"If I Had a New Notebook, I Know Things Would Change": Bright Underachieving Young Men in Urban Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Despite a preponderance of research on students who fail academically in urban schools, few studies have examined the academic experience of high-ability students in urban schools, particularly those who do not reach their potential. The study described in this article examined what happens to intelligent urban teenagers when they achieve academically. Through a qualitative research design that integrated case study and ethnographic research, the investigation examined the lives of 6 high-ability males in an inner-city high school to understand how their urban life experiences influenced their underachievement. The 6 cases reported in this study are a subset of 12 cases (Hébert, 1993) that contributed to a larger study (Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995) of talented students in an urban high school. Major findings uncovered in chronicling the lives of 6 underachievers included: inappropriate curricular and counseling experiences, problematic family issues, a negative peer group and environmental influences, and discipline problems. Implications of these findings are presented, as are suggestions for meeting the educational needs of high-ability underachieving young men in urban secondary schools.

Student performance that falls noticeably short of potential bewilders educators, parents, and researchers, especially when it occurs in young people with high ability. Nothing is as frustrating to educators and parents as a young person’s strong intellect that appears wasted. After decades of research, underachievement among high-ability students is still viewed as a major problem (Passow & Goldberg, 1958; Rimm, 1995). The gifted underachiever has been described as "one of the greatest social wastes of our culture" (Gowan, 1955, p. 247), and estimates indicate a high percentage of underachievers nationwide. Seeley (1993) indicated that 15–40% of identified gifted students are “at risk” for significant underachievement, while the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported in A Nation at Risk (1983) that “over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school” (p. 8).

The literature offers several explanations for the origins of underachievement among high-ability students. In a comprehensive review, Baker, Bridger, and Evans (1998) highlighted research studies that found individual, family, environmental, social, and school-related factors as contributors to under-

PUTTING THE RESEARCH TO USE

High-ability young men in urban high schools have educational needs that must be addressed in order to actualize their potential. To accomplish this goal, educators must be trained in pedagogical techniques appropriate for gifted students, including differentiating curricula to match diverse learning styles and to create relevant and challenging assignments. Attention also needs to be directed to the cultivation of talents typically overlooked in gifted programs, including skills in fine arts, business, and mechanical and technological areas. Educational decision makers must learn to value these multiple intelligences and provide adequate funding for comprehensive programs.

Counselors in urban high schools must receive training to work more effectively with gifted underachievers. These students need assistance in learning organizational skills, self-regulation strategies, effective study habits, and coping strategies to help them overcome barriers to achievement. For those gifted males facing family adversities or contending with peer groups that do not value academic achievement, male mentors are recommended to help facilitate healthy cognitive and psychosocial development. Finally, educational administrators should also consider the benefit of talent development specialists to provide enriched educational programs and outlets appropriate for bright underachievers.
achievement. However, research on what happens academically, socially, and emotionally to intelligent young people when they underachieve is lacking. Additionally, more research is needed that examines the perceptions of high-ability underachievers regarding their school experiences in a variety of different contexts. Educators in all settings are concerned about the problem; however, since urban educators work with populations of students who face a different set of risks in their environment, the issue of underachievement may become critical because of the specific daily risks facing students. Research may help to inform educators in planning effective interventions for high-ability underachievers in urban school settings; therefore, this study attempts to address that need by examining underachievement in an urban environment.

**Related Literature**

**Personality Factors That Influence Underachievement**

Several researchers have noted a number of personality differences between high-ability achieving and underachieving students (i.e., Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998). Gonzalez and Hayes (1988) cited studies describing underachieving students as more aggressive, judgmental, and less persistent than achieving students. Underachievers have also often exhibited an external locus of control (Laffoon, Jenkins-Friedman, & Tollefson, 1989). In addition, specific mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression (Ford, 1996; Whitmore, 1980), may be associated with underachievement, and inappropriate coping strategies, such as avoidance, procrastination, and defensiveness, may also accompany anxiety (Ford). A lack of academic and school survival skills may also contribute to the problems of underachievement (Krouse & Krouse, 1981). For example, high-ability underachievers often have deficits in organizational skills (Rimm, 1988) and little motivation to play the conventional school game (Seeley, 1993).

**Family Factors**

The atmosphere or emotional climate of the home has also been a focus of study, and researchers have indicated that underachievement may be influenced by a family’s lack of appropriate support for the student. Bright underachievers often come from homes that do not provide structure and clear guidelines about school behavior and academic performance (Rimm & Lowe, 1988). In such homes, parent-child relations may be oppositional and family relations appear conflicted (Colangelo & Dettman, 1983; Olszewski, Kulieke, & Buescher, 1987). Rimm (1984) proposed that underachieve-

ment could be a form of suppressed aggression in which youngsters are involved in power struggles with people closest to them. Families of gifted underachievers have also been described as delivering mixed messages regarding the value of achievement by stressing an achievement ideology and failing to model it (Rimm & Lowe).

**School-Related Factors**

Various features of the school environment or school experience may also influence underachievement in high-ability students. In a comprehensive study examining school records, Peterson and Colangelo (1996) concluded that the school experiences of bright underachievers appear bleak when compared to those of achievers on variables such as school absences and participation in extracurricular activities. This study calls attention to a need to examine attendance and tardiness patterns as important factors regarding underachievement and suggests that school may be a contextually different experience for achievers and underachievers. Underachievers may struggle with undiagnosed learning problems (Baum, 1988; Olenchak, 1995). Low teacher expectations for culturally diverse students are also an unfortunate reality in public schools. Ford (1991) found that many of the gifted African American students surveyed reported that, although teachers perceived them as working to their potential, they personally believed they could achieve higher than their grades reflected. In a later study describing the experiences of African American achievers and underachievers, Ford’s (1995) findings highlighted that underachievers did not perceive their classrooms to be supportive and nurturing, reported less positive relationships with teachers, and wanted more time to understand material in class than did the achievers. Diaz (1998) examined factors influencing underachievement among gifted students of Puerto Rican descent. She found that the most critical factor influencing the academic underachievement of students was the absence of early appropriate academic experiences, which thwarted possibilities of developing talents later in life.

Some attention has been paid to inappropriate academic programming (Supplee, 1989; Whitmore, 1980, 1989). A mismatch between instructional approaches and the learning styles of high-ability students exacerbates underachievement if students are not provided with encouragement or viable ways of expressing their talents (Baum, Renzulli, & Hébert, 1994, 1995; Emerick, 1992; Redding, 1990; Whitmore, 1989). Inflexible curricular requirements and lack of acceleration opportunities have also been reported (Fehrenbach, 1993) and may not allow intelligent youngsters to become involved in meaningful school experiences.
Social Factors

Social factors occurring in adolescence may also influence how young people perform in school. A gifted high school student’s social environment includes peers who may influence achievement status. Although being perceived as intelligent is often viewed as an asset in elementary school, peer conformity in middle and high school may cause intelligent students to underachieve in order to camouflage their giftedness (Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Clinkenbeard, 1991; Wolfe, 1991). When gifted teenagers underachieve, peer relationships become more important than school, and these students may be reinforced negatively by friends (Bireley & Genshaft, 1991; Rimm, 1995). In addition, gifted minority students may face cultural peer group expectations that impede their success. For example, Fordham (1988) found the fear of being accused of “acting White” created a social and psychological situation that diminished the academic efforts of African American students and led to underachievement.

For bright young men in secondary schools, a lack of participation in sports and a concentration on academics may cause peer group ridicule; therefore, they may underachieve to conform to perceived masculine peer values (Alvino, 1991; Rimm, 1984; Thompson, 1986; Wolfe, 1991). The peer culture that values athletics more than academics may be influential (Nelson, 1983; Snyder, 1985) since young people often invest themselves in sports when those activities are viewed as most likely to provide popularity with peers (Danish, 1983; Nelson).

Identification with underachieving peers may be especially common in males. Schneider and Coutts (1985) found that males are especially susceptible to anti-intellectual influences from their peers. Colangelo, Kerr, Christensen, and Maxey (1993) noted that gifted males outnumbered females in academic underachievement. These findings suggest that affiliative concerns interfering with achievement, a problem receiving considerable attention in the psychology of women, may also enlighten our understanding of the academic underachievement of intelligent young men. For example, high school males have often attained higher peer group status when they acquire an automobile, which may encourage young men to pursue part-time employment after school in order to acquire this coveted peer group status symbol. Owning an automobile can be problematic since studies on the effects of adolescent employment have found that part-time employment during high school negatively impacts students (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Fegley, & Dornbusch, 1993) and results in lower investment and performance in academics, and school delinquency.

