotes close bonds with dependable adults and peers
2. Encourages nurturing, supportive relationships
3. Values and encourages education; substantiates reasons for encouraging educational pursuits
4. Provides disciplined environment; sets and enforces clear boundaries (rules, norms, and laws)
5. Expresses high and realistic expectations for success
6. Encourages goal setting and mastery
7. Encourages life skills (cooperative learning; help-seeking and help-giving behaviors)
8. Appreciates the unique talents of each individual
9. Appreciates a good sense of humor and the ready ability to laugh
10. Provides positive role models
11. Develops sense of moral integrity and responsibility
12. Offers opportunities including access to high-quality curriculum, adequate counseling, and extracurricular involvement in school activities

**Figure 2.4. Environmental protective factors: characteristics of family, schools, and peer groups that foster resiliency. Source: Adapted from Henderson's and Milstein's (1996), using Richardson (1990) and Bernard (1991), with additional ideas from Noddings (1988), Mayeroff (1971), Winfield (1991), and Rutter (1987).**

1. Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
2. Self-efficacy; resourcefulness; personal competence; demonstrating life skills
3. of critical thinking and problem solving
4. Positive view of personal future; sense of purpose: hope
5. Self-motivation to achieve in school and life.
6. Autonomy; independence, internal locus of control
7. Life skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, assertiveness
8. Persistence; impulses control; delayed gratification
9. Social competence; ability to form positive relationships
10. Calculated risk taker
11. Flexibility
12. Sense of humor
13. Personal integrity, sense of responsibility

**Figure 2.5. Internal protective factors: individual characteristics that facilitate resiliency. Source: Adapted from Henderson's and Milstein's (1996), using Richardson (1990) and Bernard (1991), with additional ideas from Noddings (1988), Mayeroff (1971), Winfield (1991), and Rutter (1987).**

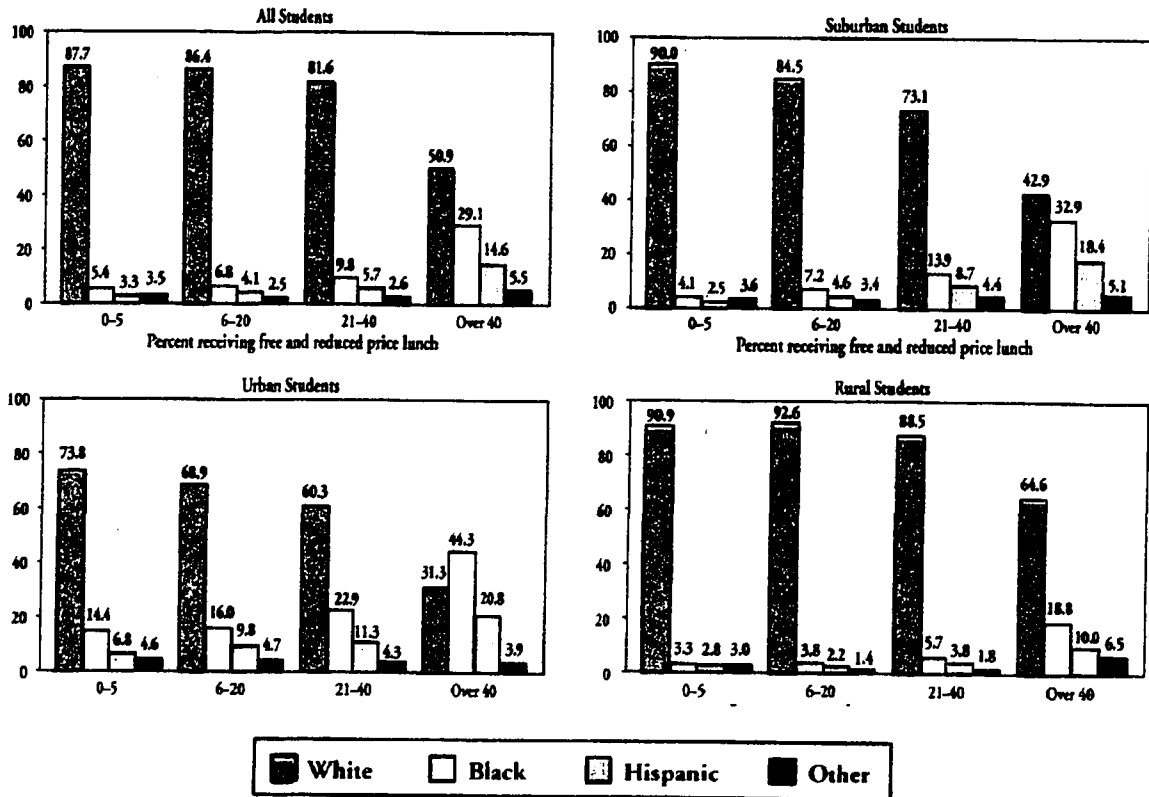
### Demographics of Poverty

While Chapter 1 touched upon the demographics of disadvantaged students, the following expands upon this information as it relates specifically to minority populations and the Hispanic community in particular. “In 1970, 10.4 million children lived in poverty; by 1992 that number had increased to 14.6 million” (Bennett, 1994, p. 62). More Americans are poor today than before President Johnson’s War on Poverty.

Kevin Phillips (1991) reports that since 1976, male blue-collared workers, especially younger men and those with high school credentials or less, suffered the greatest loss in income, and likewise, lost cultural and economic access to middle-class status.

While two-thirds of America’s poor are White, poverty rates still remain considerably higher for minorities. Poverty adds a dimension of leveling, since parallels of denied access, based on economy as well as race, can be seen in minority literature throughout history (Jackson, 1985; Harris, 1982; Sitkoff, 1981; Jankowski, 1991).

“In 1994, both Black and Hispanic children were more than twice as likely as White children to live in poverty” (U.S. Department of Education, 1996, Indicator 44, p. 1) (See Figure 2.6). Statistics on minority children overlay the statistics on children of poverty: one out of two Black children and three out of eight Hispanic children live in poverty (Reed and Sautter, 1990; Hewlett, 1991). High-poverty schools have a higher enrollment of minorities, and urban schools having a higher enrollment of minorities than suburban or rural areas. Among urban high-poverty schools, 69% of students belong to a



**Figure 2.6. Racial-ethnic distribution of students in schools, by urbanicity (urban, suburban, rural) and school poverty concentration, 1987-1988. Totals given in 1st graph. Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School and Staffing Survey, 1987-8.**

racial or ethnic minority (U.S. Department of Education, *Urban Schools: the Challenge of Location and Poverty*, 1996, p. 11).

Poverty is especially prevalent among households headed by minority single women: 56% of families headed by single Black women are poor, and 59% of single families headed by Hispanic women live in poverty (Wilson, 1987, p. K4). However, between 1960 and 1994, the percentage of Black children in poverty who lived in a female-headed household was consistently higher than the percentage of Hispanic or White youths in female-headed households. In 1994, 46% of White and Hispanic children

in poverty lived in a female-headed household, compared to 82% of Black children (U.S. Department of Education, *The Conditions of Education*, 1996, Indicator 44, pp. 1-2). In 1994, 21.2% of all children under 18 years old lived in families with incomes below the poverty level (Table 2.3).

Research shows that children from single-parent, minority families face many disadvantages. They often experience a host of social and academic difficulties reflected in negative school behaviors and dropout rates twice the average (Eitzen, 1992). Side effects of poverty can be heart-wrenching and devastating, as Kotlowitz (1991) vividly portrays in his book *There Are No Children Here*.

Homelessness, malnutrition, lack of health care, prenatal care, medicine, basic food and clothing, loss of childhood, psychological stress, anxiety, fear, despair, and death are common. "More than 10,000 children in the U.S. die each year as a direct result of the poverty they endure" (Reed and Sautter, 1990, p. K3). The infant mortality rate of the U.S. is 19th among industrialized nations (Kaplan, 1991, p. K6). Thirty percent of two year olds in the U.S. never receive immunization; consequently, preventable diseases are making a comeback (MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, 7/7/92). "In a single year 3,392 young people between the ages of 1 and 19 were dying from firearms-related injuries" (Kaplan, 1991, p. K6). While this statistic is not limited to the poor, it is particularly tied to gang violence in inner-city, poverty-stricken areas (Jankowski, 1991).

**Table 2.3. Percentage of children less than 18 years old who live in families with incomes below the poverty level: Selected years 1960-1994. Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, "Income, Poverty, and Valuation of Non-cash Benefits: 1994.**

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>
1960	26.5	20.0	65.6	not available
1965	20.7	14.4	47.4	not available
1970	14.9	10.5	41.5	not available
1975	16.8	12.5	41.4	33.1
1980	17.9	13.4	42.1	33.0
1985	20.1	15.6	43.1	39.6
1990	19.9	15.1	44.2	38.9
1994	21.2	16.3	43.3	41.1

Another factor resulting from poverty status is the damaging effects of substandard housing (Eitzen, 1990). Poor children living in antiquated, inadequately maintained dwellings are much more likely to be exposed to lead from old paint and plumbing fixtures, as well as lead in household dust. "Sixteen percent of White children and 55 percent of Black children have high levels of lead in their blood, a condition that leads to irreversible learning disabilities and other problems... with four times the risk of having an I.Q. below 80" (Eitzen, 1990, p. 587). The litany of poverty statistics also reflects a continuing, downward spiral. The poor are getting poorer; society is still "debating whether children are actually a valued national resource or just another neglected minority" (Kaplan, 1991, p, K7).

Poverty has become a frequent political football. President Clinton calls education the fault line of America, noting that "those who have it are doing well in the global economy, those who don't have it are not doing well" (President's Advisory Commission

on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996, p. 22). Despite this political interest in the plight of the poor, little seems to change.

President Bush outlined six educational goals for the year 2000, and in his 1990 State of the Union Address, Bush declared to the children of the nation, “with you rests our hope, all that America will mean in the years ahead” (Kaplan, 1991, p. K6). To children of poverty and to their teachers in the public school, Bush’s words and goals now seem hollow. That is especially true given the fact that the federal government has slashed programs and social services by thirty percent since 1980 (MacNeil/Lehrer, 7/7/92) and also cut aid to states and localities (Feldman, 1992). Howe (1992) tersely notes that Bush’s program did not even whisper that the troubles of children and youths might be connected to the rapid growth of poverty over the previous two decades (Feldman, 1992, p. 201). Feldman (1992) addresses Bush’s educational goals and a variety of issues related to public education. She places particular emphasis on the need for a more nurturing environment for students, as well as a more nurturing society that pays attention to its children and their most basic needs:

These goals (six national education goals for the year 2000) seem like a mockery to many American teachers striving to do the best they can for their students in schools that are overcrowded, under-equipped, and all too frequently, unsafe as well. Often the school is the only stable institution in many students’ lives, and teachers feel that the burden of society’s unsolved problems has been placed on their shoulders. The stresses and strains of trying to cope with the nation’s most severe problems, without the tools they need to do their jobs, explain why a health newsletter recently ranked “inner-city teacher” as America’s most stressful job. And of all the tensions in the teacher’s life, the worst may be the terrible sense that we’re watching helplessly while beautiful kids are being shortchanged. (p. 9)

Her plea reflects a developing chorus of advocate voices for children

*Trends Contributing to Poverty*

Three economic and political trends have contributed to increased poverty rates among children. The *first* is a dramatic plunge in the wage-earning capacity of blue-collar workers. This downward social mobility suggests repercussions beyond just economics, since Americans so often associate self worth with occupational status and income (Eitzen, 1992; Bellah, 1991). The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (1989) notes an increasing demand for more technological skills and flexible resources; the National Research Council (1989) reports that more than 75 percent of all jobs require proficiency in simple algebra and geometry, either as a prerequisite to further study or as part of a licensure examination (p.4).

While some parents see education as a way out of poverty, many minority students view their prospects with a sense of hopelessness. As a result, more than 50 percent of Black, Hispanic, and Native American high school students drop out before graduating from high school (National Research Council, 1989, p. 12).

Neufeld (1990) observes that Black and Hispanic students may not espouse the mainstream view that education provides an opportunity for economic and social success. Lightfoot (1983) offers divergent examples of six schools categorized as urban, suburban, or elite. Adolescents from elite schools, she says, enjoy “affluence and family status [that] assures them of a solid place in a projected future” (p.362). Urban students are not so

fortunate. “All around them they see destruction and poverty and few examples of people who have been able to climb out of the mire. They are aware of the stacked deck, the rigged race, and the discriminatory institutions that will inhibit their movement upward” (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 362).

Ogbu (1990) notes that Blacks’ long experience with wage and job discrimination has resulted in an acceptance of the belief that obstacles are more or less permanent, institutionalized, and therefore cannot be eliminated merely through hard work and education. Recent statistics show a more positive view of the Black situation in terms of school attendance, but this improvement does not apply to Hispanic circumstances. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1993) “Black students are staying in school longer with more completing high school and college. Hispanics complete less school than other groups and only 9 percent of 25- to 29-year old Hispanics completed 4 years of college or more in 1991 as compared with 25 percent of whites” (U.S. Department of Education, USDE, 23-29) The *second* trend involves an increase in the percentage of families headed by single parents:

In 1992, 24 percent of children lived in single-parent families. The figures for minority children are even higher. In 1992, 57 percent of Black children lived in single-parent homes compared with 19 percent of White children and 29 percent of Hispanic children. (U.S. Department of Education, Indicator 10)

“As social science examines the emotional and psychological consequences of single parent households, the economic consequences are already clear. Single-parent families tend to suffer severe economic disadvantages” ( U.S. Department of Education, Introduction).

The increase in single-parent households is a reflection of increased divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, and abandonment of children by fathers (Hewlett, 1991 (Waldman, 1992; Mabry, 1992). Bennett (1994) notes that “half the single mothers in the United States live below the poverty line, while only 1 in 10 married couples with children are poor. Regardless of class, single mothers are more vulnerable to persistent economic insecurity” (p.52). Data from the U.S. Department of Education (1993) note:

Female-headed households continue to struggle with poverty, and it is in these households that child poverty is concentrated. In 1991, 46 percent of children under 18 in female-headed households were supported with an income under \$10,000. (USDE, 15)

“The proportion of poor children coming from female-headed households has risen dramatically, from 24% in 1960 to 59 percent in 1991 for all children, and from 29 percent to 83 percent for Black children” (USDE, 19). The conditions of children in female-headed households are further exacerbated by the fact that absent fathers often do not meet their full financial obligations. “In 1989, only about half of women awarded child support payments received their full entitlement. Less than one-fourth received partial payment, and one-fourth received no payment” (U.S. Department of Ed, Indicator 21).

Citing Besharov, Bennet (1994) points out that “about 50 percent of all unwed teenage mothers go on welfare within one year of the birth of their first child. More than 75 percent go on within five years” ( p.65). He further notes that “children from single-parent families are two to three times as likely as children in two-parent families to have emotional and behavioral problems. In addition, they are more likely to drop out of high

school, become pregnant as teenagers, abuse drugs, and become entangled with the law” (p. 52).

The *third* trend is political, involving reductions in governmental aid. Programs designed for the economically disadvantaged were reduced by \$51 billion (Eitzen, 1992) [When to when?]. Federal funding for social programs such as day care declined or was inadequate to meet specific growing needs. Federal assistance for foster care, for example, rose just 7% while the need for such services grew 23%. Medical benefits have declined in both the public and private sectors, resulting in more than 12 million children without health insurance. When adjusted for inflation, the availability of low-income housing dropped 76%, and while juvenile detention center populations rose 27%; government funding dropped 33%. The need for mental health facilities soared by 60% while grants declined by \$17 million) (Reed and Sautter, p. K6) This need is particularly poignant, since the increased demand for mental health services is at least a partial consequence of drug and alcohol abuse by parents, resulting in abuse, neglect, and drug-dependent babies. Reed and Sautter (1990) point out that while not all of these statistics represent poor children, the needy tend to fall into such categories much more readily than their less-needy counterparts (p. K6).

Feldman’s (1992) observations seem most appropriate when he states: “Given the tremendous strains on American families, and in the virtual absence of any other institutions to shelter and nurture and guide young people, the public schools find themselves with an awesome responsibility for the next generation of Americans” (p. 11).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY**

This study will be based on naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research methodology, specifically case study research using the long interview method. Since qualitative research normally involves multiple research methods, in conjunction with the long interview, school records and documents will corroborate and augment evidence.

A clarification of why this research strategy has been selected requires a discussion of overall methodology, specifically the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. This is followed by several definitions of a case study and reasons for choosing this particular qualitative approach. Finally, strategies for conducting case studies will be presented, including McCracken's (1988) four-step method of inquiry, Kirk and Miller's (1986) advice on reliability and validity, and varied suggestions by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Marshall and Rossman (1989, 1995). Finally, the methodological specifics of the present study will be presented.

#### **Methodological Issues in Case Study Research**

An awareness of the differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies increases an appreciation of their underlying paradigms, clarifies the advantage of each strategy, and improves the selection of the most appropriate research approach.

McCracken (1988) focuses on four distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research. First, he discusses the treatment of analytic categories. "The

quantitative goal is to isolate and define categories as precisely as possible *before* [emphasis added] the study is undertaken, and then to determine, again with great precision, the relationship between them” (p. 16). The qualitative approach often isolates and defines categories *during* the research process. These categories are subject to change. “For one field, well defined categories are the means of research; for another they are the object of research” (p. 16).

Second, qualitative research searches for “patterns of interrelationship between many categories rather than the sharply delineated relationships between a limited set of them” (p. 16). Qualitative research seeks depth and breadth in understanding a phenomena.

This difference can be characterized as the trade-off between the precision of quantitative methods and the complexity-capturing ability of qualitative ones. The quantitative researcher uses a lens that brings a narrow strip of the field of vision into very precise focus. The qualitative researcher uses a lens that permits a much less precise vision of a much broader strip. (p. 16)

Third, quantitative research uses closed questions. Answers are definite. “The respondent can identify precisely what is wanted, retrieve it easily, and report it without ambiguity” (p. 16). Questions in qualitative research are more probing and often more difficult to answer quickly. “When the questions for which data are sought are likely to cause the respondent greater difficulty and imprecision, the broader, more flexible net provided by qualitative techniques is appropriate” (p. 17).

Fourth, quantitative methods usually requires researchers “to construct a ‘sample’ of the necessary size and type to generalize to a larger population” (p. 17). One exception

is the quantitative case study, which is concerned with description of data at hand for heuristic purposes.

In the qualitative case, however, the issue is not one of generalization. It is that of access. The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of, people share a certain characteristics. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world. (p. 17)

Qualitative research is “much more intensive than extensive in its objectives” (p. 17). It “does not survey the terrain, it mines it” (p. 17).

### Qualitative Research

Kirk and Miller (1986) state that “qualitative research is an empirical, socially located phenomenon” (p. 10). “Its diverse expressions include analytic induction, content analysis, semiotics, hermeneutics, elite interviewing, the study of life histories and certain archival, computer, and statistical manipulations” (p. 10). Borg and Gall (1989), using suggestions from Lincoln and Guba, Burgess, Reichardt and Cook, offer 10 characteristics as a summary of qualitative research (See Figure 3.1).

1. Research involves holistic inquiry carried out in a natural setting.
2. Humans are the primary data-gathering instrument.
3. Emphasis on qualitative methods.
4. Purposive rather than random sampling.
5. Inductive data analysis. The researcher first gathers the data, then analyzes, synthesizes, and draws generalizations.
6. Development of grounded theory.
7. Design emerges as the research progresses.
8. Subject plays a role in interpreting outcomes.
9. Utilization of intuitive insights.
10. Emphasis on social process.

**Figure 3.1. Ten characteristics of qualitative research. Source: Borg and Gall (1989), pp. 385-387.**

In terms of theory development, Borg and Gall suggest that “qualitative research methods such as long term observation (both participant and non-participant) are especially effective in the development of grounded theory and could make major contribution to many areas of educational theory” (p. 407).

Because of their emphasis upon holistic longitudinal approaches and effort to maintain a non-judgmental orientation, qualitative researchers have the potential for discovering new variables that have been overlooked by quantitative researchers.

Until we better understand the total environment in which education takes place, our psychological studies are likely to produce puzzling and contradictory results

Often an in-depth study of one individual using observation and interview will give a far better understanding than will a shallow survey of 100 subjects. (p. 408).

According to Yin (1989), exploration, or answering the more ambiguous “how” and “why” questions, is a strategy often used in qualitative research. This is particularly true in the case study, which lends itself to thoughtful, in-depth interviews with probing questions.

### Definitions of Case Study

Borg and Gall (1989) state that the case study “involves a researcher who makes a detailed examination of a single subject or group, or phenomenon” (p. 402). Yin (1989) defines the case study as an empirical inquiry that used multiple sources of evidence to explore contemporary phenomenon within its actual context, when the boundaries

between phenomenon and context often appear ambiguous. (p.23) Thus, for Yin, even certain quantitative studies can be “a case” of something. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call case studies “a snapshot of reality,” “a slice of life,” “an episode,” or “a depth examination of an instance” (p. 214, 360). They go on to quote Denny’s (1978) more formal definition of case study: “an intensive or complete examination of a facet, an issue, or perhaps the events of a geographic setting over time” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 360). Marshall and Rossman (1989) note that case studies can “facilitate the examination of prevailing myths, the explanation of differences...and the identification of a range of factors affecting the responses...” (p. 19). They add that “case studies allowed general questions leading to a total analysis” (p. 19).

Whatever the definition, it is always important that the researcher make a case for their case, i.e., they must provide a cogent rationale for why the particular case(s) they have selected are relevant to study for the intended purposes.

### *Advantages of the Case Study*

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 214, 215, pp. 359-360) mention six advantages of the case study. *First*, it allows an emic rather than an etic inquiry, offering an insiders’ versus outsiders’ point of view. McCracken (1988) states that “it is precisely because the qualitative researchers are working in their own culture that they can make the long interview do such powerful work” (p. 12). (Culture here can be taken to mean the culture of the school institution, as well as that of the student families/communities.) The

researchers are able to draw upon their own experiences “to supplement and interpret the data they generate” (p. 12). However, this intimate acquaintance can also mean researchers overlook the more obvious aspects of a situation. McCracken offers two suggestions to create distancing: “surprise” and “humor” (p. 23).

*Second*, the case study uses the reader’s implicit knowledge, building a holistic, realistic description that offers the reader a vicarious experience within an investigative research setting.

*Third*, the case study relies heavily upon the interplay between interviewer and respondent; bias can more readily be assessed by follow-up questioning. Yin (1989) observes that this strategy, which he labels *exploration*, answers “how” and “why” questions that often remain ambiguous until clarification. It involves thoughtful, in-depth interviews with probing questions to develop new insights. Such a format will be ideal for most of the questions used (See Appendix #1).

*Fourth*, the case study offers the option to probe for internal consistency. Each new item of information provides another “degree of freedom” or point of leverage from which to test interpretations.

*Fifth*, the case study approach ideally allows for “thick descriptions” to explore the complexities and intricacies of the context, thereby offering more interpretive information.

*Finally*, the case study provides an unparalleled means for communicating contextual information, the “small amount of seawater that keeps the catch alive” (McCracken, 1988, p. 25).

Yin describes these last two functions as *description*, necessitating close observation of concrete details, and *explanation*, which examines the relationship between a given setting and its immediate social context.

### **Research Strategy**

McCracken's (1988) four-step method of inquiry is particularly useful when formulating an overall research strategy. His *first* step includes an exhaustive review of literature. This enables researchers to define problems, assess data, increase their awareness of relevant theories, and sharpen their capacity for surprise. The literature offers direction, establishing topics to be explored. Yin (1989) also sees the literature review as helpful in designing the research and data collection instruments. For him, it becomes "the main vehicle for generalizing results" (p. 40), in the sense of building conceptual understanding.

The literature review identifies the categories and relationships that may later help organize the data. "It establishes an inventory" (p. 32). Ultimately it facilitates designing an interview questionnaire, which is not typically used in most qualitative research, but indispensable in the long interview.

The interview questionnaire serves several functions. "Its *first* responsibility is to ensure that the investigator covers all the terrain in the same order for each respondent" (p. 24). Secondly, it offers an opportunity for carefully crafted prompts, which may be conversation cues.

It is important that the investigator allow the respondent to tell his or her own story in his or her own terms. However, it is just as important that the interviewer exercise some control over the interview. Qualitative data are almost always extraordinarily abundant.

The question, then, is not whether, but how, to impose order and structure on these data. One of the ways of doing so in the data-collection stage of research is through the construction of a series of “prompts.” (p. 22)

Also helpful are well-designed questions or stimuli to elicit comparative responses.

Third, the questionnaire “establishes channels for the direction and the scope of the discourse” (p. 24).

The fourth function of the questionnaire is that it allows the investigator to give all his or her attention to the informant’s testimony. The first responsibility of the interviewer is the highly contingent work of assumption-inference, and he or she must not be distracted by any task that can be routinized. In sum, the questionnaire protects the larger structure and objectives of the interview so that the interviewer can attend to immediate tasks at hand. (p. 25)

In addition, it allows the researcher to pursue any opportunity that becomes available and to seize not just an insightful response, but the “context in which these ideas occur” (p. 25).

The *second* step of McCracken’s plan identifies cultural categories and relationships not considered by the scholarly literature. It focuses on self as the instrument of inquiry, and on personal experiences. This step identifies subjects’ proclivities and allows distancing. McCracken (1988) notes that what is considered “bias” in other research traditions is usually “set aside.” He adds, however that in the case study approach, bias becomes the very “stuff of understanding and explication” and “vitaly important intellectual capital without which analysis is the poorer” (p. 34).

The *third* step of McCracken's research design comprises the interview, both construction and implementation. Usually the interview begins with biographical questions. These will inform the respondent's subsequent comments and the researcher's later analysis. Opening questions usually are non-directive. Spradley (1980) suggests descriptive questions which he classifies as "grand-tour observations" and "mini-tour observations" (p. 76-81). These questions allow a descriptive overview and specific observations to return to later.

Kahn and Cannell, quoted by Marshall and Rossman (1989), describe in-depth interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose" (p. 82). Like casual conversations, these interviews are often informal, exploring general topics and uncovering the participants' perspectives on the issues discussed. McCracken offers valuable advice and suggestions on how to elicit a response that is unobtrusive and allows respondents to tell their own story in their own way. He also offers insights into why the process works so well.

Something in the interview process proved so interesting and gratifying that it kept replenishing respondent energy and involvement. The answers to this mystery are several. As Cannell and Axelrod (1956) and Caplow (1956) note, the qualitative interview gives the respondent the opportunity to engage in an unusual form of sociality. Suddenly, they find themselves in the presence of the perfect conversational partner, someone who is prepared to forsake his or her own "turns" in the conversation and listen eagerly to anything the respondent has to say (Stebbins, 1972). This characteristic of the qualitative interview leads to other benefits, including the opportunity to make oneself the center of another's attention (Ablon, 1977; Von Hoffman and Cassidy, 1956), to state a case that is otherwise unheard (Leznoff, 1956; Wax, 1952), to engage in an intellectually challenging process of self-scrutiny (Merton and Kendall, 1946), and even to experience a kind of catharsis (Gorden, 1956). (McCracken, p.28)

Yin (1989) states that an inquiring mind is a major prerequisite. He suggests being

flexible, listening for exact words, capturing the mood and affective components, and understanding the content which informs respondents' perceptions (p. 63). Lincoln and Guba (1985) claim that "review, recycling, and change must be central postures." Their key words are "adaptation" and "accommodation" (p. 249). Marshall and Rossman (1995) add one other consideration. They note that "the most important aspect of the interviewer's approach concerns conveying an attitude of acceptance" (p. 80) so that the participants feel their responses are both useful and valuable.

Interviews have several strengths. Large amounts of data can be accumulated quickly from several subjects, so the interview offers a wide variety of information. Interviews allow for follow-up questions that offer immediate clarification. They also provide the option to schedule interviews at later dates for more extensive illumination. Also, with careful attention to non-verbal body language, interviewers can validate information and follow clues to pursue other topics.

Interviews, also have weaknesses. Since the interview mandates personal interaction, cooperation is essential. Finding an interviewee willing to share enough may be difficult; keeping the participants from the beginning to the end of the research project may be equally arduous. The interviewee may not always be truthful. Then, too, the interviewer may not ask appropriate questions at appropriate times, or may miss or misinterpret the shared information. Personal biases could be inserted. Lastly, the volumes of data may be difficult to manipulate, which leads to the final step.

The *final* step includes the discovery of analytic categories, analysis, interpretation,

and writing the final report. The goal of the analysis is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that appraise the interviewees' perceptions of the topic.

McCracken (1988) divides the analysis process into five stages, each with a higher level of generality. At the *first* level, the researcher examines each comment in the interview on its own terms, ignoring any relational aspects and focusing on singular observations:

This is where the investigator must use the self as an instrument. The investigator must read interview testimony with a very careful eye both to what is in the data, and what the data "sets off" in the self. Attending to the self as carefully as to the data in the interview, the investigator will hear a stream of associations evoked by the stream of utterances. This associational activity is a treasure-trove of illumination. (p. 44)

During this stage of the present study, the data were transcribed verbatim, immediately following the interview whenever possible. Comments regarding voice inflection and emphasis were added, and the researcher made a point of listening to the students' emerging voices, as well as her own voice, thus further developing her critical listening skills.

This process resulted in the researcher saying less, but utilizing more probing, effective questions. While the long interview outline was followed both for consistency and structure, students' responses to the questions began to digress into stories. This tactic provided a more congenial environment, resulting in more data conveyed by the students. Once a topic appeared exhausted, the students' discourse was channeled back toward the prepared outline. As the students built a sense of safety and trust in the researcher, they began to share more, and their stories became very personal.

In McCracken's (1988) *second* stage, the researcher takes these observations and uses the review of literature as a template to sort out the systematic characteristics. In the present study, the researcher developed a shorthand template using the review of literature. As certain topics were mentioned by students, interview transcription pages were noted and a tally was kept of topic repetitions, i.e., violence or peer influences.

During McCracken's *third* level (1988), patterns and themes should become apparent. In the present research, students talked about their teachers in response to the interview questions, offering stories that were a mixture of both good and bad experiences. However, all eight student readily digressed from the topic of teachers toward comments about parental and peer influences. To better examine the recurring comments about peers, the researcher copied all peer references to a single file, comprising a 50+-page document.

During the *fourth* stage of McCracken's process (1988), the observations generated in previous steps are subjected in this combined form to collective scrutiny. Themes from individual interviews are evaluated holistically. The researcher is uncovering patterns of "inter-theme consistency and contradiction" (p. 42). One of two themes will dominate, and residual themes will offer supportive evidence or arguments.

The page and paper theme proved helpful in identifying possible themes, but was limited. Each student's interview was reproduced on a specific paper color. The color interview transcripts were then cut apart by topic and separated into folders labeled by themes. This exercise revealed several recurring patterns.

During McCracken's (1989) *fifth* and final stage, the researcher creates an overview, and themes from individual interviews are evaluated holistically. In the current research, the folders were winnowed down into three major groups 1) the parent/teacher references centering on issues of nurturing, 2) the peer comments document, and 3) a conglomerate file that focused on resiliency characteristics.

Yin (1989) offers a similar plan for analyzing and interpreting evidence, labeling his strategies pattern-matching, explanation-building, and time-series analysis (pp. 105-125).

### **Establishing Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer ways to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research and discuss credibility, the value of *triangulation*, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 289-331). Marshall and Rossman (1989) reinterpret Lincoln and Guba's constructs, offering a summation (pp. 144-147) while adding seven controls for bias of interpretation. The first of these is to include "a research partner or a person who plays devil's advocate and critically questions the researcher's analysis" (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.146). McMillian and Schumacher (1993) make a similar suggestion (p. 387).

In quantitative research traditions, the quality of data is usually judged in terms of reliability and validity. Kirk and Miller (1986) define *reliability* as "the extent to which a measurement yields the same answer however and whenever it is carried out; *validity* is the extent to which it gives the correct answer" (p. 19).

No experiment can be perfectly controlled, and no measuring instrument perfectly calibrated. All measurement, therefore, is to some degree suspect.

When the measurement is non-qualitative, this reservation may amount to no more than the acknowledgment that accuracy is limited.

In the case of qualitative observations, the issue of validity is not a matter of methodological hair-splitting about the fifth decimal point, but a question of whether the researcher sees what he or she thinks he or she sees. (Kirk and Miller, 1986, p. 21)

McCracken (1988) presents seven standards by which to judge the quality of qualitative research. *First*, the research must be *exact*, with explanations stated clearly and precisely, eliminating ambiguities as much as possible. *Second*, the interpretation of the data must be *economical*, reducing assumptions while still explaining the data. *Third*, the research must be *mutually consistent*; ideas and insights may not contradict each other. *Fourth*, the research must be *externally consistent*; that is, an explanation must be consistent with the major literature. McCracken informs us that external consistency must be used judiciously. Paraphrasing Kuhn (1962), McCracken notes that “it is precisely the data that refuse to submit to our guiding paradigms that offer (when differently construed) the hope of important theoretical advances” (p. 51). *Fifth*, research must be *unified*, not simply linking various assertions, but rather presenting organized and interrelated ideas. *Sixth*, research must be *powerful*, explaining as much of the ethnographic data as possible without adding unnecessarily cumbersome details. *Seventh*, the research must be *fertile*, a fulcrum for new ideas and insights, offering a clearer vision of reality. (pp. 48-52)

### **Approach to the Present Study**

This chapter has addressed overall issues of methodology, quantitative and

qualitative approaches, and has summarized a collective body of literature in regard to qualitative methodology. After reviewing this literature, it seemed most appropriate to use a qualitative approach in the present study.

This research examined the personal stories of inner city high school students. Young adults between the ages of 17 and 21, whose family income is at or below the poverty level, were interviewed. The purpose of these interviews was to better understand what factors contributed to these young adults' academic successes or failures. In order to discover what students felt most profoundly affected them, it made sense to listen to their observations and responses, and explore any ambiguous comments as fully as possible for clarification and serious understanding.

This study did not involve a random selection of students. Rather, students were carefully selected. Borg and Gall (1989) label this "purposely selecting." They note that "the qualitative researcher will be more likely to uncover the full array of multiple realities" (p.386) easily missed in random sampling or clearly rejected as outliers.

The present research studied inner-city high school students, specifically those at or below the poverty level, and explored their understanding of what factors affected their academic successes or failures. From a case study perspective, examining the phenomenon of success/failure among students who potentially have so many reasons not to be academically successful offered a chance to uncover the intimate stories behind their success or failure. All of their insights, values, intrinsic beliefs, self-discoveries, and judgments were part of a detailed, extensive investigation to capture a student's reality.

This data was used to create a “snapshot” — that elusive moment of connection, that chance to examine what makes the difference. Interviews can generate rich, subjective data that, in turn, requires more probing. Collecting extensive data from a few select individuals offered a chance to see the thinking of these individuals, in layers and in juxtaposition. It provided an opportunity to reach for an understanding that a more superficial survey of several hundred students could not offer.

Eight students were chosen for this study. Of the eight, four students were successfully academically; two were in college during the research period and two were close to graduating from high school. Four students were not successful academically and at some point dropped out of school.

Quantitative studies are definite, with exact limitations. Their range is specific and inflexible. Qualitative studies are more probing. Answers follow from earnest thinking, tangents can be pursued, ideas can be gathered, and insights developed — all of which seemed to better suit this study. Then, as data are collected, the researcher has time to continually reflect, interpret, analyze, and search for the interrelationships among categories that make sense of the data. The process is inductive, and the approach can be modified as the research progresses.

“Qualitative studies focus upon social processes and the meaning that participants attribute to social situations” (Borg and Gall, 1989, p. 387). Students adjusting to the school environment and fashioning success within that space certainly offered a social process worth studying deeply. Just as interesting were their counterparts: students not

adapting and not finding success within the institution of school. Gleaning the meaning subjects attributed to such situations may lead to schools that create more positively focused learning environments in which these students can persist and thrive.

In the present study, the long interview was utilized. McCracken (1988) outlines a four-step method of long-interview inquiry. This method offers several advantages. First, it allows investigators to exploit their familiarity with their own culture to design better questions, listen more skillfully, and analyze data with greater sensitivity. But it also seeks to help them transcend this familiarity so that it does not blunt their critical skills. (p. 65)

Second, the long interview allows the researcher a method of collecting and analyzing qualitative data so that it may be both rich and manageable. Third, this method purposely respects both the researcher and the individual interviewed. It realizes what Spradley (1980) reflectively states: that information can be used to *affirm* an individual's rights, interests, and sensitivities, or that same information may be used to *violate* them (p. 22). To insure confidentiality and honor the standard ethics protocol, I submitted the human subjects permission forms, which were approved by the appropriate sources. In addition, all names were changed and approved by each young adult. The method of sampling described on this form is explained in the following section.

It is important to note that due to the relatively small sample and limited diversity of the subjects demographic characteristics, it would not be appropriate to make broad generalizations to all Hispanic students or all disadvantaged students. However, the present study allowed a rare glimpse into eight individuals with a common heritage and similar

academic experiences. The discoveries regarding how these students perceived of and coped with adversities does offer some key points of discussion and possible grist for future research.

*Sampling: the Case for this Study*

Based on the review of literature and the demographics of Denver, this research concentrated on students from the largest racial/ethnic population group: Hispanics. In choosing this sample, this researcher looked for a reflection of Hispanic cultural attitudes and values. These young adults offered a level of maturity based on 10 to 12 years of educational experiences; yet at the same time, being young, these youths have a fresh perspective to offer.

Eight students were selected. Four represent the “successful” and four represent the “unsuccessful” categories as defined in Chapter 1. Perceived academic success or failure was validated by high school transcripts and conversations with counselors. Included in this study were two young adults still in school, two who recently graduated, and four who have dropped out of school one or more times. To achieve variety, other criteria for selection included subjects: from both single- and dual-parent families; who were immigrants or second-, third-, or fourth-generation Hispanics; who were ages 17 to 21; of both sexes; who spoke English as a first or second language; who came from both stable school environments and continual mobile families; whose parental education ranged from some grade school to college graduates. Family incomes were all at or below the poverty level. Figure 3.2 provides demographic information, including family composition, parental education, and parental occupations.

The criteria and subsequent subject selection were based upon the following:

1) "Poverty statistics" as compiled by the U.S. Government Free/Reduced Lunch Program, as well as counselor-supplied information. Counselors at various DPS schools were asked to help select eight or more DPS students within Colorado Department of Education-defined poverty levels. These students were selected and interviewed based upon the criteria outlined in the Sampling section, as well as the availability and commitment of the student themselves.

2) In regard to academic success, official school documents, including high school transcripts, ITBS Test Scores, and alternative assessments such as portfolios were checked. Suggestions from counselors and principals in terms of selecting students were solicited.

3) Several informed sources within the school system were solicited for assistance. Counselors and principals helped determine who to sample and how best to make contacts. The "Report of Impaction Official Membership" (1995), the "Summary Report of Estimated Ethnic Distribution of Pupils" (1995), as well as personal contacts with principals and counselors were also utilized in the selection process. Students were chosen from several DPS high schools including, George Washington High School, John F. Kennedy High School, North High School, West High School, Montbello High School, the Career Education Center, Denver School of the Arts, and Emily Griffith Opportunity School. The list comprises more than eight schools because, in some cases, interviewees attended several different schools. Likewise, the subjects' middle- and elementary-school experiences are also wide and varied. Figure 3.3 provides lists of elementary, middle and

high schools attended by the subjects; student current grade point averages; and additional demographic information including age, subjects' place of birth and that of immediate family members; and whether English is a first or second language. The students' choice of nationality label is an interesting topic and will be discussed in each student's brief biography and in more detail at the beginning of Chapter 7.

### Procedures

See Appendix for documentation of the following:

- Educational literature was reviewed extensively, exhaustively.
- A conceptual framework was developed that served as a blueprint for guiding the study and giving it direction. (This framework highlighted several major themes: nurturing, school culture, parental involvement, community context and student factors. As the study progressed the conceptual framework was refined.)

An interview questionnaire was developed. (The questionnaire evolved around the concept of "a student's school biography," beginning with earliest memories of school and culminating in the present. Questions were derived from the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The subjects were repeatedly asked for their opinions based on their experiences and their insights.)

