Educating Gifted Children From Low Socioeconomic Backgrounds: Creating Visions of a Hopeful Future

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The stories of 3 young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds highlight significant issues in educating gifted students living in poverty. Major themes uncovered across the 3 cases included educators who looked beyond the circumstances of the students and maintained high expectations, the positive influence of enriched teaching-learning opportunities and extracurricular activities, and the success of a mentoring approach with the students. Based on these findings, implications for educating children living in poverty are also discussed.

There can be little doubt that our nation's largest untapped source of human intelligence and creativity is found among the vast numbers of individuals in the lower socioeconomic levels.

—Renzulli (1973, p. 3)

Over 25 years ago, Renzulli challenged educators to recognize the gifts and talents of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and to effectively address their diverse educational needs. The number of young people whose daily school experience is nothing short of an educational and psychological disaster (Renzulli, 1973) concerns politicians, policymakers, and educators across the country. The enormous challenge of bringing about educational change for children living in poverty continues. Payne (1998) defined poverty as the extent to which an individual does without resources and noted that the lack of resources helped to explain the variations and differences educators saw in students. Children living in poverty have fewer resources, increased health problems, more psychological difficulties, and greater obstacles that hinder their education (U.S. Department

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of Education, 1993). Although thousands of young people in impoverished communities face adverse conditions, Frasier (1987) cautioned us not to oversimplify the problem when she indicated there are too many examples of gifted adults who come from less advantaged backgrounds to make a tenable argument that culture, class, or environment are permanent obstacles to achievement. With the understanding that gifted students are found in the culture of poverty, educators must not overlook the fact that these young people have achievement needs that must be addressed in school regardless of the impoverished communities in which they live. The purpose of this article is to highlight the academic achievement needs of high-ability students in poverty and offer suggestions for educational programming.

Following are three cases selected from three separate previously published qualitative research studies (Hébert, 1997; Hébert & Beardsley, 2001; Hébert & Reis, 1999) examining achievement issues in the lives of high-ability students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The young people presented in these cases were purposefully selected because they represent differences in race, gender, age, and region of the country in which they lived. The stories of Jermaine, a child in the rural South; Jamison, a younger in rural Iowa; and Claire, a high school student in urban Connecticut, are presented to highlight significant issues in educating gifted students from poverty. Major themes across the cases are highlighted, and implications for education are discussed.

JERMAINE

Jermaine was an ebony-skinned child with large brown eyes, a warm smile, and finely sculpted features. A small, slender child, he was animated and outgoing. Jermaine lived in Pine Grove, Alabama, with his mother, older brother, sister, and aunt. Pine Grove was a small rural community in which pockets of homes were clustered at intervals along narrow, rural, red clay roads. Jermaine’s home was a cabin with a cinder-block foundation. It was heated with a wood stove and cooled by opening windows and doors. Nestled in the woods, Jermaine’s home was surrounded on three sides by trailers.

Jermaine attended the elementary school in Pine Grove, a prekindergarten through sixth-grade facility serving 225 children. All students were African American, and 98% were eligible for the federally subsidized free-lunch program. The children were bussed from six small communities, all within 25 to 30 miles of Pine Grove and separated by rural highways. The school facility, a red brick building constructed in the late 1940s, was in great disrepair, with rain leaking through the roof, dilapidated furniture, and equipment in need of repair. It consisted of three classrooms and a modest lunchroom, with nine overcrowded mobile trailers housing classrooms behind the school. There was no media center, gymnasium, art room, or music facility. Special education classes and physical education classes shared a classroom referred to as the auditorium.

1 To protect the identity of the participants involved, the names of the people and places within the three settings were changed, with the exception of Teresa Beardsley, the coauthor of Jermaine: A Critical Case Study of a Gifted Black Child Living in Rural Poverty (Hébert & Beardsley, 2001).
Teachers in Pine Grove reported that when Jermaine first arrived at the elementary school, his clothes were ill fitting, and on cold winter days he sometimes arrived at school in only a t-shirt and jeans. One teacher in Pine Grove took special notice of the impoverished youngster. Teresa Beardsley, a first-grade teacher, learned of Jermaine when her colleague in kindergarten discovered Jermaine hanging upside down in his chair while she was presenting a lesson. When the teacher posed a question, Jermaine answered correctly and elaborated. The teacher announced to the class, "If you can do that and still give me the answers, then you can act like Jermaine." Jermaine’s kindergarten experience remained positive, and the following year Jermaine was placed in Teresa’s first-grade classroom.

