THE TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL FOR ACADEMICALLY PROMISING, URBAN, LOW-INCOME AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In nine urban Ohio school systems, low-income minority students identified as academically promising in sixth grade are eligible to participate in an intervention program. In the present study, twenty-two African American students in the program were asked to provide their perceptions of the transition to ninth grade. Specifically, the role of motivating factors, peers, school, teachers, parents, and neighborhood were examined. These students faced similar stressors, yet some were more able to achieve academic success. Results highlight the salience of mothers, the challenges of the ninth-grade curriculum, and adjustment to a bigger, more complex school environment for high and low performers. The implications for improving cooperation between school and family are discussed.

The transition to high school presents many challenges. High school students typically have more assignments, and there are more distractions due to the increasing complexity of peer relations. Further, the high school is a more anonymous setting than is the middle school. Some students experience role loss, such as no longer being among the top athletes or scholars. Research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities significantly declines in the first year of high school (Seidman et al., 1996; Gifford & Dean, 1990).

Low-income minority youth are vulnerable to declines in academic motivation and performance during the transition to ninth grade,

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which may not be regained in the subsequent years of high school (Eccles et al., 1991, 1993; Reyes et al., 1994). Clearly, the ability to cope with school transitions in ways that sustain high levels of academic motivation, knowledge, and skills is essential for student progression toward college.

In a study comparing the experiences of African American and white students during the transition to junior high school, researchers found that African American males liked school less as they got older, their grades dropped, they were more likely to experience behavior problems, and their parents were less likely to approve of their friends (Simmons et al., 1991). The students themselves experienced increased stress concerning their academic future.

Students of low socioeconomic status are eight times less likely to graduate from college than are other students. Although the percentage of African American students attending and graduating from college has greatly increased in the last fifty years, they are still only half as likely to complete four years of college as are white students. Students who do not succeed academically have been scrutinized, but far less is known about the students who do succeed despite substantial barriers (Mortenson, 1993; Mortenson & Wu, 1990). Who comprises their support systems? What motivates them? How do they overcome barriers to educational success?

The present study was designed to identify factors that contribute to the academic success of African American students who are making the transition to high school. The subjects were students participating in the Young Scholars Program (YSP), an early intervention program focusing on urban, low-income minority youth identified during the sixth grade as showing academic promise. They were all doing well in eighth grade, and the study took a qualitative approach in seeking to understand the challenges they faced as well as the strategies they used to meet the new demands of ninth grade. It drew on students' perceptions, as well as those of YSP staff and other supportive individuals.

The theoretical framework for this study was ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The following section addresses the ecological perspective, reviewing the literature on the four major microsystems that are likely to impact academic achievement for African American students during their transition to ninth grade: family, peers, school, and neighborhood.

THE ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory argues that human development is influenced by the interactions an individual has within

various microsystems, such as the family and school. In addition, events in larger systems, such as parents' workplace and governmental agencies, have an impact on development even though their influence is indirect. Further, interactions are often bidirectional, with individuals having goals, making plans, and initiating behaviors that can have an impact on the resources and challenges the setting offers.

Research on the psychosocial adjustment and academic achievement of African American adolescents offers strong support for the usefulness of an ecological approach. Economic conditions, the nature of the neighborhood, family and extended family relationships, and the school environment all influence a child's academic motivation and achievement. For example, the stresses of poverty have a variety of effects on African American families (McLloyd, 1990), impacting parental warmth, psychological availability, and control, all of which influence the well-being and academic achievement of children (Jenkins, 1989). Poverty also has a direct impact on the health and nutrition of adolescents, affecting school attendance, energy level, and concentration (National Commission on Children, 1993).

Low-income minority parents are typically employed in work settings that provide few opportunities for autonomous decision-making. This kind of work environment influences parents' values and socialization practices by emphasizing compliance with authority and discouraging initiative and creative thought (Kohn, 1977; Greenberger & O'Neil, 1991).

Family kinship (particularly extended family) is extremely important for the well-being of African Americans, providing emotional support and stability, and buffering the effects of crises (Jayakody et al., 1993). In addition, family values regarding religiosity and ethnic identity substantially contribute to how children define and cope with stress and the demands of daily life (Taylor et al., 1994).