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Maria	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>Family COMPOSITION</b>								
Parents (Legal guardians)	mother/stepfather	mother/stepfather	mother	mother/stepfather	mother	mother	father/stepmother	group home
Number of Brothers	one (age 8)			one, younger	two		one	one, older
Number of Sisters	one (age 13)	one, older	two	one, older	two			two
Number of Stepbrothers		one, older			one		one	two
Number of Stepsisters		two	two	two		two, older /younger		two
Half-brother (same mom)	one (age 3)		two uncles	three		one, (7yrs.old)		one
Half-sisters (same dad)						Aunt/Uncle/Grandmother		Lives in Group Home (25 people divorced)
Other						divorced		mom died when Theo in 8th grade
Parent's relationship	divorced	divorced	divorced	divorced	divorced	divorced	divorced	
Student living with	mom remarried with mom and stepfather--13yrs.	both remarried with mom and stepfather since he can remember	mom remarried three times 3 stepfathers (have all been jerks)	both remarried with mom/stepfather since I was a baby	divorced with mom and stepfather	dad left when Rene was a baby brothers both have different fathers than Rene	dad remarried sees mom sometimes	
<b>Parental EDUCATION</b>								
Mom	education in Mexico graduated, career does not know	HS graduate some college college graduate	Elementary grad. some high school does not know	HS graduate some college	11th grade	College graduate now a teacher does not know Aunt: 10th grade	some high school	HS graduate
Dad					11th grade, later auto-motive college pretty sure he graduated		1st or 2nd grade	some high school and his G.E.D.
Stepdad	attended school in Mexico	3.5 yrs. college		3.5 yrs. college				
Stepmom							some elementary	HS graduate
<b>Parental OCCUPATION</b>								
Mom	doesn't work	translator, works in Human Resources Electrical engineer	housekeeping	translator, works in Human Resources Electrician	Housewife Does Inventory (CD) Construction and Mechanics	Teacher, Knapp Elementary, DPS	Step-Mom: one job to another Owen's Corning Fiberglass where he makes shingles	DPS driver
Dad								Security Guard at an Hotel
Stepdad	cook/Hyatt Regency & Rock Bottom Brewery	Para-professional at North/Tech-Prep Coordinator C.E.C.		Para-professional at North/Tech-Prep Coordinator C.E.C.		Aunt: machine-shop on workman's comp Uncle: construction		Stepmom: cook

**Figure 3.2. Family information. Basic composition/education/occupation backgrounds.**

DEMOGRAPHICS

<b>Student</b>	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Maria	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>Age</b>	17	18	17	20	17	18	20	17
<b>Birthday</b>	9/10/80	5/12/79	4/22/81	5/29/77	8/17/80	10/10/79	2/1/78	9/8/80
<b>Nationality</b>	Hispanic	Chicano	Mexican-American	Chicana	Chicano	Chicana	Hispanic-Indian	Mexican-Indian
<b>1st Language</b>	Spanish	English	Spanish	English	English	English	English	English
<b>PLACE OF BIRTH:</b>								
<b>Student</b>	Guatemala, C.A.	Denver	Durango, Mexico	Denver	Denver	Denver	Denver	Denver
<b>Mother</b>	Guatemala, C.A.	San Antonio, TX	Quailia, Mexico	San Antonio, TX	Denver	Denver	Michoacan, Mexico	Denver
<b>Father</b>	Central America	Corpus Christi, TX	Puerto Rico	Corpus Christi, TX	Denver	Mexico	Southern Colorado	Denver
<b>Stepmother</b>					Denver		Zacatecas, Mexico	
<b>Stepfather</b>	Mexico	Colo. Springs, CO		Colo. Springs, CO				
<b>Grandparents</b>	Central America	Texas	Mexico	Texas	Denver	New Mexico		South Dakota
<b>SCHOOL DATA</b>								
<b>DPS Grade School</b>	Kindergarten-5th Columbian	Kindergarten-2nd Newton 3rd-5th Centennial	Kind-1st Del Pueblo 1st - Greeley Columbia Wyman Teller	Kindergarten-5th Newton 1/2 5th Edison	Kin-1st Barney Ford 2nd- Cunningham 3rd-4th Barney Ford 5th John Annesse	Kindergarten-5th Monroe	Kindergarten-4th Columbian 4th-5th Teller	Kindergarten-5th Newton 6th Esigleton
<b>DPS Middle School</b>	1992-1995 Horco Mann Middle	1990-1993 Skinner Middle	1992-1995 Gove Middle	1988-1991 Skinner Middle	1991-1994 Martin Luther King	1991-1994 Kepner Middle	1989-1992 Hill Middle	1992-1995 Late Middle
<b>DPS High School</b>	1995-1999 George Washington and C.E.C.	1993-1997 North High	1995-1999 George Washington	1991-1995 North High	dropped out 1995 1996-1997 Byers 1997-1998 D.S.A	dropped 1995 4/87 E.G.O.S.	John F. Kennedy dropped 1/94 1995 Byers	West dropped out 1/3/87 1987 Bear Creek 1987 Bear Creek
<b>High School GPA</b>	3.59	2.35	4.11	2.84	1.63	0.55	1.86	0.97
<b>College</b>		1997-1998 Metropolitan State		1996-1998 Metropolitan State				

\*NOTE: Gray indicates DPS schools

**Figure 3.3. Family information. Elementary, middle and high schools attended by the subjects; student current grade point averages; and additional demographic information including age, subjects' place of birth and that of immediate family members; and whether English is a first or second language.**

- A parent consent form and student assent form were created.
- A demographic information worksheet was compiled; this was completed and discussed during the initial interview.
- Students were given a copy of the protocol/draft of interview questions at that time. The intent was to provoke their thinking and to channel their reflections. It also provided a sense of security as to expectations.
- Principals, teachers, and counselors were contacted. The purpose of the study was explained, and their help was solicited to obtain student interviewees. (Criteria for selection of students, protocol/draft of interview questions, and parent consent, student assent forms were provided.)
- Students were first contacted by their counselor or teacher, with a follow-up phone call from the researcher establishing an initial meeting time and place. First meetings occurred at the office of the counselor or teacher. Subsequent interviews were usually conducted at school.
- The initial meeting time was an hour. Interviews were scheduled around the students' availability. Second interview lasted 30 to 120 minutes. The final interview lasted an hour or more. (Using the interview questionnaire a degree of consistency and structure was maintained: each young adult was interviewed for approximately five hours total.)
- Two tape recorders were used. One provided back-up.

- All tapes were transcribed verbatim. Names were changed to provide confidentiality. Tapes/transcriptions will be secured for five years. A transcript was provided to each student to review for accuracy both in the script and the spirit of the conversation. Additions, deletions, or corrections were made.
- A final set of interview questions was developed in response to students' insights and concerns. Interview questionnaires essentially were used to offer stimuli and to elicit comparative responses from interviewees. Peer pressures, safe schools and resiliency to adverse conditions surfaced as major concerns for the eight students. Other questions were added for clarification.
- To maximize the quality of data, McCracken's (1988) seven standards for judging the quality of qualitative research were held as the ideal and followed carefully. *First*, explanations were stated clearly and precisely. *Second*, the interpretation of the data was *economical*, reducing assumptions while still explaining the data. *Third*, the research was *mutually consistent* in that ideas and insights did not contradict each other. *Fourth*, the research was *externally consistent*; that is, an explanation must be consistent with the major literature, or offer new insights. *Fifth*, research was *unified*, not simply linking various assertions, but rather presenting organized and interrelated ideas. *Sixth*, the research was *powerful*, explaining as much of the ethnographic data as possible without adding unnecessary cumbersome details. *Seventh*, the research was

*fertile*, offering new ideas for future research possibilities and new insights for practitioners to consider.

- This study has its limitations. It examined only eight cases in a single school district (DPS) within one city (Denver, Colorado). As such, the intent of the study is not to generalize the findings in the statistical sense to a broader population of students or communities. Rather the object of this study is to suggest new ways to understand the problem, and to provide insights and ideas that might form the basis for further study — aims consistent with the purpose of qualitative case study research.
- Although their number are limited, the eight students chosen for this study were sampled very carefully and exemplify cases of student success and failure within an urban area.

### **Nutshell Biographies of Each of the Eight Young Adults**

The following one-page biographies (Figures 3.3-3.10) provide basic demographic and biographic information, mainly in the words of each young adult. The subjects' individual responses offer an opportunity to begin to hear their voices and how they talk about themselves, their families, and their circumstances.

**Figure 3.4. Biography of Alex.****ALEX**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 17  
 Born: September 10, 1980  
 Male

Alex is a junior in the computer magnet program at George Washington High School (GW), a Denver Public School, which he has been attending since his freshman years in 1995-1996. He has a 3.596 grade point average on a 4.0 scale. In addition to his courses at GW, Alex has also studied Engineering Technology at the Career Education Center (CEC). This program allows students to pursue special interest in career fields. Essentially CEC is a career focused school, whose attendance is comprised of a compilation of DPS students, who attend one class for approximately two hours daily.

Alex attended Horace Mann Middle School, another DPS school for three years, from 1992-1995. His elementary years were spent at Columbian. Alex has seldom moved; he stated that once they moved two blocks to a bigger house.

Alex was born in Central America, in Guatemala. "I moved here since I was very, very young so I know nothing of where I was born and I, we haven't visited it. So all I know is that I have family there but I never actually visited them or talked to them so I've lived here pretty much all my life." Alex's mother was also born in Central America, as were her parents. "My biological father was born in Central America. My stepfather was born in Mexico." His stepfather has been part of Alex's life, since marrying Alex's mother thirteen years ago.

Alex calls himself "Hispanic." Spanish is his first language, and Spanish is mostly spoken in his home. In elementary school, "they were teaching me to read Spanish first. So I learned a lot of the Spanish alphabet and how to read in Spanish mostly from school, I remember."

For a time "my mother and grandmother and my grandpa and me, lived pretty much together until, like she decided to move out and that was, I must've been about five." Alex continued to live with his grandmother until he was about "6½ and then I went to live with my mother. He notes that for a time "before my mother got married to my stepfather...we were like living me, and my sister and my mother, for awhile just by ourselves."

Currently six people live in Alex's household. He is the oldest of two sisters and a brother, each five years apart in age. When asked if these were natural sisters/brother or stepsisters/stepbrother, Alex responded, "Well, I guess they're part brothers, I don't know. My mother had all of us. She didn't have any kids when they got divorced. So...I don't know what you'd call that." Since his brother didn't have the same dad, Alex's identified him as a stepbrother, and as far as sisters, he said he had "a stepsister and one sister."

**Figure 3.5. Biography of Eloy.****ELOY**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 18  
 Born: May 29, 1977  
 Male

Eloy is currently a freshman at Metro State College, where he is currently taking general courses. Eloy is a 1997 graduate of North High School in Denver Colorado, a Denver Public School (DPS), which he attended from 1993-1997.

Eloy attended Skinner Middle School, another DPS school for three years from 1993-1990. His elementary years were spent at Newlon (kindergarten to second grade) and Centennial (third to fifth grade), both DPS schools.

Eloy prefers to be called "Chicano." According to Eloy, "basically it's what I've been raised with, I mean, everybody I know calls himself 'Chicano,' not really Latino, or Mexican-American, or Hispanic. So basically it's what I know."

He and his parents were born in the USA; grandparents on his dad's side were born in Texas, while on his mother's side they were born in Texas and Mexico. His great grandfather was born in Mexico and great grandmother (maternal) was born in Austria. Eloy's first language is English, and English spoken in his home, although his mother does speak Spanish fluently.

Eloy's family has moved only once in the last three years; and approximately three times in the past six years. Currently Eloy lives with his mother and stepfather and younger brother, Paco. During his high school years, the extended family also included an older sister, Maria, a stepbrother, Raoul (who moved during Eloy's junior year in high school), and an "adopted sister, Juanita." Eloy has sisters living in Texas, with his "real dad," and another, older brother, John, who did not live with them during Eloy's high school years, but who graduated from high school, with a "1.4 GPA and an ACT score of 30." Eloy refers to John as a "walking encyclopedia," who is really smart, but just lazy."

Eloy's biological father, Victor, lives in Texas. "I still talk to my real father; we have a relationship. My fathers occupation, "he's umm...I think he's like an electronic engineer.

His mother works in Human Resources at the Hyatt, as a translator, and has been there about four years. Her previous occupation was with Geiko Insurance, where she worked about five years.

In referring to Julio his stepfather, Eloy notes that "he's been like my dad my whole life." Julio has mainly worked in educational related jobs, several in the last few years. Julio was a para-professional assistant at North High School during the years Eloy attended North.

**Figure 3.6. Biography of Rosa.****ROSA**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 17  
 Born: April 22, 1981  
 Female

Rosa is a junior at George Washington High School, a Denver Public School, which she has been attending since freshman year in 1995-1996. She has a 4.11 average on a 4.0 scale, the higher average is due to the advance placement (A.P.) classes she has taken. Science and mathematics are her favorite classes. She is currently studying A.P. Calculus. Along with her academic interest, Rosa enjoys sports and has played softball since freshman year. Last year she was both a wrestling manager and a baseball manager at George Washington.

She attended Gove Middle School, another DPS school for three years from 1992-1995. Her elementary years were spent at a variety of Denver Public Schools, including Teller, Wyman, Columbian, Greenlee, and Del Pueblo. She notes "we were always moving. It was...it was extremely hard."

Rosa was born in Durango, Mexico, which is "near central Mexico, almost the heart of Mexico." Her mother was born in Quaila, Mexico. In regard to her dad, Rosa states "my dad I really didn't get to know too much about him. So I really don't know. My mom says he was from Puerto Rico." She notes that her grandparents were born in Mexico.

Spanish is Rosa's first language. She learned to speak English when she came to the U.S.A. "I moved here when I was about four, and then I started school, and it was just really odd for me, and strange that nobody spoke, well some did, but I found it, that I *had* to learn it. It was something I had to do. So, I started learning when I was like four or five." At home Rosa speaks Spanish with her family. "My mom kinda made it a rule," she laughs. "Once you get coming through the door, Spanish, because she doesn't want us to forget it." For a while Rosa attended the ESOL (English as a second language) classes offered throughout the Denver Public Schools, until she felt she was not really benefiting from the program.

Rosa calls herself Mexican-American because "I was born in Mexico. And I was raised as a Mexican-American."

Eight people live in Rosa's household. She is the oldest of five children and has two brothers, two sisters. Her mother works as a housekeeper to support the family. Her two uncles live with the family intermittently; sometimes they are in Utah, sometimes in Mexico.

**Figure 3.7. Biography of Maria.****MARIA**Background/Demographic Information

Age 20  
 Born: May 29, 1977  
 Female

Currently a sophomore at Metro State College. Maria is 1995 graduate of North High School in Denver Colorado, a Denver Public School (DPS), which she attended from 1991-1995. Upon graduation she was offered a "full ride" scholarship to Metro State College, but after a few months dropped her classes and decided to spend her first year after high school working at Denver Instruments. She returned to Metro the following year, 1996-1997.

Maria attended Skinner Middle School, another DPS school, for three years, from 1988 to 1991 Her elementary years were spent at Newlon and Edison (1/2 year), also DPS schools.

Maria prefers to be called "Chicana." She finds the term Mexican-American somewhat inappropriate, for although the term "has our ethnic background, we still live here."

She and her parents were born in the USA. Maria's fraternal grandparents were born in Texas, while her maternal grandmother was born in Texas, and her maternal grandfather in Mexico. Her maternal great-grandfather was born in Mexico; her maternal great-grandmother was born in Austria

English is Maria's first language. English is mostly spoken in her home, although her mom "would use [Spanish] every once in awhile" until "she got married to my [step]dad; my [step]dad doesn't speak Spanish. We didn't use it very often growing up." Maria notes that she can understand a lot of Spanish. "I don't speak it. My family on my mom's side would make fun of me when I would talk it, so I just decided to quit."

During her school years Maria lived with her mother and stepfather, three brothers, John, who is older, Eloy and Paco, both younger, as well as stepbrother, Raoul, who "moved in when I was in 12th grade, so he only lived with us for one year out of my high school years." She also notes that "I don't have any sisters that live with me. I have other sisters (and stepsisters) that live in another state," three total.

Her biological father, Victor, stays in touch, but lives out-of-state. (Texas) "You know, my real dad, I think it turned out for the best. I think it is better that way. Just because it is not very confusing for me. I know who my dad is and that is who I relate to most of the time. It's not like I'm bouncing back and forth." Julio has been my dad "since I was a baby."

**Figure 3.8. Biography of Jose.****JOSE**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 17

Born: August 17, 1980

Male

Jose attended a variety of Denver Public High Schools (DPS) beginning with Montbello in 1994-1995, when he was fourteen. He dropped out of Montbello during his second semester, as he puts it "I'd ditch. I'd go to school just to meet my friends and leave. And I started failing classes and barely getting "D's." His second semester transcript from Montbello shows 6 "F's." Second semester in 1996 Jose returned to school passing two classes at the Contemporary Learning Academy, Byers, a DPS alternative school, and raising his grade point average to 1.0417. He continued at Byers through 1996-7, gradually raising his GPA to 1.63. From Byers he transferred to Denver School of the Arts, where he is currently majoring in visual arts.

Jose spent three years at Martin Luther King Middle School, from 1991-1994. His elementary school years again reflect several moves: he started at Barney Ford for kindergarten and 1st grade, then changed to Cunningham, in Aurora for second grade. For third and fourth grades he was back to Barney Ford, and then spent one year, fifth grade at John Amesse, 1990-1991. All the above are DPS schools, with the exception of Cunningham.

Jose prefers to be called "Chicano, 'cause that's like, well Hispanic that, like the White people or whatever, like the label they gave us. And Latino, and that can be anybody of Latin origin, from anywhere you know. There's a lot of Latin countries. And Chicano, that's like our word for Mexican-American." Jose does speak Spanish, as does his stepfather, but Jose speaks Spanish "only like with me and my brother and my brother's friends. My mom don't know Spanish."

His parents and grandparents were all born in the U.S.A. His parents also went to a DPS school, Thomas Jefferson, but both dropped out in 11th grade, when his mother became pregnant with Jose. His mother and stepfather have been together for a long time, but "just got married last year on Valentine's Day."

For a time Jose lived with his grandfather and step-grandmother when he was in second grade. Jose currently lives with his mother and stepfather, and two brothers. Jose also has two stepbrothers and a stepsister.

**Figure 3.9. Biography of Rene.****RENE**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 18  
 Born: October 10, 1979  
 Female

Rene began her freshman year at West High School, a Denver Public School, in 1994-1995, and by the end of her sophomore year had dropped out with a grade point average of 0.550 on a 4.0 scale. She notes that she "had to deal with a lot of people, because by then they were criticizing the way you dress, or the way you talk, your hair color. So I dealt with a lot of that. And um, um I was going out, missing classes, ditching, drinking, so I was getting into a lot of trouble then." Rene also states, "I think my brother went to jail that year....the summer between that time." "He was accused of armed robbery."

Currently Rene is currently attending Second Chance High School, Emily Griffith Opportunity School where she enrolled April 9, 1997. She attended Kepner Middle School for three years, and prior to that Monroe Elementary, all Denver Public Schools.

Rene chose to call herself "Chicana." When first examining the four terms, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, and Mexican American, Rene's response was "I consider myself almost all of them. I mean to me they mean all the same. So it's like my father's Mexican, but my mom's also Mexican-American, so I don't know (she laughs) which one I like better." "Probably Chicana."

Rene was born in Denver, and so was her mother. Her father was born in Mexico. When asked what city she replied, "Well, my dad left when I was a baby. I really don't know." Later she comments that he has remarried, has a seven-year-old daughter, and lives in California. "I talked to him when I was 16, for like a weekend. And I discontinued talking to him." Her maternal grandmother was born in New Mexico. "And my grandpa, never asked him, 'cause he's not the type to talk."

Although English is Rene's first language, she is fluent in Spanish "I can't write it, but I can talk it." And comments that not English but "it's become more Spanish, now" spoken in her home between her Grandma, Aunt, and mother. Sometimes Rene chooses to live with her Aunt and her husband, going "back and forth, back with my Aunt. 'Cause my mom and me got into fights." She notes "I used to be with my grandmother like that, too. When I was in trouble."

Rene has two brothers, but adds, "Me and my brothers have different dads." The younger brother is seven and when home, Rene lives with her mother and little brother. She is pregnant, but feels she does have family support to help her, and enable her finish school.

**Figure 3.10. Biography of Stevin.****STEVIN**Background and Demographic Information

Age 20

Born: February 2, 1978

Male

Stevin attended a variety of high schools, beginning as a freshman at John F. Kennedy High School (J.F.K) in Denver, 1992-1993, and continuing his sophomore year, 1993-1994. He left J.F.K dropped out for a semester, and then went to the Contemporary Learning Academy, Byers, a DPS alternative school, in 1995. In the fall of 1995, he was back at J.F.K. for a brief period. He was suspended from J.F.K., and dropped out. A move enabled him to enroll in Ranum High School, followed by the Alternative Center for Education (A.C.E.) in Adams county, in 1995-1997. He dropped out of A.C.E., with transcripts showing a 1.86 average on a 4.0 scale. Stevin is currently enrolled in Emily Griffith Opportunity School (E.G.O.S), Second Chance High School, as of May 12, 1997.

Stevin attended Hill Middle School, another DPS school for three years, from 1991-1994. His elementary years were spent at two DPS schools: Teller for fourth and fifth grades, and Columbia, from kindergarten to the middle of fourth grade.

Stevin prefers to be called both "Hispanic" and "Indian." He comments that "Hispanic is like Chicano and Mexicano. It can describe both." He proudly notes that his mother is a Ute Indian, as are his grandparents on her side. Stevin was born in Denver. His father was born in Michoacan, Mexico and his mother in southern Colorado. His stepmother was born in Zacatecas, Mexico. Since she "doesn't really know English," Stevin often helps her translate letters or other important information.

Stevin is fluent in both English and Spanish, using the later primarily when talking to his father. "If I talk to the elders, like my parents, or my dad, 'cause I don't live with my mother, um Spanish and then his lady, Spanish. And my brothers, I can talk to them in English." His mother understands both English and Spanish, but mostly speaks English.

Stevin wore an ankle bracelet for two years, the result of a high speed chase in a stolen car, that ended when the car over turned and Stevin was hospitalized then jailed. Previous records listed what Stevin calls "petty stuff" like shoplifting, marijuana, F.T.A. (failure to appear); he also mentions getting caught drunk or fighting.

During his elementary through high school years, Stevin has lived with his father and stepmother. His parents divorced when he was about four, prior to that he was in a foster home for a short time. Also at home is an older brother, and a younger stepbrother and stepsister.

**Figure 3.11. Biography of Theo.****THEO**Background/Demographic Information

Age: 17

Born: September 8, 1980

Male

Theo attended a variety of high schools beginning at West High School (DPS) in 1995-1997, as a Freshman and continuing through half of his Sophomore year. He was active in varsity football and junior varsity wrestling. During these three semesters his grades were predominately Ds and Fs, earning him a cumulative grade point average of .9744 on a 4.0 scale. During his 10th grade year he notes that "I just kinda fell apart. Was all hurt inside (his mother died in February of 1994) and I didn't know how to deal with it. So I mainly dropped out," withdrawing from West, January 31, 1997. Later he enrolled at Bear Creek for about two and a half months from February 3 through April 22, 1997, withdrawing from there with "F" grades in all six classes. After that he attended the Career Education Center (C.E.C), also a DPS school, for a few months, where Theo was part of the Indian Focus Program. Theo left C.E.C. without obtaining any credits.

Theo is currently enrolled at Emily Griffith Opportunity School (E.G.O.S.), Second Chance High School, since April 20 of 1998, a DPS school from which he hopes to graduate eventually. E.G.O.S. is an alternative school that focuses on students who have dropped out of school (four months minimum to be applicable). Most work is self-paced and individualized.

Theo attended Lake Middle School, another DPS school for three years, from 1992 to 1995. His elementary years were spent Newlon (from kindergarten to fifth) and Eagleton (sixth grade). Theo states that he was moving around a lot and that his parent's divorce in 1991 created difficulties.

Theo prefers to be called Mexican/Indian, and is a quarter Sioux. He was born in Denver, as were both his parents. His paternal grandmother was born in the Black Hills of South Dakota. She is Sioux, and can speak Sioux, which she does occasionally around Theo. His paternal grandfather is Hispanic. His mother's parents are both Hispanic. Theo's maternal grandmother speaks both Spanish and English. Theo notes that he speaks Spanish "a little bit. I understand more than I can speak. But I can speak a little bit....enough to carry a little conversation with people." Theo's stepmother is Anglo-American.

Theo got into trouble during the time he attended C.E.C., violating his probation (the result of possession charges and riding in a stolen car) by cutting off his ankle bracelet and leaving for two-three weeks. Consequently he spent several months incarcerated.

Theo currently lives in a group-home during the week, and spends weekends with his sister, who is 23, a graduate of West High School, and presently attending college and working. Theo seems very close to his sister and comments that "we help each other out with problems and stuff."

He lived with both parents until 1991, then his mother, until she died in 1994, and after that he shifted between his grandmother, cousins, and finally his sister. He has two stepbrothers and two stepsisters, and one half-sister, living with his dad and stepmother.

## CHAPTER 4

### NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

The previous chapters have provided statistics on children of poverty, research on the academic achievement of Hispanic students in inner city schools, and educational research focusing on factors regarding nurturing environments, peer influences, resiliency and economic influences. The plan was to offer an overarching framework that encompassed both problems and solutions, believing that no single variable could be studied in isolation. As Figure 1.9 suggested, a student's motivation to persist and achieve in school was mitigated by several factors: a nurturing environment, including teachers, parents, family members and schools; peer influences, economic factors, and the students' own resiliency. While these factors are strongly interactive, the students' individual and personal responses to all these factors appeared to make the difference, and ultimately, the students create their own academic success or failure within the system.

The eight students were interviewed over the course of a year, and were eager to share their stories. They talked at length about parental influences, both supportive and negligible. They discussed sibling and extended family interactions, effective and ineffective teachers, safe and frightening schools, nurturing and counterproductive environments, and the powerful impact of peer acceptance. These young adults shared their pasts and their challenges, as well as their future hopes and dreams.

They were asked repeatedly, “Why are some students academically successful, managing to graduate from high school, while others of similar background are not successful and drop out of school?” “What helps you personally create academic success?” “What stymies your ability to do that?” Their answers fell into three major areas:

- 1) the influence of parents and teachers;
- 2) the impact of peers, and
- 3) their resiliency to adverse conditions.

The following three chapters will elucidate their perspectives.

Chapter 4 begins by examining the subjects’ views on their parents and teachers.

This chapter integrates many of the concepts of caring, as presented by Mayeroff (1971) in his book *On Caring* (See Figure 4.1). Additionally, it includes ideas of nurturing as expressed by Noddings (1984, 1992), Bellah (1991), Lightfoot (1983), and others reviewed in Chapter 2. Figure 4.1 offers a matrix, listing Mayeroff’s seven factors of caring (knowledge, patience, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage), and adds “generosity of time” and “constructivism.” These nine descriptors are correlated with the five categories presented in this chapter: support, listening, high expectations, physically safe environment and mentally safe environment.

In regard to their parents and their teachers, the eight students consistently reiterated four topics:

- 1) *Unconditional support* versus *limited support*: time was seen as a precious commodity, and adults were often unavailable;

	Support	Listening	High Expectations	Physically Safe Environment	Mentally Safe Environment
Knowledge	x	x	x		x
Patience	x	x	x		x
Honesty	x	x	x		x
Trust	x	x	x	x	x
Humility	x	x	x		x
Hope	x		x	x	
Courage	x	x	x	x	x
Generosity of Time	x	x	x	x	
Adopting Constructivist Perspective		x	x		x

**Figure 4.1. Matrix of key descriptors of nurture as compared to subjects' reported priorities.**

- 2) *Listening* with undistracted attention, genuine sensitivity, and empathetic rapport;
- 3) *High expectations*, realistic aspirations, with viable support structures; and
- 4) *Safe environments*, both physically and mentally safe: the former refers to violence, while the latter refers to effective teaching and examines teaching from a constructivist perspective.

Each topic is introduced, then illustrated by comments from the students.

Sometimes all eight students are quoted; sometimes selected students' viewpoints are more apropos. (Data are quoted with a name and page if taken from a compilation of the first three interviews, and data are designated with a name, "FI" and page, if taken from the final interview.) A brief summary follows each section.

### Support

Support entails the provision of absolute commitment, consistency and stability, and a sense of being valuable. If this support is given without ambivalence, trust and

mutual respect grow. Both the academically successful students and the students who dropped out strongly believe that support from their parents and their teachers, or the lack of such support, made a definite difference in their lives. In discussing this support, the students focused on two perspectives: the individual student's general reflections on support as unconditional, a reflection of parental caring and teacher involvement; and second, time as a factor of support or a subset of support.

Time is vital to nurturing a relationship; the more generously quality time is given, the more positive the relationship. As mentioned earlier, this gift of time needs to be centered — never too widely distributed so as to be fragmented. Time given should be valued, never taken for granted, and never abruptly taken away.

Academically successful subjects Rosa, Eloy, Alex, and Maria experienced a strong sense of support from one or both of their parents, and likewise told stories of strong support from several of their teachers. Their stories will be related in this section. Drop outs Jose, Theo, Rene, and Stevin did not share that same unconditional support from their parent(s), nor from their teachers. Their stories follow.

*Support: Being There Unconditionally*

Rosa never knew her father. She regarded her three stepfathers as negative influences or models of what not to be. Rosa voiced strong respect and appreciation for her mother. Likewise, she felt her mother's reciprocal respect and admiration for what Rosa had accomplished through her hard work and perseverance. Rosa's mother would

often say, “You’re a real good student” (p. 22). Although Rosa’s mother was not always able to help her daughter with her homework because she has limited English skills, she offered her support in other ways. When she did not know the answer herself, she elicited the support of others who did. Referring to her mother, Rosa said: “My mom is the type, where, well, gosh darn it, if you did it, let’s find out if it’s right. And she’d call somebody and say ‘Is this right?’” (p. 24).

Rosa’s mother consistently expressed that she wants the best for her children. She prioritized school and making good grades. When Rosa started softball, her mother said, “Well, you know, you gotta keep your grades up” and so it taught me to juggle, to keep a schedule and do certain things at certain times” (p. 22). About her mother, she says she is “the number one influences most of my life, if not all” (p. 18). See Figure 4.2.

Rosa received the same kind of support in school. She talked about a Mr. [NAME], her music teacher in middle school. She studied with him for three years, became very close, and mentioned that he was going to her graduation. On entering high school, Rosa knew she wanted to take accelerated geometry and accelerated biology classes, but hesitated taking Advanced Placement (AP) English or AP-history because of her English speaking skills.

Rosa’s social studies teacher encouraged and pushed Rosa, who ultimately took all the harder classes and found herself very successful. She credits her teachers as showing her opportunities and offering her several options. “I was given the choice to go into the Center for International Studies at West (C.I.S.), Cole School of Arts, because I played the violin, and then also I.B. (International Baccalaureate) and computer magnet” (p. 18).

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	María	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>Elementary</b>	Self Teachers Mother Stepfather Peers (school) Peers (n) Grandmother	Stepfather Sister .	Mother Stepfather (Negative)	Teachers Peers (n) Stepfather Mother Brothers	Mother	Brother Cousin Grandmother Grandfather Mother	Teachers Brothers Cousin	Grandmother Mother Sister Counselors Priest Father Teacher Grandfather
<b>Middle School</b>	Self Teachers Mother Stepfather Grandmother (m) Peers (school) Peers (n) Counselors	Stepmother Peers Sister Teachers	Teachers Mother Peers (school) Religious	Peers (school) Stepfather Mother Teachers Brothers Grandmother	Mother Stepfather	Brother Cousin Grandmother Grandfather Mother	Peers (school) Teachers	Mothr Grandmother Sister Father Counselor Teachers Grandfathers Priest
<b>High School</b>	Self Teachers Counselors Stepfather Mother Grandmother (m) Peers (school) Peers (n)	Stepfather Peers (school) Sister Teacher Counselor	Teachers Counselors Religious Mother	Peers (school) Teachers Stepfather Mother Grandmother Brothers	Mother Father Stepfather Brothers	EGO School: Cousin Brother Grandmother Counselor Mother	Peers (school) Father Teachers Counselors	Grandmother Sister Counselors Teacher Priest Peers (school) Father Grandfather

**Figure 4.2. Persons of influence.**

Rosa finally chose the computer magnet program at George Washington High School. She stated that teachers and counselors at George Washington have been very helpful, giving her choices and opportunities, now, for college.

Rosa admitted that one of her biggest fears since she was young was not having the money for college. One of her elementary teachers, who, despite Rosa's young age, was extremely impressed with Rosa's tenacity, made her a promise. "Don't worry about it. You can always look me up and find me and I will make sure that you get to college. ...Oh, and if you need recommendations, give me a call and whatever you need either then, or in high school or in college, then look me up, I'll be around" (p. 21 ). Rosa offers some thoughtful advice for teachers committed to helping students:

Just support them. Support them in every way that you can. You know, you may not be able to give them the world on a silver platter. But you know, just let them know, opportunities that are available. As a teacher, you should be positive. Um. I mean, if you choose to teach, it's probably because you like it. If not, then it's probably something you shouldn't be doing. But I know a lot of teachers that I've come across are teachers who like to teach, who do it because they like kids, because they like to teach kids. And obviously they're not doing it for the money, because they don't make that much as it is. And it's got to be a passion. And if you inspire children, that's really going to, it's going to give you as a teacher the benefit of, I don't know, the happiness, the joy of seeing a child succeed. (Rosa, p. 16)

Rosa mentioned one other facet of her personal support system: her religious beliefs. "I think that if you don't believe in God, then you're standing by yourself, and that's really hard" (p. 18). But she adds that a lot of people think, that "if life wants me to be successful then God is going to throw success at me. But he's not. He's just going to

say 'Look, here's opportunities. Put effort into it and you shall be blessed, or be successful' (p. 16).

Eloy, also successful, talked about the daily routine during his school years:

It's basically like you get home; we do the chores, you do the chores, you do your homework, then he (stepdad, Paul) checks it, especially with the math homework. Dad checks the math homework. Whatever you get wrong, you have to do over again, until you get them all right. (Eloy, p. 3)

His parents formed an alliance with his teachers: "If we were messing up in middle school or doing anything wrong, our parents wanted teacher to contact them" (p. 4).

During his high school years, his stepdad worked as an assistant at Eloy's high school, getting to know Eloy's teachers quite well. As far as extra tutoring, both his mother and stepfather helped; "they were pretty smart, so we didn't really have a problem" (p. 5).

Eloy acknowledges his parents for their constant support during high school. His parents expected him to be above average, or at least try to be, and they were there for him. "I don't think, without them, I don't think I'd be where I am right now" (p. 20).

I think it all starts at home. I mean, with a lot of the friends that I have that are messed up, I sometimes think I might have been a dropout, but my parents really kicked my ass and told me "you have to do good in school;" you have to get your education and that stuff. I think that a lot of the stuff starts at home. There's a lot of people in north Denver whose family only speaks Spanish. Not that is a bad thing or nothing, but when they get their grades or if they get in trouble they can lie to the parents and tell them they are actually doing good or they just don't tell them those people are calling from and stuff like that. For me, if I were in that trouble my parents would kick my butt back into shape and that is what kept me from dropping out. (Eloy, p. 17)

Now that he is in college, Eloy still very much appreciates their support and respect.

They are trying to let me do it on my own because I want to do everything on my own, but they still, you know, my dad is “Do you need help with your math?” But not as bad as they were in high school, not bad, they are not as pushy as they were in high school. In high school it was like I had to do good, “You are going to graduate.” College is more like, they are really want me to do good, but they know that they can’t really force me to take classes, they can’t force me to pass class, they can’t check on my homework to make sure that I did it right and have me do it all over again. It is a little different. (Eloy, p. 17)

Eloy most appreciated teachers who challenged him. He described several happy teachers who liked teaching and liked seeing students learn.

Mr. [NAME], he did a lot of like little projects with us and little activities. That’s why I like that math class. It’s like, he does like, what was that little thing. He drew something up on the board. And we had to like cross each line once without crossing them twice. Try and figure that out. That kept us occupied for a whole month actually, until everybody finally gave up. (Eloy, p. 12)

For much of his middle and high school years, Eloy was involved in sports and considers the threat of “ineligibility” a motivating factor for keeping himself and friends in school.

Alex, also successful, felt he was a lot closer to his teachers. He noted that he saw his teachers more everyday, whereas as he got older he was at home less frequently. He feels he has developed close relationships with his teachers, who have been very helpful. Alex mentioned another adult, whom he regarded as a mentor. She was a member of his church and someone he could talk to about everything. Alex stated, “She is supportive in the way that she may not like my decisions, but she doesn’t try to contradict me, or try to take them away” (Alex, p. 6).

Maria, the fourth academically successful student, holds both her parents in very high regard. Repeatedly she comments on the importance her parents placed on being educated. Finishing high school was simply taken for granted. Her parents also encouraged her to read, to think, and to carry on intelligent conversations. She recalled the transition from 8th grade to high school when “my dad was making me read a bunch of books that summer. After awhile, I just wanted to read books” (p. 8). She also credits her father for her love of math, a major she is now pursuing in college.

I kept up with my math in middle school because of my dad. He would be asking me, what about this? And I would go make up a homework assignment on my own even if I didn't go to school that day because I had to show my dad something. So I became really good at math. (Maria, p. 21)

Jose, one of the students who dropped out of school, said his father works construction. He does not really see his father much, but they occasionally “crossing paths.” Jose remembers going to day care as a child and from there going to school in a van, while his younger brothers waited for him to return. For a while he lived with his grandparents, and a step-grandmother who he remembered as “pretty mean” (p. 7-9). Jose credits his mother as being very influential in his life. She was not so much an influence in keeping him in school as she was in supporting him when he chose to go back later to an alternative arts school.

She was just there for me. I wouldn't be here today without my mom. She gave me the confidence that I needed to audition....

Man, you know, I'm about to do this. This is an art school. I ain't never been to nothing before, never even been to an art contest before this school. I was nervous. But she's like, I don't know. She gave me the confidence to come in here and do what I had to do without thinking about all the negative stuff that

could happen. She just had me “Just go in there and just do what you got to do. Do your thing. You’re good, you know. They see what you can do, they’ll want you,” she told me. “So just go in there and do you thing. Don’t be nervous.” And I did it. (Jose, pp. 11-12)

Reflecting upon school experiences, Jose remembers one teacher who never criticized him but always made him think he could do better. Even if he thought it was his best, Mr. [NAME], encouraged him to do better, telling him, “You’re smart. You could do it” (p. 12). Most teachers, however, just let him slide; he doesn’t remember getting much individual attention before Mr. [NAME]. Jose said he never took homework home and teachers did not call to get him into a conference, which, upon reflection, he thinks might have gotten him on the “right track.” But “they didn’t. They just kinda let me get through” (p. 11), and eventually out.

Jose’s philosophy is never-the-less very positive. Although he believes in himself and his own intrinsic value, he acknowledges the value of support:

I’ll always be confident in myself. But I’ll always believe too that you can’t do it alone. Anybody can be rich, but they can’t do it overnight, and they can’t do it by themselves. You need people that support you. You need people that will help you. People that give you opportunities; people that believe in you, and all that. And that’s what this school [Denver School of the Arts] did. I mean, they didn’t know, I mean my grades weren’t the best, when I auditioned. I mean, I had bad grades, you seen it from my transcript. But they just believed in me and said, “We’ll give you a chance.” That’s important, you know. You do a lot better when you know that there’s people that think you can do something.... besides [just believing in] yourself. (Jose, p. 12)

Theo, also a school drop-out, describes his early years with a strong sense of neglect and loneliness, and loss. From kindergarten to fifth grade he had a difficult time with his parent’s divorcing. Then in 8th grade, at the end of the year, his mother died. He

notes that he “kinda fell apart....was all hurt inside and I didn’t know how to deal with it. So I mainly dropped out. And then I started messing-up, after that and I went to the detention center, and I got out. And I was out for awhile, and then I messed up, and went back [to detention]. Then I’m out now” (Theo, p. 3).

Theo lived with his grandmother for a while, then moved in with cousins, then to other cousins, and then to his sister’s home. He is currently living in a group home and visits his sister on weekends. Regarding getting support from teachers and probation officers, Theo suggests that “If you approach them in a good way, and let them know that you really want to make it, then they’ll really help you as much as they can. But if you just show them you want it, but don’t mean it, then they ain’t going to really try” (p. 25).

Rene, who also left school, noted that her dad left when she was a baby. She did talk to him at the age of 16 for a weekend, but not since. She has two brothers; all three siblings have different fathers. She commented that she never asked for her mother’s help. Her mother was always too busy or disinterested. “A lot of those things she was always real busy with. She was just always busy. She was always either out, grading papers, or doing something sometimes, or when she was in college doing work” (p. 11). There was very little support or praise. Often, Rene felt her mother simply did not care. As far as teacher’s support, Rene did not remember getting much individual attention. She was very quiet. “I just always kept to myself. I tried to” (p. 9). Rene later became very close to her older brother.

Stevin, also a high school dropout, said his parents divorced when he was four. His mother had visiting rights on weekends. He remembers living in a foster home, and commented that “both visiting and foster homes suck” (p. 23). He recounted getting head lice from sleeping in someone else’s bed. He said he did not get help with his homework from his parents “because they didn’t know anything” (p. 22). His stepmother does not speak English.

As far as school, Stevin admits to never doing homework and to getting into trouble at home. “I never really got along with homework. I’d leave it at school and then I’d get in trouble for not doing it. I’d get home and they’d be like “Do your homework!” “I don’t got any!” “How come you never got homework?” I don’t know” (p. 22). Stevin said the teachers did not call, but his parents would see his report card and knew something was “going on.” Still they did not investigate. Sometimes teachers would call, “mostly ‘cause I was getting in trouble” (p. 23), he said. Stevin added that he didn’t think his parents were very comfortable going to school. “The only one that really went was my dad, ‘cause my mom wasn’t around. And he didn’t like it cause it was always for trouble” (p. 23).

*Support: Giving Time, Generously*

All eight student repeatedly mentioned time given or time spent, when talking about support. They saw the gift of time as critical to nurturing a relationship. The more generously quality time was given, the more positive the relationship. The less time given,

the shakier the connection. Because these eight youngsters chose to emphasize time, it seemed important to include “giving time generously” under a separate heading.

Rosa, Alex, Eloy, and Maria (who were academically successful) repeatedly mentioned teachers offering extra time and tutoring after school and/or parents helping them with homework. Jose, Theo, Rene, and Stevin (who dropped out of school) were not given much time from parents or teachers.