Environmental Factors

Environmental factors may also play a role in the underachievement of high-ability students. Some youngsters may underachieve in school for reasons associated with the difficult environments in which they live. Although definitions of “at risk” may vary, a consensus exists in that many young people lack home and community resources to benefit from school. Differences in learning outcomes result from the interaction between students and their adverse environments (Ford, 1996; Sinclair & Ghory, 1992). Because of poverty and other environmental obstacles, students in urban schools underachieve academically and experience high dropout rates (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). For many urban teenagers, survival takes precedence over educational achievement. As Ford (1994) stated, “poverty inhibits potential. Together or in isolation, poverty and other risk factors can sabotage any student’s achievement and motivation” (p. 8). Recognizing this problem, Ford logically inferred that high-ability students exist in environments that place them at risk for underachieving, dropping out of school, and not reaching their potential as talented young adults.

The vast body of literature on factors contributing to underachievement among high-ability students points to common themes: personality differences, school-related factors, environmental influences, peer group issues, and family influences. Although there is research examining factors that place urban youth at risk for underachievement, little research has been conducted to explain how these factors personally influence high-ability youth in urban settings. What urban educators and policy makers need is a better understanding of the complexity of the problem and knowledge of effective interventions that are likely to succeed for the greatest number of high-ability underachievers in their schools. The complexity of the problem may be better understood by investigating the perceptions of high-ability urban students regarding their situations in urban schools and their struggles to overcome the factors that place them at risk for underachievement. By examining the experiences of high-ability underachievers in an urban high school, this study attempts to extend our understanding of this complex issue.

Research Design and Methods

To understand the urban high school experience of the young men described in the study, a qualitative research design was used that integrated features of case study and ethnographic research. The 6 cases described in this study are a subsample of the author’s larger dissertation study of 12
The dissertation study contributed to a larger study conducted by a research team funded by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). The author’s dissertation research played an important role in the NRC/GT study in that he began the NRC/GT study, immersed himself in the culture of the urban high school for 120 days, and completed the first 12 cases before additional researchers joined the three-year NRC/GT investigation. The author’s report of the cases described in this article focuses specifically on the experiences of the high-ability underachievers in his dissertation study. Acknowledging the author’s extensive time spent in the field, the cultural diversity represented in his subsample, and his specific focus on high-ability males in the high school, the intent of this article is to report findings from a representative “slice” of a voluminous qualitative data set.

Merriam (1998) defined qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 27). Ethnography refers to research that involves the description of a culture (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Case studies are often used when attempting to answer “how” or “why” questions, such as those posed in this study.

As a research tool, case studies enable researchers to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 1993). They are particularly useful when the researcher needs to understand some specific group of people, particular problem, or unique situation in great depth. When the researcher can identify cases with rich data within this group, problem, or situation, case study research can yield valuable information (Patton, 1990). In this study, six high-ability male underachievers were the phenomena under investigation, and the primary goal of this article focuses on their experiences in an urban high school. The names of the people, places, and institutions described in this article were changed to protect the identity of the participants involved.

**Data Collection**

A combination of participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and document review was used to gather data for the study. Participant observation involves researchers systematically experiencing and consciously recording in detail the many aspects of a situation as they constantly analyze their observations for meaning and personal bias (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Ethnographers use participant observation as a strategy for listening to people and observing them in their natural settings (Spradley, 1979); therefore, observation data in this study were collected from social, athletic, and academic settings. The researcher collected observational data from the following sites: the students’ academic classes, physical education classes in the gymnasium, the cafeteria, science labs, the school library, the art room, the automotive technology center, the school corridors while students passed between classes, the in-house detention center, and study halls. The researcher also attended a school pep rally, cultural assemblies, an academic awards assembly, student meetings with college recruiters, and athletic events. While the academic setting remained the major focus of observation, information gained in school and through interviews led the researcher to other observations and interviews in the community.

Along with transcribed interviews with participants, the review of formal and informal documents, such as the students’ records, samples of their written work, programs from athletic events, or posters advertising extracurricular activities, provided a clearer picture of the urban high school life experiences being studied. Six to eight in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the young men featured in this article. These semistructured interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to explore a few general topics not only to gain information directly from the participants, but also to develop insight on how the young men interpreted aspects of their urban high school experience. These semistructured interviews consisted of open-ended or “grand tour questions” (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) and specific questions. Such questions helped to define the boundaries of the study and focused the investigation. In this study of high-ability males in an urban high school, a grand tour question was: “Tell me what it’s like to attend South Central High.” The participants’ responses to the question provided an insider’s perspective on the high school as a social meeting place for unmotivated students with discipline problems. Probing further, the researcher elicited a description of the participants’ experiences with in-house suspension. Grand tour questions led to information that allowed the researcher to construct a basic map of the high school culture and isolate preliminary topics. Such information stimulated a flow of specific, detailed questions, followed by more grand tour questions, which again led to more detailed questions until the researcher had constructed a well-designed conceptual framework (Fetterman, 1989).

By interviewing participants, a picture emerged of what each participant believed was happening, allowing each young man to tell his side of the story. In addition to the interviews with the participants, individual interviews were conducted with current teachers, former teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, siblings, friends, community members, and other parties as they emerged through related data-gathering techniques.

The following research questions guided the qualitative case studies: What did the high-ability underachieving males
expect from their urban high school experience? What support systems (family, school, community) were recognized by these young men? What views did they hold of their urban high school environment? What relationships guided the behaviors, attitudes, and aspirations of the high-ability underachieving young men?

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Field notes, notes recorded during the observations, and transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed according to procedures advocated by Stake (1995). The process began with “categorical aggregation” (p. 74), in which the researcher searched for a collection of instances from the data for issue-relevant meanings to emerge. Single instances in the data were then examined to draw meaning from them without looking for multiple instances. Stake referred to this “direct interpretation” (p. 74) as a process of pulling the data apart and then putting them back together in more meaningful ways. The next phase of analysis involved working to “establish patterns” (p. 78) and searching for any correspondence between two or more patterns or categories. Following the analysis of patterns, the researcher attempted to present the findings descriptively to facilitate the readers forming “naturalistic generalizations” (p. 85), which are conclusions readers develop through vicarious experiences so well constructed that they feel as though the experience was their own. Therefore, in the data-analysis process, the themes that emerged began with the analysis of the researcher’s initial observations, were constantly refined throughout the data-collection and analysis processes, and continuously shaped the formation of categories (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Data analysis concluded with the researcher developing generalizations about the six high-ability underachievers in terms of patterns and how they compared and contrasted with published literature on high-ability underachievers in urban communities.

To enhance the validity of the findings, the researcher conducted intensive direct observations, interviews, and document review until data saturation occurred when new information collected was redundant and did not offer any additional insights to elucidate further understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researcher provided a detailed description of how the investigation was conducted, the measures taken to ensure the accuracy of the observations, and the evidence on which the findings were grounded. In addition, three culturally diverse researchers from the staff of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) examined the data coding process to verify codes and played the role of “devil’s advocate” in reviewing the data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

**The Setting**

The study took place at South Central High School, a four-year high school in a large city in the northeastern United States. Opened in 1974, South Central High was one of three high schools in the city. Historically one of the most culturally diverse high schools in the city, South Central High’s student body was 60% Latino, 20% African American, and the remaining 20% included White, Asian, and other racial or ethnic groups. The majority of the students were from working-class families to families of low-socioeconomic status. The multicultural student body consisted of a transient population, with approximately one-third of the students transferring in or out of the high school during any academic year. The school building, a metallic brown, four-story structure, housed 1,656 students and a faculty and staff of 200. With few windows and no name on the front of the building, a passerby might have mistaken it for an industrial plant.

Students attending South Central High lived in blue-collar neighborhoods with two- and three-story tenement buildings, modest single-family homes, or federal housing projects. Gang warfare, drug trafficking, and drive-by shootings plagued the urban neighborhoods surrounding the high school. The high school administrators and a team of security guards struggled daily to keep the campus protected from the negative elements of the urban environment.