The nature of the inner-city neighborhood has been identified as a potentially disruptive force in the lives of African American students. In many communities, children are frequently subjected to intimidation and exposed to acts of violence (Mason et al., 1994).

The peer group is also influential. Several studies have suggested that, in contrast to other minorities, African Americans are less likely to receive support from other African Americans for academic excellence (Steinberg et al., 1992).

Finally, some have suggested that, for this population, home and school cultures are incompatible. The communal values of African Americans and the individualistic values of the school (with its emphasis on competition and individual achievement) may be in conflict (Fordham, 1988).

In short, the ecological perspective indicates that family, peers, school, and neighborbood should be examined to better understand academic achievement in the context of the transition to ninth grade.

The Relationship of Family to Academic Achievement

The family is an important factor in academic development and achievement. Many African American parents place great emphasis on educational attainment, hard work, and good moral values. Peters (1985) noted that African American parents named a good education as the primary strategy their children could employ to succeed in a racist society. In a study by Clark (1983), African American high school seniors who were high achievers were found to be from homes where parents were warm and nurturing, set clear limits on behavior, strongly encouraged academic achievement, and carefully monitored their children's activities. The parents exhibited optimism and faith in their children's ability to do well. They frequently communicated with the school, their children's older siblings, and members of the community about academic preparation and progress. In contrast, the parents of low-achieving seniors were overwhelmed by stress, felt they had little control, and exhibited signs of depression. There was also a spirit of defeat in their homes.

Thornton et al. (1990) asked parents to name the specific socialization strategies they used with their children. They most frequently reported that they placed an emphasis on high achievement and hard work (mentioned by 22% of the parents). In regard to child rearing, Marshall (1995) found that African American parents emphasized education, religion, self-esteem, and hard work. In a study of young African American adolescents' perceptions of their parents' achievement orientation, Ford (1993) found that demographic variables, such as primary caregiver and parents' level of education, occupation, and employment status, had little relationship to students' commitment to academic achievement. These studies suggest that parental values and encouragement are more relevant than traditional measures of socioeconomic status in influencing academic achievement among low-income African American students.

The Relationship of Peers to Academic Achievement

Family influence on school achievement becomes weaker during middle school and high school as compared with the elementary school years (Slaughter & Epps, 1987). Parents remain most influential regarding children's long-term educational plans; however, peers have more influence on day-to-day behaviors (time spent on homework and

classroom behavior). Students who receive both parental and peer academic support are more likely to have academic success (Steinberg et al., 1992).

African American students may have difficulty finding peers who encourage the pursuit of academics. Steinberg et al. (1992) found that many high-performing African American students avoided contact with other African Americans and chose instead to spend time with those from other ethnic groups. They apparently experienced a conflict between wanting to be popular with same-ethnicity peers and the desire to perform well in school.

Fordham (1988) found that African American students who are committed to school success devise unique strategies to cope with negative peer pressure. One of these is the "raceless persona"; some students minimize contact with other African Americans and for the most part adopt "white" values. Kunjufu (1988) found that some high-achieving African Americans become class clowns in order to conceal their academic abilities. Clark (1991) identified other students who live dual lives—adopting the norms and values of the majority culture to achieve success in school, but embracing African American cultural norms outside of school in order to attain social acceptance. Kennedy (1995) found different patterns of peer popularity for African American males and females; females' popularity correlated with academic success, while males' popularity correlated with athletic success. In contrast to the research of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Kennedy found a small but positive correlation between grades and popularity among African American students.

The Relationship of School Environment to Academic Achievement

Moving to a new school is an "ecological transition" encompassing changes in both setting and roles. Students are faced with a new physical environment, new teachers with different expectations, and often new peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The size of the high school (structure and population), as compared with the previous school, has been found to contribute to students' ability to adapt. Students may feel lost and forgotten in high school (Cotterell, 1992). The absence rate of such students tends to increase, which leads to lower grades and may eventually lead to dropping out of school. In terms of tracking, placement in a class that requires too much or too little ability may cause the student to lose interest, cut class, and consequently earn lower grades (Legters & McDill, 1994).

Brophy (1991) argued that positive, realistic expectations keep students from becoming discouraged. Students need to be able to see that

academic effort will enable them to succeed. Therefore, matching schoolwork to student ability is vital.