Teachers are an important part of Rosa’s life; they took the time to listen to her needs (See Figure 4.2). Sometimes that meant giving extra help after school with a special project. Sometimes it meant tutoring, and sometimes it meant caring enough to be concerned about her home situation. Rosa stated, “Like one of my science teachers, was, he was really a nice person. He was a good teacher and he’s a person you could approach any time and, you know, offered help with like anything. You know, if you had problems at home or something, you know, and with teachers you can have like any kind of relationship” (p. 16). Rosa commented that teachers in middle school paid more attention to those who wanted to learn, whereas teachers in elementary school paid attention to those who needed more attention.

Rosa told several stories of teachers tutoring after school. Teachers helped her, even though they were not her teacher for a specific class, such as computer teacher who helped her with her calculus. In particular, she mentioned one computer teacher who helped her with a project using something she was not officially scheduled to learn until the following semester, but something she wanted very much to use for a social studies

presentation. “My teacher said that it might as well be a web page. I used *Author Ware* and *PhotoShop*. I did *PhotoShop*; I used the pictures and then I imported them into *Author*. I knew some of it but I learned a lot more with by doing this personal project.” (pp. 13-14) That teacher stayed with her five hours after school. “He stayed until 7:00; until I left, he stayed. He said, ‘I’m here until you’re here and I’m willing to be here until you’re here.’ He is a real committed teacher. He will help you” (p. 17). The length of time involved did not matter. For Rosa that generosity of time was typical of her teachers.

Alex, another academically successful student, remembered every one of his teachers by name. He described each, talked about their individual personalities and mannerisms, and their relationship to him or other students in the class. Teachers were placed very high on Alex’s lists of influential persons (See Figure 4.2). Commenting about his third grade teacher, Alex states that “she took her time with everyone. She was pretty patient. Whenever you needed help, she was willing to stay after school, if you were, or during recess time she would help you if you wanted her to. She was pretty much there whenever you needed her” (p. 27). Alex talked about a 2nd grade teacher, whom he actually got to know better in 5th grade while participating in a pen-pal assignment. “She got me involved and she sent me a lot of books. She got me Jack London’s *Cry of the Wolf*” (p. 27). Another teacher, who was a sponsor of the school’s middle school science team and Alex’s classroom teacher for two years, helped his students place second in a state-wide competition. This was one of the many teachers that Alex continually referred to as an individuals that he “got to know pretty well.”

When questioned if he thought that his teachers reacted differently to boys or girls, Alex said he did not think that sex was an issue, but rather, who behaved the best. Still Alex and Rosa, who attended some of the same elementary schools, held opposing perspectives. Alex literally contradicts comments by Rosa in terms of teacher attention on the elementary versus middle school levels. Alex felt that the better behaved a youngster was in elementary school, the more attention he or she received. Whereas, in middle school if a student was well-behaved, the teachers left that individual alone so that they had time “to deal with the problems of the other kids” (p. 32). In high school they share similar views. Teachers responded to both Alex and Rosa by regularly offering extra time and attention.

Eloy, also academically successful, shares Alex’s feelings about teachers’ reactions to boys versus girls in terms of who received the most time and attention:

In middle school most of my friends [were]out of control, so it did seem like...the teachers were...uh you know, more helpful toward the girls, but they had a reason to be because the guys were kinda jerks and assholes. Actually in middle school, it wasn’t the actual school.... it was my friends that made me want to go. I was kinda at the age that I wanted to fool around a lot, get in trouble, and stuff like that. (Eloy, p. 15)

He admitted that teacher attention in many of his classes was limited, primarily because of class sizes, sometimes with 30 to 35 students. He said that he felt “kinda jealous” of an older brother who went to a Catholic school, where “it seemed like they put more individual attention on students” (p. 6). But Eloy’s parents always gave him attention and time. His stepdad made sure his homework was checked, corrected, and all questions answered. “Back at that time you don’t appreciate it ‘cause you’re a kid and

want to go out and play or something, but I guess it was all right” (p.6), Eloy said smiling. His stepdad is a very special person in his life, one that Eloy tries to emulate.

Maria, who was also academically successful, remembers middle school as a time when teachers “didn’t really pay much attention to you” (p. 4). She told me that she did not work much in middle school, came late, ditched a lot, and managed to get away with it. Her tactic was to write a note excusing herself and signing a parent’s name. The teachers did not pursue Maria’s absence. However, two weeks later her parents discovered the situation, and it ended immediately. Maria said her parents were always “there.” If she missed school, she did not miss doing her homework. “I kept up with my math in middle school because of my dad. He would be asking me, what about this? I would go make up a homework assignment on my own even if I didn’t go to school that day because I had to show my dad something” (p. 15).

Now that she is in college, Maria shares many positive stories of teachers who care and spend a great deal of extra time and energy with their students. She mentioned study groups that her math teacher held before tests. Usually, the teacher held two study groups lasting up to three hours each. “He explained things very well and if someone didn’t understand it, he would go back and explain it again” (p. 14). Maria thought he was “an excellent teacher. He really gives of himself. He made sure that he was there for the students whenever they need him” (p. 15).

Jose, Theo, Stevin, and Rene (who dropped out of school) consistently told stories of time they did not share with parents or teachers. They each remembered elementary

teachers who gave them time, but that changed with age. Parents, as mentioned earlier, seemed to have very little time to share.

Rene remembers middle school as a time when “there’s a lot more students, so you don’t really get to know teachers that well”(p. 11). She did say some of her teachers stayed after school, but she usually did not. In high school Rene felt even less connected, and she ditched frequently. Teachers and/or counselors never called her home, and never took the time to ask her personally what was happening in her life. They did not seem to care. Rene was not close enough to teachers to share her problems (See Figure 4.2).

Cultivating that type of relationship takes time and trust. It was missing from Rene’s school experiences. For Rene to open up would have required someone very special. “Yeah. It would have to have been someone I liked. ’Cause if it wasn’t somebody I liked, I probably would have given an attitude. They couldn’t [help]. After I dropped out, I didn’t talk to anybody (p. 21-22).

It probably hit me that I’m having to grow up. I’m fighting with my older brother, ‘cause I was messing up a lot. My mom and my grandma were having problems at the time because my brother didn’t really have anyone else to really take care of him and so I thought that was my responsibility. So it was stuff at home. (Rene, p. 21)

“That’s when I dropped out, I think, ‘cause of the time to watch him. And I just never went back” (p. 21). She said she took care of her brother all day. “It was hard. He was still young. So I had to get him ready and I think, by that time he might have been getting ready to go to school, pre-school. But he was still real young, so I had to watch him. That was pretty much my day” (p. 22). Her mother never seemed to get upset; she

remained indifferent to Rene. “My mom was just like ‘whatever.’ She never really cared what I did. If I dropped out, ‘fine. If not fine’” (See Figure 4.2). Her aunt, however, responded, and actually “got mad.” Still there was nothing she could really do, according to Rene, but

that showed me at least she cared somewhat. Whereas my mom was like “alright.” If I told her I went out drinking again. Ha. She’s like “Okay.” She never said “No, don’t do that, or” you know, like most parents are like yelling at you, hounding you. She’s like “alright.” Yeah, it was like “okay.” So I felt it was okay to do it, that there was nothing wrong with doing it. (pp. 21-22)

Rene sorely felt her mother’s neglect. During the last interview, when asked if there were any characteristics of her mother that she would not try to imitate, Rene said “never having the time to enjoy quality time with my children” (Rene, p. 4). For Rene, family remained extremely important. Giving quality time to each other was essential. Rene talked about the fact that in the Mexican culture it was more important to take care of family than to go to school — that taking care of family superceded anything else. And she felt that many students held that perspective, feeling school was not as important as family responsibilities.

### *Summary of Support*

The four young adults who were successful in school knew that they could depend on the unconditional support of their parents and/or teachers. Sometimes it was both mother and stepfather, sometimes a single mother, sometimes a teacher who listened and shared his or her time consistently. All four youngsters were valued, encouraged, and

nurtured. Trust and respect were reciprocated between adults and students. All four completed high school, and are continuing their education.

The four young adults who dropped out of school felt neglected. All eight students felt the disruption of divorce (See Figure 3.1), but the influence was felt more strongly in the four students who dropped out of school, because the remaining single parents were too busy, too indifferent, or died. The quality time needed to develop relationships was fragmented or abruptly taken away in the cases of the four students who dropped out. Stepparents did not bond with these youngsters, nor did the teachers make lasting connections with them. Consistency and stability were lacking for the four students who dropped out. They questioned their own value. Three of the four found themselves in trouble, either incarcerated or pregnant. Support from parents and/or teachers, or the lack of that support, did make a difference.

### **Listening**

Listening means conferring full attention on something, being genuinely attentive in ways that require all one's resources of intellect, feeling, and moral sensitivity. One becomes truly open and actually shares another's experience of reality. One knows another, his or her essence. This knowledge is essential to listening well. Mayeroff (1957) lists *knowing* as one of his essential attributes of caring. "I must understand the other's need and I must be able to respond properly to them. To care for someone, I must *know* many things" (p. 19), including another's "powers and limitations." This *knowing* provides

an accurate assessment, a discerning sensitivity to another's needs and potential.

Sometimes this *knowing* is implicit or intuitive, and cannot be articulated. Sometimes knowledge is a simple awareness and interest in what another individual finds interesting. Genuine listening validates another's being.

Another attribute on Mayeroff's list that fits well into the topic of listening is patience. "Patience is not waiting passively for something to happen, but is a kind of participation with the other in which we give fully of ourselves" (p. 24). It enables "the other to grow in its own time and in its own way" (p. 23).

Throughout the literature, several authors (Noddings, 1984, Deiro, 1996, Lightfoot, 1983) make references to sensitive, empathetic exchanges that promote easy rapport. Lightfoot (1983) defines empathy as "the ability to place oneself in another's position and vicariously experience what he is feeling and thinking" (p. 345). She considers this empathetic stance... "a crucial ingredient of successful interactions between teachers and students" (p. 345), one that depends on the environment of the school.

Empathy is not adversarial; it does not accentuate distinctions of power; and it seems to be an expression of fearlessness. By empathy I do not mean something sentimental and soft. As a matter of fact, the empathetic regard of students is often communicated through tough teacher criticism, admonitions, and even punishment. Teacher fearlessness not only comes from deep understanding of students, it also derives from an institutional authority that support their individual encounters with students. (Lightfoot, p. 345).

Being able to hear the adolescent's perspective comes first; being able to relate and respond honestly to that adolescent perspective creates a connection. Being able to listen well nurtures and promotes growth.

The following section summarizes comments made by the eight students in regard to listening, specifically, whether they felt adults listened to them. At times, the students who were successful did not feel that their teachers listened. At times, the students who dropped out fondly described teachers who took the time to be with them. But, overwhelmingly, the successful students told many more stories of teachers who chose to listen, who listened best when their students needed them most.

The stories of the students who dropped out of school centered on adults who did not listen carefully, if at all, and on adults they did not trust completely. In the cases of the four academically successful students, parents usually listened and responded. For the other four students who dropped out of school, conversations with a parent(s) were a rare event (See Figure 4.3). This section begins with a discussion of Alex's, Eloy's, Maria's, and Rosa's conversations; these four students have been successful academically.

**“How often do you have conversations with your parents and/or stepparents?”**

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Maria	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
about recent news events?	seldom	couple times a month	daily	daily/weekly	weekly	weekly	seldom	never
sports events?	seldom	weekly	weekly	weekly	seldom	seldom	seldom	never
discussion of politics?	seldom	once-a-month	seldom	once-a-month	weekly	never	never	never
important issues that concern you personally? (This question changed depending upon when asked.)	seldom	more lately	daily	weekly	daily now	weekly now	seldom	weekly now

**Figure 4.3. Conversations with parents and/or stepparents.**

*Listening: Conversations with Parents*

Alex admires his stepfather's patience and his ability to "just sit there and listen" (Alex, p. 10). Alex also respects the way he and his brother and sisters were raised by his mother and stepfather. "I like the fact that they're not pushy, you know. They let me solve my own problems. They don't interfere...they interfere only when they deem it necessary. They don't jump in right away and try to make everything better for me. I like that" (p. 10). Alex talks about his parent's willingness to take "the time to actually sit down and explain something....even though it's hard for them, or it's something they don't really want to talk about, but they do it anyway" (p. 10). I asked what, specifically, he might be referring to. Alex answered:

Well, when I asked them about my biological father, you know. She didn't have to tell me anything, but she sat down and she explained everything to me. I like them when they're honest. I don't like being lied to. I admire that. I like their honesty. (Alex, p. 10).

Still, Alex noted that he much preferred to have conversations with his best friend. As far as family, he stated, "I trust them with a lot of things, but I can pretty much handle my own problems, so I just go to them when I can't really figure it out. But it's nice to have somebody that I can talk to about anything at anytime. So I would rather do it [talk] with somebody my own age."(Alex, FI, p. 1).

Eloy stated that he talked with both parents about international events. In high school he regularly talked about sports with his dad. Now in college, he finds himself

going to school or working constantly, with little time left over, and yet he feels he has so much more to talk with his parents about than when he was younger.

Maria said while she was in high school, she talked with her stepdad daily about recent news and sports, and homework. “We would ask him one simple question and it would turn into answering that question, having us answer the question, and then us answering three questions that related to it” (p. 22). Maria always talked with her mother about personal concerns; she now shares such thoughts with her stepdad, too. “It’s changed quite a bit since high school. I still talked to my mom about important issues and I think I always will for the rest of my life, but I also let my [stepdad] in, too” (Maria, FI, p. 1).

Rosa’s interviews are filled with stories about her interaction with her mother. These stories began with “Honey, what’s wrong?” and continued with Rosa describing the situation in depth, after which her mother responded with words of wisdom and empathy.

Stories from the four students who dropped out of school are markedly different.

Rene felt her mother never really cared what she did. “My grandma’s more the person I talk to. But, my grandpa, if I have a problem, I go to him” (Rene, FI, p. 13). Jose said, “Nobody’s been really involved but me, and that’s the way it’s been since, you know, I started, because that’s the way I wanted it to be” (Jose, FI, p. 5). “My mom used to drink and she quit drinking, and so did my dad...ever since then, me and him, we’ve been getting along a lot better since I talked to you last time” (p. 5). Stevin said, “I don’t talk to

my parents that much” (p. 5). “My pop is always working and I didn’t really live with my mom that much” (p. 13).

Theo, who is currently living in a group home, does not see his dad very often. Before Theo stopped going to school, he stopped listening. His mother was upset, “real upset. She was upset about wanting me to do better, but I wasn’t listening, so she really couldn’t say nothing, so she just basically told me ‘You do what you want. If you’re going to mess up, you’re going to mess-up. I can’t go with you and hold your hand in class.’” At this point Theo had chosen to listen to his peers.

*Listening: Teachers Being Cognizant of Students’ Needs*

Rene said her mother never read stories to her, nor did her teachers. But Rene read one book, *I Won’t Let Them Hurt You*, that affected her. The father was abusive in the story, but no one suspected him. The story was filled with duplicity. “It brings out people that you would never think that would do it. But yet, in your eyes you knew they did. But you don’t want to say nothin ‘till you actually have evidence” (p. 9). Much later, in the last interview, Rene states, “As for being abused, some people are scared to talk about it, but they don’t think anyone else does. They might though. Sometimes it’s verbally, mentally, physically, so. Me, I’ve seen all three of them. It’s not something nice, but sometimes you’ve got to go for it; it makes you a stronger person” (Final Interview, Rene, p. 13).

For a school newspaper, Rene wrote about students being in jail, using drugs, getting drunk, being in gangs, and being abused. “I mean I’ve seen all five of those. It

hurts to see them, especially in your own family. But it makes you, yourself, a stronger person by seeing them. You don't want to be nothing like that" (p. 13). Rene formed a group of students from EGOS who seriously examine these issues and currently work with middle school students. Rene's group makes itself visible and available to middle school students, talking about troublesome issues and offering a safe forum to share.

Her advice to adults who wish to help students is: listen, listen with full attention. As Mayeroff suggests: "understand the other's need," "*know* many things," and "respond properly to them" (p. 19).

Probably, sometimes the best thing to do is just listen and try to help them out. Sometimes it might be financial, I mean if it's helping them get a job that they're going to keep. 'Cause you can't just get them a job; 'cause they won't like it. So sometimes getting them a job that they might like and plan on keeping. If they have a kid, then they understand that they prefer to take other classes and attend school and not tend to drop out. (FI, Rene, p. 13)

Yet, Rene is a realist. She knows that sometimes students do not listen. Still she suspects that if the students had connections, family or someone to care, someone that listened to their needs, it might be different. She says rather poignantly: "Sometimes you can't help that. You honestly can't. I mean you try telling them, and it's like, 'I just want to do this.' 'Cause they just keep doing it and doing it. Then one day they call you and tell you that they died." She continues: "There's not a lot, you can tell them: 'Just kinda slow down; watch what you're doing.' But if they don't have a family, or anybody that cares about them, they don't see the need" (p. 15).

Stevin says he preferred Hill Middle School than one he later attended, primarily because teachers there talked with him. "They like, they talked to people and they talk to

you, instead of like, just do your work and leave me alone, stuff like that . . . Yeah, they'd come by you and talk to you. See what's up. Ask you how you're doing and stuff like that" (p. 38). Stevin said he felt pretty comfortable talking to the teachers at Hill. But did he feel free to go to a teacher and talk to them about any problems? No. He still felt he needed to keep his own confidences, "...depending on what kind of problem it was" (p. 19-21). In high school, he remembers teachers oblivious to their students. Stevin referred to them as "lazy." "There's teachers who just sit at their desks and don't do nothing. They don't even associate with the students or anything" (p. 38). What Stevin remembers most about school is that he was always in trouble. The adults did not listen to his side of the story, and ultimately it did not matter. His family moved. He changed schools and/or districts. He dropped in and out.

I didn't really drop out. It's more like getting kicked out, but I was already in high school. I was doing great until, well, not really good. I always got in trouble, but I was still going. (p. 28)

I got suspended like the first day of school [at Kennedy], I think it was, 'cause some guys were trying to fight and the securities come and we all left. And like there's more of them, so they blamed it on me, so I got in trouble and then after that we moved. (p. 28)

I can tell people, but, nothing's gonna really happen about it. It doesn't really matter anyway 'cause we moved. It's like, who cares? (p. 29).

Maria reflected on a science teacher from middle school who had the class write a short-story. She still remembers his positive comments on the back of her paper. After that affirmation, she started writing poetry. She told a parallel story of a college English teacher who at first rejected her work, adding several comments and corrections, which

Maria changed and returned. Very quickly, Maria learned that it was not enough to simply make the teacher's corrections; she needed to expand and develop her ideas. Eventually, Maria considered the teacher one of her better teachers because she took the time to interact with Maria. She wrote suggestions (Maria labels as "good insights") on her essays, and when Maria improved, she acknowledged her efforts. "She would compliment me on the things that I really did try on" (p. 12). The teacher took the time to "know" and respond to her student's needs.

Students recall teachers who listen. Alex remembers his first grade teacher. "She was always funny and she always had something to say. And she was always, I guess she was always willing to listen, so it was fun talking to her. And she'd play around. I guess she just made it a little more interesting to be in school" (p. 16). Those who do not choose to listen frustrate Alex, greatly. In part, he feels that they do not listen because they want attention directed toward themselves, personally, and listening is a shared experience. Alex equates listening with hearing, and hearing, to Alex, implies open-mindedness, a trait he admires most. An open-minded person, by his definition, listens to opposing viewpoints and appreciates new ways of doing things. For the most part, his teachers fit his definition, and when they did not he adjusted, learning from the experience.

In middle school, Eloy felt "some teachers didn't really care . . . and there were only a couple of teachers I felt like I could talk to," (p. 4) until high school, when the situations, or his maturity, as he describes it, changed. "I took a whole bunch of social studies classes then, Medieval. I took all of the X-track classes, all of them, that you

could. I took more just history classes. I loved history and social studies. I don't know if I took all of those social studies classes because I liked social studies or because I liked the teachers" (p. 21).

Eloy mentions science, math, and English teachers who engaged in conversations about ideas, concerns, and life in general. One of his best teachers "made it kind of fun to go to school. There were always new activities. She treated us more like adults than other teachers. She gave us more respect" (p. 7). When asked, "What did she do that made you feel like she was treating you more like an adult?" Eloy responded, "She listened and talked to us. She wouldn't like . . . all of the other teachers assumed things because we were mess-ups and stuff. She just listened to everybody, [as] a judge, [in] a fair trial basically. She was cool. We could always talk to her" (p. 7).

Rosa played the violin and was particularly attuned to sounds from a melodious voice. She mentioned both social studies teachers and science teachers who captivated her attention because of their voices.

There was this one teacher, Mrs. [NAME], and she was a science teacher and she was just great. She had this voice, you know, she was like a storyteller and she would, you know, tell and there was this guy Newton and he was sitting in the yard, or something, you know, and you just, and she like would tell the stories and it was just a great class to be in. You know, I really loved her class. (Rosa, p. 15)

Basically Rosa enjoyed most of her teachers and seemed to relate well to them. Rosa admits that she does love to talk, and because of her natural vivacious tendencies and upbeat attitude, she is constantly meeting new people. She considers that "seizing opportunities." She has shadowed doctors and other medical professionals (persons she

met through her mom's work) to learn more about the medical fields, and she has her current job because of her friendliness. Rosa has an easy, spontaneous rapport with people.

The "Talking Book Club" I got that job by just being a people person, talking to people. The manager at "Talking Book Club," I gave her tour for George [Washington HS], because her son is going into the computer magnet. And all of the sudden, she sees me working at McDonald's and she says, No, you're coming with me and she drags me off. (Rosa, FI, p. 6).

Jose enjoyed Mr. [NAME], a science teacher, because around him "you could talk about, like, about anything. You know, it could be social problems, just anything — current events. You know, he could give you his opinion and I could give him mine and that's all it would be, it wouldn't be I get mad at him 'cause he don't agree with me. We could talk like that. Sometimes we'd have class discussions and everyone would get along" (p. 14).

Jose added these comments about a high school science teacher at an alternative school: ".....she listens to us. She asks about like, what's going on with the students, like, current events and social things and stuff like that. She listens to us when we have class conversations" (p. 19).

Finding such teachers were rare for Jose. Most teachers did not get very close to Jose, and Jose did not feel he could talk with them. His typical comments were, "They didn't give me a chance" (p. 13). Jose talked about teachers who "just gave you the work and didn't teach you, you know, they just teach the class and then a lot of teachers that I

think they're just, they're just concerned about getting paid and not doing their job. Well, they do their job but, not effectively" (p. 17).

It was like an assembly line type thing. They just taught the class, you know. And when they get a new class and taught it they didn't always take time to like explain stuff to the students that wasn't getting it and, you know, keep the class at an even pace. They, some people fell back and some people they, they just caught on to it and they're like whatever the class was about they just got with it and started doing it, but some kids fell behind and teachers just kept on. (p. 20)

Part of the problem, Jose thought, was the class size. "I think when there's a lot of kids, that it's too hard for a teacher to listen to everybody all at once" (p. 15). Part of the problem, Jose knew, was that his individuality was ignored. His suggestion: "look at each student, like, as one person, 'cause nobody is the same, nobody. Teachers, they just try to teach every student the exact same way and it don't work" (p. 25).

### *Listening: Teacher Attitude*

The attitudes of their teachers concerned the other seven students, too. For them, listening to a teacher meant listening to voice and body language, and attitude in general. Sometimes they found negative teachers overwhelming, especially in middle school. It appears that the teachers described below do not attempt to meet their students' needs; they have not yet discovered their own.

Jose attempted to explain himself better by describing problematic situations in terms of teachers' bad attitudes.

Because teachers would like, when they have a bad attitude, then it messes up everything, I mean for real, 'cause, you try to talk to 'em and then they get

smart with you and then you're mad at them, you know, and they're, they probably don't even realize that they're getting smart with you, but they do and it gets you mad and then they try to come up and talk to you like nothing happened then you're like, ugh! Get away from me, you know, 'cause they just had an attitude with you. (p. 14)

It could be anything. Just, anything at all. You know, you ask the teacher for help and they just get an attitude. You know, you ask them a question, a serious question, and they think you're being smart, you know, and try to yell at you, you're like, "man, I was asking you a real question" and stuff like that. It could be anything. Just, anything at all. You know, you ask the teacher for help and they just get an attitude. (p. 15)

Rosa told a story that occurred during middle school. Students rallied together to ask a very negative teacher, who was always upset and continually had bad days, to please change. He eventually moved to another state and quit teaching. Both Rosa and Alex reflect on instructors' negative attitudes and their impact on students:

I think attitude has a lot to do. If you're the kind of teacher that just that's there, you know, is there because you have to be there, not because you want to be there, it makes a real difference. It's not . . . I've, I've, had so many teachers in my educational experiences, I mean I've had some of those and I've had teachers who just go in and they hate kids and they and they're just there because, you know, that's what their stuff is. They say "I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but now I don't" and so they're only doing it 'cause they want to. I mean, their attitude just by looking at them and seeing what they look like, it just gives these negative vibes, it sends out negative vibes, and so then the students get all, you know, "I don't want to work hard" or "Why should I be positive and the teacher is negative" and they get like the same attitude as the teacher. (Rosa, p. 14)

Uh huh. You can, I mean, I think kids are so, like, when you're down, you can easily pick up on it. I know when I was, I could always like, either, you know, always knew when someone was mad or when they were okay or when they were not approachable and with teachers, you know, if the students know, the kids know. I mean, my sister comes home and tells me, you know, "help me with this" and I said and the teacher will write "This is class work she didn't finish" and, you know, I'll help her and I said, "Why don't you get help from her?" and she says, "She doesn't like me and she's mean to me and she

doesn't like me," and so I know you can always tell, you can tell. Kids know when the adult is being nice and when they are being mean and so. (Rosa, p. 14)

I think the attitude they have toward what they're doing is, is important. Because I've had some teachers that have had some pretty bad attitudes to what they're doing and it affects you a lot because then you, well, I've gotten the attitude where if they don't care, why should I? So, I've had to push myself not to think that way and keep going, just do what I can and fill in the gaps whenever I can. (Alex, p. 18)

For Alex "bad attitudes" occurred more often in middle school, and much less in high school. Alex describes one of his favorite high school teachers as having "a big, little kid attitude" (p. 17) . . . he's willing to teach and he's also willing to make it interesting so that people will listen, and just the way he describes, his attitude toward what he's doing, just makes it a lot easier to listen and pay attention and try to learn" (p. 17-18).

Rene adds: " I had teachers at West that were just like 'if you don't want to be here. Get out!' So I'd just get up and walk out. I was just like, it didn't matter to me. I mean, either they're sitting there yelling at you or putting you down, so" (p. 18). She further stated that if you are not involved with sports or you are not a cheerleader, then teachers "don't want you. They don't make connections with you" (p. 19).

The security guards also showed favoritism: "If you're, like I said, on extra activities, they let you go. If you're off campus, and there is no off-campus [officially], and if you're involved in something like that, they let you go. If you're a shooter, they let you go" (p. 19). That was Rene's perception of West: a tough school, where teachers did not really care, where she was considered an outsider, assumed to be part of a gang, and treated warily.

That's how it is at West, or at least when I went, that's how it was. 'Cause I mean you could see like maybe all the "cholos," or all the gangs, you know, maybe the people involved in the gangs. They tried to not fight in front of anybody else, but they fought a lot, though. You were always being accused of doing something...

Attitudes are not limited to teachers, according to Theo. Speaking of his dad, Theo said, "Yeah. I see him. We just..." "I was with him the last time in about, maybe '91" (p.6).

The reason why I say that I'd rather see people learn at a young age, is because how my dad is. He's a good guy and everything. He's a security guard, and quit doing the bad things he's done. It's just that he has a bad attitude, a bad way to deal with problems. Just the way he talks to people... He rather just like...He tries to do good, when he tries to do good, he does good. But when he comes at you, he comes at you way wrong. Like I don't want to put up with you. I don't want to have nothing to do with you. And then later on, down the road, he thinks about it and regrets it. And comes back, and he just does it so often, that you're just fed up with it. But its....I don't know, I don't hold that against him, 'cause he is my Dad. Ain't nobody else out there going to be like him, even though he don't do things he should. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. So...

That's why you have to respect him as your dad, 'cause he's your dad. No matter if he's always angry at you or whatever.

*Listening: Making Connections with Hispanic Teachers*

Stevin said he was not close to any of his counselors at Hill, but did comment on one individual, whom he enjoyed talking with because that teacher could speak both English and Spanish. "He pretty much got along with all the kids, 'cause he's Hispanic, too" (p. 21). Rene had maybe two Chicano teachers prior to high school. She talked about a Mr. XXX, a Hispanic teacher, saying "it seemed like you could talk to him about anything and he'd be understanding" (p. 13). Sometimes she felt it did make a difference if

the teachers were Chicano. "Some times you feel, like, they know where you are coming from . . . So like if you're an inner city kid, and you're raised with one parent, and sometimes that parent may be on welfare or you know, just are struggling, they can kind of relate, because maybe they've been in that situation before" (p. 13). A "Mexican" teacher she met at West High School seemed to know his students well. He listened to them, supported them, and expected the best from them.

That's what I liked about him. He always kept you going. If he knew you were slacking off, he kinda got on you. So. I mean, he did it in a positive way, not where "If you didn't want to be here, get out." He kinda was like, "You're going to stay in here. You ain't getting off that easy." That's what I liked about him. (p. 18)

Jose talked about a middle school Chicano teacher who motivated him. "He was sitting there telling me 'se su puedo: yeah, you can do this.' He used to always say that. I could talk, *talk*, to him about everything. He'd know where I was coming from, man" (p. 22).

In contrast an Anglo social studies teacher frustrated him. When talking about Latino issues, she would look directly at Jose. When describing the Harlem Renaissance, she would look seriously at the one Black student in class. "Just exactly at him, you know, like she's teaching it to him; like he don't know it or something. That ain't right" (p. 22). Asked if that made him feel awkward, Jose replies, "Yeah. It makes me feel weird and like she asks us like, like we're supposed to have an expert opinion on what happened 50 years ago or something, you know" (p. 22). During the last interview with Jose, he reflected on

the advantages of having more Hispanic teachers, seeing them as individuals whose opinions students would value.

I think that if I had an Hispanic teacher that I could talk to, I could give him my input and he could tell me what he thinks. It's like two sides of a fence on the same farm. You know what I mean? I'm an Hispanic student; he's an Hispanic teacher. If I could talk to him, you know, see what's going on, on the other side that would make me...someone that you could listen to and know that this guys opinion means something, cause he's done something. He just ain't no uncle, or nobody telling you something. He's somebody that has clout. (Jose, FI, p. 14).

### Summary

All eight students recognized the importance of having someone in their lives to listen to them. All shared both positive and negative experiences. Still, the scale was tipped. The four students who were successful in school could regularly count on parents to listen to them. The four students who dropped out did not have close, empathic relationships with parents who listened. Rene seldom talked with her mother; Stevin seldom talked with his father. Theo used the adverb "never" in terms of conversations with his dad, whom he felt was often angry. Jose's conversations with his parents were beginning to change by his last interview; originally he felt much closer to his peers.

Experiences with teachers were varied. Rosa was extremely positive; Maria, Alex and Eloy told stories of teachers who listened and related with their students. In contrast, Rene and Stevin both felt they were *kicked-out* of school by teachers or administrators who did not care to listen. Jose, Rene, and Stevin found alternative-school teachers much

more ready to care about them. They also found a natural link between Hispanic students and Hispanic teachers, both as mentors and as role models.

### **High Expectations**

Effective school literature stresses the importance of high expectations. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Knapp and Shield (1990) studied children of poverty and questioned whether these children are taught less than they are capable of learning. McCollum (1990) observed that classrooms serving disadvantaged students focused less on academic curriculum. If educational opportunities are limited for young adults, their options for academic success are likewise restricted. But, available options without incentives and viable support structures are ineffectual. Support is critical. If anything, disadvantaged students may need more back-up assistance (i.e. individualized tutoring, bilingual programs). Students become disengaged if they continually feel confused or lost.

While high expectations encourage students to excel, realistic aspirations and attainable goals promote their success. Too often, society confuses excellence with perfectionism. The latter leads to setting unrealistically high goals with flawless results. The former strives toward systematic accomplishments, challenges that can be met, and high quality ambitions grounded on sturdy foundations. High self-esteem and self-motivation are promulgated when students reach their goals. "Absolute standards of excellence are not necessary, but all students should be encouraged to strive for academic excellence" (Valdivieso and Nicolau, 1994, p. 109).

“The motivation of students, themselves, is critical to the educational process” (Hanushek, 1994, p. 110). High expectations must be intrinsic to the student. While parents and teachers are certainly influential, implanting and germinating the desire to learn, the student is ultimately responsible for his or her own academic success. Alex and Rosa, who were both academically successful, accepted this fact when they were still in elementary school. They matched their effort with their ambition to be successful. Eloy and Maria, also successful students, came to believe it during high school, and are now both applying their best energy and effort to college demands. “To tell you the truth, I mean...I know the only reason I got through [high school] was ‘cause I had my parents pushing me. Then in the end I wanted to” (Eloy, FI, p. 22).

Montgomery and Rossi (1994) state that “past returns on educational investments have a cumulative impact on a student’s ability and desire to achieve academic success and to persist in school” (p. 13). Sometimes a strong sense of self is sufficient reward. Sometimes learning for the sake of learning, or learning skills to pursue a career, is enough. Sometimes external recognition (i.e., teacher praise, report cards, honor rolls, team trophies, group acceptance) provide sufficient interest to continue investing in the educational account. But if the returns are negligible or the incentives not valued, the account often goes bankrupt. If the student does not truly believe his or her efforts count, the task at hand seems futile. Dropping out becomes a logical recourse. Eloy offered some reasons why his friends dropped out of school.

Some kids just don’t, some people just don’t have the ability to retain knowledge or, you know, they’re just not good at school. Some people aren’t.

But, the kids who don't, you know, there's some kids who don't have ability but, they're like, they try really hard so they do get by. But then there's some kids who don't really have that much ability and they really don't care so they don't put the effort in. They just, you know, a lot of kids just don't care about school. (Eloy, FI, p. 20).

When I asked, "Why do you think they don't care?" Eloy replied:

'Cause a lot of people, especially at this age, they get like, it's easy to get jobs that pay, like you know, eight, nine bucks an hour, maybe construction or doing something else. A lot of, you know, at the time, it's a lot of money for a kid but, you know. So they think that they can, you know, they don't really need, like school's biggest argument is like, to stay in school, get a better education, to have a better job. Most kids don't see it that way cause, like, you know. If I can get a job for like eight dollars an hour starting off right now, I could just get raises and I can live off of that. And a lot of my friends think like that too. They don't want to go to school because they'd rather work. Some kids don't go to school cause they have to work. (Eloy, FI, p. 20).

Stevin's comments about why kids leave school were similar to Eloy's:

I think, 'cause um, they see that they ain't getting no where. And even if you got a diploma now a days, you still ain't going very far. You can still get that same job, it might just be a little easier for you to get it, but you can still get it if you don't got your diploma. Most people, well, I think Hispanics and stuff, they don't, a lot of them don't plan on going to college. They're just like, I don't know, just drop out like well, that school wasn't getting me no where and now I need money, so I'm gonna go work. (Stevin, p. 34).

Perhaps, Eloy's and Stevin's friends were not given the support they needed to be successful at school. Perhaps adults, teachers, parents, or mentors did not instill the value of an education for their future job possibilities versus immediate financial gratification of a current job. An immediate job improves self esteem, whereas staying in a failing school situation only erodes it. Without support or scaffolding, efforts can fail, and a student become disillusioned. However, with patience and persistence, effort succeeds in creating

an appropriate amount of ability. Success breeds more success and students then have a reason to stay in school.

Like Eloy's friends, Stevin, Rene, Jose, and Theo all chose to drop out of school for a time. While both groups (the four that stayed in school and the four that dropped out) share some attitudes and reactions, they display definite differences in their perceptions of (1) their own personal motivation and effort, (2) high expectations with viable support structures (from peers, parents and teachers), (3) cumulative impact of recognition or lack of recognition, and (4) realistic aspirations and attainable goals.

#### *Personal Motivation and Effort*

Stevin remembered getting a lot of Ds. As long as he was passing, the grades did not really matter. While his teachers would tell him, "I know you can do better than that," (p. 33) and reassure him that he was smart, Stevin believed that grades did not reflect his knowledge. "So, well, yeah, I can probably do better but, I'm not. Um, I don't know. Lazy, I guess. I don't know" (p. 33). "You know, you know you can get an A but you're not doing it. You'd rather slack off and get a C or a D or an F or something" (p. 25).

All eight students were asked if earning a D grade was good enough? Only Stevin answered "yes." (See figure 4.5). Stevin, Jose, and Eloy all thought a C grade was adequate. "Yeah, I mean, I didn't always try as hard as I could've in high school. And still, I mean, I could, you know, I go to a course, get a B or a C and just do, you know, I can

do all the work in half the time, you know, it's easy. High school work was more, high school seemed to me more like busy work than really thinking" (Eloy, FI, p. 6).

Three students, Maria, Rene, and Theo, thought grades were a reflection of knowledge. Rosa, who was academically successful, differentiated between "how much you've learned and how well you learned it in the class" (Rosa, FI, p. 5). Theo, who dropped out, acknowledged his poor transcripts were a result of his poor attendance. "I didn't really have a choice of a better grade because I was hardly going to school" (Theo, FI, p. 2). Rene found herself in a similar situation or poor attendance. Maria, who was good at math, acknowledged that she put effort into solving math problems. "The amount of effort that people put into their studies has a lot to do with what they get" (Maria, FI, p. 4). She is convinced that people "steer away" from math, "just because they don't want to put the effort in to figure out the problem(s). . . But, you know, people have to put in effort to do different things" (p. 4). Asked if she thought liking math had anything to do with how she perceived it as being presented in school, Maria replied, "I don't know. It very well might. Just because I had my dad there, too. He was always there to help me out if I needed anything" (Maria, FI, p. 4).

Rosa also saw effort as a crux to learning. "If you put effort into it, the rest just comes. You can have the ability to move a mountain, but if you don't put any effort into it, then it's really pointless, you know" (Rosa, FI, p. 6). Her personal philosophy centered around learning everything that she could. She describes herself as highly motivated.

I love to learn. I go out and just look at people and learn, and I ask questions, you know. My mom has always kinda told me, "learn all you can." Because,

you know, learning is a life-time process. You never learn something...you can't learn everything just by going through college. Yeah, you may know a lot about statistics, and a lot about science and math, but you have to learn about the real world too. (Rosa, FI, p. 7)

. . . I want to succeed. I want to...um, you know, it's not all about having your diploma, like master's degree, it's about just having something to say. Like you made it this far. It's kinda more about self content[ment], that I want to fulfill. I want to be self content with my life or with my success. (FI, p. 7)

Stevin was the only student who said “no,” succeeding in school was not important to him. While the other seven said succeeding in school was important, their timing was different. Rosa always wanted to succeed academically. Alex had that ambition since elementary school. Maria and Eloy were motivated during high school. Stevin said “never,” and Jose, Rene, and Theo found themselves wanting to succeed sometime after dropping out of the regular school environment. By then, they had tried a variety of alternative schools. They decided to go back to earn a diploma because they had seen, first hand, the difference that a high school diploma could make.

I don't know like exactly when, [it became important to succeed academically] . . . I don't know, I used to always think like how it would be just to have no worries, when you get older have your bills paid, you know, everything like that. No like, no struggles, you know what I mean? That's the way I want to live when I get older. I don't want to be hustling, and pawning my stuff, to pay bills and whatever. That's when I really, that when started, like, I don't know, that's when it became important for me to do good in school, 'cause I knew that school was the only way to get a good job. I mean, there's other ways, but it's real (said strongly) hard, you know. School just opens up a lot more doors, than doing tatoos on the street. (Jose, FI, p. 3)

All eight students said they had high aspirations for themselves, aspirations that seem apparent in their conversations. In terms of setting high standards for themselves, Alex and Rosa, said “yes,” they absolutely had high aspirations. Eloy and Maria said

“sometimes.” Jose, Rene, and Theo said “yes,” they do now. Only Stevin said “no,” regarding setting high standards for himself.

Overall six of the eight students considered themselves most successful during elementary school years. Rosa, one of the exceptions, thought her high school years most successful; she has a 4.11 G.P.A. on a 4.0 scale (due to accelerated classes). The other exception, Rene, considered her middle school years most successful. Rene is the only student who considered her middle school years better. The other seven placed middle school as less successful or equal to elementary or high school years in terms of being successful academically. Alex said he “pushed the hardest in elementary school” (Alex, FI, p. 9). His high school G.P.A. is 3.59 on a 4.0 scale. Basically Alex never stopped pushing. However, in elementary school he was taunted because of his intelligence and his diligence. “In elementary and middle school it was pretty much always if you were too bright, it was because you were teacher’s pet” (p. 9). As he became older, Alex became more philosophical:

I think the biggest fear is that in my opinion, teenagers are pretty much afraid of being rejected by one other. So if you’re considered superior to others, others won’t associate with you. And so it’s more a thing of being together than trying to excel yourself, and trying to discover who you are. You’re just trying to, you know, to get the affection or the attention from people your age. (Alex, FI, p. 4).