**Selection of the Participants**

For the purpose of this study, school guidance counselors and teachers recommended the high-ability underachievers. They were defined as students with high potential, as evidenced by academic achievement or intelligence test results of above the 85th percentile using local norms, who were not achieving at the level expected based on this potential. This cut-off was used because achievement scores of these young men had consistently declined from elementary to middle school to high school. Additionally, the following criteria were examined to select underachievers for the study: (1) The student had been enrolled in a gifted program and was previously achieving at a superior level academically as evidenced by grades, teacher observation, and awards or honors, or (2) the student had previously displayed consistent strong academic performance with grades of B or better in elementary and junior high school, and (3) the student was presently maintaining a grade point average of 2.0 or lower, or (4) the student was consistently enrolled in noncollege-bound or general classes, or (5) the student was no longer in school, having dropped out or become truant. Demographic data about the participants are included in Table 1, and descrip-
tions of the six young men and their underachieving behaviors are provided below.

**Description of the Participants and Their Patterns of Underachievement**

**Skip**

Skip stood six feet tall, and, weighing 180 pounds with a rugged athletic build, he filled the position of South Central High’s star linebacker. He wore his light brown hair in the popular “mushroom style cut” and a tiny diamond earring in his right ear. Dressed in acid-washed jeans, sneakers, and athletic T-shirts, he walked the corridors of the high school carrying his textbook tucked under his armpit, with the masculine poise of a linebacker and a “devil may care” look about him. Skip’s nonchalant manner quickly disappeared as he became involved in conversation about his current high school experiences. He spoke rapidly, blushed often, smiled shyly, and nervously hesitated or stuttered as he openly expressed his feelings. As he spoke, he doodled constantly on the cover of a textbook.

As Skip discussed his school experiences, it was evident that academics were not always a problem for him. His records from elementary school included comments from teachers that indicated they recognized a child with high potential. One teacher wrote, “Skip has a quick mind and is anxious to do well.” Another teacher noted that “Skip learns quickly and is very good in math.” His math achievement test scores were consistently in the 90th percentiles. Skip’s strongest year academically in elementary school occurred in sixth grade when he had a male teacher who provided him with great support. That year he earned grades of As and Bs. That teacher recommended him for the gifted and talented program, and Skip explained he was placed in the program, “because my testing was so strong,” and he admitted that he enjoyed the enrichment activities the program provided. By junior high, Skip’s grades dropped dramatically, and his seventh-grade report card read, “Skip has become increasingly talkative, and he socializes with disruptive students who have no interest in school work. They draw him into the group and, in turn, Skip becomes disruptive.”

Skip’s high school guidance counselor was concerned about his lack of motivation academically. He had dropped from an A+ to an F in geometry and was failing his English class. He earned Cs in biology and struggled with Ds in French. His accounting class, taught by his football coach, was no problem, for he had a B+ average in that course. Skip had failed every course except physical education in his freshman year of high school. Having repeated ninth grade, his current sophomore year continued to be problematic since he was failing several courses he would need to graduate.

Skip’s program at South Central included no honors-level classes. He was enrolled in academic-level courses, and his class rank was 314th in a class of 360. His teachers, realizing Skip’s intelligence, expressed frustration with his situation. His English teacher counseled Skip and told him he was “one of the brightest students I’ve had in years” and could not under-

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**Table 1**

**Student Demographics for Grade Level, Race/Ethnicity, Test Scores, GPA, and Class Track**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Subject Test Percentiles</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Class Track</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Math 86, Reading 99</td>
<td>D+</td>
<td>Academic General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diego</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Math 99, Reading 93</td>
<td>D-</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeShea</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Math 90, Reading 96</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Academic General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitch</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Math 99, Reading 96</td>
<td>C-</td>
<td>Honors Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Math 99, Reading 97</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Honors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Math 94, Reading 82</td>
<td>D-</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: National achievement scores on either the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) or Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) taken in high school.*
stand why he was not doing his work. His high school records included reports of “major disciplinary offenses” and time spent in the school’s in-house suspension center. Attendance had become a serious problem, and the high school’s administration had established a contract regarding Skip’s disruptive behavior and high absenteeism. When Skip did attend school, his free time after classes was spent hanging out with members of the football team in the high school’s weight room. A fellow member of the football team commented that “Skip’s real aggressive on the field, but he’s a real goof-off in school.”

DeShea

DeShea had a forlorn look about him. The sad expression on his face and the whisper with which he spoke made it seem as though he were unsure of himself. The soft-spoken young man was an artist who carried his sketchpad and charcoal pencils in his backpack as he travelled the school corridors. Surviving the hallways every day proved challenging for DeShea, who explained that heavier, more athletic students were constantly harassing him because of his small size. DeShea had finely sculpted facial features, and his hair was shaped in a trendy style worn by many African American teenagers at South Central High. He dressed in jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts and was often reprimanded by the faculty for wearing a heavy winter jacket in the building. His teachers indicated that his backpack never left him, for he appeared to wear it as an appendage, or perhaps as protection from his adversaries in the hallways.

DeShea was described by a former elementary school teacher as “one of those little disruptive guys who might have been on Ritalin, much different from his younger brother who was so quiet.” DeShea’s situation seemed to change in middle school when he was enrolled in a magnet school for students identified as artistically talented. He described it as an exciting school where he studied philosophy, Latin, astronomy, art history, and had small-group instruction in advanced art on a daily basis.

DeShea’s elementary art teacher described him as “a very complex child who thought like an abstract artist.” His art teacher in high school explained that DeShea “sees like an artist and understands the art concepts far greater than anyone in my classes.” DeShea’s art teacher was completely frustrated with him, for he was not achieving in art class, having produced a portfolio filled with mostly incomplete art room assignments, and the art teacher felt frustrated assigning grades of zero for incomplete efforts to such a talented young man.

DeShea underachieved in other areas in addition to art. His English teacher shook his head and reported “absences and work not made up is what is hurting him in my course.” He was failing English, U.S. history, and Chemistry I. He had earned a B- in Spanish and a B in Algebra I. All of DeShea’s courses were general-track classes, yet his teachers and counselor agreed he should be enrolled in honors-level courses. His achievement test scores had consistently indicated superior ability, with his math and reading scores falling within the 90th percentiles.

Morgan

Morgan looked different. In South Central’s student body of primarily Latino and Black teenagers dressed in colorful, fashionable clothing styles, Morgan might have been mistaken as a visitor to the school. He looked like a model in an L. L. Bean catalogue. A tall, slender young man, he carried himself with a quiet sophistication and spoke in a polite, articulate manner. Dressed in navy blue and white striped jerseys, khaki pants, and docksiders, Morgan styled his dark, wavy brown hair to match his preppy image as he explained, “I try to look different. In this school everyone looks the same, so I’m happy looking different.”

A young teacher in the English department had said, “Morgan’s poetry is that of a senior in college. He’s brilliant, but he’s just doing enough to get by.” Morgan was enrolled strictly in honors-level classes, but he was earning grades of C. Morgan’s parents were very concerned about his laid-back attitude. Morgan was a sophomore and, until that year, his academic record had been stellar. He was described by one elementary school teacher as “an intelligent, creative child who excels in all areas,” while another teacher had commented in his school records that “Morgan was enthusiastic, articulate, and highly motivated.” His elementary and middle school records included only straight-A report cards, and his standardized achievement testing record indicated consistent reading, math, and language scores in the 98th and 99th percentiles. Identified for a gifted and talented program in elementary school, he participated in an enrichment resource room program on a weekly basis. Morgan had indeed been the model student. His program as a freshman had involved only honors-level courses, and his academic record that year consisted of strictly As and Bs, which placed him eighth in a class of 483. When asked about his parents’ concerns about his grades and his diminished motivation, he responded with a shrug of the shoulders and a quiet laugh. He explained, “I’m just taking this year lightly, I guess.”

Diego

When Diego’s guidance counselor informed him that she had nominated him for a research study and he would be meet-
ing with a researcher from a nearby university, he rolled his eyes and said in exasperation, “Why in the world did you go do a foolish thing like that?” He arrived at his guidance counselor’s office and stood slouched in the doorway. He checked the university researcher over from head to toe and asked, “Are you a professor?” While shaking hands, Diego continued to eye this stranger suspiciously. Not knowing what to make of the situation, he agreed to participate in the study.

The counselor had described him as “the most handsome Puerto Rican male in this high school.” Diego dressed in baggy jeans, a black crew neck jersey, and a gold chain necklace. His outfit was rounded off with a pair of black leather boots that reached his mid-calf. His short, jet-black hair was covered by a baseball cap, which he wore backwards. He traveled the school grounds with a lollipop stick jutting from his mouth in a Telly Savales style, and he could be seen charming the female students he met throughout the day with his handsome Latino looks.