Teresa and her husband, John, came to Pine Grove in the early 1970s with the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) Program, and 25 years later these dedicated teachers remained passionate about their work with children. Teresa was enrolled in a graduate degree program in gifted education, and when introduced to Jermaine in her first-grade classroom, she realized she would have to provide him with enriched learning experiences beyond the required school curriculum. Standardized testing in Pine Grove consisted of the Stanford Achievement Tests conducted each spring. Throughout Jermaine’s elementary years, his achievement scores ranged from the 86th to the 99th national percentiles in language arts and reading with vocabulary and language expression ranked his most prominent strengths. His Otis-Lennon School Ability Test scores ranged from 118 to 120. When compared with the above average students in his class scoring in the 40th to 50th percentiles, Jermaine’s performance was considered remarkable. Teresa scheduled after-school enrichment sessions for Jermaine and several of his peers, and during their afternoons together, the children were involved in creative writing and art activities. When the county school district did not provide for a state mandated gifted program, Teresa continued to provide after-school enrichment for the children, and developed a strong mentor relationship with Jermaine for the remainder of his K-to-6 school experience.

Teresa maintained a portfolio of Jermaine’s work throughout elementary school, saving many examples of his creative writing and art. The portfolio provided fine examples of Jermaine’s creativity. Jermaine’s love of language and creative expression was evident in his work. As a first grader, he chose to write an autobiography during his after-school enrichment sessions with Teresa. The following paragraph is the introductory paragraph of his autobiography:

I was tumbling through my mother’s stomach—BOOM ... BOOM ... BOOM. I came out crying. Everybody comes out crying. Someone was holding me, and I wanted my mamma. I was named Jermaine after my granddaddy. He didn’t have a nickname or a middle name, so I don’t either. He was my mamma’s daddy.

Jermaine’s portfolio included another first-grade story entitled How the Sun Got Hot that included colorful, vivid illustrations that were expressive, detailed, and depicted the emotions of his characters. Teresa also saved a book authored by Jermaine entitled Jermaine’s World, a story in which he was a hero using his calculating mind to solve problems in his rural community. A fifth-grade entry in the portfolio was entitled The Adventures of Turbo Man an adventure tale in which the main character lived two lives, that of Courtney Davis, a well-respected lawyer, and a second life as Turbo Man, a superhero.
dressed in a suit of red steel, who drove a "Turbomobile," and succeeded in overcoming the forces of evil. A source of inspiration for many of his stories was Jermaine’s fascination with animals. He was extremely knowledgeable about many animals in his rural environment, and numerous stories in his portfolio centered on stories about salamanders, catfish, and animals found in south Alabama. One story was entitled *The Odd Couple: Charley and Grant*, a clever tale about two baby iguanas who survived a severe winter blizzard together.

In discussing his writing, Jermaine spoke of the rural solitude of Pine Grove and how the quiet of the countryside helped to inspire his ideas, and through daydreaming he was able to foster his creative thinking process. "At night, when I’m daydreaming, I like to go out and stare at the dark and think. I call it my ‘thinking in the dark time.’ It’s my nighttime inspiration." He also indicated that daydreaming was an important part of every school day and served as a strategy for surviving the boredom he often experienced in school. He explained, "In class, I daydream all the time. I think about future plans for all the movie scripts I’m going to write when I become a movie producer."

During Jermaine’s fifth-grade school year, he connected with another significant mentor. Mr. Cooper, a gentleman from Detroit, Michigan, returned to Pine Grove to retire. On arrival, he decided he needed something to occupy his time and formed athletic teams for the children in the community to compete against teams from surrounding towns. Along with the athletic program, he organized a Boy Scout troop. As Jermaine became involved with a number of sports and scouting, Coach Cooper played an important role for Jermaine. He recognized his intelligence and selected him as the quarterback for the new football team. Jermaine explained the coach’s rationale for selecting him for such a prestigious position as he stated,

Coach Cooper saw that I really knew my plays, and I know how to call them. That’s what it takes to be a quarterback. Coach said I chose me to play quarterback because I’m smart and fast. Because I’m the quarterback, I’m getting new respect.