Alex was more apt to observe than to need peer attention. He noticed that popular kids seldom acknowledged getting an “A” on a test. “They try not to show it off too much, just with their close friends. I guess they get labeled too smart and not acceptable in

the group or something. So I see it often” (p. 5). He was also aware of a different attitude among girls versus boys, an attitude somewhat influenced by Hispanic macho identity.

From what I’ve seen, boys are a little more [sensitive]. They both do it [limit their high grades]. It’s just that girls just do it in a different way. As far as boys, as far as getting good grades, it does bother them because, you know, the male preconception that men are supposed to be tough and not smart. So they take that into consideration. And if you are too intelligent, it takes away all your masculinity or something. So they try not to excel themselves too much.

Asked if girls can be smart with less problems, Alex replied, “Some girls don’t really care. They’ll excel. I like it when they do. I like it when everybody excels, because I don’t like having limits. And when somebody is able to go against the crowd, then it’s something different” (Alex, FI, p. 5).

During his middle school years, Eloy was most sensitive to peers acceptance:

In middle school . . . I was like a little, not a trouble maker but, I was class clown and I, you know, you have a lot of peer pressure in middle school so, like, you know, you don’t wanna, let’s just say I did well enough to pass most of my classes but I didn’t wanna get like all As or Bs, ‘cause that’d be probably the only time in my life where I felt like if I, it never happened to me, but like I felt like if I did go out and get like really good grades that some of friends would make fun of me or like talk stuff, so...But, you know, that’s middle school really. Everybody goes through that. (Eloy, FI, p. 7-8)

### *High Expectations from Peers*

Not everyone is equally influenced by peers, however. The eight students responded to questions about peers with varying reactions. While Chapter 5 discusses the topic of peer influence at length, the following section discusses the effects high expectations of parents and teachers have on students, and for perspective, mentions the effect peers may have in encouraging or discouraging academic pursuits.

Peers can be very influential. In the last interview the students were asked four questions about peer responses: (See Figure 4.4) To the first question, “Have you ever felt ‘put down’ by students who thought you were ‘too smart’ or nerdy?” Marvin and Rosa responded “yes.” Eloy and Maria said “no,” but as Eloy stated above, he compensated to get that response. Jose, Rene, Stevin, and Theo (the four students who dropped out of school) all said “no.”

To the second question, “Do you consider your peers (school friends) supportive?” six students responded “yes,” with only Stevin and Theo saying “no.” However, Rene and Jose clearly stated that they were referring to their current alternative school situations when they talked about supportive peers, rather than the schools from which they had dropped out.

The third question, “Do you consider your peers (neighborhood friends) supportive?” was equally split with the academically successful students either saying “yes” or saying that did not have many neighborhood friends (Rosa), and all four dropouts saying “no.”

Students do consider their peers influential. From the students’ perspective, both school and neighborhood friends encouraged positive academic habits in successful students, while some school and all neighborhood friends are seen as negative influences on students who dropped out of school.

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Marla	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>HIGH STANDARDS:</b>								
Parents	not sure, sometimes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes
Teachers	depends on teacher	no	yes	sometimes	no	yes	no	yes
Self	yes	sometimes	yes	sometimes	yes	yes	no	yes
High Aspirations (self)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Parents supportative?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
Teachers supportative?	yes	no	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes
Ever put down by teachers?	intimidating	no		no	yes	yes	no	no
Does this affect ability to learn?	no	no	Yes	?	yes	yes	no	no
<b>Peers</b>								
Have you ever felt "put down" by students who thought you were "too smart" or "nerdy"?	yes	no	at first, then	no	no	no	no	no
Do you consider your peers (school friends) supportive?	yes	yes	ignored	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Do you consider your peers (neighborhood friends) supportive?	yes	yes	didn't have many	Yes neighborhood friends	no	no	no	no
Did this affect your academic success in school?	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes
<u>What is more important?</u>	Effort	Ability	Effort	Effort	Ability	Effort	Effort	Effort
<u>Effort or Ability</u>								
<u>Motivation</u>								
Do you consider yourself (choose one) highly, usually, somewhat, not motivated?	highly	usually	highly	usually	highly	highly	somewhat	highly
Is a "C" enough?	no	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	no
Is a "D" enough?	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	no
Do your grades reflect your knowledge?	I don't think so	no	yes and no	yes	no	yes	no	yes
Feel prepared for next level?	yes	yes	yes and no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Do Tests present an accurate perception?	I don't think so	No, test phobia						
Is succeeding in school important to you?/When did it become important for you to succeed academically?	yes since elementary	yes mid-high school	yes always wanted to succeed	yes late in high school	Yes, when I made up my mind I don't want to struggle	yes when I decided to come back	no never	Yes, when I wanted to get my diploma and move on yes, now I want to graduate
Did your attitude change? If so, when? Why?	no	Yes, mid high school	No, mid high school	-	Byers Alt Sch teachers helped	yes, after E.G.O.S.	yes, in middle sch.	
<b>KEY: 1 being most successful/ 3 least</b>								
<b>Were you more successful academically</b>								
in elementary school?	1	1	2	1-2	1	2	1	1
in middle school?	2	3	2	2-3	3	1	2	1
in high school?	2	2	1	2-3	2	3	3	2
High School GPA	3.59	2.35	4.11	2.84	1.63	0.55	1.86	0.97
There is a lot of learning outside of school or the classroom?	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE
Learning is a "life time" process?	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE
You essentially teach yourself?	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	TRUE	True and False	TRUE

**Figure 4.4. Influences on academic success/failure.**

The last question, “Did this affect your academic success in school?” was again almost equally divided. The four successful students said “no,” while three of the four unsuccessful students said “yes.” Only Stevin, who said it was “never” important to succeed academically, said “no,” peers did not affect him.

*High Expectations With and Without Viable Support Structures from Teachers and Parents*

Only three students thought their teachers had high expectations: Rosa, who was successful, and Rene, and Theo, who were not. These high expectations did not keep Rene and Theo in school. Eloy, Jose, and Stevin all said “no” they did not feel their teachers had high expectations. Alex thought that it depended on the individual teacher, and Maria agreed, saying “sometimes” teachers had high standards. Rosa appreciated quality criterion and saw it in her teachers. “Most of my teachers have been really, really great. I think I’ve been lucky” (Rosa, FI, p. 2). She added: “I think if you, as a teacher, set standards for your students, they’re going to have to work at it. And you automatically will get this, like, aura off your teachers, ‘Well my standards are high, so as my students you have to do better’” (Rosa, FI, p. 5).

Alex thought some teachers were intimidating, but this did not affect his ability to learn. For the most part, Alex appreciated his teachers. Jose and Rene felt “put down” by some of their teachers and this did affect their ability to learn. Eloy stated that he and his friends would often do just enough to get by.

“We wouldn’t go the extra mile to get an A or any of that stuff...I knew a lot of stuff, but didn’t do well in all of my classes just because I wasn’t motivated

to do well, I think. That is how a lot of my friends were, too” (p. 14). “If I got a C I really, you know, in high school, you know, I was almost proud of myself when I got Cs because most of the classes I wouldn’t go to and they were so easy, that I could still get a C so I consider that an accomplishment in a way. Seems kinda weird, huh?” (Eloy, FI, p. 5).

Is this weird? or was Eloy’s thinking a direct reflection on the lack of “high expectations?” High school did not challenge Eloy, nor did many of his teachers. While some rare teachers did help prepare him for college and tailor the course work to stimulate his thinking, many teachers allowed him to slide by.

It’s not hard to graduate from North. The courses, most of the classes, you know, the teachers really don’t expect a lot from you cause like, you know, all the other kids they just slack off so, it wasn’t hard for me, I mean I could go to a class, maybe like two or three times a week, ditch the rest of the time and still just do some of the busy work and I get a grade. (Eloy, FI, p. 6)

Why did Eloy stay in school, graduate, and then continue on? He gives his parents credit:

I think it all starts at home. I mean, with a lot of the friends that I have that are messed up, I sometimes think I might have been a dropout, but my parents really kicked my ass and told me “you have to do good in school;” you have to get your education and that stuff. I think that a lot of the stuff starts at home. (p. 17)

You know, when you do something you always think your parents might not support you, but depending on what you do. Like, if I was going to go out for speech or debate, or something like that, I don’t know, they might joke around with me but, they wouldn’t, they’d never really put me down. So I’ve never had that happen to me. (p. 2)

When asked if their parents set high standards, three of the four successful students said very definitely “yes.” Alex, who considers himself extremely independent, qualified his yes. “There are things they want me to excel at.....but....They have certain standards for

me, but I don't think they are as high as mine are for myself" (Alex, FI, p. 3). The four students who dropped out were equally divided. Jose and Theo thought their parents did set high standards, while Rene and Stevin were convinced they did not. Seven of the eight students said their parents were supportive; Rene said "no;" basically her mother was indifferent.

*Cumulative Impact of Recognition or Lack of Recognition*

Maria also observed that teachers' follow-up recognition had a definite impact, especially when students met or tried to meet their standards.

Teachers really need to recognize potential in a student. They really need to be able to let that student know that they notice there was a change or they really tried hard in writing that story or that they did practice their math problems. Something, you know. There are teachers that notice that, 'Hey you have been practicing,' and if they let you know that you have been practicing, that means a lot. It makes you want to do even more. So I thought I would get a good grade this time. But if they don't give you any recognition...so why should I even try. (Maria, p. 9)

Six students thought their teachers were supportive. Eloy and Jose did not consider their teachers particularly supportive. Lack of support was a painful experience for Jose:

It didn't really affect it negatively, when they put me down. It was like more positive, like, I don't know how to explain it. It was weird like, like, at the end of middle school and high school...when somebody is voted "the mostly likely to fail" that just makes them want to do good more just to prove everybody wrong, you know. That's how I look at it. I mean it, it, it...it hurt, you know, kinda when teachers make you feel dumb or something. like getting smart with you, you know what I'm saying? When you just answer the question. That's wrong! (said with emphasis) cause even geniuses asks

questions. So that just made me want to learn more and do better. (Jose, FI, p. 2)

While Rosa told many stories that were as poignant as Jose, stories of racist attitudes, and being shunned as a child, she did not focus there but continually looked for the best in people. Rosa often found herself liking teachers that other students did not like, and becoming close to teachers that others “hated.” Rosa held a unique attitude: she gave everyone a chance. She also believed that if you are predisposed to look for problems you’ll find them. Rosa described a teacher that she thought “awesome,” someone from whom she learned a great deal. She discovered that the teacher “beat up” her brother. “She pinned my brother up against the locker...and harassed some other students...and now she’s not working for DPS any more” (Rosa, FI, pp. 2-3). Rosa noted that her brother went into class thinking “I hate school. I’m not even going to give it a chance.’ That’s why his experience were more negative than positive. If he hated all his teachers from the beginning...” (p. 3).

Rosa is fairly self-actualized and believes in accepting herself, others, and situations as they are. While all teachers do not meet her expectations, many do, and the others she adapts to and learns from anyway. She is optimistic, open-minded and very energetic. Her philosophy:

If I go into class with a positive attitude, ready to learn, you know, it’s going to be harder for the teacher to convince me that he or she is a bad teacher...than it is if I walk in with a negative attitude and have them try to convince me that they’re a good teacher. So it’s basically, I think, it’s harder to make someone think good of you if they’re just thinking about all the negative outlooks. (Rosa, FI, p. 3)

You have to bring a positive attitude. Like some students will walk into class, and they're already pissed off at the teacher: Don't even like them; don't even know them. . . don't even know the teacher, but already hate them. It's like, you know, give it time. If you walk in with a positive attitude, you've basically just opened yourself up, you know. But there are students that come in and they're like: "I don't like you. And I refuse to get to know you. And I refuse to pretend to like you, or pretend to listen to you." I think that has a lot to do with how well you learn. (Rosa, FI, p. 2).

### Summary of High Expectations

While both groups (the four that stayed in school versus the four that dropped out) share some attitudes and reactions, this section highlights some very definite differences in their perceptions. Personal motivation and effort was similar for Marvin, Rosa, and Maria. Eloy emphasized that he did what he needed to do, but often slid into a discussion of how much he enjoyed studying history in high school, and how important it is now for him to do well in college. Jose, Stevin, Theo, and Rene lacked effort just before they dropped out of school. Also lacking was any reason to stay in school. Non-attendance, or heavy absences created severe problems for Rene, Jose, and Theo.

The four students that were successful in school talked about high expectations and found them in their parents, teachers, peers, and/or in themselves. They set realistic aspirations and attainable goals. They adjusted to situations and made the best of them. The four who dropped out lack confidence in their teachers, their parents, their peers, and often, themselves. Maria and Eloy both said they could have easily dropped out of school like their friends. Both credit their parents and their parents' unflagging support for keeping them in school. The four that did dropout did not receive such constant support

from either parents or teachers. While Rosa, Maria, Alex, and Eloy talked of awards and recognition, Stevin, Rene, Theo, and Jose had little positive to say about their regular high schools. They did not connect with teachers, often seeing them as adversaries. Perhaps connections need to be established first, before “high expectations” of others can be accepted and internalized.

### **Safe Environment**

Students need both a physically and a mentally safe school environment to function well. In a physically safe environment, order, stability, structure, and security are evident. Rules are clear and explicit. Adults are consistent and dependable. A student does not fear being alone, away from his or her group of friends. A physically safe environment offers students a chance to focus on studies and learning. He or she is able to make connections, to engage in extracurricular activities, and to feel a sense of belonging.

Lightfoot (1983) states that “Good schools are safe environments. Adults do not merely react to the random eruptions of violence, they seek to create a visible order that will help to prevent chaos” (p. 346). She also notes:

With clear and consistent authority relations, teachers feel supported in their individual efforts to build empathetic relationships with students. This bedrock of authority provides an institutional coherence that is often expressed in teacher fearlessness. (Lightfoot, p. 346)

Teacher fearlessness not only comes from deep understanding of students, it also derives from an institutional authority that support their individual encounters with students. The most explicit and visible signs of strong institutional authority are seen in the schools’ responses to violence and other disciplinary matters. (Lightfoot, p. 345)

In the stories that follow, several students present their schools as unsafe places, deficient of the bedrock of authority that Lightfoot mentions, and likewise lacking in fearlessness of teachers.

A mentally safe environment is nurturing and, as such, promotes trust, courage, humility, and honesty, four of the seven major ingredients of Mayeroff's critical components of caring. Trust encourages meaningful conversation and sharing of self. It allows risk-taking and developmental growth. Trust tends to foster learning experiences in an atmosphere that engenders ready acceptance. Trust allows mistakes and the learning that comes from hindsight. But trust "is not indiscriminate; it is grounded in actively promoting and safeguarding those conditions which warrant such trust" (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 28).

To promote such conditions teachers must offer exposure to meaningful experiences, both practical and imaginative. Teaching that employs constructivist methods encourages such exposure. Constructivist teachers plan lessons that allow students to construct their own theories, thereby increasing students' understanding. Teachers engage students in thinking, reflecting, and assimilating new knowledge on solid foundations. "Scaffolding," or offering assistance as a supporting framework, also safeguards the student's learning. "Over a decade even the profoundest thinkers never questioned the assumption; they never entertained the notion that what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85).

Humility and honesty, part of caring, are also components of a safe mental environment. Humility overcomes pretentiousness. However, “pride in a job well done is not pretentious” (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 32). Rather, humility offers an authentic evaluation of assets and limitations.

As mentioned in the previous section, although high expectations allow students to excel, realistic aspirations and attainable goals promote their success. Humility coupled with honesty makes this possible. Honesty offers deep-seated openness, a lack of guises or pretense. Mayeroff tells us, “I cannot be fully present for the other if I am more concerned about how I appear to other people...” (p. 26). Honesty does not seek approval; it seeks clarity. Mayeroff’s last component of caring is courage. He tells us that “without courage to go into the unknown such trust would be impossible” (p. 35).

This section will focus on safe environments, both physical and mental. Without the former, the latter is impossible to create.

### *Physically Safe Environment*

Stevin and Rene, two students who dropped out of school, felt very strongly about the violence they had seen in their respective high schools (Figure 4.5). Consequently, their views will be presented here.

For Stevin, school was not a safe place. If it were in his power to change the educational system, one of Stevin’s requests would be, “Make sure it’s a safe place to go.

If it's not safe, you can't really think. Your head ain't on straight" (pp. 44-45). Stevin's stories are peppered with fight incidents, as early as 4th grade. "It's mostly where you live and stuff like that and who you hang around with" (p. 19). Stevin was always "watching his back," being careful, assessing who was with whom, and how large the group was. By high school, things got "pretty bad. People start bring[ing] weapons and stuff. Weapons and fights all the time, every day" (p. 40).

Like sometimes, if you don't see your friends around but you see all the other guys around, or you walk down the hall and there's like 20 people standing there that don't like you, you're like, what should I do? So you just turn around and go the other way or take another stairway or something. (Stevin, p. 40)

When I asked if the high school administrators could do something to make a difference, Stevin said "no." He explained that if the administrators were aware of the situation, the students would then take the fight off school grounds. The problem itself would not be resolved, but technically the school could not use suspension and expulsion for control.

Not really. They can but, not really. 'Cause they can't be there 24/7, you know. At Kennedy, we used to have the student advisors in our hallways, cause they had their friends on that side of the hall and we had ours right here and we'd get into fights sometimes, pass by and bump into each other and stuff and then we'd be like, "Wow, let's go to the creek after school or let's go to the creek at lunch." We'd go fight and after school, we'd be talking stuff to each other from different cars, people pulling over and getting in fights. (p. 40).



Stevin never spoke of counseling or school mediators and programs to resolve conflicts. What he did mention was the need to belong to a group, and having friends that were supportive. For Stevin that meant being part of a gang. (He also found himself in trouble with the police and incarcerated for a time.)

I think well, you just have your friends and your friends are gonna fight these guys and you don't really want to be left out of it. You want to, but you don't. So then you get, you know, they don't like you or something like that. It's like, oh, well, he's sorry or something. (p. 41).

From the perspective of several alternative school experiences, Stevin commented that having different gang members within a school did not necessarily make the school unsafe, but rather the atmosphere and size of the school led to difficulties.

Yeah. I think, um, alternative schools, or well the ones I've been to, they're cool, cause like, you know, how people just get along. They don't really, they care, but not really care as much 'cause there's less of them. Like you'll have two or three of your friends, and they'll have two or three, and, uh, the other schools, like the bigger ones, there's like 20 of you's and 30 of them or something like that.

So, people just lay back pretty much in alternative schools. They're pretty laid back at Byers too. There was west siders and east siders and AK's and all kinds of stuff. (Stevin, p. 41)

[Having taught at some of the alternative schools Stevin mentioned, and being aware of some of the administrations' disciplinary policies and politics, I would agree that different administrators make a huge difference in the safety aspects of school. The culture or atmosphere of the school changes based on the administrators' personalities. What Stevin describes as being more "laid back" is anything but that, from the principal's and vice-principals' positions. However, because of the tight controls and restrictions, the

students are more amenable toward one another, or they do not stay at those respective schools. And for the most part, these alternative schools are last-chance situations.

Stevin's comment about size as a controlling factor is extremely valid.]

Many of Rene's experiences were similar to Stevin's. She, too, felt violence was exacerbated on the high school level. She identified high school as a time when adolescents were trying to discover themselves and find acceptance:

I mean sometimes, it's just, in schools where problems starts, 'cause that's where people find out who they are. Once you're in high school you find out where you belong, try to fit other people's needs. So, sometimes, if not accepted, you turn by the way. And then that's where a lot of violence comes in. And just 'cause of the way people judge you and your characteristics, your background. Instead of judging you about a person, they judge you about your past. (Rene, FI, p. 6).

On a weekly basis, Rene said she saw one or two fights, sometimes more, sometimes serious, where students were taken to a hospital. People getting beaten-up was a common sight, as were seeing people coming to school drunk and falling down stairs. Being alone could set the stage for serious trouble. With guns and other weapons, Rene admitted school could be scary. For safety, she considered joining a gang.

That's why it is sometimes better to be around people who are in gangs and (hesitant laugh) I don't know. . . 'Cause if you are by yourself and these people don't like you, then you're all alone. But if you are with people who are in a gang, you don't have to actually be part of that gang, but just to be by them, then you feel somewhat like they're there for you . . . If I was ever to join, it'd be because of safety. (Rosa, FI, p. 8)

When asked, "Do some join gangs because they don't have close brothers and sisters?" she replied, "Yeah. Their family doesn't support them, so they figure the gang life

is better. You always have your friends there until they end up in jail, or shot at, so” (FI, p. 8).

Rene talked about a time when she was left by herself and another girl started calling her names. “I try to avoid any, and it’s like, (pause) people think you’re scared, and it’s not that you’re scared, you just don’t want to go through that part of it. But finally I just had to do, what I had to do” (p. 26). What Rene felt she had to do was fight the other girl physically. Rene noted that her opponent wanted to fight on school grounds, but Rene insisted that they meet at the park across the street from school. Two things were very important to Rene: 1) that she earn the respect of her peers by not backing away from a fight, and 2) that she not create problems, what she calls creating a “ruckus” at home by fighting on school grounds, and flirting with possible school discipline.

There always were fights, but there are times when I had to fight for myself. Yeah. I mean, it’s just like you know, you try to leave things alone, like people say you know, “ignore it,” but it don’t work that way in high school. When you’re by yourself is when they tank up on you. Is just like, alright, then I gotta do what I gotta do. (p. 25)

So I told her just meet me at the park. And me and her fought. And I think I had busted her lip ‘cause she had braces on. And so the girl tried to come up behind me and stab me, ‘cause she got mad. [*I repeated, “stab you?”*] Yeah. She tried to. (laugh) But my friend, you know, was looking at her and she was like “well, what’s up?” you know, and so they got real hurt, emotional hurt. Because, you know, things like...I didn’t say nothing, but when I did do something, you know, I showed them I wasn’t all that scared. (p. 26)

Rene had the support of her friends, who “protected her back.” She did not have the support of the administrative or teaching staff to provide support in terms of personal

counseling or group sessions dealing with conflict. Rene's sense of school support was nonexistent.

Administrators might as well just kick you out. They don't want to hear about it. They don't want to think like that. I mean they *say* they want to do something when it comes on to it, they just rather kick you out, and not deal with you. That's just the way the teachers have been at West that I've seen... It's just 'cause, I don't know. A lot of teachers are... [they] just don't want to hear what you have to say. (p. 26-27)

Rene was concerned that teachers, like students, were more apt to judge an individual by his or her past record, rather than getting to know the individual as a person. "Miss, I don't really think a lot of teachers can see past that personality easily, the bad behavior. [If they could] they'd see a lot of potential" (Rene, FI, p. 6). Like Stevin, Rene did eventually enroll in an alternative school, Emily Griffith Opportunity School (EGOS). There she found the culture much different than what she had experienced at her regular home high school. According to Rene:

Here [at EGOS] they listen. And if you have problems, they understand. And a lot of people here have kids, and just have other things going on in their life, and a lot of these teachers have heard it, so they understand. They take the time out to say, "Alright, well, you know...."

I mean, I never talked to my teachers or counselors at West. When I go over here I talk to them a lot more...and its just, you get a better feeling. (p. 27)

To mention the other six students briefly, Jose talked around the question of violence, never being too specific. Once, he mentioned being "labeled by the crowd you hang out with . . . I wouldn't get messed with as much as I do if I didn't kick it with the people that I do" (p. 9). In regard to being "messed with," Jose stated that "I've been harassed by the police, but they've never caught me doing anything that they could pick

me up on, take me down” (p. 9). Theo felt safe during his middle school years and early in high school because of his involvement in sports. Later he did find himself in trouble and incarcerated for a time.

Alex, Eloy, Rosa, and Maria, the four academically successful students, basically felt safe at their respective schools (See Figure 4.3). Both Alex and Rosa had concerns when they were younger because of the neighborhoods in which they were living, but both were able to move. Maria and Eloy were aware of gangs at their schools, and both had friends in gangs. Maria said that once she got into high school, she “chose not to hang around with that group [the Untouchables, UTA’s]” (Maria, p. 7). Eloy stated simply that “I never had any problem with that. I got along with almost all the gangs. I wasn’t in the middle of it, so I could, you know, I was kind of like at the outside. I watched everybody. I had friends on both sides. I just stood back and let them handle their business (Eloy, FI, p. 22).

#### *Summary of a Physically Safe Environment*

Stevin and Rene did not feel safe in their high schools. They were definitely worried about being alone, away from their group of friends. Both were concerned for their physical well-being. Neither was successful academically in this environment. Theo and Jose also found themselves involved with fellow students who often got into trouble. Their school environments exposed them to problems, i.e., fighting, and use of weapons and drugs. Schools for these four students did not provide safe territories, but allowed

students to fall prey. Totally missing were the “clear and consistent authority relations” described by Lightfoot (1983) as critical to fostering good, safe schools.

Alex, Eloy, Rosa, and Maria did not consider safety an issue at their respective high schools, and all four were successful academically. While a physically safe environment offers students a chance to focus on studies and learning, one that is not safe hampers that option. While both sets of students made connections, those students who were successful academically were inclined to engage in positive activities, often extracurricular activities at school or church-sponsored events. The students who dropped out often found themselves in negative activities, sometimes with gang members and often with friends who were in trouble with fighting, drugs, shop-lifting, stealing cars, and other infractions.

The issue of extracurricular activities and who gets involved in such school activities will be examined more thoroughly in the next chapter, which concentrates on peer influences. The remainder of this chapter will focus on what students expect from a mentally safe environment. It will examine one alternative — teaching from a constructivist perspective. While these constructivist concepts do fit well with establishing a safe environment, they are just one possible teaching method that must be examined to ensure students are allowed to study in a physically safe school environment.

*Teaching from a Mentally Safe Perspective*

As suggested earlier, a mentally safe environment promotes trust, courage, humility, and honesty. All four of these attributes are an integral part and parcel of constructivist theory. This is not to suggest that other approaches may not be equally effective, or more so, depending upon the subject matter. However, much research suggests that constructivism is particularly effective for teaching mathematics, especially if two more virtues are added to Mayeroff's initial list: patience and expertise. A patient teacher allows students time for exploration and self-discovery. Constructivist thinking assumes some time will be spent in confusion; patience, therefore, is a necessary trait for both students and teachers. Patience also allows time for continuing follow-up assessment to promote, reaffirm, and strengthen learning. Another critical attribute is expertise. Expertise refers to competent personnel who are capable and knowledgeable in their fields, who delight in learning themselves and can inspire, motivate, and enjoy their students. Figure 4.6 provides an example of teaching from a constructivist perspective. A more specific example of constructivist teaching can be found in the Appendix, "A Constructivist Perspective on Teaching and Learning Mathematics."

Connecting students' prior knowledge to new learning experience seems a highly logical approach. In effect, this bridge enables students to progress steadily, assimilating new ideas on a sturdy foundation. Yet, this is a process many students readily identify as missing, both those that were not successful in school and those that were successful.

They describe their frustration, saying, “I was hearing words I could not understand,” or “the teachers didn’t help us learn.” They often noted that step-by-step explanations were nonexistent; what they did hear were lectures with major gaps. Sometimes they memorized formulas that they never understood. All too often, they were not actively involved learners.

In a geometry class based on the constructive style of teaching, a teacher would set up situations or experiments where students would work together (cooperative learning model) to derive postulates and theorems. The students would not simply memorize facts, but rather would examine possibilities, together, and together would generalize hypotheses toward solutions. These solutions would then be discussed as a class, so that conclusions (formulas, postulates, or theorems) could be validated.

Since this type of teaching is student-centered and not lecture-based, patience becomes a most necessary virtue. Along with the virtue of patience, persistence is critical. Hardest for the teacher is not saying too much, not giving answers, but rather, guiding students toward discovery. Listening well becomes essential.

Also, to be really effective in constructive teaching, a teacher must have a strong background, a definite expertise in the subject matter. This expertise enables him or her to set up the initial experiment, or totally understand what the text offers and be able to explain it several ways. Expertise also empowers the teacher to guide the students during the class time by answering questions thoughtfully, with helpful leads and suggestions. Probing a student’s past background comes into play. Likewise, integrating knowledge and experiences from other classes can be useful and supportive. The more versatile the teacher, the more advantages the students have in making connections to other subjects. Information will not remain disjointed and forgotten. This focus on student discover, because of active participation and total involvement, encourages students to make viable connections. They build on their past knowledge. The new knowledge gained seems to be lasting.

**Figure 4.6. Example of Constructivist Teaching.**

Connecting a student’s prior knowledge to new learning experience seems a highly logical approach. In effect, this bridge enables students to progress steadily, assimilating new ideas on a sturdy foundation. Yet, this is a process many students readily identify as

missing, both those that were not successful in school and those that were successful. They describe their frustration saying, “I was hearing words I could not understand,” or “the teachers didn’t help us learn.” They often noted that the step-by-step explanations were non-existent; what they did hear were lectures with major gaps. Sometimes they memorized formulas which they never understood. All too often, they were not actively involved learners.

“Constructivist in mathematics education...implies a way of teaching that acknowledges learners as active knowers” (Noddings, 1990, p. 10). Teaching from a constructivist perspective fosters the integration of new ideas and learning experiences, rather than the accumulation of disjointed information that is too often forgotten. It serves to connect students’ prior knowledge to academic learning. It allows students to construct their own worlds with guidance and “scaffolding” from teachers. Teacher’s guidance becomes crucial here. Vygotsky (1978) used the term “*zo-ped*” or the “the zone of proximal development” to describe “the place at which a child’s empirically rich but disorganized spontaneous concepts meet the systematicity and logic of adult reasoning” (Kozulin, 1985, p. xxxv).

It [the zone of proximal development] is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Appropriate adult guidance, the viable support structure mentioned in the previous section, allows a student to reach beyond what he or she is capable of alone. Interaction with a teacher and/or with fellow students, where students engage in discussions about

math, focusing on problem solving in a group activity, can create a dynamic, inquiring, assessing atmosphere in which thinking thrives. “What is clear is that the emphasis on construction forces us to probe deeply into a student’s activity. How firm a grasp do they have on the material? What can they do with it? What misconceptions do they entertain?” (Noddings, 1990, p. 14). Sometimes the answers to such questions lead a teacher to use manipulatives so that students can relate abstract ideas to concrete objects. Sometimes straightforward practice is advisable and direct instruction is needed.. Noddings (1990) points out that “constructivist teachers have to keep their basic premises in mind, but they should feel free to adapt a wide variety of methods for their own purposes” (p. 16).

Constructivist thinking appreciates divergent ways of knowing. The students repeatedly mentioned this aspect of learning as very important to them, but more often than not, ignored in preference to a teacher teaching to his or her own style of learning. Theo, Rene, Stevin, and Jose dropped out; these are their experiences:

Theo notes that early on he had problems with reading. He had a “hard time remembering what [he] read.” His problem went unsolved, reoccurring in high school. No one took the time to probe, as Nodding suggested; no one asked questions directed at learning what misconceptions a student like Theo held.

Rene recognized that she was a hands-on learner who often found herself in a classroom where the teacher primarily lectured. To make matters worse, if her fellow students seemed to understand, she felt that her needs were ignored by the teacher.

I am the type of person, where you have to show me, you know, to understand it. Where if you say it, I won’t understand. But, you have to show

me. And just being in the classroom like that, hearing a lot of words, I couldn't understand it. That was in the science classroom; that's why I had trouble with science. Because, it's just like if everyone understands it, you couldn't get individual help. (Rene, p. 18)

Her transcripts indicated that science class was not the only subject in which Rene failed to make connections.

Stevin also noted that in his science classes the teachers concentrated on book work. "The teachers didn't do experiments," (p. 26) although he thinks he may have enjoyed that, since he really liked working with his hands, as in auto mechanics. For Stevin, the teacher's explanations were simply not clear. When asked what might have helped, he responded: "What would they do? Just, I don't know, just explain things to you right and help you out when you need help. That's basically it. Maybe give you some encouragement to keep coming or something" (p. 37).

In math, Stevin never went past Algebra. He saw math as a gradual progression of learning, where a solid foundation was crucial to doing well in the higher math classes. "You gotta, if you learn what you're doing at first, then you can go on. 'Cause if you don't know what you're doing at first you can't keep going. You can, but you really won't get into it, 'cause you don't know what it's about. Gotta know your As and Bs and Cs" (p. 34). Stevin never conquered the basics and Stevin has yet to pass Algebra.

Jose found himself very responsive to a teacher who allowed students to present projects they had researched to their American history class. In an art class, he created a mural and won first place at an art gallery show where it was exhibited. These two

experiences occurred at an alternative arts school, which he began attending two years after dropping out of a regular high school.

Jose notes that “boring material” is not the issue for him. What is important is the opportunity to vary his classroom experiences with a teacher who is sensitive to student’s different learning styles. “If the teacher knows it [the boring material] and if the teaching style matches my learning style, then I can deal with it. But Ms.XXX, she talks a lot and I’m not a very good note taker. I like to do projects, visualize stuff. I’m, like, hands-on” (James, p. 19). Jose encouraged his teachers to be aware of the individuality of each student and to teach to that diversity. He encouraged them to “look at each student as one person, ‘cause nobody is the same” (p. 25).

Jose strongly appreciated the cooperative learning style that was promoted at DSA, an alternative school. As Vygotsky suggested, students can learn a great deal from capable peers. For Jose, collaborative learning was a new, powerful experience.

A lot of students work together. That’s like new to me. ‘Cause at Byers, everybody’s just worried about themselves graduating, getting their own credits straight. And at this school it’s like, that ain’t even an issue at this school, credits and stuff. And it’s like personal credit, they worry about that by doing good in their classes and they help other students by giving them insights on how that could make their projects better and stuff like that. You work together. Two heads are better than one and the whole classroom is better than two. So teachers let us work together. It’s a lot better. (Jose, FI, p. 10)

While Eloy and Maria graduated and Alex and Rosa are doing very well in high school, all four found themselves wishing teachers would explain the material in a way they could readily understand. Scaffolding or safety nets were all too often missing, and

students searched for ways to learn from books, peers, parents, or other teachers, any one who could and would help.

Part of constructivist theory is to connect students' prior knowledge to academic learning. In order to be successful doing that, a teacher needs to be very explicit when asking questions and likewise, a teacher needs to listen carefully to make sure all questions are understood well. Continuing feedback is essential. Eloy remembers his first day of kindergarten when he felt both "scared and stupid" (p. 2):

It was a pretty bad first day if I remember right. I knew all my ABCs; my parents taught me that, but I was ignorant as to like what school was about so on the first day when the teacher asked us to write our ABCs down. Well she asked everybody if they could do it and we did it. The only thing is that I wrote ABC, ABC, ABC because she said just write ABCs, she didn't say the alphabet. So she kind of made fun of me in front of the class and I got mad about that and I cried. That's about the only thing I remember about kindergarten, is my first day (Laugh). (Eloy, p. 2)

Perhaps Eloy's teacher had low expectations and was not anticipating a youngster who understood the term "alphabet," and who could write all 26 letters. Perhaps, her class was too large for individual attention. Regardless, she left one youngster disillusioned with his first day of school. Fortunately, he had parents that could "pick-up-pieces" and listen to his needs. Eloy reflected that if he had problems with school work, his dad was always there, and he could help, however a lot of his fellow students did not ask questions in class, feeling that they would get into trouble.

That was a problem in several classes. "Some of the [teachers] were intimidating, some of them were just rude.....if they [the students] asked a question that might not be the smartest question in the world, the teacher might rag on them, or just mess with them

a little bit. A lot of students at North do not like that (Eloy, p. 16). Eloy stated that he had some teachers who explained things very, very well, and others who did not. He remembered one math teacher that he described as “horrible:”

She went off like a hundred miles per hour. It seemed like that to me. Like everybody else thought so, too. So I just, like, lost interest for a couple days and then I stopped paying attention. That is where my downfall began, because as you know, if you don't pay attention in math for even one or two days you get lost. So, I stopped paying attention for the whole two weeks and stuff. I really started a downward spiral in that class. She'd get up on the board, and she would do a whole bunch of things, she'd jump from one step. She'd like do two steps in her head and we don't know what she is doing. “Like how'd you get that?” Then she'd look at us like we were stupid or something. Like, “NO!, just explain to me how you went from that step to that step.” She would get mad at me a lot. She would, like, she gave me a referral once for drinking pop in her class.

Eloy said he learned the most from two older teachers he had: a gym teacher and a math teacher. The former could bench press 300 pounds and did push-ups with her students. The later had a great sense of humor and explained math well, so well, that his students understood and still remember.

He's just a great guy. If you ever talk to him, really, he's one of the best teachers I've ever had. The way he talks, he's funny, sense of humor. He'd always be making jokes but, he'd have this coffee mug on his desk and on the side of it, it says, ‘the older I get, the better I used to be.’ I always got a kick out of that one. And he used to always tell us these stories and how it was when he was younger. He was a good teacher.

Yeah, he *really* did explain it [math]. Some of the younger teachers, some just because they were younger, a lot of the math teachers they know what they're doing, they just can't make their point across to people, you know what I mean? They just can't, they're really good in their field, they just don't know how to teach it. Yeah, I really did learn the most [from Mr. XXX]. A lot of the things I know in math I still remember from him. (p. 7)

Maria had both positive and negative high school experiences. In regard to the latter, she described a math teacher whom she labeled a rocket scientist. He reached a limited audience. Those students who did not understand him “doodled” and hoped that they would be able to read the textbook later.

It had a lot to do with presentation, too. I mean, he was excited about the material and there were some kids who really did understand what he was talking about. It was very easy for them to envision things. But for me, it is harder for me to see things, if I don't see a picture, you know. For them, if he would just talk and they would see exactly what he was talking about. For me, I would say, whatever, and I would just go off and doodle for awhile, and say, I would either ask my dad or read the book and see if I could get a better understanding from the problems in there. (Maria, p. 10)

Maria describes an energized teacher who perhaps did not realize that he was not connecting with the majority of his students. Maria, who is very self-motivated, persisted; Maria also was able to get extra tutoring from her dad. Few students have a father who studies calculus for fun and who consistently takes extra time to make sure his own children understand math well.

One of Maria's effective math teachers involved the students in cooperative learning situations. Working together with other students naturally increased the available resources for individual attention, and likewise augmented the options for divergent ways of thinking.

I thought it worked pretty well just because everyone would bring in their homework and we would be able to explain, you know. If the teacher didn't get her point across, because sometimes they don't, you know. Sometimes you just don't understand them. So at least one of the kids in the group would understand it and be able to explain it to somebody else, and then someone they know, they will catch it, and they would be able to explain it in a different way to somebody else. (Maria, p. 14)

Maria, now in college calculus, is an advocate of constructivist thinking. She recognizes that solving problematic situations rather than repeating rote arithmetic, and deriving formulas rather than memorizing rules is critical to developing in-depth understanding.

We learned the formulas and I think that was a real disadvantage. I think that's a real disadvantage, because at college level you have to be able to understand where the formulas come from and that I had a lot of problems with that when I first got into college because I thought all I needed was the formulas and I didn't need to know why they're there or anything else. (Maria, p. 14)

Still Maria has adapted successfully. Her high school experiences, and her father's assistance provided her with the tools to continue learning.

Alex first learned to read in Spanish, and by late 1st grade was reading in English as well. Except for not being very good with the accent marks, Alex notes that he is fluent in both speaking and writing Spanish. He is also very articulate in English. His early education worked, providing a solid foundation. In regard to constructivist learning, Alex's geometry class was taught from a constructivist perspective, and the math department in general favored that style of teaching. Alex did note, especially in writing English papers, that he appreciated teachers who allowed him to be creative.

Rosa notes that in 1st grade she learned to read and that was "the happiest feeling of my entire childhood" (p. 6). "That's like, the thing I remember, just being so happy about learning and excited" (p. 6). She also remembers that first story, about a goose and the holidays, and the fact that her teacher gave her a copy of the book.

Rosa mentions several positive experiences. One high school math teacher did not connect at first, but over time became special. The students taught him how to listen and how to respond to their needs.

[Initially], he would just talk and talk and talk. And I think he assumed that we knew a lot of the stuff that he was talking, because he would use like, math terms that we had used but we didn't really remember and so no one would ask questions because he was like, a young teacher, and he was like, you know, I don't know, he was really young, just out of college and so we just kind of felt like, intimidated by him. I don't know if that's what you would say, but then, you know, all of us would like flunk the test pretty much. And then after while, I think he started encouraging more and more to, you know, that students ask questions and, like, I could tell you that two years ago his class averages were like Ds and now they're like Cs and Bs.

We helped him and he helped us. You know, he's encouraging us to ask more questions, I mean everyone, you know, in the class. (Rosa, pp. 11-12)

Rosa is very conscious of teachers' varying styles and what she considered positive changes over the years. She describes the "book work type" as "read it yourself, answer the questions, and then there's tests. I don't think there are too many teachers anymore that do that too much. I think there are some that will do it maybe once a week" (Rosa, p. 12). Rosa also describes a very dynamic physics teacher who embodies the constructivist style.

I think science is another subject where there is no way you can just read it and learn it. It's something that you have to experiment. That's what we do. Our physics teacher is like a real good teacher and he gives us like the back of our notebook or just the front of it, you know. "You don't have to remember any of these, but some of them will stick, cause you'll use it so much that you just know them off the top of your head." And so, he teaches. We have experiments at least once a week at least, sometimes more and his notes are all interesting. He has us up there doing stuff, like interaction with the students, he's not just up there babbling and you're sleeping in his class.

“Babbling” teachers for Rosa were more typically found in the English and social studies classes. Yet, she enthusiastically mentioned a social studies teacher who turned her lectures into stories, real stories, interesting stories that mesmerized her students. Also Rosa gave the “babblers” credit for providing collaborative learning situations, projects and presentations utilizing the Internet or library resources. For Rosa, school worked.