As a young child, Diego had been a Head Start student. Growing up in a home where only Spanish was spoken, he was placed in a bilingual program in kindergarten and was mainstreamed into a regular program following third grade. His elementary school teachers described him as “an excellent student in all areas” and “a fine citizen well liked by his peers.” His elementary school progress reports were superior, and his middle school transcript reported a record of straight Bs in all subjects. Diego had scored in the 90th percentiles in math and reading throughout elementary and middle school achievement testing. By the time he arrived at South Central High as a freshman, the picture had changed. He was enrolled in strictly academic classes in ninth grade, but failed all of them, with the exception of physical education. Following that dismal year, he was dropped to general-level classes. His high school portfolio was filled with warning notices from teachers that continually indicated problems with tardiness, absences, lack of completed assignments, and occasional disruptive behavior in class. Diego explained his behavior when he commented, “I just mess around a lot. I just joke around. I talk with the other guys in class and get on my teachers’ nerves.” One teacher had noted, “Diego has a lot of growing up to do. Right now, he does not belong in an academic setting.” Throughout the academic warnings, teachers noted his high-ability and his active participation in lively class discussions. His math teacher, who had unsuccessfully attempted to recruit Diego for the school math team, commented to his guidance counselor, “He wants to look to the streets, but he’s too smart for that. He’s the smartest kid in the room.”

**Mitch**

Mitch looked like a Boy Scout in a Norman Rockwell painting. A clean-cut, heavy-set young man with sandy brown hair, a round freckled face, and braces on his teeth, he appeared in the school library every day wearing his maroon football jacket emblazoned with his varsity letter. At 5’9” and weighing 270 pounds, Mitch was a third-year offensive tackle on the team. Mitch had also been on the wrestling team, but he left that group after his freshman year because he felt overweight and he was tired of rolling around on the floor with smaller, wiry wrestlers he called “mutants.” He spoke in a quiet manner and wore a mischievous grin. Mitch had a witty sense of humor and constantly cracked jokes with other athletes who joined him at his self-designated table in the library every day during fourth period.

Mitch’s educational experiences in elementary and middle school were positive. He had attended the same school from kindergarten through eighth grade and became involved in the gifted and talented enrichment program in the upper elementary grades. Several teachers reported that Mitch was a “very capable child,” and others commented on his need for structure and his tendency to become lazy. His achievement test scores placed Mitch in the 96th and 99th percentiles in reading and math, and his report cards throughout elementary and middle school consisted of As and Bs, with an occasional grade of C.

Mitch arrived at South Central as a freshman and was placed in strictly honors-level classes. He achieved grades of Bs and Cs, with an A+ in physical education. By 10th grade, his grades dropped drastically to Ds and Fs. Mitch’s mother became very concerned and contacted Mitch’s guidance counselor on a weekly basis. Mitch claimed that the nagging at home never stopped, and he described how even the other neighborhood housewives who were friends of his mother were also “on his case.” Mitch had very close friends in the neighborhood with whom he had grown up. They had all maintained high scholastic achievement throughout school, and Mitch was besieged by comments from them, as well. Eventually, he told his neighborhood buddies to “mind their own business!”

By his junior year, Mitch’s mother insisted that he not be scheduled into any honors-level classes. She demanded that his guidance counselor place her son in academic-level courses. Mitch was furious since he wanted to remain with his best friends, yet he was forced to give in to his mother’s demands. He did manage to convince his first-semester English teacher to allow him to take a class on urban literature and contract for honors-level credit without his mother knowing, and he earned a grade of B+ in a course he found interesting and challenging.

**John**

John’s satin complexion was a light shade of cocoa brown, the only indication of his biracial background. John was over
six feet tall and was built like an Olympic runner. He had a warm, friendly smile, and he appeared carefree. A meticulous dresser, he arrived for his first interview wearing a fashionable trenchcoat and carrying a matching umbrella. On other days, he wore colorful jogging outfits and explained he owned nine pairs of Nike running shoes that matched his athletic outfits. John enjoyed shopping and was proud of his reputation as a Beau Brummell.

Throughout elementary and middle school, the obviously very intelligent young man puzzled his teachers. John’s teachers knew he had the ability to succeed in school since his achievement test scores consistently indicated reading, math, and language scores ranging from the 90th to 99th percentiles. However, his early childhood report cards were filled with descriptive comments such as “capable but unmotivated” and “very talkative, capable student who has little motivation.” The only bright spot in John’s early educational experiences was the industrial arts program in middle school. In that hands-on program, John excelled, achieving a grade of A+. Since his freshman year at South Central High, John’s dismal academic record was filled with Cs, Ds, and Fs in academic and general-level classes. As a senior, he was ranked 248th in a class of 330. With a record of high absenteeism causing concern over whether or not he would graduate, the high school administration had intervened, and John’s attendance was being monitored by the vice principal.

Findings

The major factors that were found to influence the academic underachievement of the six participants were (1) inappropriate curricular experiences and questionable counseling experiences and (2) a series of family issues. The young men in this study generally found their curricular experiences boring and indicated that their classes did not match their preferred learning style. A mismatch existed between their strengths and the classes they were enrolled in, and accordingly their special talents or strengths often were not nurtured. They believed courses were often irrelevant, and several remarked they needed more hands-on learning experiences. Their frustration with the system led to apathy, and some of them turned to the negative influences in their environment. They were negatively influenced by their peers and their dismal surroundings and had few strategies for constructively dealing with their problems. These factors resulted in behavior problems and disciplinary infractions, too much unstructured time, and confused or unrealistic aspirations.

John described how he was a hands-on learner and how, as a young child, he was known throughout his neighborhood for traveling to the city’s junkyard with friends in search of old bicycles to take apart and rebuild them into new “inventions.” He explained he learned kinesthetically when he said, “I never picked up a book at home and read. At home, I was always doing something else. As a little kid, I never wanted to read. I always wanted to do something.”

John’s talents were nurtured for the first time in middle school when he enrolled in his first industrial arts class. His grades in that course were straight As. As a senior in high school, John worked after school repairing equipment at a physical fitness center. His kinesthetic talent was being nurtured in his part-time job, and he explained that he really enjoyed tinkering with the second-hand car he had recently purchased. As a student at South Central, John explained that his auto tech class was what brought him to school. During his freshman and sophomore years, John had struggled unsuccessfully to enroll in an automotive technology course because the class was always filled. Now, his relationship with his auto tech teacher was important to him, and he admired the way his teacher provided new hands-on expertise in a real-world, consumer-oriented class in which students worked on car repairs for adults from surrounding neighborhoods.

John did not enjoy the same challenges in other classes, and he described an unchallenging geometry course where he was able to “sit at the back of the room and nod off,” yet maintain a B average. He realized that he had been scheduled into several classes that were inappropriate for his ability level. He described times when he found the curriculum so easy he refused to respond to questions in class. Instead, he chose to hide his intelligence. He explained:

I know that most of the kids in my English class know the stuff. I know they learned this simple stuff in elementary school. Nobody wants to admit it, including me. It’s been like that for so long. I started doing it when I was younger. When you’re in the fourth and fifth grade, you’re fighting to raise your hand. Something happened when I got to junior high. You just stop. I guess it’s because everyone else affected me. I don’t bother raising my hand today, not voluntarily.

John had failed U.S. history and had to repeat the course. The scheduling of classes was completed in September by his guidance counselor and the school’s principal, who assisted the counselors after their department had been reduced. He was scheduled into a basic-level class that John claimed was “sixth-grade level” and filled with students who struggled with learning difficulties. He described the class as “reading a chapter and answering questions following each paragraph.” For this reason, John decided to sleep through U.S. history again.

Skip faced a similar problematic situation since he claimed he did not learn through reading. He lost his copy of Antigone for his literature class. Although he had not read a word of the book, he was able to provide a detailed rendi-
tion of the plot. Skip explained that he learned by listening well in class and being involved in the discussions. Miss Marzano, his English teacher, had noticed his ability to learn auditorially. He described a conversation with her in which she said, “Skip, you would miss weeks of school, and you’d come in and understand right away what we were talking about, and you’d still do well on the exams. You’re one of the smartest kids I’ve ever had.” Skip explained that Miss Marzano was “tough, but good,” and he found comfort knowing that “She respected me even though I failed her class.”

Skip’s performance in school during the second and third marking period was miserable. He blamed his drastic slump on the time of the year, for he only succeeded academically during the marking periods when he needed to be concerned about his eligibility for the football team. He blamed the problem on the negative environment, his peer group that lured him into mischievous behavior, and his lack of organization. His external locus of control and a total naïveté was evidenced in conversations about his current lack of success in school. He appeared to be lost in his problem; however, he saw a solution in what he referred to as his “new notebook theory.” He explained:

I know if I went across the street to the pharmacy and bought a new notebook, I would start fresh again. If I had a new notebook, I know things would change. There is something about a new notebook that gets me all psyched. I get all psyched up when it’s the start of a new school year. I even write neater when the notebook is new. It might sound crazy, but it’s the little things like that that make a difference for me.