In a study of school stressors, middle school administrators and students were found to have different perceptions (Elias et al., 1985). Administrators listed academic concerns (such as harder schoolwork), harder teachers, and high expectations for students as the primary stressors. Students said conflict with authority, including being sent to the vice-principal and verbal arguments with teachers, was the source of the most stress.

Students' perceptions of teacher commitment are related to performance. For African American males, teacher absences have been found to correlate with students' academic achievement (Davis & Jordan, 1994). Schools that had high teacher attendance rates and small class sizes had more educationally engaged African American males.

Ogbu (1978) described an attitude/achievement paradox, in which students consider education very important, but not personally beneficial or attainable. Examining Ogbu's paradox, Mickelson (1990) divided students' perceptions of education into abstract and concrete. Abstract perceptions, which were not predictive of academic success, express the American belief that anyone can raise his or her economic status through education. Concrete perceptions, which were predictive of academic success, originate from positive and negative life experiences related to school achievement. Students who have concrete perceptions are both optimistic and realistic about the personal effort needed to be successful.

The Relationship of Neighborhood to Academic Achievement

Dornbusch et al. (1991) found that community traits impacted families and children. Unfortunately, African Americans often live in communities with many social problems.

In a recent study of the effect of community structure on the behavior of adolescents, the likelihood of conduct problems was found to be higher in underresourced neighborhoods (Simons et al., 1996). In these neighborhoods, parents had little control over their environment and adolescents showed increased involvement with troublesome, deviant peers. Further, the psychological well-being of male adolescents was lower in more underresourced communities.

METHOD

Young Scholars Program

The present study focused on the perceptions of a group of high-ability, urban, low-income African American youth who were partici-

pating in the Young Scholars Program. This early intervention program seeks to expand the pool of minority youth who aspire to a college education. The program is coordinated through The Ohio State University, with students drawn from nine Ohio cities. To be eligible for the program, students must be members of an underrepresented minority group and come from low-income families in which neither parent has earned a college degree. Students are nominated during sixth grade. Nominations can be submitted by teachers, counselors, parents, and community leaders, with selection being based on academic performance and promise, leadership, and demonstration of other talents or abilities.

Upon selection, students and their parents or guardians sign a contract that promises admission to The Ohio State University after high school graduation, as well as a loan-free financial aid package. For their part, students must participate in year-round YSP activities, complete college-preparatory courses, and maintain a 3.0 or better grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) during high school.

YSP students are expected to attend the Summer Institute for one to three weeks each summer on the campus of The Ohio State University. There, students engage in academic course work, career exploration, social and cultural activities, and personal development. Students whose grades fell below 3.0 in the previous school year attend Summer Academy in their home city, rather than the Summer Institute.

Sample

Twenty-two African American YSP students from nine Ohio cities participated in this study. Thirteen were identified as high performers (HPs), with grade point averages above 3.0 at the end of ninth grade. The remainder were considered low performers (LPs). Eighteen of the students lived in single-adult homes: 14 in mother-only, 2 in single-guardian, and 2 in grandmother-only homes. In the mother-only homes, 6 students were LPs and 8 students were HPs. One LP and 1 HP lived with single guardians. Two HPs lived with their grandmothers.

Data Collection

Data collected for the study included: (1) tape-recorded in-depth interviews with the students; (2) student responses to standardized measures of academic motivation (Brookover et al., 1967), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1990); (3) taped interviews with YSP coordinators in each city; and (4) paper-and-pencil questionnaires completed by persons identified by the students as academically supportive.

Some students were interviewed in the summer following eighth grade. All students were interviewed in the summer following ninth grade. They were asked questions about interactions with family members, school personnel, peers, YSP staff, and community members. They were also asked about their thoughts and experiences regarding the transition to ninth grade, including the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to cope with these challenges.

Case narratives were written for each student based on the data from the above four sources. The case narratives were organized around the following ten issues: (1) characteristics of the transition from eighth to ninth grade; (2) classes where students felt confident and did well; (3) what helped the students do well; (4) classes where students had difficulty; (5) why students did not do well; (6) people supportive of the students' academic efforts; (7) challenges faced during ninth grade; (8) people to whom students turned when faced with challenges; (9) the role of the Young Scholars Program during the transition to ninth grade; (10) characteristics of a successful student at their school.