### *Summary of a Mentally Safe Environment*

As stated at the beginning of this section, a mentally safe environment promotes several of Mayeroff’s characteristics of caring including: trust, courage, humility, honesty, and patience. Along with these traits, I added: teacher expertise and teaching from the perspective of constructivist thinking.

All eight young adults mentioned the benefits of collaborative learning. All eight students appreciated teachers who offered guidance and support, who anticipated their needs, and who probed deeply to learn what each student actually understood. They, too, universally respected teachers who knew their subject matter well and who continually worked at presenting that material clearly. And lastly, all eight youngsters recognized their own learning styles and acknowledged teachers who were able to teach using many aggregate styles.

Descriptions of teacher experiences tended to include the spectrum of positive and negative encounters. Overall, the academically successful students related many more effective learning experiences than troublesome ones, primarily because they could talk

with their teachers, and their teachers often worked very hard to improve the situation. If that failed, they could rely on their parents or friends to tutor. The students who dropped out of school lacked that alternative.

**CHAPTER 5****THE IMPACT OF PEERS**

Throughout the interviews, each of the eight young adults was repeatedly asked, “Why do you think some youngsters are academically successful in school while others are not?” While some students matter-of-factly gave parents a great deal of credit for supporting their ambitions to stay in school, all eight youngsters regularly discussed the very intense and dominating influences of their peers. In Maria’s words, “Peers have a lot to do with whether or not you make it” (Maria, p. 17). Overall, a great deal of the information the eight young adults shared during the interviews centered on their peers, both immediate friends and youngsters with whom they had problems. Many of their comments were thoughtful, careful reflections of what did and did not work in their environments.

I think that the big thing in high school [is that] the kids need to find a group that they feel comfortable in. You know, it’s good to have a lot of organizations, not just sports where they can go on in activities. Anyplace. They need somewhere to belong. The need to belong. I think that is why a lot of people might even join gangs and end up leaving school. They don’t know where they belong, nowhere in the school so they go elsewhere. (Maria, p. 17).

Rene also noted the importance of feeling part of the school, of belonging.

Some kids had [connections]. Those would probably be like those on the football team, cheerleaders. Depends on where you fitted in at school. ’Cause if you were around the negative part, you really didn’t care. It’s like, “Oh, well.” Where, if you had something to look forward to, like if you’re a cheerleader, or you had that positive response always around you, then you probably had more chance at success. (Rene, p. 10)

Eloy emphatically stated that his peers motivated him to go to school. “Actually in middle school, it wasn’t the actual school....it was my friends that made me want to go. I was kinda at the age that I wanted to fool around a lot, get in trouble, and stuff like that” (Eloy, p. 6).

Stevin felt that staying in school was a reflection of the neighborhood’s culture. “Probably their peers, where they’re from and stuff like that. And it’s what people tell them I guess. If you’re like from a neighborhood where everybody goes to school, chances are you’re going to school, too. I mean if you’re not, if you’re somewhere where everybody drops out, then you’ll probably drop out too” (Stevin, p. 6).

Alex said, “I think that you either have supportive parents or have somehow learned to be responsible or otherwise you actually [don’t] succeed academically” (Alex p. 20).

I think that the only thing that we can do is teach kids to be more reliable to themselves. Not to try to please everyone. Because in high school you maybe try to please all your friends, try to please the crowd and go with the crowd, do what everybody else does, and that doesn’t work for everyone. It works for some people. But then again, everybody is an individual. An so everybody has their own basic needs, and you have to tend those needs before you do anything else. So, that’s pretty much it. (Alex, p. 21)

The above student comments offer a short summary of this chapter. Young adults value the opinions of their friends. They value the opinions of their peers and the crowd, in general. They want to please. They want to belong, to make meaningful connections, to be part of a group. Moreover, they allow these peers and/or their friends to influence them,

often more than parents, teachers, or community members, or their own growing sense of self.

The impact of these peers can be positive or negative. While positive peer influences deal with making connections, negative impacts involve the ostracizing of young adults. Responses show a mix of both supportive and discouraging behaviors from peers. Descriptive student comments and illustrations are interjected throughout the chapter, and the four who are academically successful are mentioned in order. The four who are academically unsuccessful are also grouped in an effort to show emerging trends.

This chapter will discuss peer pressures that influence academic progress at several levels: 1) involvement with extracurricular school sports, clubs, and events, as well as activities sponsored by religious institutions; 2) moving, changing schools and/or locations; 3) grades, study habits, and doing well as a liability; and 4) peer pressures, which in some cases lead to poor attendance, ditching, drinking, drugs, and/or trouble with the police.

### **Extracurricular School Activities/Religious Affiliation Activities**

#### *Academically Successful Subjects*

When asked if he thought extra-curricular activities affected his attitude toward school, Eloy responded that playing football influenced both him and his friends to stay in school.

Well, for a while no, because I did like drop my grades. It made me want to be

there, like I wanted to be in school, and I wanted to play football. I wish I didn't have to go to school to play football, you know. I wish I didn't have to keep my grades up. After I got ineligible, I kind of figured out that I had better do good in school my dad is getting mad and I can't play football and that stuff. It did keep people like me and my friends in school. But for lot of people, they don't really care. But for me and my friends, probably after our freshman year, we realized that they would do at least average in school so we can keep our grades good enough to play football. So it was a motivational factor. (Eloy, p.10)

Eloy belonged to several clubs including the "Key Club," an after-school club that focused on helping the community. Members worked with the elderly at a nearby nursing home. Eloy also participated in "Young Life," a church youth group that provided fun activities, and worked with "Big Brothers, Big Sisters" taking phone calls and eliciting donations. Eloy stayed in school, continuing on to college.

Maria was very active in high school track, cross-country, and basketball, as well as her church group. Maria is very bubbly, outgoing, and exuberant. She enjoys having fun. In her words: "It is really boring if you just try to do all the homework and not have any fun along with it, you know. For me, track was, I loved track practice. I love going to the meets. It was my social thing. It was good for me. I met a lot of good friends that way" (Maria, p. 17). Maria also managed a part-time job. When asked if it was hard being so very involved, she responded:

I don't know. It gave me a lot more to do. I think I enjoyed it, more than anything else, just because it was another part of my life, especially in high school. I was just making money for myself. I mean, I went to school, went to track practice, had fun there, then after that I'd go to work It wasn't a big deal for me at all, you know. It was just like, well, I could either be here working and making money for myself, or else I could be at home, just sitting there, you know, (laugh) vegging out in front of the TV. (Maria, FI, p. 2)

Maria is engaging, and she was very engaged with high school.

Rosa is another highly energized individual. In middle school she played violin and was in the orchestra. Her skills were polished enough to earn her admission to the Denver School of the Arts, had she been so inclined. Rosa instead chose a vibrant high school with a wide variety of extracurricular activities. She did play music for a while at George Washington High School (GW) in her freshman and sophomore years, but now mostly plays for “self-satisfaction” (Rosa, FI, p.12). She has also played softball since her freshman year of high school. As a sophomore she was wrestling manager and baseball manager. She laughs as she explains this:

I got along with all the guys, got to talk to all of them, but...and then, this year, I started playing golf and it's been really fun for me. I think it's really fun, it's just kind of competitive and it gets really tense and, like, one-on-one with somebody and I think that's the bad thing about golf, but it doesn't have to be competitive all the time. (Rosa, p.21)

“My mom asks me ‘Why golf?’ It's such a boring sport.’ It's not boring if you're with your friends and hanging out. It can be so much fun. Even if you walk miles and miles, but I don't mind it. Time flies. Talk, walk, and have fun” (Rosa, FI, p. 18). For a short time, Rosa had a part-time job helping disabled persons living in assisted living homes. Although she found the environment depressing, she said it was a real “eye-opener” and provided experience for a possible career in medicine. Rosa continually laughs as she describes some of her other working experiences. When asked about activities in addition to school and work, Rosa noted, “I've been with church all my life” (Rosa, FI, p. 12). She is a highly involved individual who seems to totally enjoy life, people, and learning.

Alex noted that although he preferred to be by himself, he learned to deal with groups. His best friend helped change his view on people, friends, and relationships.

It made me realize a lot of things as far as... that it's kinda a necessity to be able to work with everyone, to be able to adapt with everyone, to be able to socialize with everyone, no matter whether you like it or not, that there is a responsibility that you're not always going to get what you want. And you have to be somehow... either learn to deal with it or do something about it. (Alex, p. 20)

Freshman year, Alex "tried-out" a multi-culture club, but found that it did not suit his temperament. 'I just didn't like it. Everybody was just there. And everybody was in their own little group and nothing ever got accomplished and it didn't trigger my interest and so I didn't go back" (p. 23). By his junior year, Alex was involved with the Speech Club and participated in the Lincoln-Douglas Debate, as well as other varsity debates. He found it improved his public speaking abilities and intrigued his mind.

You look at philosophers and what they thought about that [the Lincoln-Douglas Debate]. You implement that with what you think and then argue whether you think it's better off depending on what side you get.

You learn to write. It's pretty much an argumentative essay. And it's pretty interesting because, well, it makes you think. Not just the wrong aspects of one thing but also what the benefits are. So, it kinda helps you open your mind a bit more. (Alex, p. 19).

Alex also mentioned his involvement with church, and talked a bit about a mentoring relationship he had with an older lady, age 48, he met through church. "We talk, we go out for ice cream. We go for walks. We talk about everything." He also mentioned that she doesn't try to influence his decisions, but rather, said she would "just be here whenever you need me" (Alex, FI, p. 6). While Alex does not participate in many

group activities, he does seem to choose his friends carefully, and they support him and his drive to expand his mind and his skills.

### *Academically Unsuccessful Subjects*

The next four students tell different stories. Rene, Jose, Theo, and Stevin had limited or nonexistent involvement with extracurricular activities. They did not feel the close connections with high school that were an essential part of the lives of Eloy, Maria, Rosa, and Alex.

When Rene was queried about extracurricular activities, she recalled the excitement of being involved with “Odyssey of the Mind” in 6th grade. When asked if her middle school offered sports, or other after school activities that she enjoyed, she replied, “No. They didn’t” (Rene, p. 15). In terms of activities outside school, Rene reported “none.” During her freshman year at West High School, Rene did not participate in extracurricular school activities. She believed that teachers were only interested in students who were involved in sports. “They don’t make connections with you. If you’re not on the football team, or a cheerleader, or on the basketball team, baseball team, it’s like they don’t want you” (Rene, p. 19).

Jose, like Rene, was not involved with extracurricular activities at school. He likewise reported no participation in group activities outside school. “Yeah, when I went to Montbello, there was a lot of like, a lot of my friends, that I knew from middle school

and elementary school, and everything, went there, and I just couldn't handle it. 'Cause they was always influencing me" (Jose, p. 4).

For Jose, this influence meant problems. "Yeah, 'cause I still had friends at Byers, you know, that came with me, but now that I'm here [at Denver School of the Arts (DSA)] alone, and I have no distractions, I'm getting it done....It was just I ah, basically just, set my friends and everything to the side and just got busy with what I got to do done" (Jose, p. 4). "Yeah, I don't know. It's just better, better environment. As I got, went on in school, friends started, I got kicked out of that school. I just got rid of all the people that were bringing me down" (p. 11).

Theo mentions being very active in middle school wrestling and basketball. He participated in talent shows, demonstrating his break-dancing skills. And yet, Theo had problems. He mentions experiencing difficulties with his parent's divorce and living with his mom. His mom was upset with his behavior in classes. Still, Theo's love of sports involved him initially in high school. According to Theo, during freshman year, "I went out and I was in football for varsity and junior varsity. I was in wrestling for JV and varsity and I was in a little bit of baseball" (Theo, p. 2). And then things changed again for Theo. At the end of his 8th grade year his mother died. He said, by 10th grade:

I was in there [West High School] for a while, and then basically, I didn't have counseling yet for my mother's, when she passed away, and I just kinda fell apart. Was all hurt inside and I didn't know how to deal with it. So I mainly dropped out. And then I started messing up, after that and I went to the detention center, and I got out. And I was out for awhile, and then I messed up, and went back.. (Theo, pp. 2-3)

Stevin does not mention any extracurricular school or church activities. He did comment that his favorite subjects were recess and lunch, and laughed. In terms of his friends Stevin said, "I think they keep me from thinking about school, 'cause they tell you to ditch and stuff like that. They don't tell you to do your homework or go to class. If they tell you to go to class when they see you in the hall, it's just messing around". (Stevin, p. 29). When asked if most of his friends stayed in school, he said, "Uh, no. Mostly a lot of them dropped out" (Stevin, p. 29).

### Summary of Extracurricular Activities

Consistently, students' involvement in positive and varied extracurricular activities parallels academic achievement, while lack of extracurricular involvement aligns with dropping out of school. While many other factors are obviously involved, peer connections seem to be critical. The next section discusses moving, changing schools, and/or home locations, and its peer-related impact.

### **The Effects of Moving on Peer Involvement/Influence**

Moving, either from school to school or to different neighborhoods, affects peer connections that students make and maintain. For some students, moving means loss of friends and the need to start over, to build new relationships. For others it means a chance to leave a "gang" situation and its accompanying worry behind. Figure 5.1 shows each young adult's movements in terms of the schools they attended, elementary through high

school, as well as place of birth. Since the four students who dropped out of school moved most often, this section begins with their stories.

*Academically Unsuccessful Subjects*

Stevin enjoyed his early elementary school years, stating, “I think everything is pretty much all good until ‘we moved and I started going to Teller [4th grade]. That’s probably when I started kind of disliking school....Every school’s pretty much different. You get used to one thing and then you change to another. You gotta get used to that, too.” Asked if something in particular had triggered this feeling, Stevin answered, “Um, I don’t know. I guess it’s just the people. There’s some bad-ass kids, I guess” (p. 17).

They used to beat up people. Pow (whispered). They’d hit him. Like they’d gang up on him. I didn’t get ganged up on, though. But I used to see some of my friends sometimes. I wasn’t gonna jump in. I was just a kid, I was like, uh. I’d walk out of the class and there’s like five guys on him. If you tell the teacher, you’d get beat up. Yeah. So you don’t want to try to do that. (Stevin, p. 17)

When asked if there was any opportunity to move out of the area, Stevin responded, “Uh, no. It’s kinda hard to move, if you ain’t got money and stuff” (p. 17). How did he handle the stress of such an environment? “I don’t know, you just gotta handle it. You just learn to, I guess. Yeah, to really put up with it and just hang around other people maybe. Later on, I think later on, I started becoming one of those people too” (p. 18). When asked if, in turn, others were now afraid of him, Stevin relied, “They just didn’t mess with me. I don’t know if they were really afraid of me” (p. 18). Perhaps, peers were just being very cautious around Stevin, who, for awhile, was an active gang member.

Stevin attended six different high schools, literally dropping in and out:

Well, I moved and I tried to get in other schools in Adams County but they wouldn't let me in 'cause they'd start looking at my school record and like "Uh uh! You ain't coming here!" It's like I tried like about four or five schools and they wouldn't let me in. I think it's also cause I had an ankle bracelet and they'd look at me. I went to this one school, was it? I guess, Ranum. I walk in and I had a conference with the principal and he said, "Well, I know about you gang-bangers here, 'cause we had a couple before, so, you can't come here." And so, I tried other schools and then, I was like, "He can't do that, he can't just tell me I can't come to his school. I don't do anything bad." (Stevin, p. 35)

Stevin finally did get into Ranum on a probationary status and stayed there for a year or more until he again was "kicked out." This time, he states, "I got kicked out 'cause I broke my contract, 'cause I had a contract for attendance and grades"(Stevin, p. 35).

Theo also mentions "moving a lot. Basically just hopping all over the place" (Theo, p. 2). He states that "it's hard, 'cause you're not at a steady place and it just interferes with your schooling" (p. 2). Theo notes that he moved 10 times in the last six years. "I lose some things when I move. Just basically messes up with my school" (p.5). Some of the effects were positive. Although he moved during middle school, Theo did not switch schools, and he moved for safety reasons.

Basically moved because of the environment I was in. It was just basically all these gangs and this activity that I could fall into, the negativity, but I don't want to. [My parents] kinda talked to me about it. But I wanted to do it myself, because I just don't want to, I was, had a lot of friends that were involved in gangs. I don't want to get associated " Muerta." I'd rather just straighten out my life. It's not worth it. Just go to jail for, to be with your friends for a couple hours for just doing something that's real dumb. (Theo, p. 5-6)

Currently, Theo lives in a group home and visits his sister on weekends. Unlike Stevin, who moved into a gang area, Theo moved out and did not become a gang member.

Jose has not moved in the last six years, but his early school years reflect quite a bit of movement: four changes of schools from kindergarten to fifth grade. James lived for a time with his grandfather and a step-grandmother he found “pretty mean.” Later, he changed this to “just strict.” He also describes a day care center during this time. “I remember we used to go to this day care, together all of us [two younger brothers], and I’d be the only one going to school on the van and they’d have to stay at the day care and wait for me. And I’d get back to there after I’d get off school. It was just a lot of kids” (Jose, p. 8).

Jose now lives with his mother and has contact with his father.

Rene moved very seldom, staying at the same elementary and middle schools. She talks about moving in regard to making the transition from middle school to high school and remembers that as a scary time. “You had like new people to meet from different schools now and they’re a lot older than you, so it’s just hard” (Rene, p. 16). Some of her friends from middle school also went to West, but she noticed that “they changed a lot. Seems once you hit high school you find your identity. At least, you think you do” (Rene, p. 16). Rene laughs. “They just liked to be around people that were popular, and older. Me.....I went, instead of going for popular I went for, I guess, average” Rene, p. 16). Other things happened in Rene’s life at that time, too, but the peer pressure seemed to affect her:

Um, I think my brother went to jail that year. That was 1992, so the summer between that time. And it just. After my freshman year it got real hard on me. Um. Had to deal with a lot of people, because by then they were criticizing the way you dress, or the way you talk, your hair color. So I dealt a lot with that. And um, um I was going out, missing classes, ditching, drinking, so I was getting into a lot of trouble then. (Rene, p. 17).

Age	Place of Birth	DPS Grade School	DPS Middle School	DPS High School	High School G.P.A.	College
17	Guatemala, C.A.	Kindergarten-5th Columbian	Kindergarten-2nd Newton	Kindergarten-5th Newton	17	Denver
18	Denver	Kindergarten-2nd Newton	Kindergarten-5th Newton	Kindergarten-5th Newton	18	Denver
17	Durango, Mexico	Kind-1st Del Pueblo 1st Grealey Columbia Wyman Teller	Kindergarten-5th 1/2 5th Edison	Kin-1st Barney Ford 2nd- Cunningham 3rd-4th Barney Ford 5th John Arnesse	17	Denver
1992-1995	1990-1993	1992-1995	1988-1991	1991-1994	1991-1994	1991-1994
Horace Mann Middle 1995-1999	Skinner Middle 1993-1997	Govie Middle 1995-1999	Skinner Middle 1991-1995	Martin Luther King 1984-1985	1991-1994	1991-1994
George Washington and C.E.C.	North High	George Washington	North High	West Dropped out 1995	1991-1994	1991-1994
1997-1998	Metropolitan State	1996-1998	Metropolitan State	1995-1997 Ranum/ A.C.E. dropped again 5/97 E.G.O.S. 4/1998 E.G.O.S.	1991-1994	1991-1994
3.59	2.35	4.11	2.84	1.63	0.55	1.86
						0.97

\*Note: Gray indicates DPS School

Figure 5.1. Subject school data.

Rene did not move permanently, but she moved within her extended family connections. Often she went to live with her aunt and step-uncle when things were not going well at home with her mother.

### Academically Successful Subjects

Alex was born in Guatemala, and made a major move as a very young child, so young that he does not remember when. He commented: "I'm not really familiar with the customs and traditions besides what my parents have told me" (Alex, p. 3). "I wasn't there long enough to actually start a life there. So I started life here. I wasn't born here, but, as far as I am concerned, this is where I've lived my entire life. I didn't have to adjust to anything, because when I was growing up the American traditions, you know, were instilled in me. I didn't have to adjust very much" (Alex, FI, p. 7).

Alex's went to only one elementary school, and likewise, his middle school years were stable, as is his current high school experience. In the last three years he moved once, two or three blocks from his previous address, to a larger house. Early in his life he lived with his mother, grandmother, and grandfather. His mother decided to move out of her parents' home when Alex was about five. He didn't join his mother until about a year and a half later. His grandmother still lives close.

Actually, we all lived pretty much in the same neighborhood and I talked a lot to one of my neighbors...the neighbor kids, just sat next to me in class. Eventually, once we moved, but before, I used to live with my grandmother instead of my mother so, living with my grandmother was a different story, so once I moved in with my mother, I kinda socialized a lot more with kids I went to school with. (Alex, p. 13).

We're just that we were a lot closer now and, uh, I started visiting the kids that I moved away with, I lived like only eight blocks away from them and so, I had to go back and forth. Since I lived so close, I guess we all got together and played every once in a while. (Alex, p. 14)

Alex did not move often or far away. He also was able to stay close to his extended family.

Rosa, like Alex was not born in the United States. She was born in Durango, Mexico, a city Rosa describes as "almost the heart of Mexico" (Rosa, p. 1). She says she was raised as a Mexican-American and started speaking English when she arrived in the United States. "I moved here when I was about four; and then I started school, and it was just really odd for me, and strange that nobody spoke [Spanish], well some did, but, I found it, that I *had* to learn [English], it was something I had to do. So, I started learning when I was like...Four or five" (Rosa, p. 3).

Rosa move only once during the past six years and has been stable for three years. However, this was not the case during her elementary school years. "We were always moving. It was...it was extremely hard" (p.2). Rosa attended five school between kindergarten and 5th grade. She did note that a lot of her friends went to Teller Elementary (her 5th grade school) and then eventually went to East or George Washington High School, with her. Most of them stayed in school. (p. 2)

Eloy moved only once, and that was during his elementary school years; he remembered the move as being a difficult experience. "I was disappointed when we moved here, 'cause I had to start finding new friends, just starting over. That was kind of hard in

elementary” (Eloy, p.3). But Eloy seemed to make friends quickly, although he also worried about starting over during the transition from elementary to middle school. He remembered being scared the first few days, since most of his friends went to another middle school and he “didn’t have any confidence with any of the friends that did go there...It was crazy, scared” (Eloy p. 7). Eloy also said, “at Skinner, a lot of those kids were raised together at the other elementary schools around. So middle school was kinda weird, at first, but then I made a lot of friends” (Eloy, p. 6).

Maria also talks of one move she made across town, and the frightening experience of attending a new, much larger school.

See, I was going to school on the west side of town where I grew up. Then we moved away to the north side of town and I was really afraid to go to middle school because I didn’t know any kids. There was one girl that I had met before I went to class and she was a grade ahead of me so I wouldn’t see her that often and she lived down the block. We used to ride our bikes together everywhere. And so she was telling me I didn’t have to worry. I was really scared of the big, huge school, you know.

### *Summary of the Effects of Moving*

For some students, moving and transitioning to new schools was a major challenge, and at times a serious hurdle to overcome. What seemed to make a difference was how quickly they established new friendships, perhaps how quickly they adjusted and fit into the new school’s groups. The reason for moving also appeared to impact some subjects. Although finances prompted the move, Eloy and Maria moved only once, with the same intact family structure. Poverty and divorce necessitated moves for Rosa and Alex initially, but later both had stable environments with supportive family units and

friends. These four students managed to be successful in school, establishing friendships and a niche at school for themselves.

Divorce and finances occasioned Stevin's and Jose's moves, and they lived for a time with grandparents. Theo talks about how much the divorce affected him also, followed by the death of his mother. Rene mentions only a move from middle school to high school, but couples this move with her brother going to jail. The four students who dropped out of school speak of their moves in terms of going to neighborhoods or situations with predominately negative peer influences. They seemed to lack support both from family and friends, and consequently were affected by the adverse changes associated with moving.

### **Peer Pressures that Influence Academic Progress**

Peer interactions are critical to all eight students. Their choice in friends differs, as does their willingness to allow peers to affect their individual achievement. All four successful students found school friends supportive, and three (Alex, Eloy, and Maria) said neighborhood friends were also supportive. The exception, Rosa, said she was not really involved with the neighborhood kids because of their ages. In contrast, two of the four who dropped out, Theo and Stevin, considered their school friends academically non-supportive, and all four said their neighborhood friends were not supportive. Three of the four subjects who dropped out said this affected their academic performance (Figure 5.2).

The next two sections examine peer pressures that influence academic progress. The first section discusses students getting good grades, and trying not to be too obviously smart around their peers. The section that follows focuses on youngsters who did not see a purpose in graduating from high school. Some of their friends were in gangs, others were into drugs or drinking, and ditching became the norm for all of them. Trouble often followed. It is in high school that these adolescents turn sixteen, and make decisions that greatly affect their future, one of which is whether to complete high school or to drop out. Their choices in peer relationships have a serious impact that decision.

#### *Peer Perceptions of Intelligence*

Among the academically successful students, Rosa held a GPA of 4.11 (A+) and Alex held a 3.59 (B+/A) GPA. Maria had a GPA of 2.84 (B/C) and Eloy's GPA was 2.35 (C). All high school grade averages are based on a 4.0 grading scale and the individual transcripts were available transcripts the summer of 1998. These are their reflections.

When asked if she had ever been told she was too bright or too smart by her fellow students, Rosa said yes, "but what do they know?" Rosa has a great deal of confidence in herself and her academic abilities, and she tends to focus on what she felt was even more important than her intelligence — her social skills:

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Marla	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
Is doing well in school a liability as far as being accepted by your peers?								
in elementary school?	sometimes	no	for me it	no	no	no	no	no
in middle school?	sometimes	yes	has not	no	no	no	no	yes
in high school?	-	sometimes	been a problem	sometimes	no	no	no	no
Have you ever felt "put down" by students who thought you were "too smart" or "nerdy"?	yes	no	sometimes	no	no	no	no	no
Do you consider your peers (school friends) supportive?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Do you consider your peers (neighborhood friends) supportive?	yes	yes	n/a	yes	no	no	no	no
Did this affect your academic success in school?	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	yes
Were you more successful academically								
KEY: 1 being most successful/ 3 least successful								
in elementary school?	1	1	2	1-2	1	2	1	1
in middle school?	2	3	2	2-3	3	1	2	1
in high school?	2	2	1	2-3	2	3	3	2
High School Grade Point Average (GPA)	3.59	2.35	4.11	2.84	1.63	0.55	1.86	0.97
Years enrolled in College at the time of interview.		1997-1998		1996-1998				
College		Metropolitan State College		Metropolitan State College				

**Figure 5.2. Subjects' peer influences on academic success/failure.**

For me it hasn't been a problem, but I've seen with other clicks, what you call it, it is a problem. Like there are some groups where you have to be so smart to hang out with them. Or there are some that you can't be smart and hang out with us. You have to be dumb, or . . . I see it throughout schools. You have like the really smart people that hang out with each other. And then there's once in awhile you get the really smart person who just thinks he or she is too good to hang out with anyone so they're just like "friendless people." And I think that's really important, 'cause you know, you can be smart, but if you don't have social skills, you're not going far. (Rosa, FI, p.6)

Rosa's knowledge was usually appreciated by her peers. She admits being teased at times by her peers, but she was regularly sought for extra help throughout her entire school experience.

Yeah. I was the helper. "If you don't know what it is, then ask Rosa." They would, you know. Sometimes, you know, I'd get teased, "Oh, you're the teacher's pet." Like no, I just know the stuff, you know. But, yeah, I was, the teacher would have me to help...I think [peers] found it more like comfortable like to get help from another students than from the teacher than to try and ask the teacher, 'cause I think that's a big part. I know, I remember, until this day, I sometimes get uncomfortable asking a question to a teacher, just 'cause I don't know how they are going to respond. Even though they all say "there's no such thing as a stupid question" [Rosa drops her voice and imitates a teacher]. (Rosa, pp. 10-11)

Alex said "yes," he has felt put down by students who thought he was too smart, even nerdy. And "yes," sometimes it was a liability. In fact, "in elementary school if you did too well, you were considered a teacher's pet" (Alex, FI, p. 9). Occasionally he felt similar sentiments in middle school, but noted "in high school I don't think people actually take the time to see if you're actually close to any teacher or not, so those don't really affect me" (Alex, FI, p. 9). Alex agreed that some students don't want to be labeled "too smart" but "it's quite common" (Alex, FI, p. 5).

Everybody has a category for everything, but I mean, if you go out with the

popular kids in school they try not to say “I got an A on a test,” you know. They try not to show it off too much. Just with their close friends. I guess they get labeled too smart and not acceptable in the group or something. So, I see it often. (Alex, FI, p. 5)

Alex felt girls were less sensitive to appearing too smart than were boys. But both genders could be sensitive, just ‘in a different way’ (p. 5). Alex knew some girls who were not affected by peers and excelled. “I like it when they do. I like it when everybody excels, because I don’t like having limits. And when somebody is able to go against the crowd, then it’s something different” (p. 5). Alex has some female friends who are exceptionally bright. Many Hispanic females felt “being too intelligent” was detrimental to their femininity. Similarly, Alex felt many young Hispanic boys need to act masculine.

As far as boys, as far as getting good grades, it does bother them because, you know, the male preconception that men are supposed to be tough and not smart. So they take that into consideration. And if you are too intelligent it takes away all your masculinity or something. So they try not to excel themselves too much. (Alex, FI, p. 5)

Speaking of himself, Alex noted that he is really quiet around his peers, and a loner for the most part. “Consequently, they’ll already think I’m a certain way, and I’m really not. And so it’s either they’ll bother me about that, or they’ll try not to associate with me, or they’ll be really sarcastic. Or they’ll just do things that they know gets on my nerves” (Alex, FI, p. 4).

I think the biggest fear is that in my opinion, teenagers are pretty much afraid of being rejected by one other. So if you’re considered superior to others, others won’t associate with you. And so it’s more a thing of being together, than trying to excel yourself, and trying to discover who you are. You’re just trying to, you know, to get the affection or the attention from people your age. (Alex, FI, p. 4).

Alex has known rejection, therefore he is not one to “jump into a friendship or relationship of any kind without thinking about it first” (Alex, p. 15). Alex has a habit of protecting himself from people. Because of this distancing behavior, Alex has avoided much of the peer pressure that his classmates have felt. “So, anyway it’s kinda helped me even though it’s kinda of isolated me. It doesn’t really bother me, so” (Alex, p. 15).

While Alex thought anything less than an A was unacceptable, Eloy considered getting a C grade good enough. He describes his high school courses as not requiring much effort, at least to get that C.

The courses, most of the classes, you know, the teachers really don’t expect a lot from you ’cause like, you know, all the other kids they just slack off so, it wasn’t hard for me, I mean I could go to a class, maybe like two or three times a week, ditch the rest of the time and still just do some of the busy work and I get a grade. (Eloy, FI, p. 5)

...and the class, you know, was just a lot of busy work. I remember one time when I tried, not even tried, most of the times I got like Cs in his class and that’s when I didn’t try at all. I didn’t do any work, hardly. Uh, the time that I tried half, you know, half way, I gave a little bit effort at the end, I got a B, but, I didn’t try as hard as I could of. Never...you know... (Eloy, FI, p. 7).

Eloy found that getting an A or a B meant being taunted by friends. “Well, sometimes people, like in middle school, I would get lower grades than I could’ve or should’ve, ’cause I thought I’d be a nerd” (Eloy, FI, p. 3). It was not until his senior year of high school that he felt that peer pressure really did not matter.

In middle school, I was like a little, not a trouble maker, but I was a class clown and I, you know, you have a lot of peer pressure in middle school so, like, you know, you don’t wanna, let’s just say I did well enough to pass most of my classes but I didn’t wanna get like all As or Bs, ’cause that’d be probably the only time in my life where I felt like if I, it never happened to me, but like I felt like if I did go out and get like really good grades that some of

friends would make fun of me or like talk stuff, so... But, you know, that's middle school really. Everybody goes through that. (Eloy, FI, p.7-8)

Eloy said that kind of thinking carried over into high school, until he got older. He describes "getting his act together" at the end of his sophomore year, and then taking a special course the summer before college called "Summer Bridge" to improve his study habits. Now, as a college student, he is very self-motivated and, in his words, "I'm trying to get good grades in college now. It's better. You shouldn't be going to college unless you get good grades" (Eloy, FI, p. 3).

Peer pressure could be equally positive for Eloy. He found he had very supportive friends when he became ineligible for football during his junior year. He had, in his words, been "messing around," not making the grades he needed to stay on the team. His friends exerted pressure. "They did mess with me about that, about not being able to pass the classes and what not. That's the only time. They didn't mess with me for not, for um, for doing well but for not doing well" (Eloy, FI, p. 8).

Maria never felt put down by students who thought she was too smart. In fact, most of her friends seemed thankful that she could help them with their math homework. "A lot of my friends, especially when I got to a higher level, they would always compliment me on my math. I would help them out with the questions that they had. A lot of my friends would come to me asking questions. I was a tutor in Algebra like a year" (Maria, p. 17). Maria was also asked to attend several school conferences because she was a rarity: a female minority student who excelled in mathematics.

When I was in school I was like sent everywhere, you know. When I was in

high school just starting because my math was so good they would send me to CU. I would be practically the only girl going for the minority jobs. They would go over and they would say we need women minority engineers, you know, da, da da da da. I was sent to a lot of stuff like that because of the fact that I was a woman minority good at math. (Maria, p. 17)

When asked if her friends ever hassled her for being selected, Maria said, “No, they didn’t,” but added, “I wouldn’t really tell my friends, though, that I was going out on a field trip because I was smart, you know” (Maria, p. 17).

Peers camaraderie was very important to Maria. She thought that at the high school age, students are more influenced by their peers than their teachers.

I think it is your peers once you get into high school. When I was in middle school it was a lot of the teachers, but the teachers are a really big thing to you at that age. Your peers will always have to do with it a little bit at that age, but when you get into high school you are competing with every one to see who can get the better grade on it. Who has the right answers, stuff like that. So then when I got into high school I did really good. I almost got straight As through my first year. I wanted to do good. (Maria, p. 8)

Maria did well in high school until, as she said, “My friends came back to [high] school from middle school and I decided to go ditching instead of attending class. I decided to try smoking pot, you know, and stuff like that. Then it was, like I’d come to class all high and take notes” (p. 8). Maria had ups and downs with school. Her one love was math, and she stayed in the accelerated program in mathematics for three of her four high school years. By senior year she was ready to take calculus, but she did not.

I went to pre-calculus. I didn’t take calculus. I was supposed to. It was like a choice. You could either take pre-calc one semester or else you can go into Calc I or Calc II. And by the end of my junior year I decided to go into the pre-calculus course.

It was easy. I knew more than the teacher did. Yeah, I really took the easy way out in high school. A lot of the teachers didn't pay much attention, you know. (Maria, p. 9).

Neither teachers nor peers challenged her at that time. However, in all fairness, taking pre-calculus would not have been considered the easy way out by most of her classmates. Now, as a college student, Maria has taken three semesters of calculus. While she offers high praise for her college teacher, she also acknowledges her own effort, and reflects on the lack of that same amount of effort in her friends. In college however, her motivation is intrinsic and not influenced by her peers.

I had close friends in the class, who weren't getting the best, best grades in the world. But that's because they weren't putting as much time into it. I mean I wasn't putting a lot, a lot of time into it. But some people, like I said, have to put in a little bit of extra effort and they weren't doing that though. (Maria, FI, p. 15).

The next section continues the discussion of peer pressures focusing on the four students who dropped out of high school.

#### *Attendance, Ditching, Drinking, Drugs, and Trouble with Police*

Casas (1995) mentions a study that found "among adolescent males strong endorsement of masculinity ideology is associated with problem behaviors in four areas: school difficulties, substance use, delinquency, and sexual activity" (p. 233). In traditional Hispanic culture, this endorsement of masculine ideology is popularly referred to as "machismo." (p. 231). Hispanic youngsters trying to avoid "acting White" (Ogbu, 1987) and adhering to "machismo" are prone to dropping out of school.

Jose noted that “you’re labeled by the crowd you hang out with, too. I wouldn’t get messed with as much as I do [by the police] if I didn’t kick it with people that I do” (Jose, FI, p. 9). Still Jose remains loyal to his friends. “I’ve got very few friends, but the ones I’ve got, I’ve had for a while. And I think I will have them for a while” (Jose, FI, p. 9). Referring to his freshman and sophomore years at Montbello High School, Jose commented, “Yeah, I’d ditch. I’d go to school just to meet my friends, and leave. And I started failing all my classes and barely getting Ds” (Jose, p. 12).

Jose added, “I just never really did [homework]. I mean, I would do it. But not when I was supposed to. You know, I’d do it, like the next day, before I’d go to class, or something. I’d never took homework home, rarely” (Jose, p. 10). During freshman year, Jose skipped classes to join his peers. “Yeah. I’d ditch. I’d go to school just to meet my friends and leave. And I started failing all my classes and barely getting “Ds” (p. 14).

I just lost interest basically. I don’t know what it was. Could’ve been other kids, or it could’ve been teachers that I didn’t like. I don’t know. I’m not trying to put the blame on nothing. It was just me. You know, I just didn’t want to go and, I didn’t like being told what to do. You know, just your basic teenager, you know, rebellious. (Jose, p. 16).

Stevin told a similar story. He said, “I never really got along with homework. I’d leave it at school . . . ” (p. 22). While in class, Stevin found it hard to pay attention, noting, “I’d rather sit there and associate . . . ” (p. 26). He admitted, “I knew what I was doing but, I don’t know if I was doing as good as I was supposed to be doing. Like, you know, you know you can get an A but you’re not doing it. You’d rather slack off and get a C or a D or an F or something” (Stevin, p. 25).

Asked if his parents reacted to his poor grades by putting any restrictions on his activities, Stevin said, “No, not really” (p. 25). Stevin said he tried to make sure he was passing: “It didn’t really matter to me if it was a bad grade or a good grade, as long as it was passing” (p. 33). Often Stevin was not passing. Encouraged by his peers to ditch, Stevin found school less and less important. “I think they keep me from thinking about school, ’cause they tell you to ditch and stuff like that. They don’t tell you to do your homework or go to class. If they tell you to go to class when they see you in the hall, it’s just messing around” (Stevin, p. 32).

Peers strongly impacted Stevin, noting, “If you’re somewhere where everybody drops out, then you’ll probably drop out, too” (Stevin, FI, p. 6). When asked, “Did most of your friends stay in school?” Stevin responded, “Uh, no. Mostly, a lot of them dropped out” (p. 32).

Stevin talked about persistent problems at school with drugs, fighting, and suspensions. He left Kennedy High School because of trouble. “Um, trouble, I guess. I’d just leave and go to another school for a while, ’til things calmed down” (p. 34). Asked if he had friends in gangs, Stevin replied, “Yeah.” Stevin added that he, too, is still in a gang. “You just don’t go mess around as much, I guess” (Stevin, FI, p. 6).

Stevin described several jail situations, some he classified as “nice jails” and others as “boring” with 23-hour lock downs. His initial trouble was mostly “just petty stuff, probably, like shoplifting, or something, marijuana, or something...FTA, failure to appear, ’cause I didn’t go to court...maybe get caught drunk or fight[ing] or something, I don’t

know” (Stevin, FI, p. 8). Once it was much more serious: a high-speed chase with police. Stevin was at the wheel and “‘cause we were in a stolen car and I wasn’t going to pull over” (FI, p. 7). The car overturned and Stevin spent two days in the hospital before going to jail. Stevin received two years of probation and about a week of jail time. “Then they gave me the ankle bracelet and made me some sort of agreement” (FI, p. 8). Casas’s (1995) study of Hispanic adolescents seems to accurately describe Stevin’s behavior.

Like Stevin, Theo joined peer groups in high school that set him up for trouble, and like Eloy, he found getting high grades was a problem. When asked if getting an A or B meant not fitting in, Theo replied, “Maybe in high school in the beginning like, when I was a sophomore” (p. 6). During 10th grade, Theo left West high school. Ditching classes had become a pattern for him. Theo adds that he was

just basically falling into the ditching and I didn’t want to go anymore, and I would wake up to catch a bus, but didn’t go to school... I don’t know. It changed just because of the peers I was with. Some were in gangs and didn’t want to go to school. [Others] were into drugs, and drugs interfered with their schooling. So, they didn’t really care anymore. Just about like me. (Theo, p. 14).

When asked what he did while ditching, Theo replied, “just go out there and do drugs or else just go to parks and smoke cigarettes with my friends and play basketball and that’s about it” (Theo, p. 15). Theo noted that it felt good at the time. “It did, because you’re with your friends, and you want to spend time with them” (p. 14). “It’s just that other people, my peers would just want to do stuff that wasn’t supposed to be done. And I just was pressured into it” (p. 16). “Just ’cause I fell into their, (pause) um behavior, I guess, you could say: saw it as being a little bit better. It was just being; it was fun at the

time. But I shouldn't have did it" (p. 19). Most of the friends Theo mentioned eventually dropped out.

Theo said he spent six months at Gilliam, a juvenile detention center in Denver. "I violated my probation. Cut off my ankle bracelet," he explained (Stevin, FI, p. 4). Theo continued: "I was in there for possession charges, and then I was riding with somebody that had a stolen car, and just got in trouble for being there. I had three possession charges. Now I'm in drug and alcohol for my classes" (FI, p. 4).