Morgan also appeared frustrated with his situation. Several of his classes were not challenging, and his academic strengths were not nurtured appropriately. Morgan had not learned to work hard in elementary school, and this problem had become a serious issue. He explained, “I never did any homework in elementary school. It’s a bad habit now. I’ll have my book open, and after 10 minutes, I can’t sit and do it. I don’t know why. I was always this way, but it was no big deal in elementary school. Now, it’s become a serious problem.” He went on to describe his philosophy of homework and how he felt some of the curriculum could be streamlined. He said:

I have a philosophy on homework. If I know how to do it, why bother to do the homework? It’s when you don’t know how to do the work that you should have to figure it out. If I’ve mastered the skill, why should I have to continue to prove that I know it by doing more?

Morgan was well known for his creative writing ability, which had been nurtured in his elementary school gifted and talented program. His older sister reported that he spent time writing poetry for his new girlfriend in the evening. He had entered city-wide writing contests with his poetry, and for this reason, he complained about his English class in which he was earning a C-. He explained, “We had to do a dialec-
tic notebook. You read the novel and you take passages and you write on them. I hate doing those. I hate having to stop and write when I’d rather just read the book. That’s what’s important.”

Mitch had been enrolled in the same English class, and he too had decided that many of the assignments were useless and frustrating. He provided his view:

She had dialectic notebooks. You had to divide your paper in half and she had you take scenes from the story and interpret them. You had to do it for pages! They were bad, no fun at all. I got a 98 on the first one and all the others were less than 60. I play it straight with my teachers. On the final exam, she had us write our opinions of the class. I wrote that I thought it was busy work!

Several of the participants’ underachievement appeared to involve issues related to curriculum and instructional style. If they enjoyed the content and the teacher, they worked for that teacher. When they were disinterested in the content, they refused to work. Mitch described this issue when he discussed his experiences with several English classes:

It’s their style of teaching. Some people I like, some people I don’t like. Some work I like, some work, I don’t. In freshman English there was a lot of Shakespeare and The Odyssey. That was pretty good. I liked that.

Last year, we had to study a lot of boring books that put me to sleep. When she handed them out, I knew we were headed for trouble. Pride and Prejudice took place in the 1800s. I hated that book! Then there was another about some dumb kid who fell out of a tree, broke his leg and died. It was called A Separate Peace. Dumb book! This year in urban literature, we’re reading good books and I like it. Down These Mean Streets is not a typical high school book. It kept my interest.

Morgan’s curricular strengths included math, yet he was enrolled in Algebra I in ninth grade. He described his ninth grade math experience as a “repeat” because his middle school math teacher had recognized his talent and provided him with an accelerated program. Morgan was frustrated with having wasted a year in Algebra I when he could have been accelerated. Because of this, he would have to double up on math courses in order to become enrolled in a coveted trigonometry course offered to South Central seniors at a nearby college.

As a middle school student, DeShea had been involved in a magnet school program for artistically talented students. In that setting, in addition to his core curricular requirements, he was enrolled in art classes in which he studied advanced topics such as sculpture, contour drawing, and art history. He became intrigued with the lives of famous artists and researched the work of Vincent Van Gogh. DeShea was attending school out of his district, and when space in the program became limited, he was transferred back to his neighborhood school.

When DeShea arrived at South Central, he was not enrolled in art classes. Instead of art, he had two math courses, Prealgebra and an experimental course in statistics. DeShea’s counselor did not realize that he had been involved in a magnet school arts program. He was not offered art classes until his
The sibling problem was evidenced in Morgan’s remarks. Morgan was overshadowed by his older sister who was a powerful high achiever succeeding at everything at South Central. Morgan was honest about his feelings as he explained:

I come here and nobody knows me as Morgan, they know me as Margaret’s brother and that’s hard. It’s always been like that. In elementary and middle school, it was the same way. So here [at South Central] it will be nice when she leaves [laughs nervously], but they’re still going to know me as Margaret’s brother.

An interview with Margaret shed some insight on the brother-sister relationship. She described their relationship as “close,” and she evidently cared about her younger brother deeply. She described the dismay she felt when she and her brother were both finalists in a city-wide writing contest. Her brother had written a “wonderful” poem about baseball, but her essay won the $1,000 award. Morgan had received an engraved pen and pencil set. She said, “When I brought it up, he just shrugged it off.” She explained that her brother’s situation in school was becoming a troublesome family issue, noting, “Dad is a calm man. The only time I’ve ever heard him yell has been recently over Morgan’s grades. He’s not an underachiever, he’s just so unmotivated. I guess I’m an overachiever.”

Mitch faced a similar situation with his younger brother. Mitch’s brother, Billy, was an elementary school superstar academically, but a real “klutz” athletically. Mitch was honest in saying he had no respect for his only sibling and described his relationship with his brother and the problems involved:

We don’t get along. There are so many differences between us. He gets all As in school, and he doesn’t do sports. He got a D in gym. That really says a lot! Sometimes, he’ll show off his grades. When he does that, I teach him a lesson. He knows if he keeps it up, he’ll get hurt.

Along with sibling rivalry, other participants had inconsistent role models within the family. Diego had nine older half-brothers and half-sisters. He respected several of his older half-brothers while being disgusted with the remainder of them. Several of his older siblings were in the military and were promoted rapidly. Another half-brother received an athletic scholarship, graduated from college, and was a successful businessman. Living at home with Diego and his parents was an older half-brother Diego described as “an addict.” He explained, “He took coke when he was stationed in Japan. He’s screwed up. He’s been to rehab. He’s just hurting my mother. I don’t respect him.” His half-siblings nagged Diego, and he claimed they all attempted to give him advice about how he should run his life. Diego indicated he only responded positively to Ralf, the half-brother who did not preach, but commiserated about the difficulties faced by urban teenagers.

John faced a similar situation at home. His older brother had a drinking problem, but had managed to remain employed
by a large department store. John was troubled by his brother's drinking. John's younger sister was pregnant, unmarried, and unemployed. His second sister was employed as a librarian's aide in the city's public library system. All three of John's siblings had dropped out of high school, and John was struggling to be the first in his family to receive a diploma.

In the case of two participants, family dysfunction appeared to be influencing their underachievement. Skip came from a troubled home. Skip's father had deserted his wife and two sons when they were very young. He had returned from California after being gone for 15 years and had brought back a friend who was now sleeping on the family sofa. Skip's mother had suffered nervous breakdowns and was having problems finding employment. Skip's only sibling had dropped out of high school and struggled to hold down a steady job. Skip commented that his parents were not at all consistent with him, and he complained that all his parents ever heard from school were bad reports, so "they were always on his back." He would be grounded at home after each disciplinary problem at school, but his parents never followed through completely with the punishment. When he defined what "being grounded" involved, he explained he couldn't talk to his new girlfriend on the phone and he had to do the dishes after dinner. When he was restricted from talking on the phone at home, he would sneak out of the apartment and call his girlfriend from a nearby pay phone.

DeShea also came from a troubled home. DeShea's mother had remarried, and the relationship between DeShea and his stepfather was unhealthy. Following a rather violent family fight in which DeShea had struck his mother and she was forced to call the police, DeShea's family received the services of a social worker. DeShea's guidance counselor had supported his mother through several difficult crises with her son. DeShea's mother had expressed total frustration with him and explained that he consumed half her energy. The other half of her life was filled with her new husband and DeShea's younger brother.

Miss Bothmer, DeShea's soft-spoken, sensitive elementary art teacher, had watched DeShea grow as a young artist. She provided evidence that DeShea's home life had been troubled for some time. In an interview, she reflected back on the young child who would draw fantasy characters and comic strips in the corner of her classroom for hours at a time. One of her most vivid memories of DeShea was painful for her. She remembered a parent conference with DeShea's mother:

I'll never forget something she said to him in front of me during a teacher conference. It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life. She said, "DeShea, if you don't straighten out, I guess I'll just have to give you up." I felt sick. I just couldn't imagine a parent saying that to her child.