As Jermaine moved on to the county’s middle school, Teresa and her husband John reflected on their work in Pine Grove and poignantly shared their feelings about their work with children like Jermaine. John explained,

Occasionally you see a child like Jermaine, and he gives you so much hope. You know that you play an important role in shaping that youngster’s experience and exposing him to a world beyond Pine Grove. You know that if you help him achieve in school and provide him with the tools he needs to get accepted into a college, he’ll leave here. So few ever return since there’s nothing here for them. Knowing that the community may never benefit from their talents and abilities is a difficult thing to have to accept, but that doesn’t stop you from doing all you can to help them achieve a better life. You chip away at a big problem one child at a time, and you just hope and pray that you’re making a difference.

JAMISON

Jamison was a blond, blue-eyed version of Tom Sawyer. A wiry little boy of 9 years with a mischievous grin and tousled hair, Jamison lived in an impoverished neighborhood in a
small rural community in southwest Iowa. A fourth grader who was well known throughout his community, Jamison spent much of his spare time designing creative schemes to acquire money to visit the local video arcade. One afternoon, Jamison was caught collecting money door to door for a local baseball team and then spending the money on video games.

Jamison's family was receiving the help of a conscientious social worker who recognized Jamison's intellectual abilities. The social worker approached Cathy McClellan, the teacher of the gifted, about the possibility of Jamison being involved in the gifted program. She saw Jamison as a bright boy with a great need for some type of intervention, for she was afraid the school system was "losing him." Previous teachers had described Jamison as "a real handful," a student who needed to be supervised closely. They recognized that Jamison was a bright youngster, yet they referred to his continually disruptive behavior, talking out in class, and making inappropriate comments throughout the school day in a never-ending search for attention. Jamison's third-grade teacher reported that he had filled in the dots haphazardly and without thought when taking the Iowa Test of Basic Skills despite the teacher's caution to consider the annual achievement test an important task. Jamison may have frustrated many of his teachers; however, the physical education teacher thought highly of the young boy and his superb athletic ability, good naturedly nicknaming him "Lord Jamison." Jamison underwent screening for the talented and gifted program, scored in the superior range on an individual intelligence test, and was scheduled for enrichment activities in the school's enrichment classroom.

Jamison's home life was not calm. His family was poor and faced constant financial struggles. His father had been killed in an automobile accident when Jamison was 4 years old. He and his 14-year-old sister lived with their mother and her boyfriend, who had been accused of treating the children abusively. Teachers had reported seeing bruises and scars on Jamison, and the Department of Human Services in the community had been investigating. Jamison also had an older brother who had dropped out of school and was facing trouble with the law, and his older sister's promiscuous behavior was becoming a serious problem, leading Jamison's mother to request help with parenting from the school system. The worried mother had asked Cathy during a parent-teacher conference whether her son ever spoke of his situation at home and then explained that she thought school for Jamison served as "an escape for his rocky home life."

Cathy was the enrichment teacher in the school's gifted program based on the schoolwide enrichment model (Renzulli & Reis, 1997). When she began her work with Jamison she administered an interest inventory, which involved the student responding to a series of hypothetical questions. When Jamison was asked to respond to the question, "Pretend you could invite any person you wanted, living or dead, to be a teacher in your class for one day. Whom would you invite? Why?" Jamison replied with "I would invite Abe Lincoln because I like him a lot." When asked, "What is the most interesting place you ever visited?" he referred to traveling to Lincoln, Nebraska, to visit a University of Nebraska museum that featured a special exhibit on Abraham Lincoln.

As Cathy administered the interest inventory with Jamison, she discussed the emerging theme in his responses and discovered something rather interesting about
her student. For years relatives had told him that he was related to Abraham Lincoln, and he was curious about his family ties to the famous president. This interest in the 16th president of the United States became the focus of Jamison’s research.

Following a field trip to the local public library, Jamison spent time with Cathy in the enrichment classroom on a weekly basis involved in reading and note taking, and watching biographical videos on Lincoln. Together they decided to write a letter to the state archivist in Springfield, Illinois, President Lincoln’s birthplace, in search of more information about Lincoln’s descendants. Jamison received a reply from a historian specializing in genealogical connections to Abraham Lincoln. The historian encouraged him to pursue his project and sent him a copy of his published biography on Lincoln. Jamison and his teacher then wrote to the historical society of Lincoln, Nebraska, in search of additional information. Jamison decided to pursue his genealogical connections to the famous president by writing to his deceased father’s parents. His grandparents had told him that an older relative had traced the family tree, and his grandparents had records of this completed research. With the information he acquired from his relatives, he was able to create a genealogical chart that explained how he was indeed a ninth cousin of Lincoln.