Theo stated that he got into trouble because of his need for peer acceptance. "Yeah. It was just 'cause I wanted to be with my friends. And ah, and that was just the reason why, just like fitting in with the crowd, actually" (FI, p. 6) Theo attributes his experience regarding the ankle bracelet story to following the advice of friends and running from his probation officer. As long as he needed to be accepted by his peers, Theo found himself getting deeper into trouble.

Well, hey, you know when you're home, or if you're not home, or what are you're doing. And your track will come to your house every once in a while and not let you know, and see what you're doing. I was late my first time coming back from CEC. It was on a Friday, and I was at like 15 minutes from school, and my probation officer said he was going to send a car to pick me up. So, I just hung up with him and said "All right," and left. And then I was gone for about two or three weeks and still had it on. And just, it didn't feel right on my ankle and people were telling me that I shouldn't have it on. So I cut it off and threw it away. And I ended up getting lucky and they just, they haven't, they didn't charge me for it, 'cause most people they charge for cutting off the ankle bracelet. That like another felony and \$2,000 fine. (Theo, FI, p. 7)

For Rene outside-school activities meant literally outside, leaving school grounds and ditching. She recalls, "I didn't go [to school] for, like, weeks. I mean. I'll go to a class

here and there” (Rene, p. 20). During her first semester in high school, Rene managed to pass half her classes; second semester she did not pass any. That summer her brother went to jail for six years, “accused of armed robbery” (p. 17). Problems seem to accumulate for Rene. She recalled a personal experience with the police, the result of being with friends who were driving while intoxicated.

Me, I was in a police car, but that’s because a guy hit me, and my friends went after him. So, (laughs) other than that. They’re usually. . . wasn’t my fault. My cousin gave us a ride cause my friend’s car broke down and he was drunk. And we didn’t know, ’cause he was already in the car, so we figured he could drive and he was wrecking into cars. And the police said that me and my friend were laughing and we were screaming. When you’re hitting cars you know it, but there’s nothing you can do ’cause you’re in the back seat. And they had guns pointed to us and it’s like. . . “ssssssshhh.” It’s crazy. They’re treating us mean, but yet we didn’t know. (Rene, FI, p. 14)

By sophomore year Rene was just barely making it to classes. She describes her typical day: “It was just like going probably down to Ellen’s, ’cause she lived just a little ways from West, and drinking, partying, stuff like that” (Rene, p. 20). When she was not with peers, Rene was home, taking care of her younger brother. Life was not easy and school was not a priority. “I’m fighting with my older brother, ’cause I was messing up a lot. My mom and my grandma were having problems at the time because my brother didn’t really have anyone else to really take care of him and so I thought that was my responsibility. So it was stuff at home” (Rene, p. 21).

Rene felt many students dropped out of school for reasons similar to her own. In part, she thought it was a cultural response, very much aligned with Ogbu’s (1987) theory that some minorities do not really believe that education can make a difference for them.

It's like, education isn't that important to [the] Mexican. It's more you work and support your family. And it's like you finish school, fine. If not, fine. I mean girls get married at fifteen, sixteen. (laughs) And that's just the way they were raised. So, and as far as the guys go, as soon as they get out of high school, you rarely see one go to college. They right away go work construction, landscaping, things like that. (Rene, FI, p. 14)

Academically successful student Rosa also reflects on cultural influences, referring to her younger brother. Although they are siblings, their experiences differ, possibly because girls are often treated differently than boys in Hispanic families. Rosa is concerned for her young brother and fears he will be influenced by peer pressures. She reflects that a middle school student needs to be a strong individual to stand up to such pressures. She offers sisterly advice, admitting that she has also been asked to ditch classes and join friends. She chose not to, and encouraged him to do the same. Rosa speaks frequently about her brother, and during the final interview mentioned he was thinking of going back to school:

He said that the reason even he dropped out [was] because he didn't feel like, you know, that they wanted him there. He was the type, my brother, he's always telling me, "I don't know why you go to school." And I just, I block him out after he says "I don't know why you go to school." I block him out. Everything he says. But, you know, he used to... I would ask "Why did you drop out?" and he told me, "Well, the teachers, and just my friends and peer pressure." I mean peer pressure is a lot. Peer pressure, I think, when you hit middle school is what's gonna do you in if you don't have like a strong person, like, I think it's just a quality that you have to have to like, go against peer pressure 'cause I know my brother, his friends are just like, okay, you know... but let's ditch school today and go to the park and let's do this and, you know. I know I've been asked to "Let's go ditch," and it's just something that, you know, you have to say "no" you know I wanna go to class. I don't wanna have to make up this assignment and I don't wanna have to get counted absent. (Rosa, p. 30)

In the final interview Rosa did comment that her brother had been raised with different parameters. Being the oldest child, Rosa had responsibilities that her brother did not. More important, he was a boy.

I hate to admit it, but my mom has double standards because she was raised in just a Hispanic background. And I think Hispanics a lot, but I think a lot of cultures that have double standards. And um, my mom has always had more strict rules for me. 'til this day I've never spent the night at a friend's house, because she never let me, you know. Then after awhile, after I got into middle school, I just didn't ask anymore. I just said "no" the answer is no, so I can't spent the night over at your house, Jennie, or whoever. But then with my brother, he was spending the night at friend's houses at the age of seven. He got to go out. (Rosa, FI, p. 14)

#### **Summary of Peer Pressures that Influence Academic Progress**

Ogbu, quoted in Boyd (1991), argues that minority youngsters tend to fail because of conflicts between their culture and the culture of schools. He notes that their "collective oppositional identity" causes them to view academic success as "acting White" (p. 347). While Ogbu basically addresses Black students, his theories do have applications to Hispanic students. Ogbu (1987) concluded that "the minority groups who are doing well in school are the ones who differ more from the dominant group in language and culture" (p. 316). He then cited an example of students from Mexico who appear to be more successful in school than native-born Chicano students.

While cultural, language, and opportunity barriers are very important for all minorities, the main factor differentiating more-successful from less-successful minority students appears to be the nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of the minority, and the nature of the minority's own instrumental and expressive responses to

their treatment, which enters into the process of their schooling. In other words, school performance is not due only to what is done to or for the minorities; it is also due to the fact that the nature of the minorities' interpretation and responses makes them more or less accomplices to their own success or failure. (Ogbu, 1987, p. 317).

Ogbu's theory accurately describes the two most successful Hispanic students: Rosa and Alex. Alex was born in Guatemala, as were his parents. His stepfather was born in Mexico. Rosa was born in Durango, Mexico and her mother in Quailia, Mexico. Her father, whom she never knew, was born in Puerto Rico. (See Figure 5.1) These two students' attitudes were definitely affected by their parents' values, values that were not "involuntary minority" values. Rosa's mother told her stories about a great-grandfather whom she described as well-respected, kind and helpful, compassionate, rich, and generous. Her mother also acted as a role model for Rosa. Alex talks about his family's about the moral code: "To them it's more like an obligation that has to be fulfilled...you have to be responsible with everything and everyone. So that's something that always gets instilled into every single one of us" (Alex, FI, p. 13).

Both Rosa and Alex were raised with very high standards, and the belief that they were very capable and responsible for their own success. Rosa and Alex clearly saw education as a means of reaching their goals.

The other six students were all born in Denver. Of these six students, only two had parents not born in the United States. However, neither Rene, nor Stevin had contact with

these two parents. The parents with whom they lived were born in the states, as were their grandparents.

Maria and Eloy at times voiced concerns with doing “too well” academically because of peer pressures. Consequently, they were somewhat susceptible to their environment. They were inclined to settle for grades below their ability. Still, both Maria and Eloy had parents who continued to push and support them. They were not as vulnerable to their peers.

Like Rosa, Maria was very proud of her heritage and told stories about her great-great grandparents who owned a great deal of land in Texas. She also recounted a highly romantic tale of love between her great-grandparents.

Both Eloy and Maria graduated from high school and are now in college and both see education as a means to their goals. Maria is majoring in math and biology and plans to be either a math teacher or a doctor. Eloy is majoring in business and hopes to own his own store. They delight in learning for the sake of learning, a trait they acquired from their stepfather.

The four students who dropped out of school found themselves in predicaments defined by Casas (1995) “school difficulties, substance use, delinquency, and sexual activity” (p. 233). They also seemed to fit Ogbu’s category of “involuntary minorities [who] do not really believe that they have an equal chance with White Americans to get ahead through education....They do not work hard enough in school to get the education that will help them get ahead” (Ogbu, 1987, p. 325). These four allowed themselves to

join peer groups whose interest in school and studies was nonexistent. While each student's own interpretation and reaction to their environment does make them "more or less accomplices to their own success or failure" (Ogbu, 1987, p. 317), their resilience is supplemented by the support of adults around them. When this is lacking, peer influence dominates.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESILIENCE TO ADVERSITY

A 1996 study by the U.S. Department of Education, entitled *Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty*, states that “students in urban schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantaged students appear to have the lowest rates of graduation” (p. 33). Graduating from high school is significant because “an individual’s productivity, employment prospects, and risk of falling into poverty are often linked to the quality and extent of their schooling” (p. 36).

It is a well-documented fact that rates of employment are higher and more stable for those with higher educational attainment. While 70% of men ages 25 to 34 who did not complete high school were employed in 1991, 85% of men in this age group who had completed high school were employed. Higher rates of employment were found among those who attended college: 89% of those with one to three years of college were employed, as were 92% of those with four or more years of college. In addition, the employment rates of college graduates remained stable during downturns in the economy over the last two decades but declined for those with less education. (p. 31).

High school graduation is the first step. While statistics show that Hispanic young adults are more likely to drop out of high school than their non-Hispanic peers (See Chapters 1 and 2), some Hispanic youngsters are very successful despite attending urban schools and living in poverty. These students tend to be very resilient.

As demonstrated in Chapters 4 and 5, young adults' resiliency is affected by the support of adults and peers. Particular characteristics of families, schools, communities, and peer groups tend to promote or hamper resiliency in young adults. Still, some students from the same families, from the same socioeconomic conditions, and from the same schools, respond differently. Resiliency can be very individualistic, very personal. Henderson and Milstein (1996) state that "the process of resiliency development is, in fact, the process of life, given that all people must overcome stress and trauma and disruption in the process of living" (p. 4).

While developing resiliency may be universal, young adults from backgrounds of poverty have more adversity to overcome, and they often, but not always, are more susceptible to succumbing to negative influences and a sense of futility and hopelessness. Such a phenomenon raise the questions:

- 1) What seems to make the difference?
- 2) What resiliency characteristics are apparent in successful students?
- 3) Why are these students resilient?
- 4) Can "critical turning points" positively impact the lives of students who have dropped out, enabling them to return and complete high school?

As Winfield (1991) noted while quoting Rutter: "Particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms operating at key turning points in people's lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path" (pp. 7-8). This chapter will focus

on individual characteristics that facilitate resiliency, or what Henderson and Milstein (1996) refer to as the “internal protective factors” (p. 8) (Figure 6.1).

1. Feelings of self-worth and self-confidence
2. Self-efficacy; resourcefulness; personal competence; demonstrating life skills of critical thinking and problem solving.
3. Positive view of personal future; sense of purpose: hope
4. Self-motivation to achieve in school and life.
5. Autonomy; independence
6. Persistence; impulses control; delayed gratification
7. Social competence; ability to form positive relationships
8. Calculated risk taker
9. Flexibility
10. Sense of humor
11. Personal integrity, sense of responsibility
12. Supportive of others; gives of service to others.

**Figure 6.1. Environmental protective factors: characteristics of family, schools, and peer groups that foster resiliency. Source: Adapted from Henderson’s and Milstein’s (1996), using Richardson (1990) and Bernard (1991), with additional ideas from Noddings (1988), Mayeroff (1971), Winfield (1991), and Rutter (1987).**

During the interviews, the eight young adults were asked directly if they considered themselves resilient. (“Resilient” was defined as focusing on the positive and letting go of the negative, bouncing back from problems.)

Six subjects answered “yes.” Stevin said “sometimes” and added “Yeah, I try to [handle problems and move on.]” Maria said “no” and clarified that with “it depends.” She explained that she had a difficult time “focusing on the positive and letting go of the negative [when it came to] worrying about money” (Maria, FI, p. 5). Maria’s comments were directed toward her current college situation rather than high

school, when she lived at home and her parents took care of her. Now she laughs “When you’re sitting there worrying about how you’re going to pay next month’s rent, the phone bill, the electricity, you know, everything on top of that. It does take away from well, ‘I have a test tomorrow’” (p. 11). Still, Maria manages to find a way to make it all work.

The resiliency question was followed by a set of 30 adjectives (Figure 6.2) chosen to represent specific aspects of resiliency. (Figure 6.3). The students were asked to check (xx) each characteristic or personality trait they felt applied to them personally. (See Appendix for Final Interviews.) The results showed only two characteristics were viewed as universally applicable: all eight students checked “self-confident” and “responsible.” Three other adjectives were selected by seven of the eight students: “creative” (Theo was the exception), “dependable” (Stevin said “no”), and “supportive of others” (again, Stevin was the exception). The remaining 25 adjectives were selected by six or less students, each choice reflecting the student’s current sense of self.

While there is some consistency between the four students who dropped out and the four students who were academically successful, there is greater consistency in terms of all eight students’ long-term vision of their future. The four students who dropped out of school now feel very strongly about eventually completing high school. They cited critical turning points in their lives that fueled this ambition. Consequently, resiliency traits are often latent in the four students who dropped out.

The difference between the academically successful students and those who were unsuccessful seems to be timing, that is, *when* they exhibit resiliency characteristics.

To further explain individual students' thinking in terms of resiliency, this chapter is divided into five main sections:

- 1) Feelings of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and independence (focusing on Alex);
- 2) Life skills, problem solving: learning from both successes and failures  
(comments from Jose);
- 3) Positive view of the future, sense of purpose: hope (focusing on Maria and Rosa);
- 4) Sense of humor (Eloy and Stevin);
- 5) Critical turning points (conversations with Rene, Theo, and Jose);

Students' personal experiences of poverty, specifically, individual perspectives of these young adults and why living with poverty has motivated them to grasp opportunities and take charge of their own futures.

The following section examines one student's sense of self-worth. He offers an over-arching sense of confidence, a delight in accepting challenging opportunities, and a continuing ability to create a dynamic world because of his personal strength and resiliency. While these characteristic may equally apply to some of the other seven students, Alex's comments best delineated this section.

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Maria	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>Adjectives that best describe:</b>								
<b>SELF</b>	articulate creative analytical like to observe sense of humor	funny nice out-going creative intelligent	socially competent independent reliable committed problem-solver	ambitious reliable goal-oriented self-motivated considerate	(mom) always been there for me (dad) he's just more concerned now; not involved but concerned	caring loving understanding	hard-working perserving flexible positive negative	nice caring respectful helpful
<b>PARENT(S) (Guardian)</b>	cohesive serious quiet reasonable responsible patient	(mom): nice supportive sensitive reliable (dad): stern intelligent committed socially competent	hard worker pessimist loving generous conservative thinks life is suffering and hard work	(mom) charming sympathetic tries to see from everybody's point of view view (dad) intelligent always trying to learn		independent hard-working never having the time to enjoy quality time with her children	good hard-working there trustworthy capable	nice caring helpful honest dependable
<b>TEACHER(S) (describing one)</b>	pretty big kid reasonable willing to listen understanding responsible with her teaching/funny	(describing one) extrovert funny socially competent positive	helpful resourceful respectable committed positive		understanding caring trying	supportive resourceful focused committed intelligent	nice helpful respectful confident	
<b>FRIENDS</b>	best friend: quiet adapts/reliable responsible as far as her education good sense of humor self-motivated	risk-takers funny optimistic intelligent reliable	funny outgoing sensitive humble positive		left blank: "They-re just.....they never were a big part of my life."	sense of humor resourceful problem-solves supportive committed	active helpful dependable	

**Figure 6.2. Descriptive adjectives.**

	Alex	Eloy	Rosa	Maria	Jose	Rene	Stevin	Theo
<b>RESILIENT</b>	yes	yes	yes	no, it depends	yes	yes	sometimes	yes
<b>#1 Self-confident</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx
<b>Intelligent</b>	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx		xx
<b>#2 Resourceful</b>	xx		xx	xx	xx		xx	
<b>Capable</b>	xx	xx		xx	xx		xx	xx
<b>Problem-solver</b>	xx		xx	xx	xx		xx	
<b>Insightful</b>		xx		xx	xx		xx	
<b>Creative</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	
<b>#3 Positive</b>	xx	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx	
<b>Enthusiastic</b>			xx	xx	xx	xx		
<b>Optimistic</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		
<b>#4 Self-motivated</b>	highly	usually	highly	usually	highly	highly	somewhat	highly
<b>Focused</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx			xx
<b>Committed</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx				
<b>Goal-oriented</b>	xx	xx	xx	xxxx	xx			xx
<b>\$5 Autonomous</b>	xx	xx	yes		yes	xx		
<b>Independent</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes/no	yes/no
<b>#6 Perserverant</b>					xx			
<b>Patient</b>				xx	xx	xx	xx	
<b>Hard worker</b>					xx	xx	xx	
<b>#7 Socially competent</b>	I'm just doing what I need to do.	yes	yes	sometimes	yes	yes	no	yes
<b>#8 Calculated risk-taker</b>	xx	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx	
<b>#9 Flexible</b>	xx		xx		xx	xx	xx	xx
<b>#10 Sense of humor</b>	xx	xx	xx		xx	xx	xx	
<b>#11 Responsible</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>Dependable</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
<b>Reliable</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		yes
<b>#12 Supportive of others</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		xx
<b>Sensitive</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		xx
<b>Compassionate</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		xx
<b>Empathetic</b>	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx		xx

**Figure 6.3. Subjects' self-perceptions.**

### **Self-confidence, Efficacy and Independence**

Alex seemed to have been born self-confident; at least he projected that image. He credited his academic success to his own initiative and motivation. "I think it's more or less me. My friends have very little to do with, um, pretty much my decisions. I pretty much make my own decisions. I'm pretty independent, so I rarely go to my parents when I need something" (Alex, p. 9). In fact, Alex was so confident in his own decision making, he chose both the middle school and the high school he wanted to attend.

Well, for elementary school, um, whatever my mother picked out was just fine with me, because I wasn't aware. Um, after I started there and started, you know, given the option of going to middle schools or, I thought of Horace Mann. I think the main reason I decided to go there was because of the classes and most of the teachers that I knew. So, once I went there, it wasn't as difficult to adapt to the new system as it would've been if I had gone to any other school. (Alex, p. 9)

While most Horace Mann students matriculated to North High School, Alex did not. He analyzed his options and chose a computer magnet school across town. His thinking was consistent with participants in a study by Gandara (1994). These subjects were "acutely aware of differences in opportunities that existed between schools" (p. 22) and made decisions accordingly.

Over the years I've seen how kids really changed a lot, and I um, I don't think it was [North HS] going to be offering me what I wanted from a high school education and, since I saw computers were becoming a little more technology advanced and a lot more people [were] wanting careers with computers, I decided to go here. (p. 10)

Asked about the source of his resiliency, Alex responded,

Well, I think it's before my mother got married to my stepfather. We were, like, living me, and my sister and my mother, for a while just by ourselves, so um, she worked, so, I guess I kinda matured a little bit and developed my own self esteem, confidence and so, I would really make my own decisions and I'd occasionally ask my parents, my mother and sometimes my father if I ever needed help and something like that. Not very often. (p. 9)

Alex's initial role model was his mother. This is also consistent with Gandara's (1994) study, which found that "high achieving subjects reported overwhelming that their mothers were either the dominant force in their homes, or had at least equal influence as their fathers on family decisions" (p. 33).

Alex explained what he considered his typical reaction to problems:

If something didn't go my way or it wasn't what I expected or I didn't do as well as I thought I would, or wanted to. It would frustrate me a lot, so I'd go out for walks. I pretty much kept everything to myself. I very rarely go to my mother or my father for help. And, um, eventually I'd get back on track. It wouldn't take me very long. And I'd try to resolve it myself and, once I got to that point, I kept on going instead of [giving up; I'd] try to do it again. So it was kinda like a cycle. I guess it's the fact that my mother wasn't around pretty much when I was younger, so I kinda learned to fend for myself. (p. 21)

Alex saw a great deal of merit in his ability to resolve conflicts, and he also saw this trait as one of the critical differences between those who stay in school and those who drop out. He labeled this trait "mentality," and added, "I like to challenge myself and most of the other people don't. It's like most people just want things to go their way, and when they don't I just see them get really frustrated and upset" (p. 35).

Alex depended upon himself. "From what I've seen and what I've had to experience in life, the only person I can really depend on is *me*. Every once in awhile, I will get some help from other people, but if I want to get things done, I have to go out and do

them” (Alex, FI, p. 5). He strongly believed in his own effort, but he was not afraid of failing or of trying something different. Alex felt it is “more important to try than to see how good you are. Because if you don’t try, then you’ll never know if you’re actually good at anything or not” (Alex, FI, p. 9). Alex believed in taking calculated risks, but he was also quick to note that there are some mistakes he does not need to make.

There are things that I’ve seen other people do that I don’t want to do. And I’ve seen the consequences to it. And I don’t want to go through that. I’ve seen many kids my age have kids. And I don’t want to have a kid right now. And you know it takes away from being a kid. And I don’t think I’m ready to actually take on the full adult responsibility yet. And I don’t want it yet, so....

If you don’t want to stumble on the same rock, then you’d better learn from your mistakes [or those of others...] (Alex, FI, p. 15)

Efficacy was Alex’s middle name. He believed that he created opportunities in part because he is analytical and systematic. “I like to plan ahead and make sure that whatever I plan either goes through or somehow I assure myself that I am going to get there somehow or during some time. So I like to plan things out. It just helps me organize things and makes things a lot easier to follow” (FI, p. 7). His plan included graduating from college.

Alex used five adjectives to describe himself: articulate, analytical, observant, creative, and a risk-taker. In a later question, he added sense of humor. These are all characteristics of a resilient person, as are the traits he lists for the people that are most involved in his life (See Figure 6.1). He described his best friend as being reliable, responsible, self-motivated, and adaptable, and noted that she has a good sense of humor. His favorite teacher was funny, reasonable, listened well, and was responsible with her

teaching. He noted that his parents were also responsible, patient, reasonable, and “cohesive” — all perhaps unusual descriptors for an adolescent to choose for his parents, but then Alex, perhaps, was not the typical adolescent. He was, however, very resilient.

### **Critical Thinking: Learning from Successes and Failures**

Jose was familiar with failure, having dropped out of high school after his freshman year. But being labeled a failure sparked his resiliency.

Like at the end of middle school and high school, when somebody is voted “the mostly likely to fail” that just makes them want to do good more just to prove everybody wrong, you know. That’s how I look at it. I mean it, it, it...it hurts, you know, kinda when teachers make you feel dumb or something....[but] that just made me want to learn more and do better. (Jose, FI, p. 2)

At home life was not always easy, either. His parents dropped out of school when he was born, and they later divorced. For a short time he lived with his grandfather and a step-grandmother of whom he was not particularly fond. “My mom used to drink....So did my dad” (Jose, p. 5). Still, Jose strongly believed “life is what you make of it, not what your parents make for you. Not what anybody does. It’s all about you” (p. 13). In terms of role-models, Jose looked to himself.

I tried to do my own thing, look up to myself. ’cause if I’m my own role model, then I don’t want to do nothing to lower my own views on myself. Like if you look up to somebody like a basketball player or somebody, and then like they mess up, you know, like be caught with drugs, or something. Then you like “dang, that’s my role model that just did that!” So I look up to myself, and I have no problems. (Jose, FI, p. 4)

Jose acknowledged responsibility for himself and for creating his own opportunities. He regarded failures as good lessons, noting that if you've already experienced the negative outcome you'll appreciate success when it comes. Likewise, he appreciated learning from others' mistakes:

...About other people, you can learn from other people's mistakes, too. That's what I did a lot, a lot of. I listened to everybody, everybody's regrets. That sticks with me, so I don't got to go down that path to find out that dropping out of high school is hard when you have a kid, and girl, and all that, you know. I don't want to do that. I already know people that made them mistakes and told me. When people succeed too, you can look at that and you can gain from that too. It just all depends on how open your mind is. If you just want to learn from *your own* successes and failures, it's going to take you a long time to learn everything you need to know about life. If you can learn from everybody else's mistakes, too, then, it would be less time. (Jose, FI, p. 7)

While Jose was aware of adversity, he tended to focus on the positive:

Temptations I mean...I can't sit here and tell everything, you know, all the negative influences...you should focus on the positive, you know, not the things you do wrong, but if you focus on the things you do right, and improve on them, then you'll get better in them other areas where the negativity is trying to get you. You'll be more stronger." (Jose, FI, p. 5)

While success was important to Jose, he offered a philosophical perspective on what success and failure meant to him.

Success is just as hard to deal with as failure is, you know. It's just almost the same, except different people around you. When you fail you've got the same people around you telling you off "you're always going to fail; you're always going to fail." But when you succeed them same people is trying to be your friend, you know what I'm saying? They try to be all for you. So you have, I don't know, you don't really need to fail often, 'cause success is hard too. (Jose, FI, p. 8)

Jose defined success as “doing good at what you choose to do. Whether it’s being a criminal, a bank robber, or a businessman, or a banker. Success is being good at what you do, no matter what you do” (p. 11). He equated happiness and success:

You’ve got to be happy doing what you’re doing to be successful, ’cause you could be the best anything in the world, but if you’re not happy, then you’re not successful. You could be the best and not be successful. Like John Elway, you know, I could look at him and say he was the best for how many years before he won a Super Bowl. He’s got a grip of records, and stuff, just by being, just by being the best. Now that he’s got success, it’s like, it’s complete now. He’s been happy through it all. So that’s what made a difference for him. He’s been happy. He wanted to do it. (Jose, FI, p. 15)

Jose’s ambition was to complete high school and continue developing his artistic talents. He took the initiative to return to school by auditioning at Denver School of the Arts (DSA), recognizing that “if you want something, you got to get it yourself. There are people that’ll help you, but not if you don’t help yourself first” (p 25). “In high school there’s too much going on for a teacher to be worried about just one kid...to be readmitted, I realized I’ve got to do it on my own and there will be couple of teachers that will help me, if I am lucky. Mostly it’s me.” (p. 12).

That decision bolstered his self-confidence and his sense of resourcefulness; ultimately it changed his life, offering him a sense of purpose and hope for the future.

Well, I was going to Byers, and they was moving Byers. And I don’t know what I would have done, because I didn’t want to go to their new building. So I’d of probably ended up dropping out. And a teacher told me they were going to open visual arts [at Denver School or the Arts], so I ought to go and audition. I had to catch a bus everywhere; do everything by myself. My mom didn’t help. I went and took my portfolio, dropped it off, auditioned, came here to my audition. Did everything by myself. (Jose, FI, p. 3)

Jose lives in a different world now. Success has become a major component in his life. He is motivated to achieve in school and in life,

'Cause when you start to succeed and stuff, you can't stop, you know. Like me, I started to do good in school, and I can't stop here. I want more. You get hungry when you succeed. You want more, more. Whatever it is, whether it's sports. Somebody can win the Super Bowl and they succeeded. They're at the top of their game. They can't do nothing else. But they want more. They want to do it again. That's how I look at it. (Jose, FI, p. 8)

The next section reviews the values inherent in looking at the world positively. Having a sense of purpose offers hope. Hope is the foundation for realizing dreams.

### **Positive View of the Future, Sense of Purpose, Hope**

Maria and Rosa always planned to graduate college; finishing high school was never an issue. Both young adults look forward to careers involving math and science. High school was only the first step for them. Both were very self-confident, resourceful, and focused. They were likewise independent, responsible, and dependable individuals who were supportive and caring toward others. Both subjects exhibited these traits in their conversations; likewise, they saw these characteristics in themselves (See Figure 6.3).

Maria noted that her family would not even consider allowing her to drop out of school. "I mean, of course, I could of but I just didn't want to. I wanted to get through high school, you know. I guess, I thought only dumb people didn't graduate from high school. (laugh) That is what I thought at first. I never even saw myself as not graduating from high school. I always saw myself graduating" (Maria, p. 18)

Maria acknowledged her family for part of her motivation, and also friends who were currently attending college, adding “I am going to get through college whatever I do. I know that much” (p. 24). Her plan involved majoring in math, minoring in biology, and obtaining a teaching certificate.

For a while I’m going to be a teacher and that will be great, because I know I’m going to love it, you know. I know I’m going to love going over to the chalkboard and teaching math (laugh). But aside from that, um, (pause) one day I’d like to be a doctor, if I can get there. And it’s going to take awhile, but... I want to make a lot of money. That’s what I really want to do. (Maria, FI, p. 11)

Teaching fits in because it’s something that I like to do, you know. That’s where it fits in. Making a lot of money is where the doctor fits in. (FI, p. 11)

Maria described herself as ambitious, reliable, goal-oriented, self-motivated, and considerate — all resilient traits. (See Figure 6.3) She often spoke of her parents as special individuals who are positive role models. She described her mom as charming, sympathetic, and empathetic; she considered her stepdad very intelligent and also eager to learn. Maria adopted characteristics from both.

Like Maria, Rosa had definite plans for her future; this resolve goes back at least as far as grade school. As she explained to one of her teachers then, “Well, I want to make it to college and graduate from college...but I have to go on scholarships because, I’m like, my family has no money” (p. 20). Now that she is in high school, Rosa has been applying for assistance and getting positive responses. When asked to describe her ideal self in her ideal future, she says it “would probably be me, just like I am now, but working

in a hospital or in a clinic” (Rose, FI, p. 14). Her specific ambition — to become a doctor — will involve quite a bit of school and studying beyond college.

I hope to get my medical degree and become a physician. I might do pediatrics or I might just do general practitioner. But I don’t know if I want to open my own practice. I think I would rather work in a hospital where there’s more people, ’cause I like to be around people. (Rosa, FI, p. 14)

With her 4.18 average on a 4.0 scale and her relentless drive to learn and achieve, Rosa will probably realize her dreams. She attributed academic success to effort.

If you have the ability to be successful, yeah, that’s great, but you have to put in the effort. And I think, you know, success is effort, too. You have to make an effort to be successful. It’s not just going to come to you... with academics that’s the same thing. You can be the brightest person in the world. You can be a genius, but if you don’t put effort in, you’re not going to be academically successful, or you’re just not going to be successful. (Rosa, FI, p. 15)

Asked why she was willing to put in the effort when so many other students were not, she responded:

That’s a self thing, it’s an inner-self. If you yourself want to be successful, you’re going to work at effort. You have to, I think you have to realize that success is an effort. Success is an effort you have to make, in order to.... It’s like a chain. And I think I realized that I have to put effort in, so that I can be successful. And a lot of people don’t realize that. They think (changes voice intonation) “Okay success is just going to fall upon me. If life wants me to be successful then God is going to throw success at me.” But he’s not. He’s just going to say “Look, here’s opportunities. Put effort into it and you shall be blessed, or be successful.” (Rosa, FI, pp 15-16)

Rosa defined success much like Jose did. Happiness and success are equated.

I think success is something that makes you as person feel good. It brings content[ment], and it’s just something that you’re happy that you did. Your life is successful when you’re happy, basically. Success is happiness. . . Small things make some people happy, and makes them successful. And then there are some people that have these high, high, star-reaching expectations, and that is what success is to them. But when they reach that point, then they’re

just as happy as that person whose expectations weren't as high, or whose success were fulfilled in a smaller way. (Rosa, FI, p. 15)

Also, like Jose, Rosa understood the value of failure. She personally noticed how much she discovers when she takes a risk. Rosa sees life as "a whole trial and error learning experience. You try something, if you fail, then you know, okay well next time I'll do it differently" (FI, p. 11). Like Marvin and Jose, she is also observant of others and learns from their experiences.

I think you learn more by making errors than you learn by just having it perfect the first time, 'cause the first time you may learn by doing it a certain way, but then if you make an error, then you discover something new. So you discover new things by making errors.

You may sit there and you know that teacher told you "program it this way, like this." And then you program something else and then you get colors and all kinds of new stuff. And like whoa! I missed up the program but I got something new out of it. (Rosa, FI, p. 11)

Rosa goes as far as saying, "You don't learn anything if you did it right. I mean, you know that you did it right" (p. 11).

When people say, "Well, I haven't failed at anything in my life." Well then you don't know anything about life. And failing and succeeding that always something that you have to have, can have. If you fail at something then you'll have the satisfaction of succeeding in something else. Or maybe trying it again and then succeeding. So then you get both views the failing and the succeeding, instead of just success. If you succeed all your life, when you finally fail, you're going to be really disappointed. And that's something you should learn. (FI, p. 11)

When asked, "then you will know how to deal with it and how to solve the problem?" she laughed and added, "Or how to play it off? No?" (p. 11). Both Maria and Rosa demonstrated good senses of humor throughout the interview process.

For five descriptive adjectives, Rosa chose: socially competent, independent, reliable, committed, and a problem-solver (See Figure 6.3). She identified with friends who were funny, outgoing, sensitive, humble, and positive. Her favorite teachers were helpful, resourceful, respectable, committed, and positive. Typically Rosa surrounds herself with resilient individuals. However, while she described her mother as exceptionally generous, supportive, and loving throughout, Rosa also characterized her mom as depressed and pessimistic. Perhaps this trait caused Rosa to amplify her efforts to stay positive. Rosa certainly exudes energy, vitality, and optimism.

The next section discusses humor, certainly a major factor in the life of any resilient person, and a trait that, when shared, increases geometrically.

### **Sense of Humor**

Eloy liked to laugh. He described himself as funny, nice, outgoing, creative, and intelligent (See Figure 6.3). He was certainly all those adjectives, as well as very self-confident, capable, committed, independent, and responsible. Eloy mentioned that in high school he would often “jump around and be class clown” (p. 18) He also appreciated a sense of humor in his friends, whom he saw as risk-takers who are funny, optimistic, intelligent, and reliable. His favorite teachers were classified as socially competent, positive, extroverted, and, of course, “funny.” Eloy enjoyed teachers who engaged in clever repartee with their students, teachers who could “mess around,” “joke with people” (p. 16), and make class fun.

Eloy is serious when he needs to be and was paying for college by working at a computer store as a technical support representative. He was learning rapidly, and states, "They give you everything you need to know. You just have to grasp onto the concept and, as long as you're good, they'll keep you" (Eloy, FI, p. 4). Eloy was good.

As Alex and Jose, Maria, and Rosa discussed in the previous sections, Eloy sees merits in both success and failure. He questions the semantics of the word failure, especially if it is used casually. "I think when you fail, you know, a lot of times when you fail, you aren't. You might go to the limits you have at the certain time and then you learn, so you can set your limits higher and you keep on going and going from there" (Eloy, FI, p. 13). That kind of thinking provided Eloy powerful resources to challenge his abilities, expand his expectations, and reach beyond his current goals.

Alex liked to take himself with a "grain of salt or sugar." Rosa, Jose, Rene, and Stevin also checked a "sense of humor" as one of their descriptive characteristics. While Eloy, Alex, Rosa, and Stevin appreciated their friends' humor, only Eloy and Alex related to their teacher's sense of humor, and both chose to describe just one particular teacher. Perhaps their other teachers were not apt to laugh as readily, if at all.

Stevin was very direct in noting that what he considered funny, others often did not, like the time he went to visit his new high school. He and his friends were lighting matches and saying, "like the best, we'll strike anywhere." He was sent to the administrators office, and told "Man, you don't even come here and you're already getting in trouble" (p. 30). Stevin said he was always in trouble. When asked how that made him

feel, he replied, “I thought it was kinda funny at the time. Yeah, I think some things are funny, even though other people don’t...(p. 30). Stevin definitely exhibited a droll, active sense of humor.

Stevin describes himself as hard-working, persevering, flexible, and depending upon the circumstances, sometimes positive, sometimes negative. His current teachers are supportive, resourceful, focused, committed, and intelligent — all strong characteristics of resilient individuals who happen to be teaching resilient and needy students. Stevin considers his friends resourceful, supportive, committed, problem-solvers, and, of course, they have a sense of humor (See Figure 6.2 and 6.3).

### **Critical Turning Points for Subjects who Dropped Out**

Sometimes the timing of interventions by supportive family, teachers, and community has a strong and definite impact. For the following three students, family members made a difference.

Rene decided to go back to school after conversations with her brother, who has recently accumulated 49 hours toward a bachelor’s degree in psychology — all while incarcerated. She talked with him on Wednesdays and visits him on Sundays. While in jail he matured, according to Rene. He went to jail at 16 and was 21 at the time of the interviews. He provided one of Rene’s strongest motivations to return to school. “’Cause I want to hopefully be done with, um, getting my diploma by the time he gets out. Or

hopefully, you know, by the time he goes to college and so I can go to college with him. So that's kinda my reason for coming back" (p. 17).

Rene described herself as caring, loving, and understanding. Friends' qualities are left blank. She stated that her mother is hard-working, independent, and that she never took the time to enjoy quality moments with her children. (See Figure 6.1) "She was always either out, grading papers, or doing something sometimes, or when she was in college doing work" (p. 11) Still Rene gave her mother a great deal of credit as a role-model. "I see my mom at work, at home, in both places. So that gave me a sense of ability. She was a single mother doing it, so that's what makes me want to do it" (p.14). Her mother was obviously resilient.

Rene was pregnant, which made her mother's example even more apparent. It also gave Rene a second reason for finishing school: having the financial ability to provide for her coming baby. While Rene wanted to graduate from high school before the baby arrives, that was unlikely, considering the credits she still needed.

Theo saw himself as nice, caring, respectful, and helpful. He describes his parents similarly, adding honest and dependable. He considers his friends active, helpful, and dependable. In Figure 6.1 which lists characteristics of resiliency, Theo checked only 9 of 24 possibilities, the least of anyone. Theo's life has not been easy.

When asked what made him decide to go back to school, Theo answered with five short phrases: "just going to a detention center. And didn't want to be in that

environment. Didn't have no freedom. Wanted more freedom. Wanted to have a diploma, a good job, and a better life" (p. 19).

More than anything, he hoped "to get a diploma and a real good job" (Theo, FI, p. 6). He defined success as doing "what you have to do to be the right person, and not doing anything wrong" (FI, p. 6). Theo spoke highly of his grandmother. His sister was also a strong role-model. She graduated from West High School and was studying criminal psychology in college, a career path Theo also found interesting. Based on his own experiences he felt he could talk with kids who are in trouble, offering his own insights.

Jose, whose resiliency was discussed earlier, gave both of his parents credit for his decision to return to school. He said his mother encouraged him, motivated him, and pushed him when necessary. His promise to his mother when he was young to graduate tugged at his sense of guilt and responsibility. His dad gave him a taste of the real world.

I think my dad, he's the one that made me realize that I need school. You know, he wanted me to go work with him in the yard one day. I could've gone and done a tattoo and made more money doing tattoos than I would've done shoveling all day, you know, so I was like, "Wait a minute, this ain't working out. I gotta go to school and get a career." Working construction or whatever, that ain't the way to go. You get paid good money but you gotta bust your ass — it ain't worth it. (Jose, p. 16)

Jose was very talented artistically, and finally recognized that formal training and education would provide a wider variety of opportunities.

I found it's more fun, life's more fun to do what you enjoy doing than, and when you get paid for it, then it's even better. Yeah, what I'm trying to do

now, is just basically get all kinds of options, that way when I graduate, I can make up my mind, or talk to my family or whatever to see what they think would be the best way. (Jose, p. 16)

Life has gotten much better for Jose.

The final section of this chapter takes a serious look at adversity born of poverty from the eyes of the eight young adults who participated in this study. All eight regarded the effects of poverty as something they wanted to avoid, and all were working toward that goal with varying means and measures of success.

### **Overcoming Adversity: Resiliency in Action**

Rene, who originally dropped out, knew what it means to be on welfare. Her aunt, who often functioned as her surrogate mother, was on welfare for 18 years. “That’s something I don’t want to do. I don’t want my child to see me on that. I don’t want them to be put down because of it. And I don’t want my child to like think that’s what’s right, you know. That’s just my feeling” (Rene, p. 24).

Rene’s feelings about welfare were very strong and definite. She wanted no part of it. As she stated “I know I could work. I could learn. I could read.” (p. 24).

Toward the end of the interview process, Rene began to make a serious effort to complete her high school degree. The effort was not easy. Rene recalled a rebuke from her brother.

We were visiting him in jail. He sat there and yelled at me, and called me some names and made me feel really bad. And I wanted to show him that I could do it. Yeah, it’s kinda hard, you know, for him to sit there and yell at me, and say I’m making it up, when he’s in jail, and he’s not out here dealing with

everything I've dealt with. So, that was just... but it's like, alright, he has a point. Because it like you don't want to end up on welfare and all this and that. So, he's right. I don't. (Rene, p. 23).

Rene agreed with her brother. "Yeah, so, it's like, "alright, you go back to school" (p. 23).

Stevin, who also originally dropped out, said his parents wanted him to have a better life than they had. "My mom, she's always like, 'Well, go to school, 'cause look at me.' My dad pretty much said the same thing, too" (p. 37).

Since they didn't go to school, they said they had it rough so, they want me to have it better so they tell me to do it... Well, their parents they didn't go to school. They probably told them, but I don't think they were too, they didn't really care about it, 'cause they didn't go back. They just go get a job somewhere and that's it. (Stevin p. 32)

Stevin was ready to break that cycle. He wanted a better job where he could use his mind and his talents and be paid for his efforts. He acknowledged that his dad worked hard all his life at what Stevin regarded as a boring job. He stated, "Dad's a hard worker, but I don't want to emulate [him]. I don't want to be like a hard worker like him, though. That's all he did, his whole life, just work. Yeah, I just don't want to sit down and do the same thing for my whole life for some [minimum wage]" (Stevin, FI, p. 3).