**Peer Group Issues**

Five of the six young men in the study faced peer group issues that appeared to have a negative influence on their attitudes toward academic achievement. Mitch was surrounded by not only an academic superstar younger brother in elementary school, but also a neighborhood of all high honor-roll students in his class. The three closest friends Mitch had were all young men who grew up with Mitch and lived within several city blocks. Mitch was losing this circle of friends when he was forced to drop his honors-level classes. Along with seeing less of his best friends in school, several of these friends had a tendency to nag Mitch about his lack of effort in school. "He's so lazy!" was something that was heard occasionally from these teenagers who felt they needed to let him know they were concerned. Mitch had difficulty dealing with this peer group nagging and would become rather explosive when his friends "got on his case."

Diego also shared some of his peer group problems. He admitted that his selection of friends had adversely affected him during his first year at South Central when he had failed all of his freshman classes. He explained, "I had to stay back in freshman classes. Now, I'm in sophomore classes when I should be a junior. I don't fool around as much because my best friends aren't with me, the guys I came to school with."

The peer group was important to Diego. His friends appeared to direct his life after school. He explained he enjoyed "chillin' on Park Street" with his best friends. Park Street was a commercial strip in the city filled with small Hispanic businesses. Police officers in cruisers patrolled the street constantly because it had a reputation for being an area of the city plagued with gang warfare problems.

Diego described shopping excursions to the Bronx borough of New York City with friends on Saturday mornings. He explained that he liked to buy gold link necklaces and medallions. He had found a leather and fur coat in the Bronx priced for $500 that would sell for $800 in his neighborhood. He wore the coat to South Central High and found he had to keep it stored in the vice principal's office because it was not safe in his locker.

As Diego's teacher noted, he wanted "to look to the streets," but was "too smart for that." Instead, his intrigue with "the streets" helped him manage his image with his peers. Diego claimed he was "always broke," yet he arrived for one interview with a large roll of $20 bills, which he proceeded to count throughout the interview. He was wearing a new pair of Nike sneakers, which he said he had purchased in the Bronx for $189. Where Diego and his friends were getting the money to pursue their shopping excursions to the Bronx was something he did not care to discuss. He arrived for another inter-
view wearing a beeper and proudly demonstrated how it worked. The electronic devices worn by some South Central High students were confiscated by the school’s administrators. Diego had managed to keep his beeper well concealed. According to students, the beeper was a method for keeping in touch with drug pushers. The question became whether the students were actually involved in drug running for a pusher or whether the beepers were simply a status symbol. When questioned about this, Diego did not reply.

The peer group issue was discussed with Diego’s mother, who expressed concern about her son because she saw so little of him after school. Diego also mentioned that his mother was constantly complaining that he never spent time at home with his parents and how she was worried about him. Several of his half-brothers nagged him about his selection of friends and their after-school activities. He explained, “Some of my older brothers, they lecture me, and I don’t like it. Don’t mess up in school. Don’t start selling drugs. Don’t join a gang. Don’t do this. Don’t do that.’’ My brother Ralf, he’ll say he’s seen the streets.” When Diego was asked to describe the streets, he replied, “Hell.” His cryptic response was perhaps an appropriate way to describe the turmoil he felt when he considered his options and support systems in and out of school.

When he wasn’t playing football, Skip surrounded himself with students who were not successful in school. In his freshman year, his older brother, who had been in ninth grade for three years, was in Skip’s homeroom class and would convince Skip to join his friends in leaving the school campus for the day. Skip apparently understood the influence his peer group had on him. He explained:

There are a lot of kids just wasting away. They’re failing. Kids like me. . . . It’s a place to hang out. Everybody like me stays in school for social reasons. They see their friends here every day. They don’t take home books. If they took school seriously, if they tried, they could be A students.

Skip knew that his peer group was influencing his underachievement because he compared his situation at South Central with the lifestyle of his academically oriented girlfriend from a nearby suburban high school. Skip’s girlfriend, Dolores, had emigrated with her family from Poland as a young girl, and Skip claimed her parents were still “European-style strict parents.” Dolores, an honors student, wanted her boyfriend to achieve academically. Dolores had plans for college, and Skip pointed out that this was the best relationship he had ever had with a young woman. Though Skip struggled to find a support system with the more positive peer group of Dolores and her friends, he had difficulty. Dolores’ parents did not approve of her relationship with Skip. They did not want him in their home. Having experienced a different environment and group of students at Dolores’s school dances and athletic events, Skip decided he would be a different student if he attended school in the suburbs. He said, “Skip from Carter High would be different from Skip from South Central.”

Behavior Problems and Disciplinary Issues

The participants apparently were generally bored with their curriculum and negatively influenced by their peers and their dismal surroundings, and they turned to the environment to create some fun. Four of the six young men were constantly facing disciplinary problems for their poor behavior in classes. This was evidenced by an extensive collection of disciplinary reports in their guidance office files. The problematic behavior of the underachievers was observed throughout the study. Skip would often be seen lying horizontally across several chairs in study hall, while others were seen with their heads down on a desk, either sleeping or hiding under a hooded sweatshirt. Several teachers would allow them to remain that way while a few insisted they sit up and participate in class.

DeShea associated with a younger group of students from his neighborhood. His best friend, Montoya, was a freshman who was involved in a pilot program at South Central designed as an intervention to improve school attendance and academic achievement. The experimental “Sheltered Study Hall” provided freshman students with enrichment activities on a weekly basis during their morning study hall. When Montoya informed DeShea about an upcoming talent show the study hall students were preparing, DeShea joined the group during first period, convinced the directors of the program he belonged there, and was eventually designated as the “dance coordinator” for the show. He arrived every day and supervised his freshman friends in their dance routines. While he was involved in the Sheltered Study Hall activities, his absentee record in first-period U.S. history was increasing daily. He was failing his history course because of the number of days he skipped class and the assignments he failed to submit to his teacher. Eventually, the program monitors realized that DeShea was not a freshman and were forced to counsel him to return to his first-period U.S. history class.

Skip’s school file included “Major Disciplinary Offense” reports from teachers. One described a day when he had been involved in a fight in study hall. He started a prank on another student, spraying hair spray in another young man’s hair. A skirmish followed in which Skip sluggishly the student in the face. The young man’s eyeglasses broke, and he had to be rushed to the hospital for stitches near his eye. Skip was then expelled from school. On other occasions, Skip spent time in the in-house suspension program held on the school grounds. Skip devised a plan to get around the in-house suspension program. He explained his philosophy concerning the disciplinary measure and described his strategy for avoiding time there:
It's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of in my life. If you get outside suspension, you get to stay home and watch The Price is Right. It's just like if I was in prison and started a fight, they'd send me home for a week's vacation. It makes just as much sense. In in-house suspension, you sit in a room all day and there is no teaching. It just doesn't make sense. They have you with other kids just like you cutting up all day. No homework is done. The monitor is a lady who tries to control the place. So what do you do? You start a little rumble and you get a little vacation.

John purchased a second-hand car, which earned him the envy of his friends and the consternation of his vice principal. He often left the school grounds and gave his friends rides to local fast food restaurants because the school's cafeteria meals did not appeal to them. He was closely monitored by his vice principal for his high absenteeism and his repeated recreational cruises throughout the city during the school day. John's vice principal was livid because, while serving as a chauffeur for his friends, John was skipping classes and risking his high school graduation with the mischievous excursions. He could not afford to be absent from classes, yet his friends seemed to steer him in the wrong direction.

**A Problem With Unstructured Time**

Unstructured time proved problematic for the underachievers. Morgan admitted that his free time was a problem for him after dinner. He spent hours on the phone with his girlfriend, and this had become a family issue. He explained, “My parents try to organize my life. I had a long talk with Dad. We wrote out a schedule. ‘From this hour to this hour, no matter what is going on, you are either going to do homework or read.’ That was fine. After one week, we didn’t do it any more.”

Skip considered the football team his salvation. During football season, his time was structured, and academics were important to him, for he knew he had to maintain a C average to remain eligible to play on the team. Without the team, his unstructured time became a problem. Skip knew that his involvement on the team made a difference, and he simply had not figured out a way to transfer the drive he had for the sport into a similar motivation in school. Skip's description of his problem is evidence of his turmoil over his underachievement. He described:

> What's the problem? An alcoholic can go to a clinic and get cured. What's there for me? I'm searching for a combination. I think it's football. Football drives me. I have the drive to make all-conference, to win the games. During the second and third marking periods, when I don't have to worry about being eligible to play, I have no drive to achieve.