Categories were developed based on these case narratives (derived from the responses of the students, program coordinators, and parents or other supportive persons). For each of the ten issues listed above, a matrix was produced linking individual participants with their responses.

Two researchers coded each case narrative. Interrater reliabilities for the categories in each matrix ranged from 61.54% to 82.05%, with an overall reliability of 71.81%. In instances of disagreement, the item was discussed until agreement was reached on coding.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Transition to Ninth Grade

Table 1 shows the students' perceptions of the transition from eighth to ninth grade. Negative comments about teachers were most common (77%): 62% of HPs and 100% of LPs mentioned something negative about their ninth-grade teachers. However, 55% also had positive comments regarding teachers. Low performers (67%) were somewhat more likely to mention positive teacher characteristics than were high performers (46%). Fifty-five percent found ninth grade more difficult than eighth grade. Forty-one percent mentioned some aspect of adjusting to a new school.

Only LPs suggested that ninth grade was easier than eighth grade (easy class work, less homework, and less responsibility). LPs, on aver-

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of the Transition to Ninth Grade

Description	High Performers $n = 13$	%	Low Performers $n = 9$	%	Total $n = 22$	%
Adjust to new school	6	46	3	33	9	41
Bigger school	3	23	2	22	5	23
Class involves participation	0	0	1	11	1	5
Classes longer	2	15	1	11	3	14
More classes	0	0	2	22	2	9
Smaller classes	0	0	1	11	1	5
Advice of older friends	1	8	1	11	2	9
Many friends in class	1	8	3	33	4	18
Meet new people	3	23	3	33	6	27
Treated more mature	1	8	0	0	1	5
More fighting	0	0	1	11	1	5
Ninth grade easier	0	0	4	44	4	18
easy work	0	0	1	11	1	5
less homework	0	0	2	22	2	9
less responsibility	0	0	1	11	1	5
Ninth grade more difficult	8	62	4	44	12	55
homework harder	4	31	2	22	6	27
more homework	2	15	2	22	4	18
more responsibility	1	8	0	0	1	5
study more	1	8	0	0	1	5
Positive teachers	6	46	6	67	12	55
good teacher attitude	0	0	1	11	1	5
good teaching methods	1	8	1	11	2	9
same teachers	1	8	1	11	2	9
teachers more open	0	0	1	11	1	5
teacher supportive	1	8	1	11	2	9
teacher more helpful	3	23	2	22	5	23
Negative teachers	8	62	9	100	17	77
less work enforcement	2	15	1	11	3	14
bad teacher attitude	1	8	1	11	2	9
teachers harder	3	23	3	33	6	27
teachers not supportive	1	8	4	44	5	23
less time with teachers	1	8	0	0	1	5

age, reported more characteristics of the transition than did HPs (3.1 versus 1.77 per student, respectively).

What Helped Students Do Well

Table 2 shows the students' perceptions of what helped them do well in their classes. High performers and low performers generally

Table 2. What Helped Students Do Well in Class

Description	High Performers $n = 13$	%	Low Performers $n = 9$	%	Total $n = 22$	%
Teachers care	1	8	2	22	3	14
Teachers help with assignments	2	15	1	11	3	14
Seek help from teachers	2	15	0	0	2	9
Teachers explained more	2	15	1	11	3	14
Teachers easy to talk to	0	0	1	11	1	5
Working hard	5	38	1	11	6	27
Understand class material	1	8	0	0	1	5
Doing the work	0	0	2	22	2	9
Good study habits	3	23	0	0	3	14
Interest in class	0	0	1	11	1	5
Easier work	0	0	2	22	2	9
Paying attention	1	8	0	0	1	5
Taking notes	1	8	0	0	1	5
Determination	2	15	0	0	2	9
Focus	2	15	0	0	2	9
Cooperating	1	8	0	0	1	5
Prior knowledge of subject	1	8	0	0	1	5
Grandparents	0	0	1	11	1	5
Friends in class	0	0	1	11	1	5
Hanging out with right people	1	8	1	11	2	9
Mentors	1	8	0	0	1	5
YSP tutors	2	15	1	11	3	14
Limit peer activities	1	8	0	0	1	5

disagreed; of the 23 factors named by the students, only 6 (26%) were mentioned by both high and low performers. Low performers gave fewer responses to this question than to any of the other questions used in this study. Within groups, there was little consensus about what helped students do well. The factor mentioned most often was working hard, but only 1 LP (11%) mentioned this, compared with 5 HPs (38%). Only HPs mentioned such factors as good study habits, seeking help from teachers, determination, and focusing. Only LPs mentioned doing the work and easier work. Items reflecting peer support included both positive peer influences, such as having friends in class and hanging out with the right people, and negative influences, such as limiting peer activities.