Jamison worked on his research project with Cathy for part of his fourth- and fifth-grade experience. As Cathy worked with Jamison on his research, and she came to understand how turbulent his home situation was for him. Her concerns for Jamison’s troubled life remained throughout her time spent working with him, and she viewed his work in the talented and gifted resource room as one positive aspect of his life that appeared to serve as a therapeutic outlet for him. As Jamison and Cathy came to know each other better, he became more attached to Cathy. The caring teacher in his life was making a difference for him, and Jamison felt comfortable expressing how he felt about her. An entry from a journal Cathy maintained reflected the emerging bond between Jamison and Cathy:

During the past few days, he has said or done something every day to let me know that he likes me and/or to be reassured that I like him. He gave me the name Mom in a computer game we played. When he found my immediate family name in my genealogy booklet he said, “Gee, I wish my name was there.” I laughed and I said I would pencil his name in as my part-time adopted son. After school today he made a gift for me, a heart, and inscribed within was “Mrs. M is a good teacher.”

With Cathy’s mentoring, he completed his reading and note taking, designed a historical time line of Lincoln’s life and the genealogical family tree, and compiled all of his efforts into a slide tape show entitled “Abe and Jamison: 9th Cousins.” Knowing that he would share his final product with classrooms throughout his community school and interested groups in his town, he researched foods that were typical of Lincoln’s time and prepared “corn pones” to serve to the various audiences attending his slide show presentation. With this success, Cathy arranged to have several nearby community newspapers interview Jamison about his project. To the delight of Cathy and Jamison, Abe Lincoln’s young ninth cousin was featured in the local human interest sections of the papers.
CLAIRE

Claire attended South Central High School, an inner-city high school in the heart of one of Connecticut's most impoverished urban communities. Claire had a broad, effervescent smile and body language that radiated a positive attitude. An African American, she was a 10th-grade student who was motivated to achieve in academics, as well as athletics, despite a childhood marked by divorce and family disruption.

Her mother's perspective on life had the greatest impact on Claire's "just do it" attitude. Attributing her successes in her life to her deep religious faith, Claire's mother was employed in a small college library. A high school graduate, Claire's mother attended night school and enrolled in summer school while her children spent summer months with their father in North Carolina. A benefit of her current position was that she could enroll as a student and attend college classes tuition-free. Claire maintained that her mother's religious beliefs helped her set her goals and believe that their accomplishments were possible dreams. Her mother hoped to graduate from college the same year in which her daughter would graduate from high school.

Claire's most memorable teacher was Mrs. Scott, her second-grade teacher who Claire described as a supportive woman "who loved me!" Mrs. Scott would allow Claire to make special presentations in other classes throughout the school. She remembered attending anything that had to do with the human body and medicine. It was during this elementary school year that Claire decided that she was going to be a doctor. She explained that she watched the Bill Cosby Show, was inspired by the television program featuring an African American pediatrician, and decided that she, too, would become a successful doctor delivering babies. Her mother, realizing the seriousness of her intent, scrimped and saved to purchase a set of medical encyclopedias. They were inscribed with these words: "To Dr. Claire M. Johnson, Love, Mother."

At South Central High School, Claire was encouraged by her counselor to enroll in as many honors courses as possible, emphasizing that she'd be disappointed if Claire didn't strive academically. Claire spoke of the profound belief her guidance counselor had in her:

My guidance counselor—that woman adores me! She tells me: "You are honors material."

And I'm like, "But Miss. It's hard." She answers me with "No, no, no, no no. You have to do it. You have to do it. You must do it. You are one of the leaders in the school. You have to do it." And so you get a lot of pressure to have to do things. If one day I just decided not to do my homework, everyone would look at me like I was crazy. Especially in my biology class. The teacher would say, "You didn't do that? I'm very disappointed in you." And so I do it!

In her sophomore year, Claire enrolled in four honors classes. French, geometry, history, and English provided her with ample stimulation and homework. She spent her weekends working up to 5 hr on one subject alone. On Saturday she allowed herself time to listen to music, exercise, or take in a movie with friends. Sundays meant a day partially filled with church and choir activities. Returning from church, she saw her book bag and a "tug of war" ensued. Realizing, however, that school assignments were waiting, Claire pulled the shades down if it was a nice day and burrowed into the books, emerging only
when the work was completed. Frequently this meant that she spent all day preparing for
Monday's classes at South Central. "You have to work hard to get good grades," admit-
ted Claire, although at times it seems "overwhelming." Her attitude regarding the aca-
demic challenge remained positive. She believed that "if you try and fail, that's good. If
you don't try and you fail, that's stupid!"