Mitch also seemed to struggle with time after school. He also claimed that the football team was his support system. Though he spent some time working out with the team in the weight room after school, he had withdrawn from the wrestling, baseball, and indoor track teams. He explained he no longer enjoyed those sports and pointed out that he was “50 pounds overweight, and it wasn't muscle.” Instead, Mitch chose “a boring job” as a cashier at a neighborhood gas station where he “punched keys on the cash register all day and sold cigarettes.” DeShea, John, and Diego were not involved in any extracurricular activities. DeShea also worked as a cashier at a discount department store in his neighborhood. John worked 37 hours a week at a fitness center, and Diego explained he “spent time chillin’ with friends.” As for summer plans, several of the participants spoke of attending the remedial summer school program sponsored by their school district for students who had failed classes and needed to make up credits to fulfill graduation requirements.

**Confused or Unrealistic Aspirations**

A majority of the participants appeared to have aspirations that were either confused or unrealistic. They seemed out of touch with the reality of their situation. For example, Skip, the high school linebacker who had a dismal record of academic failure and discipline problems, dreamed of attending a New England college “not too far from home,” a large enough school where he had a chance of being recognized by professional recruiters. Mitch seemed to have aspirations that were totally incongruent with his record of achievement at South Central High. He mentioned Ivy League schools and other high-powered colleges he wanted to attend. Morgan seemed unfocused as he talked about attending law school, but explained he didn’t “really enjoy history” and pointed out that math was his favorite subject. DeShea, the artist, dreamed of pursuing his passion for art through his career. He spoke of attending a commercial art school in Florida and claimed he would do anything to get accepted into that program. However, the young artist who planned on a lucrative career did not appear to make the connection with his aspirations and his dismal performance in his Art I class at South Central High.

**Discussion and Implications**

**Personality Issues**

The findings of the study confirm the work of several researchers who have examined underachievement in high-ability students. Personality issues played a role in the underachievement of several of the young men in this study. When considering the individual personality factors that influence underachievement, Diego, Morgan, and Skip discussed deficits in their organizational skills and self-regulation strategies. This finding confirms specifically the work of Krouse and Krouse (1981), Rimm (1988), and Seeley (1993). Maladaptive
coping strategies, avoidance, and procrastination, highlighted in the work of Gonzalez and Hayes (1988), and behaviors displaying the anger and defensiveness described by Ford (1996) were apparent in the discouraging situations of all six participants.

Evident in the cases of the six participants were examples of maladaptive coping strategies in the face of their academic problems. Several of the students may have developed a defensiveness to cope with their problems. The six young men avoided their assignments and procrastinated. Some admitted that they had never worked hard in elementary and middle school and had developed poor study habits. Their requests for more hands-on experiences and more relevance in their school assignments may be justified, but it is also possible that these requests were their own biased interpretations based on their entrenched bad habits.

Interestingly, several blamed their problems on inappropriate curricula and referred to classroom experiences as “boring.” Rimm (1995) noted that the word boring is the single word regarding school that parents and educators hear from underachievers most frequently, and its interpretation may mean something different for each young person. She cautioned adults to examine the use of this word by underachievers. For some, it may mean the assignments are too difficult; for others, they may be too easy. It may be a sign that the student is fearful of competition with peers, and, for others, it may suggest a power struggle with a particular teacher. Although the young men in this study seemed honest in their desire for challenge, in some cases they used the lack of challenge as a defense mechanism, a common strategy of underachievers as noted by Ford (1996) and Rimm. For example, in DeShea’s art class, it may have been a series of assignments that were too easy for him combined with his fear of criticism. He had not been enrolled in art classes for several years since his magnet school experience. If he considered the work too easy, how could he cope with achieving anything less than superlative, especially since he had been successful in the magnet program? Perhaps it was easier for him to design excuses and save face. DeShea’s problem should help parents and teachers realize the significance that personality issues may play in underachievement. The personality dimension of the underachievement problem is complex and may be better understood with help from counselors and other mental health professionals.

Family Factors

Family factors also appeared to influence the underachievement of the participants in the study. The families of the participants did not consistently model an achievement ideology. Parenting issues that involved inconsistent expectations and indulgent discipline were evident in the stories of Diego, Skip, John, and Morgan, which confirms the research by Rimm and Lowe (1988). Several of the participants appeared to suffer from unhealthy emotional climates at home similar to those described by Colangelo and Dettman (1983) and Olszewski, Kuklae, and Buescher (1987). Several of the young men, specifically Morgan, DeShea, Skip, and Mitch, displayed the suppressed anger described by Ford (1996). The after-school employment of John, Mitch, and DeShea confirms the research of Steinberg, Fegley, and Dornbusch (1993) that highlighted the deleterious effects of part-time employment on academic achievement.

The findings of this study have implications for urban families. The turmoil evidenced in the homes of several of the participants indicated that educators cannot expect the educational programs offered by a school district to serve as a panacea for all problems facing troubled youngsters. Brice-Heath and McLaughlin (1987) maintained that the old role of the school as “the deliverer” of educational services no longer applies. They called for a new view of the school as a “broker” of multiple services that can be used to achieve the functions previously filled by traditional families (p. 579). When complex family issues are part of a student’s experience, professional interventions may be required for healthy change to occur. Several of the young men were from families that appeared to suffer from serious dysfunction. Their stories should remind school administrators to develop close ties with family counseling centers in their communities to assist urban parents in a culturally sensitive manner when addressing the developmental needs of their adolescent sons. In addition, urban school districts might consider implementing a program of integrated services, as described by Abdul-Haqq (1993) and Smrekar (1996). In a coordinated approach to addressing the needs of young people and their families, the high school becomes the hub of a network of service providers and a link between these service providers and the families. The focus of such a program is on wellness and prevention, with the programs providing a comprehensive range of education and human services to help young people overcome barriers to academic success.

Curriculum and Learning Style Issues

Five of the six participants were frustrated by a serious mismatch in their learning styles and the courses in which they were enrolled. In addition, the same five participants struggled with curricula that did not address their intellectual needs and
interests. Complaints of unchallenging curricula, a lack of hands-on experiences in their coursework, and boredom were consistent throughout the study. These findings confirm the research of Baum, Renzulli, and Hébert (1994, 1995), Emerick (1992), Redding (1990), Rimm (1988), and Whitmore (1989). Morgan’s frustration with the school’s inability to address his need for acceleration confirmed the findings of Fehrenbach (1993). The participants in this study described the lack of challenge they faced in many of their high school courses and were honest in expressing how an urban youngster could easily “coast” through a high school career while laughing at an educational system that was failing him. It is time that educational policy makers recognize this problem and address it through appropriate training for educators.

The findings of the study involving the curricular needs of the participants indicate that serious staff development efforts must occur in urban schools if teachers have not received training in pedagogical techniques appropriate for high-ability youngsters. These findings also highlight a need for university degree programs in urban education to include coursework that addresses teaching talented youngsters in urban schools. Coursework or staff development training in how to address the learning styles of a varied student population would help urban educators deal more effectively with all youngsters. Urban school administrators need to support their teachers and counselors by implementing a schoolwide effort to maintain learning style profiles of the students enrolled in their high schools. Urban high school teachers and counselors would also benefit from maintaining such inventories. This helpful information would enable teachers to better understand the population of students with whom they work and modify their curricula accordingly. School guidance counselors would also benefit from this information and be better prepared to direct students to appropriate course selections in planning their educational programs and careers.

Special attention should be addressed to DeShea’s experience. Urban school districts should pay close attention to DeShea’s very positive experiences in the middle school arts program. DeShea’s “creative explorations” reported by the university graduate students in the Sheltered Study Hall indicated that the program was providing a creative outlet DeShea had been missing since his middle school experience in the magnet school for the arts. The value of magnet school programs with a visual and performing arts emphasis is crucial to many artistically talented youngsters in urban environments. Since many young people learn best through the arts, efforts at strengthening magnet arts programs in urban schools should be encouraged. In order to meet the needs of the most creative and artistically talented urban teenagers, a differentiated program designed to challenge artistically talented students is essential. Clark and Zimmerman (1994) noted that these students must be identified and given challenging educational experiences for the development of their unique talents, and magnet programs have proven to be one effective service-delivery model.

Special attention should also be addressed to John’s experience. John’s interest and talent in automotive technology highlights a need for public schools to provide more vocational program opportunities for talented young people. Special talents in home arts, business, agriculture, and trade-industrial areas are rarely identified aspects of programs for high-ability students (Milne, 1982). According to Feldhusen and Robinson (1986), “Often it seems that the vocational areas are viewed as being of the opposite end of the ability spectrum from giftedness and talent” (p. 163). Nevertheless, teachers in the vocational subjects appreciate Gardner’s (1983) notion of multiple intelligences and are well aware that their classes include young people who show unusual talent or capacity to learn in vocational fields. A comprehensive program for high-ability high school students needs to provide for the identification of youth with vocational talents. John’s discussion of his experiences in automotive technology classes should serve as a wake-up call to school decision makers, reminding them of the importance of adequately funding comprehensive vocational programs in all high schools.