Lack of money was an issue during Stevin's childhood. Stevin's family moved and he attended a school he disliked, with students who fought often (See Chapter 4: Peer Influences). When asked about getting out of that neighborhood, he replied, "It's kinda hard to move, if you ain't got money and stuff" (p. 17). His only option at that time was to adjust. "I don't know, you just gotta handle it. You just learn to, I guess. Yeah, to really

put up with it and just hang around other people, maybe. Later on, I think later on, I started becoming one of those people, too” (p. 18).

Part of resiliency, is flexibility, blending in with the culture and adapting. For the younger Stevin, that meant hanging out and bonding with gang members. Now, older and more mature, Stevin was, likewise, more independent and ready to complete his high school diploma so he could continue on to a technical school that taught skilled trades.

Stevin added that his parents had begun to suggest he simply “get out” of school, probably because he seemed to have been going to high school for a very long time (p. 18). Stevin laughed. “But all throughout my life, they’re always like, go to school, go to school. That’s all I heard. All right! I’m going, I’m going!” (p. 37).

Like Stevin’s mother who wanted a better life for her child, and pushed her son, Rosa’s mother also expressed regrets, and from an early age she told Rosa her story. She encouraged Rosa to finish school, go to college, and make a success of her life, so that Rosa would not constantly worry about money, as her mother did. Rosa took this advice to heart, and has been academically successful.

I know what my eye-opener was: my mom. She just, the story that she told me, that, you know, she regrets not finishing her high school and going on to college and she tells me that she could’ve just gotten ahead and maybe gotten into a profession and you know, easily became a teacher in Mexico or something like that and she says, ‘It’s just something that she chose....She couldn’t finish it... (p. 30)

Rosa vowed she would be different, as did her younger brothers and sisters.

[Mom] told me all along that “I want the best for you.” And, you know, she doesn’t want us to be flipping hamburgers for the rest of our lives. You can flip hamburgers for a few years during high school, but it shouldn’t be

something you have to do for a life time and, you know, I've always, just I know after school, after I finish school, and I want to have a job, where I want to be there. I think it's kinda miserable that my mom has to work a job that she doesn't want to be there, but has to because she's got five kids and has to pay rent and bills and everything else and buys, puts clothes on shoes on our backs. And, to me, it's something I don't wanna live like that. I don't wanna worry about, "Gosh, what am I gonna eat tomorrow?" Or, "Gosh, you know, I don't have money to buy my kids school clothes this year, "or, you know, something...

It gives me long-term goals. It gives me, I know, my mom has worked so hard all her life, you know, to live, to raise us to be the best that we can be. (Rosa, p. 30)

Academically successful Maria also had very strong feelings about improving her socioeconomic situation. Throughout the interview she mentioned worrying about money and paying bills.

It is just I want a better life for myself. That is what it comes down to, and for my kids when I have them. I don't want to have to struggle. Live paycheck to paycheck, you know. It is not a good way to live. When you are raising kids you want to be able to buy them what they want plus have what you want for yourself. (Maria, p. 7)

Maria took a hard look at reality following high school. She had been given a full scholarship to Metro State College, but freshman year she decided not to go to school. "I mean I went but I really didn't attend. I wasn't trying to do anything. I would rather just go out and go to parties. So I decided well, I will just drop all of my classes, you know, and go have fun" (p. 20) (She laughed). It just did not turn out to be quite so much fun.

"I started working and things just didn't seem to go well. It was the same routine every single day. People at my work were great, but I saw that they were already old and didn't have much going for themselves" (p. 20). Maria had the chance to work with

several engineers, some of whom had just gotten out of college. She found herself “helping them work on a lot of their projects. “ This lead her to decide she “might as well go back and make as much money as they do” (p. 21) (She laughed again). Maria certainly had the math ability to pursue an engineer career.

Maria was also influenced by a close high school friend, one that was not affected by poverty. He offered her a point of view that expanded her thinking.

He was a different class of person than I was used to seeing. If I put it that way, it sounds better. Because his parents had a lot of money and the places where we would go, you know. They had pools in the backyard. That type of life. And I think in between what my parents had always said for me to go to school, and learn, and you know, this and this and that, and between him trying to make sure that I, 'cause he would try and talk to me about my friends who were in gangs, and you know. He was a different perspective than I was used to in my friendships. So I think that that helped me out a lot. (Maria, FI, p. 12)

Maria's friend gave her a glimpse of a different world, one that she had only seen on television. “I think that it did help me a lot to see there were different types of lifestyles out there, you know. You see them on TV, but if you have them right there...” (p. 12).

Maria believed that such an awareness had influenced some of her friends as well.

I think it goes back, maybe to the lifestyle. Not just family lifestyle. That has a large part to do with it. But, I think as far as most of the kids that I've seen that have made it through school, they've *seen how you can be*, you know. Some of their parents are well-off... their families are well-off, their parents do set restrictions or boundaries for them, um, some of them don't... They saw that, you know, they had an opportunity to make money. *To be able to see that you do have the opportunity to make that money.*” (FI, p. 12)

To Maria that made all the difference.

You can't feed your kids and raise a family off of nothing. And that's what I've seen a lot of people, if they drop out of school; they had um, their

parents, just didn't have much money. They weren't living in the best of places. They didn't see that they could make a lot of money, you know. (FI, p. 13)

The next question for Maria was how to get from where she was to where she wanted to be. She decided she could reach her goals through education. "Definitely. I think there are other ways to do it. But it's very labor-intensive work. I mean, gosh, there are some people who don't mind it. And if that's their way of making money, well then go ahead" (p. 13). Maria had other plans.

Not all of Maria's closest friends were rich. Some were quite poor, although one in particular had a lot of possessions, but that was because her mother was an efficient thief.

Well, one of my friends, Angel, her mom was a thief. That is how she made her living. She would go into Target and K-Mart and steal a bunch of stuff and then sell it at the flea market. I mean, Angel had a lot of materialistic things because her mom would always provide for her in that way, but other than, besides that, she really didn't want Angel to do much with her life except to maybe just find a guy that would support her. She didn't really push her into doing much with her life. And Angel was a smart girl, you know. She was a good friend of mine. She was a smart girl. (p. 6)

Asked Angel's mom was ever caught or ever spent time in jail, Maria replied:

A couple of times. She [Angel's mother] had like a bunch of a fake IDs; so she would go into jail under a different identity a lot of times. And her [Angel's] father was in jail in Wisconsin. So, she moved in with me and my family for a while. She started doing a little bit better in school, but we still weren't her real parents or brothers and sisters. (p. 6)

Another good friend, Magdalena, lived in the projects. She was one of six siblings, with another on the way. When she was in 6th grade Magdalena's mother gave her the keys to the car. During middle school, Magdalena had parties at home; her mother

supplied the alcohol. By 9th grade she dropped out of school; a year later she was pregnant.

Another of Maria's friends considered going to school "a burden" (p. 7):

She got pregnant and she has a baby now. She is a good mom. She is from a pretty decent family. Her dad drinks a lot, but I have known other families where the dad drinks a lot, still, she has done pretty well. Her mom doesn't stress education that much, I don't think. (p. 7)

Not all of Maria's stories are dismal.

One of my friends, he is from Mexico. Well, he was born here in the United States but his mother is from Mexico and I think he just saw the way his mom is living and how hard, she is a single parent, how hard she had to struggle just to get by, that he figured that he needed to take care of it himself and to take as much of an opportunity as he had to make his life better. That was his motivation. (p. 7)

Maria was well aware of the effects of poverty. She told many sad stories. In terms of her own life, Maria continued to feel very positive and optimistic. She was personally grounded by love and felt valued. Maria had no doubts about her own self worth. In contrast, her friends did not enjoy stable environments with nurturing parents.

If you've already been raised so long believing that you're really not worth too much for your parents to stay around and, you know, listen to you or your parents don't care what time you come home. I mean these are even some of the parents who really love their children a lot, you know. But they're just not strong enough to discipline them. (Maria, FI, pp. 13-14)

Maria felt that was why a lot of students dropped out of school. "That's where I see most of them...I just wish there was a way. I wish I could tell you something that would really, you know, help those kids" (p. 14). Then she added,

It could have been me, just as easy, you know....And I do have loving parents, and they did set boundaries. But the way I see it, it could have been

me just as easy. (p. 14)

### **Summary of Resilience to Adversity**

The four students who were academically successful exhibited similar tendencies. Alex, Rosa, Maria and Eloy possessed all 12 resiliency characteristics outlined in Figure 6.1 and exhibited these traits during the interview process. They were very self-confident, independent, and motivated to achieve both in school and in life. While they gave their parents, and sometimes their teachers, credit for supporting them, they strongly believed in their own efforts. They were committed, persistent, resourceful, and creative. They were neither afraid of taking risk nor of failure. The later, they assumed, would promote growth and offer new learning experiences. They also readily engaged in laughter, possessing strong senses of humor.

Each of the academically successful students enjoyed challenges, were flexible, and optimistic. They believed positively in their futures. They cared about others, shared a strong sense of responsibility, and were involved in their communities and their schools.

The four students who were not academically successful and subsequently dropped out of school also identified with many of resiliency characteristics listed in Figure 6.1. All four students considered themselves self-confident and responsible. However, during the interviews, the students who dropped out of school seemed less positive, less confident, and less hopeful of their futures than the four successful students. Often, this was a matter of what specific topic they were discussing and what incidents in their home lives or

academic career they were remembering. Some of their references and examples were quite negative and tragic.

The unsuccessful students were often less independent, following peers into problematic situations. They were less involved with school or communities activities. They did not talk about “giving of service to others” except in contexts that were inappropriate. For example, Rene was very supportive of her younger brother, but her care of him was at the sacrifice of her own education.

These four students certainly took risks, but not well-calculated ones. Stevin and Theo both took chances that resulted in incarceration; Rene became pregnant; and, in general, these students lacked a sense of responsibility.

All four unsuccessful students were resourceful and persistent, however, and during the interviews they discussed their intentions to complete high school. In addition, all four were currently attending alternative DPS schools. They viewed their failures as learning experiences and were ready to reach for success. Rene and Stevin had already started the change process when they were first interviewed. Theo was still troubled but was undergoing counseling at his own instigation. Jose’s attitude changed the most from first to last interview. He was reconnecting with his parents and was cognizant of their pride in him.

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The qualitative nature of the current research provides powerful insights into why some Hispanic students of poverty are academically successful and graduate from high school, while others from similar economic and social circumstances maintain a near-failing or failing GPA average and eventually drop out of school.

Moreover, the study offers a unique perspective on the roles of nurturing environments, peer influences, and resiliency to adverse conditions as they relate to student performance and academic decisions. It also provides compelling evidence with respect to the key questions posed in Chapter 1. This evidence, while impressive, is limited, since the study examined only eight cases in a single school district within one city. As such, there is no intent to generalize the findings in the statistical sense to a broader population of students or communities. Rather, the object of this study is to suggest new ways to understand the problem, and to provide insights and ideas that might form the basis for further study.

Although their number is limited, the eight students chosen for this study typify cases of student success and failure in a representative urban area. As such, their stories are powerful and offer insights into the lives of other students elsewhere. This Chapter begins by answering the three main questions posed in Chapter 1. This is followed by a discussion section, which explores six major conclusions:

- Resiliency and nurturing environments are strongly linked.
- Poverty can help create resiliency to adverse conditions.
- Parents are a critical influence in Hispanic children's lives.
- While the decision to dropout of school is gradual, critical turning points provide the impetus to return to school.
- Peers exert strong negative or positive influences.
- Students' perceptions of school safety impact their academic performance and commitment to school.

Literature supporting these conclusions is documented. Likewise, the scarcity of literature in certain areas is noted. New findings or unexpected themes are discussed. Possible interpretations are posed. Limitations of this study are noted. Finally, the last section of this chapter offers suggestions for future research.

### **Key Questions**

***1. Given the same socioeconomic background, what causes some students to drop out and others to graduate?***

The four successful students in this study are apparently motivated to succeed by several factors, including nurturing environments, positive peer influences and intrinsic characteristics of resiliency. Conversely, the lack of success of the four students who dropped out of high school is also influenced by the paucity of these factors in their lives.

*A nurturing environment* is characterized by the unconditional support of parents and/or teachers who serve as role models. These adults inspire, motivate, and encourage. They value students as individuals and help their self-esteem. They are sensitive, understanding, patient, honest, and unpretentious, and they listen well. They promote realistically high expectations for the youths in their care. They help create a sense of safety and security — both physically and mentally. They offer hope and guidance. Trust and respect are reciprocated between adults and youths. These parents and teachers foster growth toward self-actualization.

The eight young subjects participating in the present study stressed four nurturing concepts as pivotal: making commitments, listening, having high but realistic expectations, and finally, ensuring physically and mentally safe schools that foster learning. Henderson and Milstein (1996) list environmental protective factors, and characteristics of family, schools, and peer groups that foster resiliency. This same list could be titled “factors that nurture young adults,” and includes such topics as bonding with dependable adults and peers, encouraging nurturing, supportive relationships, and having high expectations (See Figure 2.4).

The four young adults who were academically successful knew they could depend upon the unconditional support of their parents and/or teachers; the adults in their lives listened to them, encouraged them, and believed in them. The four who dropped out of school felt neglected. They doubted their intrinsic value.

The four successful students set realistic aspirations and attainable goals. Parents and teachers encouraged their educational pursuits. Earning good grades and learning just for the sake of knowledge was important to them. Parents and teachers also set and enforced clear boundaries (rules, norms, and expectations). The students responded by assuming personal responsibility.

In contrast, the four students who dropped out talked about not valuing homework and seldom, if ever, doing it. They did not make connections with their teachers and often felt ostracized from school. Absenteeism was a major problem; ditching became the norm. Parents were often indifferent or not available, and consequently rules were not enforced or, in most cases, even mentioned.

Safety in school was a major issue for the four students who dropped out. They made a point of staying close to friends who offered protection, even if that meant spending time with or joining gangs. Mentally, these students were not engaged in academic learning. Adults did not stabilize their world; they certainly did not provide guidance toward self-actualization, so these four subjects turned to their peers.

*Positive peer influences* offered stability and helped young adults in this study feel connected. Frequent moves disrupted these connections. Until peer relations were reestablished, youths were often perceived as outsiders. Involvement in extracurricular activities paralleled academic achievement; community service activities also promoted responsibility and a sense of serving others. Extracurricular activities allowed students to identify with school and school friends, which, in turn, fostered academic achievement. All

four successful students were involved in school and community activities; the four students who dropped out of school had not made this connection.

The attitudes of fellow students toward studying and academic success also appear to make a difference. All eight young adults discussed the very intense and dominant influences of their peers. They talked about the need to belong, to be a viable part of a group. When students perceived that their peers view success negatively, they often felt compelled to put forth less effort. In middle school, peer acceptance was critical — even if that meant ditching school and getting into trouble. By high school, delinquent behavior resulted in serious consequences, often involving drinking, substance abuse, or trouble with the law.

Many of the academically successful students maintained two distinct peer groups: one consisting of school friends, one comprising neighborhood friends. In doing so, they were able to avoid the potentially negative effects of peer pressure. Gandara (1994) identifies this concern in her dissertation about educationally ambitious Chicanos. While at school they focused on academic success and established relationships with peers who valued education.

The four students who dropped out of school adopted this thinking later, when they returned to alternative schools. Rene, Stevin, and Theo put aside their previous friendships to focus on doing well in school. Jose mentioned the need to separate friends, but not lose them. “There ain’t many of my friends here, from like the neighborhood, whatever, you know. My good friends here to distract me and stuff, I can come over here

and do what I got to do and then go home and do what I go to do” (Jose, p. 17). Jose successfully moved between two cultures.

Parental support and high expectations can override many negative peer influences. However, when parental guidance is lacking, peer influence dominates.

*Resiliency to adverse conditions*, comprising the 12 characteristics listed in Figure 6.1, appears to be key to the successful students. Although unsuccessful students may exhibit some of these characteristics, they are demonstrated inconsistently, if at all.

## ***2. What creates resiliency to adverse conditions?***

More than any other factor, parental involvement appears to engender resiliency. The four successful students were grounded by love and valued by their parent(s) or stepparents. They were encouraged and nurtured, and pushed when necessary. Likewise, they were respected by their teachers and often took accelerated classes where expectations were highest. Safety in school was not an issue for them. Their school peers were similarly motivated. While they enjoyed neighborhood friends, they distinctly separated activities with these peers from school commitments.

Alex and Rosa learned to assume responsibility early; both were oldest children and both were raised by single mothers who relied upon them. Both were born outside the United States. While still quite young, Alex and Rosa had been taunted by other youngsters for being Mexican and different. Such situations developed their resiliency.

Specifically, Rosa told a story of name-calling that occurred in fourth grade at the Children's Museum ski slope exhibition. A worker called her a "be-ach" which left Rosa humiliated and crying. Taunting continued in grade school, where she was often called "a Mexican-so-and-so" or an "ignorant XXXX." (Rosa p. 7). Rosa noted that even teachers told her, "Well, you know, you'll never be anything. They wouldn't straight come out, but they'd imply and that's how I felt. I felt, gosh, you know" (Rosa, p. 8).

Despite this negative behavior, Rosa remained a positive person. Rosa's resolve was strengthened and supported by her mother. As a Hispanic mother, she strongly believed familial values superceded outsider's opinions, and told her daughter: "Don't believe what people say; you shouldn't care what people think. The only people whose opinions should matter are your family" (Rosa, p. 8). Alva (1995) who reviewed successful Mexican American professionals noted that "the educational support received from parents was the single most important factor affecting their high academic goals and expectations" (p. 290).

Alex told similar stories and became somewhat of a loner because of such taunting. "I became an observer for a while and then I guess after a while I got tired of it and, um, I didn't call them names back, but I kinda stood up a lot for myself, so, eventually things turned out okay" (Alex, p. 14), he explained.

Eloy and Maria were third-generation "Chicanos" and not subjected to the name calling that Rosa and Alex experienced. However, because Eloy and Maria were well-integrated into their neighborhood, they had to learn to distance themselves from peers

who were indifferent to school. Consistent, supportive parental input countered negative peer influences.

I think it all starts at home. I mean, with a lot of the friends that I have that are messed up, I sometimes think I might have been a dropout, but my parents kicked my ass and told me “you have to do good in school; you have to get your education” and that stuff. I think that a lot of the stuff starts at home. (Eloy, p. 17)

The parents of Eloy, Maria, Alex, and Rosa all communicated high expectations; they valued education, and were continually exhorting and encouraging their youngster to do well. All four young adults respected and appreciated their parents. Similarly, all four exhibited a great deal of self-confidence, self-efficacy, independence, persistence, and personal integrity — traits modeled by their parents.

Alex offered a statement that summarizes the genesis of resiliency: “I think that you either have supportive parents or have somehow learned to be responsible or otherwise you actually [don’t] succeed academically” (Alex p. 20). Alex was a very resilient young adult, as were the other three successful students participating in this study.

The four students who were not academically successful and subsequently dropped out of school did not enjoy the same nurturing home environments. They did not feel loved by their parents; they felt neglected by them. They were not inclined to take accelerated classes nor did they always feel welcomed at school. Stevin often refers to being “kicked-out.” Safety at school was a major issue for these subjects. Their school and neighborhood peers did not support academic pursuits, but did encourage ditching, partying, and delinquent behaviors. These students were not as resilient to adverse

conditions. However, it appears that the marginal resiliency characteristics found in the academically unsuccessful student may still have a powerful effect. With subsequent experiences, these residual tendencies were preserved and cultivated, resulting in a willingness and even a commitment to return to school — and succeed.

***3. Are there critical turning points in students' lives that affect their decision to stay in school or drop out?***

Rutter, quoted by Winfield (1991), stated, "Particular attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms operating at key turning points in people's lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path" (pp. 7-8). Based upon this assertion, all eight students were questioned about such turning points.

For Alex and Rosa, academic success has always been important. They viewed education as an opportunity to improve their lives. Their lives did not have dramatic "turning points." Rather, they demonstrated a consistent commitment to success, overcoming obstacles and growing in self-confidence.

Maria talks about "seeing" and becoming aware of possibilities when she visited the homes of rich friends. This peek into a dramatically different world sparked in Maria an examination of her own potential. But while this experience may have reinforced Maria's commitment to school, it cannot be construed as a watershed moment. She matter-of-factly stated that her family had consistently voiced the expectation of her finishing high school and going on to college.

While in high school, Eloy was reluctant to perform too high above “average,” but as he grew older, he began to care more about good grades and less about peers’ perceptions of doing well in school. For both Maria and Eloy, life was a gradual progression toward getting an education. Parents continued to support and push occasionally; the effect was cumulative and a direct product of a nurturing environment.

For the four students who left school prematurely, the decision to drop out was also gradual. They started spending more time ditching with peers and less time going to school. Their grades began to suffer. “I started failing all my classes and barely getting Ds,” notes Jose (p. 232). Going back to classes became harder, and hanging out with friends became the norm.

Rene began taking care of her younger brother on a regular basis. Stevin talked about persistent problems at school, regularly getting into trouble, getting kicked-out, and then looking for a new school. Jose and Theo mention going to school just to meet friends, then leaving. Theo explains that on a typical day, “[I would] just go out there and do drugs or else just go to parks and smoke cigarettes with my friends and play basketball and that’s about it” (Theo, p. 15). Parents and teachers seemed indifferent. Restrictions were not apparent and consequences were ignored. Thoughts of school faded, gradually.

Critical turning points may make for good drama, but they are not necessarily an element of all major decisions. Contrary to the existing literature, the present research indicates that — at least for the subjects in this study — students may not always experience profound moments or events that change the course of their academic careers.

Rather, the experiences of these students demonstrate a gradual, cumulative effect of positive or negative influences that affected their decisions to either commit themselves to school or give up.

Interestingly, the students who dropped out did relay very specific events that impacted decisions to return to school and make a concerted effort to graduate. At least for these young adults, critical turning points occurred and, at some level, countered earlier long-term negative influences.

### **Discussion**

Unexpected themes, some not anticipated by the literature, emerged throughout the interviews with the eight study subjects. The eight youths cared seriously about many issues. They voiced their concerns and they seemed appreciative that someone wanted to listen to them. They wanted to be heard. The six conclusions that follow summarize the discoveries inherent in their stories.

#### ***1. Resiliency and nurturing environments are closely linked.***

While the literature in general suggests that nurturing adults (both parents and teachers) foster academic achievement (Milstein and Henderson, 1996, Taylor, 1991, Swanson and Spencer, 1991) the present research indicates a relationship between nurturing and the development of resiliency. Resiliency does not just happen. Parents, teachers, community, and peers all serve to model and strengthen resilient behaviors.

Adult influences create and reinforce the resiliency necessary to achieve academic success in a negative and sometimes hostile environment.

Alex, Rosa, Maria and Eloy all had great respect for their parents and stepparents. These adults were responsible and loving. They nurtured their children and encouraged their growth toward self-actualization. They modeled resilient behavior and their children emulated them. Alex explained the lesson his mother taught him:

You have to be responsible with everything and everyone. So that is something that always gets instilled into every single one of us. She [his mother] realized that in order for us actually to have something or some ability in life we had to learn how to be responsible and take care of things on our own. So she taught us that.” (Alex, FI, p. 13).

## ***2. Poverty can help create resiliency to adverse conditions***

While a poverty environment may contribute risk factors that can lead youths down the road to failure, these conditions can also have a positive effect on young people’s lives. If framed by responsible adult influences, adverse conditions and poverty have the power to make kids streetwise, aware, responsible, and more resistant to adverse conditions. In either case, training starts early.

The present research indicates that, at least in some cases, poverty can help create resiliency to adverse conditions. This finding is in contrast to the research of Swanson and Spenser (1991), who felt that the structural conditions linked to poverty, race, and ethnicity create a hostile milieu and promote the likelihood of adverse outcomes. Eitzen (1992) discussed the disadvantages that single-parent minority families faced and noted

that the dropout rate for students was twice the average. Reed and Sautter (1990), Howe (1992), Bennett (1994) and data from the U.S. Department of Education (1993, 1999) all reported the damaging influences of poverty. Poverty denies an individual many basics, and eliminates many advantages. Yet poverty does not claim all its bearers as victims. For all eight students in this study, poverty functioned as a heavy-weight teacher.

The eight study subjects held no pretenses about accepting poverty at face value. This strengthened their resolve to change their own lives and created streetwise youths who valued education and their own personal insights as a means to this end:

Kids who have been given everything since they were a little boy or girl....expect that will also happen throughout their academic career. And it doesn't. And that sets them back. You know, it goes back again to teaching your kids how to be responsible, you know. And some kids don't know how to be responsible. Even while they are in high school. So it is stressful for them. And sometimes they don't feel like they can do anything. So they don't try hard enough. (Alex, FI, p. 20)

For these students, education was not confined within the walls of their schools.

"There is a lot of learning outside of school. I mean, just 'cause you're book smart, I mean, that don't guarantee you a spot in society. You've got to be street smart too. Street smart, I don't know, it's like the ability to read people," Jose explained (Jose, FI, p. 6). He added that success requires a combination of both formal education and street smarts.

"...It keeps you a lot safer" (Jose, FI p. 6).

### ***3. Parents are a critical influence in Hispanic children's lives***

Family and family relationships are very important in the Hispanic culture (Lopez, 1993, Belitz and Valdez, 1995). Casas, et al, (1995) noted the strong emphasis on familism, specifically a concern for children and family members. Alva (1995) also stated that “the literature consistently suggests that the educational support from parents is strongly associated with achievement” (p. 300). Wigfield (1983) noted that parents’ beliefs about their children—particularly perceptions of their children’s math ability, and their expectations for future success—related to the youngsters own beliefs. This finding is exemplified in Alex, Rosa, Maria and Eloy. Gerig (1988) posited that the father’s educational expectations contributed strongly to a girl’s continuation in higher-level math classes. Maria is certainly a product of her father’s high expectations. Her father’s continual support and encouragement guided Maria toward a career using her math skills. Orland (1990), Taylor (1991), and Jackson and Cooper (1989) and Clark (1983) similarly stress the importance of parental influence in youngsters’ academic success.

Family and familial relationships are very important in the Hispanic culture. Lopez (1993) cited the prevalence of family themes in Chicano literature, noting, “The elders are the roots of our cultural ways.” (p. 9) As such, the relationship of youths with their elders afford a valuable learning content, offering both a way of thinking and behaviors to emulate.

Alex's relationship with his parents exemplifies this tradition. He often commented that his parents allowed him to solve his own problems. "They don't interfere.... They interfere only when they deem it necessary. They don't jump in right away and try to make everything better for me. I like that" (Alex, FI, p.10). Alex's parents reinforced his self-confidence and his resiliency. They watched from a distance; but they always watched. From his stepfather Alex also learned the virtue of patience. "I'd have to say one of the qualities I admire about my father is that he is extremely patient. He can just sit there and listen and not do anything and not get angry for quite some time" (FI, p. 10).

Modeling is extremely important in the Hispanic culture. This is not necessarily as true in other cultures. Banks, Slaving, and Biddle (1990) pointed out that American parents are more likely to influence their children by articulating norms rather than by modeling relevant behavior. Noddings (1992), however, chose modeling as a major component in her vision of moral education.

It would seem that for the eight Hispanic subjects in this study, parental influence was a key factor in their academic performance. The four Hispanic students who were not successful did not have the same parental input and parental modeling as did the successful students. For all eight young adults, teachers played a secondary role in their lives, far below the status of parental influences. The lasting impact of individual teachers was essentially downplayed. Teachers were transient in the lives of these subjects.

***4. While the decision to dropout of school is gradual, critical turning points provide the impetus to return to school***

As discussed earlier, the process of staying in or dropping out of school was a gradual and cumulative process for these Hispanic young adults. The more dramatic turning points described by Rutter seemed to occur when the young adults who dropped out decided to return to school. Rutter (quoted by Winfield, 1991) thought it critical to be aware of the “key turning points in people’s lives when a risk trajectory may be redirected onto a more adaptive path” (pp. 7-8). This redirection seems to have occurred for the four student who dropped out of school, not when they left high school the first or second time, but rather, when they finally made a commitment to graduate.

Rene slowly dropped out of school. Ditching became a pattern and caring for her younger brother was prioritized above education. Rene explained that this was a typical of Hispanic culture. Helping the family was more important than staying in school. Yet, Rene decided to go back to school primarily because of comments made by her incarcerated older brother. She saw changes in his behavior and attitude, and noted his new-found respect for education and his desire to change his own life. She felt her brother cared about her and wanted her to make similar commitments.

Her older brother’s shift in thinking precipitated a thinking transformation for Rene. It seems what she had been willing to accept as status quo was being challenged by a brother she very much respected. He was adamant, angry, and demanding toward Rene. Perhaps this was a moment of enlightenment (or a critical turning point) for Rene. She felt

very loved by her older brother, more than other family members, especially her mother, who was indifferent. Consequently, she was more affected by him. Her brother's resilience to adverse conditions served as a very strong role model. Rene returned to an alternative DPS school — one that allowed her to progress toward a diploma while granting time off so she could cope with her pregnancy.

Theo decided to go back to school because of an incarceration at Gillium correctional facility. He keenly felt his loss of freedom. For a while it seemed that the impact of being in jail, then on probation, and finally living in a group home jolted Theo. Unfortunately, he did not have sufficient support from home to maintain the momentum to finish school.

For Hispanic youngsters, parents play a pivotal role (Lopez, 1993, Belitz and Valdez, 1995, Casas, et al, 1995). Theo's mother was deceased and his father was indifferent. Strong, nurturing role models who were themselves resistant to adversity did not seem to be part of Theo's life. Eventually peer involvement lead to further problems.

Stevin decided to return to school because of parental influences and his own personal motivation, but success came as a result of enrollment in an alternative school. To Stevin, the discovery of a format that supported his needs became a critical turning point. McLaughlin and Talbert (1990), Knapp and Shields (1991), and McCollum (1990) all observed the importance of personalized teaching that encourages care and respect for a student's cultural background. Grubb (1996) and Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) see advantages to integrating vocational and academic learning.

Part of Stevin's enlightenment may have been part of the natural maturation process. He was almost 23. He knew poverty intimately, and he wanted to divorce himself from that lifestyle. He believed that earning a high-school diploma was his first step. Stevin, was a very bright young adult, and he knew he was responsible for his future. He made choices accordingly. Not all young adults could adapt as well as Stevin did. Perhaps intelligence played a crucial role. Maybe it was his skill at creative problem solving, exemplified by Stevin's ability to constantly find new schools. While this study did not attempt to explore that possibility, future research may find innate intelligence, or lack thereof, is more controlling than the influence of poverty.

Jose experienced two critical events: when the alternative school he was attending moved, a teacher suggested that Jose investigate an art-focused alternative school. He also spent a day performing manual labor with his father. The negative impact of this experience, combined with a school environment that nurtured his talents, caused Jose to make a real commitment to his education.

During the course of the interviews, Jose shared his thoughts on whether effort or ability was more critical to generating accomplishments. While six of the eight students saw effort as being the deciding factor, Jose valued ability first and foremost. "When you've got ability, you've got potential. And potential is the best thing in the world you can have, 'cause you can only go one way from potential, you can only go up" (Jose, FI, p. 4). Perhaps, part of Jose's resiliency was derived from his artistic talent, what Henderson and Milstein (1996) labeled "personal competence—being good at something"

(p. 9). Maybe, it was more than that. Also, it seemed more than high expectations and defined goals. Perhaps, it was Jose's artistic temperament, his ability to create, to dream, and to believe in possibilities. "When you've got ability you've got potential..." (Jose, FI, p. 4).

This study focused on academic achievement as a measure of success or failure. That is certainly a limitation. Still it is a realistic measure for most of today's schools. While Gardner (1985, 1991) illustrated his theory of multiple intelligences and then followed his thoughts with how schools should teach, years later, few traditional high schools offer the artistic specialization that Jose found in an alternative school.

Longitudinal studies that view success over time and/or utilize more diverse criteria measuring skills used by participants in life after school might much more realistically assess "success" and "failure." Such studies might also promulgate more specialized, alternative schools.

##### ***5. Peers exert strong negative or positive influences***

While literature specific to Hispanics regarding peer influences as related to academic achievement is limited, it is important not to underestimate the power of peers. Ogbu (1989, 1990) noted that young Black students' fear of "acting White" often kept them from succeeding academically. Clark (1991) described a "raceless or bicultural identity" among some minority students. The cost of being academically successful often meant alienation from Black

peers and mainstream Whites. While both of these researchers focused on Black youths, their work is apropos to the adolescent Hispanic.

All eight Hispanic young adults interviewed for this study were aware of the peer pressures associated with being considered too smart. Although their individual responses differed, all eight were extremely conscious of peer acceptance. Many of the students who were successful maintained two distinct peer groups: one composed of school friends, the other made up of neighborhood friends. In doing so, they were able to avoid the potentially negative effects of peer pressure (Gandara 1994). High incidences of mobility affect a youths' ability to bond with their peers and often causes them to feel threatened or alienated from other students (Lippman, Burns, and McArthur, 1996). Stevin found himself in such circumstances often, and he ultimately joined a gang, perhaps to fulfill his need for peer acceptance. Alex and Rosa moved to the United States when they were very young and were labeled as outsiders initially, probably until they learned English well. Once in middle school, these two no longer moved to different schools and were academically successful. Alex and Rosa, like Eloy and Maria, had parents who always provided a safe, nurturing home, regardless of location. This was not always the reality for the four students who dropped out.

A sense of "home" was missing for Rene. She often left her home after arguments with her mother. Her older brother left home for jail. In taking care of her younger brother, Rene might have been attempting to create a nurturing home environment for someone she cared about deeply. Perhaps getting pregnant also fulfilled this need, or maybe it was just a matter of

modeling her mother's behavior. Rene and her brothers all had different fathers. Family life and a nurturing home environment was missing.

Theo lost his home the first time through divorce. The second time occurred with his mother's death. Finally, a group home, became his base after incarceration. In many ways, Theo remained unattached. He was never quite grounded. While he spoke of his Indian grandmother and his heritage, his personal link was more of a wish. His foundation lacked solidity. This single factor may have impacted Theo much more than this study was able to pursue.

In terms of attachment theory, both Rene and Theo seemed to be "insecurely attached" adolescents. Karen (1990) noted that the behavior of the insecurely attached child "often tries the patience of peers and adults alike. It elicits reactions that repeatedly confirm the child's distorted view of the world. People will never love me, they treat me like an irritation, and don't trust me, and so on" (p.63). Karen stated that "a steadfast parent or an available teacher can turn a child around," (p. 63) but also noted that such students' behaviors often alienate teachers and parents.

Involvement in extracurricular activity is also a strong part of peer influence. Literature supports the positive aspect of such commitment. Newman (1992), quoted in Lippman, Burns and McArthur, felt that extracurricular activities often provided additional incentives for student to succeed academically. His thinking is supported by stories told by the four successful students. They were highly involved in a plethora of activities at

school, at church, and in their neighborhoods. The four students who dropped out of school either isolated themselves or became involved with troubled peers.

***6. Students' perceptions of school safety impact their academic performance and commitment to school***

The recent spate of school shootings has focused media attention on school violence, but relatively little research has explored the effects of safety on academic performance. Boyd (1991) talks of disturbing changes and escalation of violence in urban schools. U.S. Department of Education (1998) research entitled Indicators of School Crime and Safety provides statistics indicating that Black and Hispanic students were more frequently afraid of being attacked than White students.

The subjects of the present study recognized the importance of safe schools and offered powerful stories sharing their concerns and fears. The four students who dropped out of school, Rene, Stevin, Theo, and Jose commented quite a bit on school safety and personal fears within the school environment. Rene mentioned seeing one to two fights weekly in the school corridors. Like Stevin, she felt the violence was exacerbated on the high school level. Both students lacked confidence in school administrators' ability to solve the problem.

Rene and Stevin did feel differently about the administrators when they attended an alternative school, E.G.O.S. Partially this may have been the school climate. Students who attended this school had a purpose. Class size was small. Teachers were able to

individualize and interact with students on a personal level. The gang issues were not as prevalent, according to Stevin, because of numbers—alternative schools were comprised of a mixture of young adults with only two or three friends from one gang, whereas regular high schools “like the bigger ones, there’s like 20 of you’s and 30 of them or something like that” (Stevin, p. 41). Another factor influencing climate may just be the personality of alternative school administrators. They are wary and prepared. Out of necessity they are cautious, well aware of potentially volatile situation, given the temperaments and background of the student clientele they serve. Studying personalities and dispositions of urban alternative high school principals versus principals in regular urban high schools might offer insights to controlling violence in schools.

Alex, Eloy, Rosa, and Maria, the four academically successful students, basically felt safe at their respective schools (See Figure 4.3). While they still told stories of fights, gangs, and problems at school, these students had learned to avoid unnecessary trouble. In Eloy’s words, “I never had any problem with that. I got along with all the gangs. I wasn’t in the middle of it, so I could, you know, I was kind of like at the outside. I watch everybody. I had friends on both sides. I just stood back and let them handle their business” (Eloy, FI, p. 22). Perhaps this ability to avoid problems is another characteristic of their resiliency. Maybe it is due to the influenced of their adult role-models.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The present research is based upon the experiences of eight Hispanic students, within a single urban school district, and as such, is limited. However, it does provide numerous insights. It also generates ideas ripe for investigation by scholars and possible implementation within the school environment for practitioners.

Suggestions for future research include:

#### *Explore the Relationship Between Academic Success and Resiliency*

Insights and ideas found in this study suggest that a full exploration of the relationship between academic success and resiliency is needed. These studies must include an in-depth examination of specific characteristics that contribute to resiliency and an identification of strategies to promote such characteristics. Perhaps intelligence or creativity played a crucial role. While this study did not attempt to explore that possibility, future research may find innate intelligence or a lack thereof functions as a predictor of future resilience.

While Henderson and Milstein (1996) discuss internal and environmental protective factors that facilitate resilience, more research is necessary. A study of nurturing environments may offer a launching point for resiliency research. Research testing the theory that nurturing adults create and reinforce resilience would be helpful. It

seems apparent that resilience does not just happen. This study suggests that parents, teachers, community, and peers all appeared to serve as models and strengthen resilient behaviors. Future research might explore the impact of each of these groups separately and comparatively.

### *Examine the Critical Role of Parents*

This study presents strong implications for the influence of Hispanic parents on the academic success of their offspring. To the extent that this proves to be a finding on a larger scale, including studies on other cultures such as Asian-Americans, Native Americans, European Americans, and African Americans, it may suggest serious public relations work nationally to acknowledge parents' powerful influence on their children.

Teachers certainly play an important role, but their time is more narrowly defined and limited when compared to parents. While some researches have acknowledged that building on the cultural strengths in the home is essential, (Knapp, 1991, Lewin, 1987, Dill, 1995), more research is needed.

The present study also suggests there is a strong need for growth and development in promoting effective Hispanic parents' interaction with school environments. An in-depth examination of what encourages teamwork between parents, teachers, and administrators could be very beneficial, since current research on Hispanic parents' interaction with school institutions indicates that parents are often uncomfortable in the school environment (Rumberger and Larson, 1994, Reyes and Valencia, 1995, Dill, 1995).

Learning how this “distancing” attitude impacts students’ academic performance and adjustment to school is necessary.

*Broaden the Base of Minority Research*

Research on academic success focusing on Native American, Hispanic, and Asian students is not as well-developed as current research on Black students. More research is needed about these students’ perceptions. Such studies could be highly enlightening and beneficial, especially considering minority demographic trends.

*Explore Benefits of a More Robust Multi-cultural Curriculum*

Several students in the present study noted that their school curriculums failed to mention Hispanic leaders, and likewise failed to identify with Hispanic students’ interests. Future research is needed to verify or corroborate these students’ comments and the impact on students’ academic success. Jose suggests that reexamining the curriculum might keep more Hispanic young adults from dropping out of school.

If a teacher would want to make it better for minorities to stay in school, maybe they should like teach them about their heritage, and history, you know. Make classes Hispanic history, classes like that, you know, minorities issues, something like that ’cause there is a lot of stuff going on that... with Latinos now in the news and out of the news that really, if we knew about it and we were given the chance to learn about it, we’d want to. You know what I mean? ’Cause now it’s like you learn about American history. You learn about all the presidents and stuff, but you don’t learn nothing about the southwestern United States. And there’s a lot of history there too, you know, the Alamo. But they don’t teach all that in class. In American History they don’t really go over that. And the West coast, the crop workers struggles, all that stuff. If we were given a chance to learn about that they’re be more Hispanics *hungry* for

knowledge, wanting to know about it. (Jose, p. 14)

Both Jose and Rene felt very strongly about the lack of historical information and literary selections by Hispanic writers. Future research may suggest the importance of a more robust discussion of Hispanic contributions in social studies or other curricula. Such curricula could also highlight intelligent, successful Hispanics as a means to counteract peer pressure to hide or deny intellect. Reading stories of nurturing individuals who promote self-actualization and resiliency in young Hispanic adults might be helpful. Hispanic anthologies are becoming more prevalent. Works such as *Growing Up Chicano*, edited by Tiffany Ana Lopez, and currents from the *Dancing River: Contemporary Latino Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry*, edited by Ray Gonzales, could be incorporated into high school English curricula.