Why Students Did Not Do Well

Table 3 presents students' explanations of why they did not do well in their classes. The two most common explanations, particularly for HPs, were the need to study more (36%) and problems with teachers (32%). Other themes mentioned by the HPs were that they did not like their classes, lacked motivation, were bored, and had difficulty staying awake. These responses suggest that some HPs were not being challenged. The LPs seemed to have three different views of why they did not do well: those who said they did not understand the material or

Table 3. Why Students Did Not Do Well in Class

Description	High Performers $n = 13$	%	Low Performers $n = 9$	%	Total $n = 22$	%
Needed to study more	5	38	3	33	8	36
Problems with teachers	5	38	2	22	7	32
Did not attend class	1	8	4	44	5	23
Did not do work	2	15	3	33	5	23
Did not understand	0	0	4	44	4	18
Too much work	3	23	1	11	4	18
Hard class	1	8	3	33	4	18
Acted up in class	0	0	3	33	3	14
Did not like class	3	23	0	0	3	14
Lack of motivation	3	23	0	0	3	14
Boredom	2	15	0	0	2	9
Staying awake	2	15	0	0	2	9
Talked constantly	0	0	2	22	2	9
Did not pay attention	1	8	2	22	3	14
Influence of friends	1	8	2	22	3	14
Did not go to tutoring	1	8	1	11	2	9
Distractions in class	1	8	1	11	2	9
Need to ask more questions	1	8	1	11	2	9
Lack of participation	1	8	0	0	1	5
Too shy	1	8	0	0	1	5
Sports	1	8	0	0	1	5
Gangs	1	8	0	0	1	5
Lack of structure	1	8	0	0	1	5
Did not seek help	1	8	0	0	1	5
Nobody cares	0	0	1	11	1	5
Suspended	0	0	1	11	1	5
Too much after-school activity	0	0	1	11	1	5

the class was hard seemed to be struggling with course content and needed to study harder; those who said they did not go to class or did not do the work; and those who said they acted up in class, talked constantly, did not pay attention, or were influenced by friends. Four LPs but no HPs mentioned that they did not understand the work. Four LPs and only 1 HP said they did not go to class.

Who Is Supportive of Academics

The students were asked to name the people who are supportive of their academic work. The average number was the same for both high and low performers (4 supportive people per student). Overall, mothers were most frequently mentioned (68%); however, HPs were more likely to mention their mothers as supportive (12 of 13, 92%) as compared with LPs (3 of 9, 33%). Four students named only one supportive person. In each case, the student named his or her mother (3 HPs, 1 LP). Even though 3 HPs were not living with their mothers, 2 of them mentioned their mothers as supportive of academics.

After mothers, friends were most often mentioned as being supportive. More HPs (54%) mentioned friends than did LPs (22%). Four students listed fathers (including one stepfather) as supportive (3 HPs, 1 LP). The mother of one of the HPs who mentioned father was deceased; the two other HPs listed both mother and father.

Roughly a third of the students mentioned teachers as supportive of their academics (44% of the LPs and 23% of the HPs). Three students mentioned religion or church members as being supportive of their academics (all were HPs). One student, a low performer, did not mention anyone supportive of academics. Extended family members, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, and great-grandparents, were mentioned 20 times by the students.

Who Is Supportive When Students Are Faced with Challenges

Students were asked to name the people to whom they turn when they are faced with challenges that are not necessarily related to school. The average number was similar for LPs and HPs (2.8 people for HPs and 2.5 people for LPs). Mothers and friends were mentioned almost equally by LPs and HPs: mothers were named by 5 HPs (38%) and 4 LPs (44%); friends were named by 4 HPs (31%) and 3 LPs (33%). Relatives other than parents were mentioned by 9 HPs (69%) and 2 LPs (22%). LPs were more likely than HPs to list adults who were not related to them (including teachers, tutors, counselors, principals, and Young Scholars Program coordinators) as being supportive.