**Peer Group Issues**

Findings from this study also confirm research that has addressed social factors and peer group issues for gifted male underachievers. Masculine peer group values that reward athletics more than academics were evident in the experiences of Skip, who achieved only during the athletic season when he wanted to excel on the football field, and John, whose life after school revolved around his desire to maintain his second-hand automobile. These data confirmed the findings of Alvino (1991), Danish (1983), Nelson, (1983) Rimm, (1984), Snyder (1985), Thompson (1986), and Wolfe (1991). The masculine peer group played a significant role in shaping the school achievement ideology of all six of the participants in the study and confirmed the research of Bireley and Genshaft (1991), Compton (1982), and Rimm (1995).

The masculine peer group values, combined with problematic issues within the families of several of the participants in the study, highlight the need for male mentors for high-ability young men in urban settings. Mentor relationships have been identified as facilitating both cognitive and psychosocial development in young adults and contributing to resilience in youngsters who face adverse environmental conditions (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995; Rhodes, 1994; Werner, 1990). Many more
urban male teenagers could benefit from organizations or special programs that connect them with successful male career models, advocates, or mentors who share a common interest with them. Urban school districts have found success with mentoring programs for at-risk youth, and others have been able to match minority youth with mentors of similar cultural background (Canada, 1998; Hopkins, 1997). Urban school districts cannot shrink from the important challenge of designing mentor programs for more students. The search for advisers, supporters, and mentors may make a world of difference in the lives of intelligent young men in urban settings.

Male mentors have often been found in athletic coaches in urban settings. The literature on scholar-athletes and their relationships with significant coaches has revealed that high school athletics has played an important and beneficial role in the lives of young men. High school athletics has provided an environment where kinesthetic talents have been nurtured and developmental issues have been addressed. For example, the encouragement from Skip’s football coach was obviously significant for part of the academic year, as he maintained higher academic grades to meet eligibility requirements during football season. Within the culture of every high school are athletic subcultures, each with its own value system. In his ethnographic study, Hébert (1995) uncovered an athletic subculture, a championship swim team, where high-ability males not only excelled as athletes, but achieved excellence academically under the guidance of their coach. Urban school districts need to maintain strong athletic programs with dedicated coaches who enjoy nurturing scholar-athletes. The maintenance of healthy athletic programs may play a significant role in reversing patterns of underachievement in high-ability urban youth.

Counseling Issues

The findings of this study supported the literature on counselors’ awareness levels of the special needs of high-ability youngsters. The school counselors at South Central High were overwhelmed with their demanding caseloads of over 300 students; hence, the identification of high-ability underachievers was not an issue that even entered their realm of thought. None of the counselors had training or coursework in gifted education. Since these counselors were often involved in addressing the needs of many young people who faced such adversity, their responsibilities became centered around school attendance and drop-out problems, providing them no time to consider what high-ability youngsters in the school might be needing. For South Central High guidance counselors, the notion of a gifted student whose performance might not match potential was a new phenomenon they had never considered. These findings confirm the work of Frantz and Prillaman (1993), Klausmeiner, Mishra and Maker (1987), Ford and Harris (1995), and Welch and McCarroll (1993) and highlight a need for counselor degree programs to include coursework addressing the counseling needs of gifted youngsters and minority youth.

The participants’ negative experiences with the guidance department also highlight the need to redesign the training high school counselors receive to improve skills necessary to work effectively in culturally diverse urban high schools. Although culturally diverse counselors were employed at South Central High, one cannot assume that all counselors will display cultural sensitivity with the variety of student populations represented in a student body. To work successfully with teenagers from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, high school counselors need training to enhance their own cultural awareness, knowledge, sensitivity, and skills. As indicated by Ford (1996), urban school districts should provide counselors with thorough training to gain awareness of diverse cultures and empower them with appropriate counseling skills needed to deal effectively with ethnically diverse teenagers. With these skills and an increased respect for individual and group differences, high school counselors would be better equipped to address specific needs of culturally diverse underachieving males. The challenge before urban school systems is to train counselors to be sensitive to the diversity within their schools and become aware of how their values can affect a counseling relationship.

The finding related to the overwhelming responsibilities of high school counselors should speak loudly to school policy makers concerning the important role a talent development specialist in an urban high school would play in combating underachievement. A talent development specialist who served as a facilitator to develop appropriate educational programs for high-ability students would be a key to guaranteeing better educational programs for bright underachievers. High schools need “advocates for underachievers”—professionals trained in gifted education who would work in a proactive manner with teachers in identifying high-ability teenagers who may not be fulfilling their potential. Such a professional in a high school would help train the faculty about the characteristics and needs of gifted teenagers, serve as an advocate for high-ability students in the school, provide appropriate educational programs, and assist the guidance staff with career counseling.

The findings concerning the young men in this study becoming discipline problems and their inability to deal with unstructured time are troublesome, yet they reveal an important problem in urban high schools. The participants were observed during periods of unstructured time, and they themselves admitted that their discipline issues evolved when they did not have anything constructive to do during the school day. Several of the young men described the problems they met
during study halls. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher recommended to the school district that they abolish study halls. Because the school guidance counselors were overwhelmed with large case loads of students, the study hall period could be replaced with sessions facilitated by counselors and a talent development specialist during which time counselors might address critical issues such as career planning, the college application process, and completing financial aid forms. In addition, this period would be an appropriate time to invite community guest speakers who would serve as successful career role models for talented urban youth. The confused or unrealistic career aspirations of the underachievers in this study may have been exacerbated by a lack of exposure to realistic, successful models in the community. Providing a wide array of culturally diverse guest speakers from an urban environment to share personal strategies for success would be far more beneficial to urban teenagers than a 50-minute study hall period during which little studying takes place and students with reputations as discipline problems “take center stage.”

Several participants in the study described periods in their middle school experiences during which their patterns of motivation changed. John referred to a time when he stopped raising his hand in class, and Morgan mentioned how he never learned to work hard in elementary and middle school. Teachers’ comments in the school records of the participants also highlighted a change in behavior within these young men. This finding forces us to ask ourselves the painful question, “Did we lose these students before they even arrived at South Central High?” Their experiences during the middle school years highlight a need for earlier underachievement interventions during the crucial years when the peer group begins to play a more important role than school achievement in the lives of adolescent males. This illustrates the need to train middle school counselors and teachers in identifying high-ability underachievers before the unmotivated behavior becomes a more serious problem in high school.

This study has enlightened us concerning the role that environment might play as an influencing factor of underachievement within high-ability youth. The findings involving the six participants at South Central High should help us to understand that, for some young people, an urban environment may not be any different for high-ability students who are turned off to school than youngsters living in rural or suburban environments. Underachievement manifests itself in behaviors that are symptomatic of the problem regardless of the context of the environment in which a young person lives. Although the young men at South Central High lived in a community filled with adverse conditions, environmental obstacles, poverty, and gangs, they did not turn to such an environment for validation. John left the school campus and cruised through the community in his car, while DeShea skipped classes and attempted to find an outlet for his talents in the Sheltered Study Hall. Skip turned to a girlfriend from a neighboring community, and Diego hung out with his friends on the streets, but was not impressed with gangs. Morgan and Mitch simply shrugged off their lackadaisical attitude about school as their families and friends worried about their lack of motivation. These behaviors remain consistent with underachieving rural and suburban youngsters. The underachievement behaviors of the six participants in this study were not unique to urban youth. Regardless of where a student attends school, underachievement behaviors may look similar. Fortunately, the six young men in this study did not turn to gangs, drugs, and alcohol; however, we would be naive if we concluded that other gifted teenagers in urban high schools have not experimented with these problematic aspects of their environment.

High-ability young men in urban high schools across the country have educational needs that must be addressed if we are to help them reach their full academic potential and ensure a productive life in which they fulfill their goals, dreams, and aspirations. High school educators in urban settings must deal with the question of how to provide high-ability culturally diverse males with educational programs that will best provide for their needs. The experiences of the six participants in this study can enlighten educators and policy makers in urban settings. Urban school systems must better address the educational and counseling needs of high-ability young men. Urban educators will have to work hard to develop creative solutions to this serious challenge, and should they succeed, society will be enhanced greatly by their efforts.

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