IN THEIR OWN VOICES
An Ethnographic Study of Low-Achieving Students Within the Context of School Reform

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The purpose of this ethnographic study was to investigate the causes of school failure from a student perspective. Interviews were conducted with 40 students who were experiencing academic difficulties in an urban high school undergoing reform into a science academy. Drawing on the innovative methodology employed by Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, and White, this study used low-achieving students as collaborative researchers to conduct and analyze interviews with their peers. Interviewees revealed minimal, although significant, peer and home influences on their levels of achievement and focused primarily on the impact of school structures. Students also discussed the transformative influence that teachers have had on their lives, particularly when classrooms incorporated challenging curriculum and high expectations, interactive learning, and closer relationships with students. These findings magnify issues of power, resistance, and diversity intricately linked to patterns of student achievement that many urban schools must address before advancing specific restructuring efforts.

He’s not like a regular teacher. The way he teaches is artistic because he’s so involved in his work. He’s like a leader to me.

—Mark, 9th-grade Asian American

Oooh . . . I really don’t like her [school counselor]. Sometimes I feel like if I see her on the streets, I want to do something to that lady! Don’t let her walk past my house! Lord knows . . .

—Felicia, 10th-grade African American

When students cut [classes], some just go and get high, others go drink, others just sit there and watch them. Others go and watch TV,
they eat, some sit at the bus stop . . . they’ll go call somebody. Anything instead of going to class.

—Alma, 12th-grade Mexican American

It’s not surprising that a diversity of students in an urban high school would come to express such diverse educational opinions, values, and experiences. One common strand that interweaves the above quotes, however, is that they were all expressed by students with severe academic difficulties at a high school undergoing reform. Students experiencing academic problems often feel alienated from schools, which are typically structured to foster little student participation and involvement (Fine, 1991; Nieto, 1992). When the voices of students are routinely unsolicited or ignored amid reform planning and implementation, the directions assumed by teachers and administrators can be misguided, particularly when their efforts directly clash with students’ own concerns. Determining student interests in curricular topics and themes; encouraging participation in schoolwide teams or councils; and creating greater support services to meet social, cultural, and academic needs are all important elements toward fostering a school culture that empowers students (e.g., Louis & Miles, 1990; Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Moll, 1986; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). However, if schools maintain reform goals that aim to directly increase student achievement, then they must also systematically tap the voices of low-achieving students and address those factors that students identify as contributing to their academic performance (Wasley, Hampel, & Clark, 1997).

In this ethnographic study, low achievement was examined from a student perspective at Emerson Academy, an inner-city high school in the San Francisco Bay Area populated by approximately 1,800 students, 90% of which were students of color. The goal of this investigation was to provide the entire school community, as well as other teachers, researchers, and administrators, with insights into perceptions of the varied causes of academic failure. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What factors do low-achieving students identify as contributing to their academic difficulties? (b) How do curricular and
instructional variables influence these learners’ achievement levels? and (c) What reform directions do low-achieving students advocate to meet their academic needs?

Drawing on the innovative, ethnographic methodology employed by Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, and White (1988), this study similarly used low-achieving students as collaborative researchers to conduct and analyze interviews with other students experiencing academic difficulties. The findings of this study demonstrate that students’ experiences with home, peer, and especially schooling structures can directly clash with the priorities established within reform movements. Ultimately, these clashes magnify issues of power, resistance, and diversity intricately linked to patterns of student achievement that many urban schools must address before advancing specific restructuring efforts.

STUDENT VOICES AND SCHOOL REFORM

Ethnographic researchers have contributed significantly to the understanding of complex educational phenomena by studying the ways in which schools structure realities and how students make sense of the contexts in which they learn (e.g., Corsaro, 1981; Heath, 1986; Philips, 1972; Watson-Gegeo, 1988). In particular, scholars focusing on students’ peer cultures have demonstrated the importance of investigating the perspectives of learners themselves who bring experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and cultural knowledge that shape the social organization of schools (Cazden, 1988; Fine, 1991; Lee, 1997). As urban schools become increasingly diverse, implications arise for all aspects of educational reform, including teacher education and professional development, school governance, instructional planning, and assessment practices, which, to be effective, must all be directly linked to the particular needs of students. These needs often remain hidden from professional staff members in schools because students display opposition to the adult-governed structures of schools (Dyson, 1993). Moreover, the voices of underachieving students, particularly low-performing students of color, often go unheard. When experiencing forms of
racism and discrimination, students of color can become pro-
grammed into silence in ways that lead to resistance to learning and
failure to challenge the oppressive forces in their lives (Delpit,
1995; Erickson, 1987; Freire, 1970; Ogbu, 1987).

Gaining insight, then, into students’ beliefs about the causes of
low achievement holds tremendous value in informing the planning
of school reform policies. An important goal of using student
voices as a research and evaluation tool is to challenge educators
about their assumptions and understandings of low-performing
students. Through greater awareness of students’ academic experi-
ences, school officials can reflect on the effectiveness of particular
strategies, programs, activities, and policies that are intended to
ameliorate patterns of underachievement (Nieto, 1996).