What It Takes to Be a Successful Student

Table 4 shows the students' perceptions of what it takes to be a successful student at their school. The most common answer overall was hard work (45%). Seven HPs (54%) said hard work was necessary for success, compared with 3 LPs (33%). Five LPs (56%) said doing assignments was necessary for success, compared with 3 HPs (23%). These reflect the different pictures of the path to success held by HPs and LPs. HPs were more likely to emphasize self-regulation, including studying, dedication, determination, doing the best one can, focusing, prioritizing, using time wisely, and studying over the summer. LPs were more likely to mention behaviors that might be considered minimal requirements for academic achievement, such as doing the assignments, having a good relationship with the teacher, paying attention, and going to class.

Table 4. What It Takes to Be a Successful Student

Description	High Performers $n = 13$	%	Low Performers $n = 9$	%	Total $n = 22$	%
Hard work	7	54	3	33	10	45
Doing the assignments	3	23	5	56	8	36
Student-teacher cooperation	2	15	3	33	5	23
Being good in class	3	23	1	11	4	18
Determination	3	23	1	11	4	18
Studying	4	31	0	0	4	18
Dedication	4	31	0	0	4	18
Paying attention	1	8	2	22	3	14
Going to class	0	0	2	22	2	9
Limiting friends	1	8	1	11	2	9
Limiting time with friends	1	8	1	11	2	9
Do best you can	2	15	0	0	2	9
Avoid gangs	1	8	0	0	1	5
Avoid drugs	1	8	0	0	1	5
Forget outside problems	1	8	0	0	1	5
Focus	1	8	0	0	1	5
Get boys out of mind	0	0	1	11	1	5
Hang out with right crowd	0	0	1	11	1	5
Prioritize	1	8	0	0	1	5
Self-discipline	0	0	1	11	1	5
Surviving on your own	0	0	1	11	1	5
Use time wisely	1	8	0	0	1	5
Study over the summer	1	8	0	0	1	5

Peers were believed to play a small role in the students' success. When peers were mentioned, however, they were generally not viewed positively: friends must be limited, time with friends must be limited, gangs must be avoided, and boyfriends should be kept out of one's thoughts. HPs and LPs had similar perspectives about the role of friends as it relates to being a successful student.

DISCUSSION

Twenty-two African American students from nine urban areas of Ohio provided their perceptions of the transition to ninth grade. All of these students had been identified as having academic promise in the sixth grade, and had done well in eighth grade in accordance with YSP standards. By the end of ninth grade, 13 had a grade point average of 3.0 or above. The nine other students were making adequate progress toward high school graduation, but were in danger of losing YSP support and financial aid for college. The goal of this study was to learn more about students' perceptions of this important school transition, the strategies they used to succeed, the explanations they gave for not doing well, and the influence of family, peers, and community.

Transition to Ninth Grade: Teachers

In describing the transition to ninth grade, the students had a lot to say about the central role of teachers. While the most common responses identified negative aspects of teachers, the next most common set of comments identified positive aspects. LPs seemed to have a somewhat more positive view of teachers than did HPs.

Supportive teachers tended to be most needed by LPs. Teachers, in turn, need to realize the important function they serve as a source of academic and personal support in their students' lives. HPs may need less attention from teachers than do LPs because their parents provide the monitoring and encouragement necessary to excel academically.

Seidman et al. (1996) found a correlation between decline in academic performance and the inability of high schools to engage students. It is troublesome that some of the high performers in the present study mentioned boredom, not liking classes, lack of motivation, and difficulty staying awake as reasons why they did not do well in class. High performers must therefore be continually challenged in the classroom and guided toward resources that will further their knowledge and interest in specific academic areas.

Many students mentioned that they missed certain teachers from elementary school or junior high school, with whom they had estab-

lished close relationships. These teachers may have provided them with the experience of enjoying school, which helped them to do well (see Gregory, 1995). About a third of the students viewed teachers as supportive of their academic efforts (a slightly greater percentage among the LPs than the HPs). Perhaps the LPs who view at least one of their teachers as supportive will be able to improve their grades in tenth grade.