Claire was a dedicated student, a sophomore class officer, a participant in the Upward
Bound program, an officer of the French Club, and winner of many awards and letter
jackets. As a South Central High athlete, she played soccer in the fall, basketball in the
winter, and ran track and field in the spring. The many friendships available through
these endeavors became her social life as Claire claimed she had no time for serious rela-
tionships with boys. She had very strong opinions about male and female relationships.
Chosen as a leader in a health program sponsored by the guidance department called
"Take Control," she talked with younger girls in her neighborhood about becoming "ac-
cident victims" and sending the message that it's "OK to say no." Claire believed that
many of her peers did not think of the consequences of pregnancy, and she was adamant
that mothers and older sisters should not end up doing the child rearing. "I'm too strong!
I don't have compassion for girls who get in trouble."

Claire's plans following graduation included college and medical school. Her first
choice was Brown University, although she planned to apply to other Ivy League schools
and state universities with strong premed programs. She planned to apply for scholar-
ships and finance her education by working during school. Driven to achieve, Claire in-
sisted that she would have all of her college loans paid off in 2 years following
graduation. Claire envisioned her future life of living in upstate New York. A comfort-
able home and a husband emerged in the picture. Claire added that she wished to have a
family that would include, not only her own natural children, but teenagers who were un-
wanted and needed loving homes. "Everybody only wants to adopt cute babies." She
would have a pediatrics center that would provide service to impoverished children. "I'll
be the head," she declared with a warm smile.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ABOUT
JERMAINE, JAMISON, AND CLAIRE?

Look Beyond Their Circumstances and Hold High
Expectations

Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire have reminded us that regardless of a child's socioeco-
nomic background, "every learner has strengths or potential strengths that can be used as
a foundation for effective learning and creative productivity" (Renzulli, 1994, p. 99). It is
our job as educators to continue to nurture these strengths. Jermaine enjoyed creative
writing, Jamison enjoyed historical research, and Claire had a love of science and a strong
passion for becoming a doctor. In all three cases, supportive adults looked beyond the
economically disadvantaged backgrounds of the students, recognized their abilities,
maintained high expectations for them, and nurtured their strengths. The experiences of
Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire indicate that if young people are continually encouraged in school by developing skills to facilitate their own learning, they will see themselves as capable learners. With students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, educators are sensitive to the difficulties in children's home environments or communities. Teachers often cannot accept the notion that with the existing difficulties in their students' lives, they still have a responsibility to acquire an education, and as educators, we have a responsibility to maintain high expectations for them. Clark (1994) maintained that oversensitivity, which manifests itself in acceptance of children's problems although not addressing solutions involving academic concerns, is inappropriate. Holding lower expectations for high-ability students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds threatens their growth intellectually and socially. Educators can no longer underestimate what students from impoverished backgrounds are capable of achieving and postpone more challenging and personally relevant work (Greenberg, Coleman, & Rankin, 1993). Educators in the lives of Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire looked beyond the low socioeconomic conditions their students faced and demonstrated their belief in these young people as they prepared them to tackle serious intellectual work.

Foster Their Gifts Through Enriched Teaching and Learning

The experiences of Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire highlight the importance of providing enrichment opportunities for students from low socioeconomic homes who show potential for superior performance in areas that are not easily assessed by traditional ability measures. Jermaine thrived in Teresa's after-school enrichment sessions in creative writing. Jamison left the problems of his home life at the door of Cathy's enrichment classroom and became immersed in his genealogical investigation of Abraham Lincoln. Claire was achieving in her urban high school and maintained a hectic schedule filled with involvement in a wide range of extracurricular activities and athletics. All three of the students presented in the cases benefitted from an enriched teaching and learning approach to education.

The facilitation of enriched learning and teaching experiences with students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds is critical because many other approaches have not been effective. Renzulli (1994) noted that the lack of success from years of compensatory programs should convince educators to explore alternative models to the traditional remediation approaches that have grossly underestimated the potentials of poor children. He indicated that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds have been the victims of the "drill-and-kill" approach to learning and suffer most from declining enrichment opportunities in public schools. He emphasized that children from low socioeconomic homes need enriched teaching and learning, for the families of these young people cannot afford the computer camps, dance lessons, science programs, and athletic competitions that more affluent families use to compensate for unchallenging schools.