#### *Explore Strategies to Encourage Dropouts to Return to School*

While this study examined what kept students in school, more research defining what variables impact a student's motivation to return to school and graduate is needed. Additionally, future research needs to investigate how resiliency is sometimes rekindled in students who drop out but later return to school and become successful. While the four dropouts in this study did return to an alternative school and two of these students graduated, not all dropouts return, and not all students who return stay in school. More research exploring these motivational differences would be helpful.

*Study the Need for More Alternative Schools*

Insights and ideas found in this study strongly suggest the value of alternative schools, from computer magnets to second-chance opportunities. Future research studying the alternative and magnet schools formats and whether they actually can provide students with more occasions to excel is needed. The stories of Jose , Stevin, and Rene strongly support this thinking. Traditional schools often do not meet students' needs, in part because the world has changed. For students who have dropped out of school, alternative schools often offer a safe place to reconnect with their talents and innate abilities. Such schools also encourage teachers to employ constructivist learning theories because curriculums at alternative schools focus on the specific needs of individuals. Such values need to be more fully studied and documented.

As suggested earlier, longitudinal studies that examine young adults' successes over time could be helpful. Studies that are not limited to academic success, but rather, include life-serving criteria could be more useful in assessing youths who become successful adults. Such studies might also promulgate more specialized alternative schools.

*Further Examine the Impact of Class Size*

It also is important to continue research into the formation of strong connections in the classroom—connections that are more readily made in smaller classes. Although not stressed in this research, all eight students asked for smaller classes. In the inner cities, the reverse is reality: class size is continually growing.

“I think that if the classes were smaller and teachers were able to work with kids on more of an individual basis, then there would be more confidence within the students *and the teachers*. And there would be far more understanding than there is now.” (Alex, FI, p. 19).

“You could get more one-on-one things with the teacher, so they could help you more...” (Jose, p. 12)

### *Study Ways to Promote Physically and Mentally Safe School Environments*

Last, and maybe most important, it is essential to continue exploratory research on how to create and keep school environments mentally and physically safe. Although school safety has become a major political and media theme, educators need to be aware of the toll violence takes on academic performance. In the present study, fear of violence definitely affected the students’ ability to concentrate on school issues and studying. When Stevin was asked what he would change within the educational system, he replied: “Make sure it’s a safe place to go. If it’s not safe, you can’t really think. Your head ain’t on straight” (Stevin, pp. 44-45).

The eight students who were interviewed were well aware of this impact, and the data collected for this study is proportionally larger in this section than any other. This alone demonstrates students’ concern. It is imperative that educators and researchers are cognizant of safety concerns and respond immediately to this issue without waiting for additional research.

## Epilogue

The present research provides a robust picture of the factors that lead to academic success or failure, but the subsequent experiences of the eight subjects add a certain poignancy to the stories related in the original interviews:

Stevin returned to school, chose an alternative school that supported his efforts and provided a safe environment. He completed the necessary credits to officially graduate from high school. He recently received his diploma and is now attending a two-year technical school, where he is studying electronics.

Jose was accepted by Denver School of the Arts. He attended two years and graduated in June 1999. Upon graduation he was awarded a full scholarship to continue his artistic studies at the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design.

Rene had a daughter. She has been out of school taking care of her baby but recently returned to EGOS, an alternative school that is highly individualized and allows students to earn credits at their own pace. She hopes to eventually graduate from high school and then continue on to college.

Theo has dropped out of school again. He parented a child and, according to his school counselor, was "having a hard time with reality." For Theo, the responsibility was overwhelming and he lacked credible, nurturing role models. He could not reproduce what had not been given to him. He eventually got into more difficulties with the police.

Rosa graduated from George Washington High School in June 1999 with a 4.18 GPA on a 4.0 scale. She has been granted a full scholarship to the University of Denver.

Alex graduated from George Washington High School in June 1999 with a 3.75 GPA on a 4.0 scale. He joined the Marine Corp, deciding that, financially, this commitment would offer an ideal opportunity for him to continue his studies toward an engineering degree.

Maria is in college, where she is pursuing a mathematics major and a biology minor.

Eloy is studying for a business degree, which he plans to use to establish his own sports business.

Hispanic poet Cisneros (1984) in The House on Mango Street, poetically describes resiliency in a vignette entitled "Four Skinny Trees:"

*Their strength is their secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.*

*Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep, trees say when I sleep. They teach.*

*When I am too sad and too skinny to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing left to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (pp. 74-75)*

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## APPENDIX A — CRITERIA FOR SELECTION

Inner City High School students will be interviewed to better understand what factors or influences contribute to their academic success or failures. Students will be selected from Denver Public Schools (DPS). These students will be Hispanic and between the ages of 17 and 21. Four students will meet the criteria defined as academically successful, while the remaining four will not.

Success is basically defined as relative success, meaning average to above average achievement.

This modest conception of success is not to suggest low expectations, but rather to demonstrate the magnitude of the problem. Success should have a two-fold definition: first, (a) "not dropping out" of school (b) transcripts that show credit given for completion of course work, with at least a "C" grade (c) Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores as available with average to above average scores (d) alternative assessments such as portfolios or individual projects, as available. Second, upon the students' graduating from high school, immediately obtaining employment that offers stability and a comfortable living wage, with the potential to continue post-secondary education or immediately continuing post-secondary education and completing either a two year college or technical, vocational or trade school or four-year college or university. As my research will focus on students currently in high school, or just beginning college, the second half of this definition is hypothetical for some of the students. It is mentioned because the standards of high school success are realistically measurable only in terms of the follow-through after high school.

Failure, or lack of success is also relative, but for purposes of this study, will be defined as (a) lower than average grades and (b) dropping out of high school. Perhaps interviews with students will reflect whether the students failed, or the educational institution failed the students.

### OVERVIEW

This research will use naturalistic inquiry or qualitative research, employing case study research focusing on the long interview procedure (McCracken, 1989) and personal narratives (Riessman, 1993).

Data will be gathered from 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade high school students currently attending the Denver Public Schools (DPS), recent graduates, or drop-outs from DPS. This study will focus on Hispanic students, one of the fastest growing populations within the United States, and approximately 47.5% of the DPS students. Eight students will be interviewed to better understand why some students are able to succeed academically while others from similar social and economic circumstances are not successful.

Interviews will last about an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Initially, the first interview will involve getting acquainted. Ultimately, we will spend four to five hours total, talking and exploring the topics of education while retracing personal histories, attitudes and insights into what seems to work well in education, and what simply does not.

Examples of more sensitive or personal questions include:

"How would you describe your feelings or frustrations, when you realize that you were not passing a particular class?" "Did you ever feel "put-down" by fellow students/by teachers?" "Were you ever labeled "Anglo" or "nerdy" if you did well in school?"

Since multi-method approaches are suggested, in conjunction with the long interview, this research will use student records and documents, including ITBS scores, ACT, PSAT, SAT scores, ASVAB (Career Profile) and documents, to corroborate and augment information.

**APPENDIX B — STUDY INTRODUCTORY LETTER**

Nance Minnick, Doctoral Candidate  
University of Washington  
College of Education  
Math Teacher  
Denver School of the Arts  
Denver Public School  
Work #722-4669

Dear Students and Parents:

As a teacher in the Denver Public Schools since 1971, I am extremely interested in the academic success of my students. I have been pursuing that interest, studying at the University of Washington, Seattle, where I am focusing my research on high school students. In particular I hope to explore, to analyze, and to discover what factors contribute to the successes or failures of Denver Public School students.

For the last few years I have been reading a great deal of literature about educational theories. At this time, to continue my research, I need to talk directly with students. I will be conducting interviews to better learn what they are thinking, and what viewpoints they can share about their successes and failures in school. Our interviews will last about an hour to an hour-and-a-half. The first interview will involve getting acquainted and exploring general questions. We will probably spend four to five hours in total, approximately three interviews. We will be talking about educational topics, while retracing personal histories, attitudes and insights into what seems to work well in schools, and what simply does not.

Hopefully, you will find this study beneficial in that your ideas will be heard and maybe, because of your candid comments, part of the educational system will improve. Realizing that many students work and have extremely busy schedules, I will be offering each student a sum of \$40.00, to be paid when the research is completed, in order to partially compensate for the time and effort involved.

The following page offers some basic information about this study. Please read it carefully, then sign the consent form, if you would like to be part of this research project. I sincerely appreciate your support in this endeavor. Thank you for your assistance and ideas.

Sincerely,

Nance Minnick

**APPENDIX C — PARENT CONSENT FORM**

University of Washington  
College of Education

Exploring the Perspective of Inner City High School Students  
in Regard to Their Academic Success and Failure

Research project by Nance Minnick, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Washington  
Denver School of the Arts, 150 S. Pearl, Denver, Colorado 80209 Work #722-4669

**INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT****PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

This study is designed to explore the viewpoints of inner city high school students. The purpose is to better understand what factors affect a student's academic successes or failures.

Individually, students will offer their own point of view regarding what exactly effects their academic success or failures. This information may offer some insights as to why some students manage to achieve academically when others of similar circumstances and ethnicity do not succeed in school.

I have chosen to conduct this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree in Education. Hopefully, your son or daughter will find this study beneficial in that his or her ideas will be heard and maybe, because of his or her candid comments, part of the educational system will improve.

**RESEARCH AND PROCEDURES INVOLVED**

For the last few years I have been reading a great deal of literature about educational theories. At this time, to continue my research, I need to talk directly with students, conducting interviews to better learn what they are thinking, and what they can share about their successes and failures in school. Interviews will last about an hour to an-hour-and-a-half. The first interview will involve getting acquainted and exploring general questions. We will probably spend four to five hours total, approximately three interviews. We will be talking about educational topics, while retracing personal histories, attitudes and insights into what seems to work well for your son or daughter in school, and what simply does not.

In addition to the interviews, this research will use student records, such as transcripts, ITBS scores, ACT, PSAT, or SAT scores, ASVAB and documents to corroborate and augment information. All academic records are and will remain confidential; students will be identified by code numbers, rather than by names.

Likewise any sharing that your son or daughter does during the interview will remain confidential. Your son or daughter has the right to refuse to answer any question. The following are samples of more sensitive or personal questions: "How would you describe your feelings or frustrations, when you realized that you were not passing a particular class?" "Did you ever feel "put-down" by fellow students/by teachers?" "Where you ever labeled "Anglo" or "nerdy" if you did well in school?" "Does the ethnic background of your teachers make a difference in your ability to learn?" Since we will be using a tape recorder, students have the right to review and delete any portion they choose. After the interviews are completed, the data analyzed, and the final draft written, feedback from the students will be requested, so that I may be sure I am accurately representing their comments and ideas.

**OTHER INFORMATION**

All data will be confidential. The tapes and data identified by code numbers will be kept approximately one year. Copies of actual student records will not be kept. The written report of the results of the study will be placed in the thesis section of the University of Washington Library.

A student may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator  
Nance Minnick

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**PARENT'S STATEMENT**

"The study described above has been explained to me. I consent to allow my child to participate in this activity. I understand those future questions, that either I or my son or daughter, may have about the research will be answered by the investigator listed above."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature Parent or Legal guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

cc: Parent  
Investigator's file

**APPENDIX D — STUDENT ASSENT FORM**

University of Washington  
College of Education

**Exploring the Perspective of Inner City High School Students  
in Regard to Their Academic Success and Failure**

Research project by Nance Minnick, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Washington  
Denver School of the Arts, 150 S. Pearl, Denver, Colorado 80209 Work #722-4669

**INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT****PURPOSE AND BENEFITS**

This study is designed to explore your viewpoints as inner city high school students. The purpose is to better understand what factors affect your academic successes or failures.

Individually, you, as students or ex-students, will offer your own point of view regarding what exactly affects your academic success or failures. This information may offer some ideas as to why some students are successful academically while others of similar circumstances and ethnicity do not succeed in school.

I am personally conducting this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree in Education. Hopefully, you will find this study beneficial in that your ideas will be heard and maybe, because of your candid comments, parts of the educational system will improve.

**RESEARCH AND PROCEDURES INVOLVED**

For the last few years I have been reading a great deal of literature about educational theories. At this time, to continue my research, I need to talk directly with you as students and ex-students. I will be interviewing you individually to better learn what you are thinking, and what you can share about your successes and failures in school. Interviews will last about an hour to an-hour-and-a-half. The first interview will involve getting acquainted and exploring general questions. We will probably spend four to five hours in total, approximately three interviews. We will be talking about educational topics, while retracing your personal histories, attitudes and thoughts about what seems to work well for you in school, and what simply does not.

In addition to the interviews, this research will use your student records, such as transcripts, ITBS scores, ACT, PSAT, or SAT scores, ASVAB and documents to verify and add additional information. All academic records are and will remain confidential; you will be identified by code numbers, rather than by names.

Likewise any sharing that you do during the interview will remain confidential. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. The following are samples of more sensitive or personal questions: "How would you describe your feelings or frustrations, when you realized that you were not passing a particular class?" "Did you ever feel "put-down" by fellow students/by teachers?" "Where you ever labeled "Anglo" or "nerdy" if you did well in school?" "Does the ethnic background of your teachers make a difference in your ability to learn?" Since we will be using a tape recorder, you have the right to review and delete any portion you choose. After the interviews are completed, the data analyzed, and the final draft written, I will ask you for feedback, so that I may be sure I am representing your comments and ideas accurately.

**OTHER INFORMATION**

All data will be confidential. The tapes and data identified by code numbers will be kept approximately one year. Copies of your actual student records will not be kept. The written report of the results of the study will be placed in the thesis section of the University of Washington Library.

You may refuse to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator  
Nance Minnick

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**STUDENT'S STATEMENT**

"The study described above has been explained to me. I voluntarily consent to participate in this activity. I have had an opportunity to ask questions. I understand that future questions I may have about the research, or about my rights as a subject, will be answered by the investigator listed above."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

cc: Student  
Investigator's file

## APPENDIX E — PROTOCOL/DRAFT

### Possible interview questions/general questions:

*Note: These are possible questions, depending on the answers given in the initial demographic questionnaire, depending upon the flow of conversation during the actual, and depending upon the interest of the interviewee to expound on certain topics. Again, the purpose of these questions is to allow each student to best describe his or her experiences, both successes and failures within the educational system. Although the interview will be basically unstructured, the goal is to create a narrative flow, allowing the student to tell his or her story, highlighting those experiences that seem to be “turning points.”*

What were your initial feelings on starting school? Do you attend pre-school? Do you remember your parents reading to you when you were little? Did your parents talk about school expectations before you actually started school? What are your first memories? Can you recall your first teacher? your interactions with classmates? Any special stories that you remember about first school experiences?

Thinking of your earliest grades in school what good feelings do you remember? Were you excited to be “in school?” Did you like your first teacher? Do you enjoy your classmates? Do you remember playing with them in the school yard? Did you feel “good” that you were “in school” like the older kids? Did you have older brothers and sisters in school?

Do you remember learning to read? wanting to learn? having fun? learning to print your name? wanting to impress your teacher? your parents? your classmates? Do you remember any failures or frustrations? trying, but not succeeding? Do you remember getting stars or stickers on your papers? Did your parents hang these papers from the refrigerator? Did your teachers seem to care about you?  
How large were your classes? Did you seem to get individual attention from your teacher?

Continuing thinking through later grade school, do you remember your parents, or others helping your with school work? With projects? attending school events? Did your parents seem to care that you completed your homework? Did they contact your teachers if they thought you needed extra help or were concerned about your school progress? Were your teachers helpful in explaining school work? How large were your classes? Did you get individual assistance? Did this matter?

Did your parents help explain your homework? could they? Did your parents expect you to set aside time each evening to study? Do you see them reading? studying something for work or for a class they were taking? Did they seem to care about your learning? Did you have books, magazines, newspapers in your home? Did you go to the library together? or work on the computer together?

Was middle school very different from grade school? Did you miss the closeness or caring of grade school when you first entered middle school? Was it different? How? Did you feel as close to your teachers? Closer? How large were your classes? Did you receive individual attention very often?

Did it matter if you were a boy or girl, as far as getting attention from the teacher? Did you feel that girls/boys learned differently? did that matter? Did the boys act “smarter” in some things? the girls? Did your expectations for yourself change after grade school? after middle school?

Did you try harder or not as hard? Did your interest in school change? Did you think you did well because of your ability or because of your effort?

Did your school experience include both private and public schools? If so, what difference did you notice? Which years in which grades? What factors were positive? Negative?

Were you excited about attending high school? anxious? did your friends attend the same school as you did?

How much did this matter? What experiences do you remember that felt positive? Negative?  
 Were you excited about going to high school? Describe some of your high school experiences. When in your academic career have you felt successful? How important are extra-curricular activities? How involved are you? What do you think personally promotes the opportunity for success in school? What made a difference for you? Can you remember any particularly eventful experience?

Do you remember feeling proud of certain accomplishments?  
 Do you remember certain teachers? Why? What stories or experiences are still very memorable?  
 Any particularly funning stories?  
 When did you start to “like” one subject more? want to continue learning about some specific area?  
 What were you most often praised for achieving? By whom? Can you see this particular subject that you enjoy becoming part of a future career for you?

What high school classes do you remember positively? Negatively? Why? How large were your classes? Did this make a difference? Did you have a regular schedule (45 minute classes) or a block schedule (90 minute) classes? Or both? Which did you prefer? Did the subject or teacher make a difference in your preferring either the block or regular schedule?

What teachers did you enjoy most? Why?  
 What peer interactions do you still think of? Any humorous stories? Do you prefer working together with other students (cooperative learning environment) or do you prefer working alone? Does this depend on the subject area? Were you allow to do both? Did this make a difference in your feeling successful?

Did you get to use the computer on a regular basis? If so, how were you using the computer in the classroom or for assignments? Was this helpful?  
 Did you enjoy getting to use technology? Do you see yourself using it later in your career? Were you ever frustrated trying to “learn” how to use specific software? Do you feel you know more than your parents about the computer? More than some of your teachers? Do you find yourself learning a great deal just by experimenting?

What made some school years different than others? Did you feel “safe” at school? Did you get to know any of the school administrators? in what capacity? Do you consider your administrators “fair?”  
 Have you ever been in a situation were you felt you personally were not treated fairly?  
 Does the ethnic background of your school disciplinarian matter?  
 Does the ethnic background of your teachers make a difference in your ability to learn? to feel comfortable with them? to feel nurtured by them? to trust them?

Were you bussed to your school?  
 Did this make a difference? Explain.  
 Did you transfer to several schools during your twelve-year school career?  
 How do you think this affected you? Affected your ability to succeed? did you or your friends move often?  
 How did this affect you? Your school work?

Do you remember your school/your teachers having clearing defined expectations for you? Did some teachers not only expect from you, but seem to expect a lot from themselves? Were they well-organized, knowledgeable, patient, offering extra help? Where they available? Did they answer your questions? Do you trust your teachers? Feel they truly cared? Did this matter? Could you get extra help at home or from friends? Did you ever call Homework Hotline? Did you ever have a tutor?

When were you frustrated? Why? How did you deal with such feelings?  
 Have you ever failed a class? How would you describe your feelings or frustrations when you realized that you

were not passing a particular class? Did you ever feel “put-down” by fellow students/ by teachers? Were you ever labeled “Anglo” or “nerdy” if you did well in school?

Do you find yourself more resilient some times? less at other times? What factors do you suppose contribute to such feelings? What supports do you remember? Which are most important? Are they still? How have you personally changed? Do you consider yourself a success academically? a failure academically? How does this make you feel? How would you describe yourself, using three adjectives.

What do you think causes some students to drop-out and others to graduate? Why do you think some students are better served by the educational system than others?

What factors or influences lead to your academic successes? failures?

When were these factors strongest? or non-existent?

What motivates you to be successful in school? What caused you to drop-out?

What might be perceived as a “key turning point” in creating your success? failure?

What do you hope to do after high school? Have you worked during high school? What type of job and approximately how many hours weekly? Did this interfere with your ability to study and keep up your grades? What was your prime motivation for working?

If graduated/dropped-out, what are you doing now?

Are you currently working? How long have you held this job? Do you hope to continue working at this job or do you wish to do something different eventually. Will studying at a two-year college or technical school be part of your plans? Will you attend/graduate from college? What type of job would you hope to have after graduating from tech-prep college? four year college? graduate school?

What would you consider your ideal job, assuming you have the qualifications for any job of your choice?

What types of jobs do your friends currently hold? Your parents? Has this influences your decision?

Do you feel that your school experience will/have helped you obtain a job?

What is the most crucial thing you think you have learned during your high school experience that will help you create successes in your future?

How would you change the educational system to be more effective?

What is the most important change that you would encourage to happen? Top three changes?

Do you considered the educational system a success or a failure? Explain. Has it been a success or failure for you individually? your friends?

Would you personally become involved in the educational system? In what capacity? How do you see yourself making a difference in the educational system?

Any other insights you wish to add?

**APPENDIX F — DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

*Please answer each of the following questions as carefully as you can. Please ask me to explain any question that you do not understand. After completing this information, we will discuss your responses together to insure accuracy. Your answers will remain confidential.*

1. Which classification describes you most accurately, or simply which would you prefer as identification? (Circle one)

Hispanic                  Latino/a    Chicano/a                  Mexican American  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Male: \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

4. If currently attending school, what is your present grade level? \_\_\_\_\_

	Dates	School	City, State	Private	Public
5. School attended 1997-1998	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. School attended 1996-1997	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. School attended 1995-1996	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. School attended 1994-1995	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9. School attended 1993-1994	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. School attended 1992-1991	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. School attended 1991-1990	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
12. Middle/Junior High (      )	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
13. Elementary School (      )	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

*Please answer yes or no:*

14. Were you born in the U.S.A.? \_\_\_\_\_

15. Were your parents born in the U.S.A.? \_\_\_\_\_

16. Were your grandparents born in the U.S.A.? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Is English your 1<sup>st</sup> language? \_\_\_\_\_ Is English your 2<sup>nd</sup> language? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Is English mostly spoken in your home? \_\_\_\_\_ Is Spanish mostly spoken? \_\_\_\_\_  
Other? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

Number of times Cities/Within a City

19. How often have you moved in the last three years? \_\_\_\_\_

20. How often have you moved in the last six years? \_\_\_\_\_

21. How often have you changed schools? Explain. \_\_\_\_\_

22. How many persons total live with you in your home? \_\_\_\_\_

23. Number of brothers/sisters living at home with you now:

\_\_\_\_\_ brothers \_\_\_\_\_ stepbrothers \_\_\_\_\_ sisters \_\_\_\_\_ stepsisters

24. Check appropriate situation:

\_\_\_\_\_ live with both parents

\_\_\_\_\_ live with mother only

\_\_\_\_\_ live with father only

25. Number of brothers/sisters total, including those who no longer live at home: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ brothers

\_\_\_\_\_ stepbrothers

\_\_\_\_\_ sisters

\_\_\_\_\_ stepsisters

\_\_\_\_\_ live with mother/stepfather

\_\_\_\_\_ live with father/stepmother

\_\_\_\_\_ live with grandparent(s)

\_\_\_\_\_ live with aunt/uncle

\_\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent (and/or guardian's occupational history)

Father

26. Father's (current occupation)? \_\_\_\_\_

27. How long at his present job? \_\_\_\_\_

28. Father's previous occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

29. How long at this job? \_\_\_\_\_

Mother

30. Mother's current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

31. How long at her present job? \_\_\_\_\_

32. Mothers previous occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

33. How long at this job? \_\_\_\_\_

Legal Guardian (if applicable)

34. Legal guardian's occupation (if applicable, specify stepfather/ stepmother, or other) \_\_\_\_\_

35. How long at his/ her present job? \_\_\_\_\_

36. Guardian's previous occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

37. How long at this job? \_\_\_\_\_

Parents' Level of Education: *check each level that is appropriate:*

Father

38. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Elementary School

39. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Elementary School

40. \_\_\_\_\_ Some High School

41. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from High School

42. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Post High School/Technical School/Two Yr. College

43. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Technical School/Two Yr. College

44. \_\_\_\_\_ Some College

45. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from College

46. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate or Professional School

Mother

47. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Elementary School

48. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Elementary School

49. \_\_\_\_\_ Some High School

50. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from High School

51. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Post High School/Technical School/Two Yr. College

52. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Technical School/Two Yr. College

53. \_\_\_\_\_ Some College

54. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from College

55. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate or Professional School

Legal Guardian (stepmother, stepfather, other: specify \_\_\_\_\_)

56. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Elementary School

57. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Elementary School

58. \_\_\_\_\_ Some High School

59. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from High School

60. \_\_\_\_\_ Some Post High School/Technical School/Two Yr. College

61. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from Technical School/Two Yr. College

62. \_\_\_\_\_ Some College

63. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduated from College

64. \_\_\_\_\_ Graduate or Professional School

65. After graduating from high school, or upon leaving high school, I plan:

\_\_\_\_\_ to attend a four-year college

\_\_\_\_\_ to attend a two-year college, or technical school

\_\_\_\_\_ to begin working

\_\_\_\_\_ to join the military

\_\_\_\_\_ other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX G — SURVEY QUESTIONS/FINAL INTERVIEW**

How early do you go to bed, during the school year? \_\_\_\_\_  
 How early do you get up, during the school year? \_\_\_\_\_

A recent *Denver Post* article (July 6, 1998) notes that some teens are more alert if schools have later starting times (changing from 7:30 to 8:30). Since teens typically stay up late and get up later, which in part is biological, not just personal choice, according to the article, later schedules seem to help the students to be alert, students that would often “sleep” or respond more like “zombies” during their 1<sup>st</sup> hour class. Other students prefer earlier start times because of after school jobs. What’s your opinion on this issue? And the time schedule at your school?

How often do you have conversations with your parents or guardians \_\_\_\_\_

**Circle one as appropriate:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ about recent news events, local or international events (daily, weekly, once-a-month, seldom, never)
- \_\_\_\_\_ sports events (daily, weekly, once-a month, seldom, never)
- \_\_\_\_\_ discussion of politics (daily, weekly, once-a month, seldom, never)
- \_\_\_\_\_ important issues that concern you personally (daily, weekly, once-a month, seldom, never)

How old is your mother? \_\_\_\_\_ Father? \_\_\_\_\_ Grandmother? \_\_\_\_\_ Grandfather? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you feel your parents consider new ideas and information important?

What are your parents hobbies? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your favorite hobbies? \_\_\_\_\_

How much TV do you watch daily? \_\_\_\_\_

How much TV do you watch weekly? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your favorite TV programs? \_\_\_\_\_

How much time do you spend working daily? \_\_\_\_\_

How much time do you spend working weekly? \_\_\_\_\_

- Do you feel your parents set high-standards for you? Yes or No (Circle one)
- Do you feel your teachers set high-standards for you? Yes or No
- Do you feel you set high standards for yourself? Yes or No
- Do you have high aspirations for yourself? Yes or No
- Do you consider your parents supportive? Yes or No
- Do you consider your teachers supportive? Yes or No
- Have you ever felt “put down” by teachers? Yes or No
- Does this affect your ability to learn? Yes or No

Have you ever felt “put down” by students who thought you were “too smart” or “nerdy”? Yes or No

Do you consider your peers (school friends) supportive? Yes or No

Do you consider your peers (neighborhood friends) supportive? Yes or No

Did this affect your academic success in school? Yes or No

Have you had a mentoring relationship with an adult? Yes or No

*mentoring: A nurturing relationship with an adult that promotes high aspiration toward academic success.*

*A process by which a particular individual dramatically affects the student's orientation toward schooling.*

Who? \_\_\_\_\_ When? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself independent? \_\_\_\_\_

*Independent: Doing things on your own; solving problems by yourself, or finding the resources to solve those problems by your own initiative; being self-reliant; not asking for help, especially outside the family, being able to fend for oneself.*

Do you accept large amounts of responsibility? Yes or No

Do you consider yourself dependable? Yes or No

What opportunities have you had to create for yourself? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself a hard worker? Yes or No

Do you consider your parents, legal guardian, a hard worker? Yes or No  
 Do you consider your \_\_\_\_\_ a hard worker? Yes or No

Is it important that you do well in school? Yes or No  
 Is getting a "C" grade enough? Yes or No  
 Is passing with a "D" grade enough? Yes or No

Do you feel your grades reflect your knowledge? Or success? Yes or No  
 Do you feel that you're prepared for the next level of school? Yes or No  
 Were you more successful academically in (number from 1 to 3; 1 being most successful)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ elementary school?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ middle school?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ high school?

Is doing well in school a liability as far as being accepted by your peers?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ in elementary school \_\_\_\_\_ in middle school \_\_\_\_\_ in high school?

Is succeeding in school important to you? \_\_\_\_\_  
 When did it become important to succeed academically? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Did your attitude change? \_\_\_\_\_ if so, when \_\_\_\_\_ Why? \_\_\_\_\_

When did you first decide you were going to college (either a two or four-year program)? \_\_\_\_\_

Which do you think is more important? ability or effort? (circle one)  
 Do you want to learn, just the sake of learning something new? Yes or No  
 Do you consider yourself highly motivated? Usually motivated? Somewhat motivated? Not motivated? (Circle one)

Most children will adopt the characteristics that define their parents, whether their parents want them to or not.  
 What characteristic of your parents do you appreciate and try to emulate? (*emulate: To equal or excel*)

What characteristic of your parents (guardians) to not like, and try to not imitate?

Do you consider yourself resilient (focusing on the positive, letting go the negative; bouncing back from problems)?  
 Yes or No (Circle one)

Check each of the following characteristics, or personality traits that you think apply to you personally:

- |                                 |                      |                      |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| _____ sense of humor            | _____ autonomous     | _____ reliable       |
| _____ confident                 | _____ self-motivated | _____ intelligent    |
| _____ compassionate             | _____ independent    | _____ focused        |
| _____ empathetic                | _____ insightful     | _____ committed      |
| _____ flexible                  | _____ creative       | _____ goal-oriented  |
| _____ socially competent        | _____ patient        | _____ risk-taker     |
| _____ problem-solver            | _____ perseverant    | _____ self-confident |
| _____ resourceful               | _____ supportive     | _____ introvert      |
| _____ capable                   | _____ sensitive      | _____ extrovert      |
| _____ internal locus of control | _____ enthusiastic   | _____ other _____    |
| _____ positive                  | _____ optimistic     | _____ other _____    |

Think of five adjectives that best describe you? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Think of five adjectives that best describe your parents (guardian) \_\_\_\_\_

Think of five adjectives that best describe your teachers \_\_\_\_\_  
 Think of five adjectives that best describe your friends \_\_\_\_\_

Can you remember any family "myths" or stories? \_\_\_\_\_  
 Any heroes in your family genealogy? Any role-models from the past? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have more than 25 books in your home?	Yes or No	Dictionary?	Yes or No
Magazine Subscriptions?	Yes or No	Daily Newspaper	Yes or No
Encyclopedia?	Yes or No		

There is a lot of learning outside of school?	True or False
Learning is a "life time" process?	True or False
You essentially teach yourself?	True or False

Do you often ask your teachers: "When am I ever going to use this?"	Yes or No
Do you ever get answers that make sense to you?	Yes or No

Do you think it is important to learn things in class, even if you do not see the relevance immediately?	Yes or No
Are you willing to learn things even if you don't see the immediate relevance?	Yes or No

We learn from our *own* successes. We succeed in achieving a goal, and the behavior that led us to that goal is reinforced or "learned." We learn not from our failures, but from our successes— and the failures of others.

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

We need to fail often If we don't, it means we're not testing our limits. It means we're not taking the necessary risk to improve our behavior.

Comment: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

What activities have you been involved with outside of school? i.e. Scouts, church activities, etc. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Lately the news (newspapers and television news) has been filled with a article about teen violence.

Does this concern you?	Yes or No
Do you have any suggestions on how to prevent such violence?	Yes or No
Or what creates such violence?	Yes or No
Do your parents (guardians) have a weapon?	Yes or No
Do you have access to a weapon?	Yes or No
Do you friends have weapons?	Yes or No
Have you seen peers with weapons.	Yes or No
If yes, where? _____	
Have you ever wished you had a weapon?	Yes or No
Have you ever used a weapon to threaten someone?	Yes or No
Been involved with someone else who used a weapon?	Yes or No

Describe your ideal self. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your ideal school situation. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Describe your ideal future life. \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Are you being prepared academically for that future now? \_\_\_\_\_

How do you define success? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think some students are academically successful in school while others are not? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you think you would have accomplished what you have without your close relationship with \_\_\_\_\_  
Yes or No.

**APPENDIX H — CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS**

On a scale of 1 (extremely close) to 14 (not close at all) who would you say you felt closest to while you were in **elementary, middle school, or high school**? If some persons are not-applicable, write N/A, and use lower numbers. For example if you choose only 8 of the persons listed below as persons you are close to, your scale will be 1 through 8 only. (1 being extremely close; 8 being not close at all). If you wish to add another person, please do so under the last person, listed as other. Identify your "other."

*Close to: As in close relationship based on a strong feeling of respect, honor, love, trust, sincerity, integrity, commitment, sensitivity, generosity of time, and willingness to listen.*

Who did you feel closest to during your **ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** years?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal) (circle one)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi) (circle one)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

Who did you feel closest to during your **MIDDLE SCHOOL** years?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

Who did you feel closest to during your **HIGH SCHOOL** years?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

### APPENDIX I — PERSONS OF INFLUENCE

On a scale of 1 (most influential) to 12 (least influential) who would you say affected or influenced your **elementary, middle school, high school experiences** the most? If some persons are not-applicable, write N/A, and use lower numbers. For example if you choose only 8 of the persons listed below as influential, your scale will be 1 through 8 only. ( 1 being most influential; 8 being least influential). If you wish to add another person, please do so under the last person, listed as other. Identify your "other." *Affect: to produce an effect or change in; to impress the mind or move the feelings of; to influence, touch, or stir. Influence: capacity or power to produce effects on others by intangible or indirect means. Intangible: not perceived by the senses; hidden from the mind.*

Who affected or influenced your **ELEMENTARY SCHOOL** experiences the most?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal) (circle one)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi) (circle one)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

Who affected or influenced your **MIDDLE SCHOOL** experiences the most?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

Who affected on influenced your **HIGH SCHOOL** experiences the most?

\_\_\_\_\_ mother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ father  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandmother (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ grandfather (maternal or paternal)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepmother  
 \_\_\_\_\_ stepfather  
 \_\_\_\_\_ brother(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sister(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (school friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ peers (neighborhood friends)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ teachers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ counselors  
 \_\_\_\_\_ religious (priest, nun, minister, rabbi)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX J — RECEIPT**

I, Nance Minnick have paid \_\_\_\_\_ the amount of \$40.00 on August \_\_\_\_, 1998 for participation in my research study conducted in partial fulfillment of my doctoral degree from the University of Washington, Seattle. Research was conducted through a series of interviews. All information shared in the interviews will be held as confidential. This sum of money is simply to acknowledge my appreciation for each student's willingness to share with me and to, in a small way, compensate for his or her time.

Sincerely,

Nance Minnick

I have received \$40.00 from Nance Minnick on August \_\_\_\_\_, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of student

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**APPENDIX K — STUDENT INFORMATION FORMS**

RESEARCH STUDY  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
Nance Minnick  
17831 E. Purdue Place  
Aurora, Colorado 80013  
303-690-5295

Math Teacher: Denver School of the Arts  
150 South Pearl Street  
303-722-4668  
Homework Hotline:  
303-322-PASS

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Birth date: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Evening Phone # \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to call you \_\_\_\_\_

Plan to graduate high school in \_\_\_\_\_.

Last DPS school attended before \_\_\_\_\_.

Mother's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Father's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Guardian's age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grandmother's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grandmother's age: \_\_\_\_\_

Grandfather's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grandfather's age: \_\_\_\_\_

Check one (or more) of the following as appropriate:

\_\_\_\_ Have my G.E.D.

\_\_\_\_ Currently a full time student at E.G.O.S.

\_\_\_\_ Part time student at E.G.O.S. Also working at \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Attending full time at E.G.O.S. and working part time at \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ Plan to graduate from E.G.O.S. in \_\_\_\_\_.

RESEARCH STUDY  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
Nance Minnick  
17831 E. Purdue Place  
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Math Teacher: Denver School of the Arts  
150 South Pearl Street  
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Homework Hotline:  
303-322-PASS

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Birth date: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Daytime Phone # \_\_\_\_\_  
Evening Phone # \_\_\_\_\_  
Best time to call you \_\_\_\_\_

Plan to graduate high school in \_\_\_\_\_  
Last DPS school attended before \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Mother's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Father's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Guardian's age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Grandmother's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grandmother's age: \_\_\_\_\_  
Grandfather's age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grandfather's age: \_\_\_\_\_

Check one (or more) of the following as appropriate:

- \_\_\_\_ Working during the summer at \_\_\_\_\_  
Hours per week \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Working during the school year at \_\_\_\_\_  
Hours per week \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Currently attending college at \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_ Plan to graduate in \_\_\_\_\_

**CURRICULUM VITA****NANCE MARIE MINNICK**

---

17831 E. Purdue Place, Aurora, CO 80013 • (303) 690-5295 • cell: (303) 886-6900 • NYCOLO@aol.com

---

**EDUCATION****Doctorate of Philosophy, 1999 (3.8 GPA)***University of Washington, Seattle, WA*

Focus: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Dissertation: *Exploring the Perspectives of Inner City Hispanic High School Students In Regard to Their Academic Success or Failure*. This qualitative study examines why some Hispanic students of poverty are academically successful and graduate from high school while others from similar economic and social circumstances maintained a near-failing or failing grade point average and eventually dropped out of school.

**Master of Arts, 1975 (4.0 GPA)***University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO*

Major: Curriculum and Instruction

**Bachelor of Arts, 1970 (3.3 GPA)***Fontbonne College, St. Louis, MO*

Majors: Mathematics and English

**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE****Consultant, Clarke Consulting, LLC, Denver, CO (1998-Present)**

Served as consultant, providing business guidance to IBM, Endicott, New York. Interviewed and provided feedback to managers using Human Synergistic's software that focuses on "Strengthening Organizations through Individual Effectiveness"

**Teacher of Mathematics and English, Denver Public Schools, Denver, CO (1971-1998)**

- Denver School of the Arts (1997-1998)
- Fred N. Thomas Career Education Center (1995-1997)
- Contemporary Learning Academy, Byers (1994-1995)
- George Washington High School (1985-1994)
- Hamilton Middle School (1983-1985)
- Montbello Middle School (1982-1983)
- Horace Mann Junior High (1971-1982)

**Math and English Consultant/Teacher, *Homework Hotline, Denver, CO (1985-1998)***

**Math and English Consultant/Teacher, *Emily Griffith Opportunity School, Adult Program, Denver, CO (1977-1980)***

**Teacher of Mathematics and English, *Denver Public Schools, Denver Summer School Programs, Denver, CO***

- Morey Middle School (1984, 1985)
- Merrill Middle School (1983)
- East High School (1980, 1981, 1976)
- Manuel High School (1975)

**Instructor, *University of Denver, Denver, CO (1985-1987)***

Pre-Calculus Instructor for the Summer Program; Rocky Mountain Talent Search: Gifted and Talented Program

**Teacher, *St. James Elementary School, Denver, CO (1970-1971)***

Taught Mathematics, English, and Music for grades 3, 5, and 8

#### **SPECIAL PROJECTS**

- Research Assistant, *University of Washington (1989)*
- Inter-professional Case Management Dropout Prevention Project, *University of Washington (1989)*
- Internet Grant Recipient, *sponsored by U.S. West Communications in conjunction with MAST Hotline, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO, Homework Hotline, and University of Colorado, Boulder, Denver (1994-1995)*

#### **REVIEWS, PRESENTATIONS AND CURRICULUM PUBLICATIONS**

- Reviewer, *Glencoe Pre-Algebra: An Integrated Transition to Algebra and Geometry, Glencoe/McGraw-Hill (1997)*
- Speaker, *National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE) Conference, Long Beach, CA (Summer 1996)*. Topic: "Applied Mathematics in Construction: Common Rafter Layout"

- Speaker, Colorado Council of Teachers of Mathematics Conference (CCTM) (Fall 1993). Topic: "The Relationship Between Students' Perception of Parental Support and Students' Achievement Levels In Mathematics."
- Created mathematics units for *Curriculum Mastery Learning Curriculum*, written for the DPS Curriculum Library (1974-1975)
- Guaranteed Graduate Tests in Algebra 3-4, written for DPS (1993)
- *Model for Improving Self-discipline* (unanimously approved by the DPS Board of Education (1984)

#### **ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES**

- Supervisor for Student Teachers, George Washington High School, Denver, CO (1986, 1988)
- Supervisor for AT-RISK Program for 9th grade students, George Washington High School (1989-1990)
- Sponsor, National Honor Society, George Washington High School (1989-1990)
- Sponsor, *Flight of Fantasy* literary magazine, (Horace Mann Junior High) (1981)
- Sponsor, Yearbook, Horace Mann Junior High School, Denver, CO (1980)
- Representative, Building Committee, George Washington High School (1986-1989)
- Representative, Collaborative Decision Making Committee, Contemporary Learning Academy, Denver, CO (1994-1995)

#### **AWARDS AND HONORS**

- Colorado Governor's Award of Excellence, Honorable Mention (1985)
- Member, Phi Lambda Theta, initiated 1992

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

- Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)
- National Conference of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)
- Colorado Conference of Teachers of Mathematics (CCTM)
- American Education Research Association (AERA)
- Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA)
- Colorado Education Association (CEA)
- National Education Association (NEA)