The students described some teachers as unapproachable, too busy, and belittling. They mentioned that some teachers give homework without explaining how to do the assignment. Negative remarks were made by all of the low performers. The most frequent comments were that high school teachers were not supportive and were harder than eighth-grade teachers. Teachers may feel that setting higher standards and demanding more of ninth graders is necessary and appropriate. However, from the students' perspective, harder may be seen as indifferent, unavailable, and therefore unsupportive.

Transition to Ninth Grade: School

The next major set of responses about the transition to ninth grade (after remarks about teachers) was that high school was harder. Sixty-two percent of HPs and 44% of LPs made this observation. The LPs were the only ones to say that ninth grade was easier (44%). It may be concluded that some LPs assessed ninth grade unrealistically. They may have interpreted the fact that teachers do not check homework daily or monitor progress with frequent tests as a sign that high school was easier. In comparison, HPs seemed to set higher standards for their academic performance than did LPs.

The students also commented on the process of adjusting to a new school. The size of the school, the organization of classes, the length of class periods, and interaction with new people were all challenging aspects of the transition to ninth grade. HPs and LPs had similar comments in this regard, although LPs had more to say than did HPs. This suggests that the LPs were struggling with more facets of the school transition, which may help explain, in part, why they were not doing as well.

Strategies for Doing Well and Explanations for Doing Poorly

HPs and LPs had different views of what it takes to be academically successful. HPs knew they needed to apply themselves to their studies, focus their attention on school assignments, and manage their time in order to maintain good grades. Even if they had problems with teachers, they understood that they must approach them when assistance

is required. High performers also seemed to be more critical of their own levels of performance, saying they needed to work harder. They saw school achievement as within reach if they put forth the necessary effort, and they were willing to make good grades a primary goal. Thus, high performers displayed the concrete perceptions that are predictive of academic success (see Mickelson, 1990).

HPs recognized the need for determination and good study habits. They named lack of motivation and boredom as reasons behind poorer grades, but had the self-control and sense of dedication to prevent these from leading to disruptive classroom behavior or withdrawal from academic pursuits.

LPs had fewer notions of what is necessary for academic success. Further, they did not seem concerned about the drop in their grade point averages. Instead, many asserted that they could do the work well if they put forth the effort. According to Brophy (1991), students who are not doing well or are afraid to try may blame lack of motivation in order to maintain high self-image.

The LPs can be divided into three subgroups. One group appears to be struggling with the fact that ninth grade is harder. The combination of more difficult work, less supportive teachers, and the need to study harder may be creating a sense that academic success is no longer within reach. The second group appears to be distracted by the social aspects of high school. They may talk too much in class or spend too much time with friends; in short, academics are overwhelmed by the social stimuli of the larger school. Of the LPs, these students seem more capable of turning around poor grades as they mature. The third group of LPs appears to be disconnecting from school (e.g., attendance problems, not doing schoolwork). They are the students who need the most one-on-one time with an adult mentor, but unfortunately are the least likely students to receive such help at home or school.

It is possible for the LPs to regain their HP status. Gregory (1995) found that urban youth who were able to turn their lives around had three things in common: all had positive experiences in elementary school, each had a person outside the school environment who was supportive, and all held the belief that they could do better, that poor grades were not a true measure of their abilities. It is hoped that the LPs in the present study will have what Gregory describes as the "Aha!" experience and return to the path of academic success.

Related Microsystems: Family, Friends, and Neighborhood

Family support has been shown to be positively related to the commitment of African American students to academic achievement (Ma-

ton et al., 1996). The importance of mothers was evident. Twelve HPs listed their mothers as supportive of their academic goals (the mother of the remaining HP student was deceased), while only 3 of the 9 LPs mentioned their mothers as being supportive. Further, when students could think of only one person who was supportive of their academic efforts (3 HPs, 1 LP), they named their mothers. That speaks to the influence of mothers, and seems to indicate that if students have at least their mothers' support, they can excel academically.

Fourteen (64%) of the students in this study resided in mother-only households, 8 of whom were high performers. In addition, 2 HPs lived in grandmother-only homes. Four students were part of a two-parent family (2 HPs and 2 LPs). These findings concur with those of Dornbusch et al. (1991), who found that family structure was not predictive of academic performance among African American students.