Rather than drill-and-kill learning experiences Renzulli and Reis (1997) maintained that an enriched teaching and learning approach for low socioeconomic students is more appropriate. Through such an approach each student is viewed as unique. All learning experiences take into account the abilities, interests, and learning styles of the youngster.
In enriched teaching and learning, teachers acknowledge that learning is more effective when youngsters enjoy what they are doing, and therefore, learning experiences are designed with concern for student enjoyment. In addition, learning is more meaningful when content and process are learned within the context of a real problem. Therefore, attention is focused on opportunities that personalize student choice in selecting a problem to pursue, the relevance of the problem for individual students and authentic strategies for addressing the problem. Jermaine’s enjoyment of creative writing, Jamison’s interest in exploring his genealogical connection to Abraham Lincoln, and Claire’s passion for medicine were recognized by teachers who provided them opportunities to explore questions through enjoyable learning experiences. Teresa’s work with Jermaine in writing a collection of creative stories helped to nurture his creativity and aspirations of becoming a famous movie script writer. Cathy’s mentoring of Jamison’s genealogical research made for an enjoyable and personalized learning experience that kept him focused on a real problem. Claire’s interest in pursuing medicine was nurtured by a teacher in elementary school, supported by her school counselor who insisted that she enroll in honors-level science courses, and fostered by her involvement in the her high school’s Take Control program to prevent teenage pregnancy. The experiences of these three students incorporated important elements of enriched teaching and learning experiences for developing talent in young people and should help educators understand the powerful influence enriched learning experiences may have on young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Extracurricular Activities Make a Difference

Similar to the enriched teaching and learning approach highlighted by Renzulli and Reis (1997), extracurricular activities in school parallel talent development experiences for young people in that they are interest-based, become personalized, and often allow students to pursue real-world problems that concern them. The role of activities beyond the classroom in shaping adolescent self-identity was highlighted in a longitudinal study that examined the motivational importance of extracurricular activities for 200 talented teenagers. In this study Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1997) reported that extracurricular activities were the most likely school activities that engaged youngsters fully—the most consistent source of interest and flow for students. Such activities combined feelings of spontaneous involvement with a focus on important goals and perceptions of high skill with correspondingly high challenges. McLaughlin (1993) noted that out-of-school activities involving the production of tangible products or performances reinforced the positive sense of self by building a sense of accomplishment and success within teenagers. The activities gave low socioeconomic youngsters evidence that something could be gained by maintaining effort and providing opportunities for success. Ball and Heath (1993) also indicated that out-of-school experiences helped create a sense of connectedness for low socioeconomic youngsters through strong discipline, group achievement, and mutual expectations of high quality. In addition, involvement in extracurricular activities offered adult relationships that influenced how young people viewed themselves. Caring adult relationships were recognized as critical in assuring success in
adolescent life, and young people tended to emulate the behavior they saw in others whom they cared about and admired (Bandura, 1977).

Educators as Mentors

The caring relationships that emerged between Jermaine and Elizabeth, Jamison and Cathy, and Claire and her school counselor highlight the significance of a mentoring approach with gifted students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The experiences of the three youngsters included an adult who saw them as talented young people, cared for them as individuals, and served as their mentor, critic, and advocate. The presence of the extrafamilial sources of support has been noted by investigators of resilience who discovered that relationships with nonparental adults provided psychosocial support and served as a protective factor in stressful environments (Garmezy, 1985; Rhodes, 1994). Torrance, Goff, and Satterfield (1998) noted that mentors working with children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds “encourage mentees to play with problems and dilemmas, look at possible solutions from various viewpoints and assist the mentee in creating visions and future images” (p. 6). Fortunately, Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire had mentors in their lives who enabled them to create a positive vision of their future.

When examining the challenges facing children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, educators realize that some who reach their goals in life face far greater obstacles than others. The life stories of Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire highlight significant lessons and remind teachers of the important issues faced in nurturing the gifts and talents of children from poverty. Through their work with educators who looked beyond their neighborhoods, recognized their talents, maintained high expectations, and nurtured their strengths, students like Jermaine, Jamison, and Claire may have the opportunity to create a vision and a hopeful future image of a life of personal fulfillment.

REFERENCES