Parents' perceptions (whether in single-parent or two-parent households) of both their children's educational abilities and the quality of the school have been shown to be very predictive of academic success (Reynolds & Gill, 1994). Even when a school had poor ratings, parents' positive feelings toward that school were found to influence their children's perceptions and to correlate with higher grade point averages. Bronfenbrenner (1986) indicated the need for closer relations between schools and families. Schools need to form partnerships with families and welcome their participation in children's education.

Beyond the role of mothers and fathers, the importance of extended family was evident. Eleven HPs and 8 LPs mentioned extended family members as being supportive of their academics. A majority of the HPs (69%), but only 22% of the LPs, also named extended family members as people to whom they turn when faced with any kind of challenge. Perhaps the LPs were unable to establish or maintain close relationships with extended family, or perhaps extended family members were less available to them than to the HPs. LPs were more likely than HPs to list adults who were not related to them, but it is likely that these adults, as compared with family members, spend less time with individual students. Less involvement in the students' lives may mean less monitoring of their behavior and activities, including studying and completing homework assignments.

The students provided a mixed picture of the role of friends. Students may go to friends for encouragement and support, but to become academically successful, the students expressed the need to pull away from friends and limit time with them. Students may realize the need to spend more time studying because of the increased quantity of homework assigned in ninth grade. No students mentioned spending time

studying with groups of friends. Friends may not share the college aspirations of the YSP students, or may see tuition as a barrier to higher education.

When asked who was supportive of academics, HPs were much more likely to mention friends than were LPs (54% versus 22%). HPs' friendships may be based on classroom associations with similar students, while the nature of the friendship group of which the LP is a member may not be conducive to academic success (Legters & McDill, 1994; Clark, 1991). LPs' friendships may be formed outside the school environment, and these friends may downplay the importance of academic success.

Regarding the role of neighborhood, in urban, low-income communities, high rates of poverty, violence, crime, gang activities, and the stressors associated with these social problems, coupled with the poor quality of many of the local schools, have been identified as factors that place students at risk for low academic achievement (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). A few students mentioned more fighting in high school, gangs, and the need to "forget outside problems." Interviews with YSP coordinators revealed that many of the students lived in dangerous neighborhoods, where shootings, police raids, and gang activity were common. However, most students did not analyze how these aspects of their neighborhoods might be affecting school performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The study illustrated the impact of multiple, interacting microsystems on students' ability to maintain academic success during the transition to ninth grade. The prominent role of mothers in academic achievement was revealed in student interviews. Students who mentioned only one supportive person named their mothers. Mothers' encouragement and support seemed to insulate students from some of the difficult aspects of the transition to high school.

Ability to control behavior was another key to success, a factor highlighted by high performers. The support of extended family members was also salient, as was support from teachers, which was mentioned by both high and low performers. More teachers need to be aware of their vital role in the lives of students who do not have adequate parental support.

The impact of friends on academic achievement indicates that students must play an active role in managing their peer relationships. Friendships are particularly important at this stage of development,

but at the same time, most of the students realized that their friends can distract them from pursuing and achieving academic goals.

For LPs, the transition to ninth grade marked a decline in academic performance, which put them in danger of losing the YSP financial aid package and possibly filling them with feelings of hostility and hopelessness. These students may be overwhelmed by the increased quantity and difficulty of high school classes. Schools should catch problems early and counsel students on time management and study skills. It may also be necessary to reduce their course load. In addition to more attention and assistance from parents and teachers, the students themselves must learn to balance their social lives with the increased academic responsibilities required to achieve a good grade point average.

Schools need to recognize the vital role families, particularly mothers, play in students' academic success. High schools typically are less open to the participation of parents on a day-to-day basis, and provide them with less information about the academic program, compared with lower grades. Encouraging reciprocal communication and including families in the educational process at the high school level will improve cooperation between home and school and lead to greater academic success for students.

The dynamics of peer relationships in the high school context need to be acknowledged. Strategies used by the Young Scholars Program include bringing academically able students together for mutual support, cultural activities, and career exploration, which helps bright students avoid feelings of social isolation or alienation.

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