METHODOLOGY

Achievement data from Emerson Academy revealed a history of
low test scores, low grade point averages, and high rates of absen-
teeism among many students of color, in particular African Ameri-
cans and Latinos.¹ The significance of adopting an interpretive lens
in this study resides in the potential of ethnographic research to
unveil those issues that often remain hidden among statistical indi-
cators of achievement, including the impact of home, peer, and
school influences on students’ lives (Erickson, 1987; Geertz, 1973;
Watson-Gegeco, 1988).

PARTICIPANTS

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 40 Emerson
Academy students² across grade levels and racial, linguistic, and
gender backgrounds who displayed at least two of the following
criteria used to define low achievement and behavioral difficulties:
(a) a cumulative grade point average of less than 2.0, (b) two or
more suspensions or expulsions from school for delinquent behav-
ior, and (c) excessive absenteeism from classes. Recognizing that
students can be the best sources for accessing their peers’ views and
attitudes, this study drew on the talents of five Emerson students whom the author trained to collect and analyze interview data. These 11th- and 12th-grade students—one Latino, one Latina, one European American female, one Filipino American male, and one African American female—were enrolled in a science classroom that served as a focal site for a larger study investigating science curriculum development. Because virtually all of the students in this small classroom of 10 students met the above criteria for low achievement, all could have served as potential participants. After presenting the goals of the project, the above five students volunteered for the study.

PROcedures

Training sessions were held with the five student researchers to discuss the varying stages of the project. We met during several lunch hours to delineate appropriate interview questions, identify peers to interview, develop protocols for approaching potential interviewees, and discuss strategies for facilitating interviews. As a group, the students decided on the following areas of inquiry: (a) descriptions of academic difficulties, (b) the causes of these difficulties, and (c) areas of school reform needed to improve performance. The students identified interviewees during a planning session by selecting peers they knew who met the criteria for low achievement. To ensure that they interviewed respondents who represented a range of grade levels, ethnic, linguistic, and gender backgrounds, as well as different types of academic and behavioral difficulties, the students discussed the demographics of the individuals they selected and modified their lists.

Each student researcher was given materials, including a tape recorder, audio cassettes, and notebooks. Students were to explain the purpose of the project to interviewees and to obtain oral permission to proceed with an audiotaped interview. Students conducted anonymous interviews and assured respondents that individual identities would remain confidential. Cassette tapes were collected and transcribed by the author and a graduate student assistant.
DATA ANALYSIS

The student researchers were paid $10 for each completed and analyzed interview. A total of 40 interviews were conducted throughout the spring 1997 semester. Student researchers read over their transcribed interviews and were asked to highlight comments that seemed to best represent the experiences described by the respondents. In particular, they identified the primary perceived causes of low achievement for each interviewee. The student researchers also provided a written summary analysis in which they identified prevalent themes and patterns across all the interviews they conducted. These summaries and highlighted statements were focused on by the author in defining the categories that collectively captured the respondents’ voices. Three groups of factors—home, peer, and school influences—emerged from the data.

The methodology employed in this study does present several potential limitations. In particular, the findings may reflect some bias. Although the students were trained in conducting interviews, the transcriptions showed some evidence of occasional leading questions. The fact that the student researchers knew the interviewees personally was viewed largely as an advantage in that it provided a forum for open dialogue around sensitive issues related to low achievement. However, the possibility that interviewees may have provided biased responses because of their relationships with the student researchers should also be noted. Last, the students selected for interviews may not be reflective of the experiences of typical low-achieving students at Emerson Academy. Still, the focus of this study was less on the generalizability of findings than it was on researching and capturing diverse students’ perceptions of the causes of their own achievement levels.

CONTEXT OF SCHOOL REFORM

Guided by key reform movements consistent with Second to None (California High School Task Force, 1992), California’s blueprint for public education reform, Emerson Academy was the focal site
of investigation as it underwent its 1st year of transformation from a comprehensive high school to an academy emphasizing rigorous science- and technology-based learning. To accomplish this transformation, the school developed a 4-year restructuring plan intended to promote scientific literacy, critical thinking, and technological skills. Emerson administrators, teachers, and staff worked specifically to increase graduation requirements, to develop four science career pathways, and to encourage the use of portfolios and other alternative assessment tools.

In planning meetings throughout the school year, most members of the school community, including parents, teachers and staff, and community members, applauded the move toward rigorous learning and higher standards. However, many teachers also expressed concern over whether the new expectations were realistic for many students attending Emerson, particularly those students of color who evidenced patterns of course failures; absenteeism; and severe social, personal, and familial problems. Several questions were continually posed by the staff over how the school was to ensure that such learners would not be left behind in restructuring efforts: What home-, peer-, and school-based factors were influencing student performance? Were these factors ones directly addressed within restructuring efforts? How could the experiences of students inform reform planning?

MULTIPLE SPHERES OF LOW ACHIEVEMENT

The findings from the student interviews are organized through discussions of the varying spheres of low achievement, particularly those of home, peers, and, most notably, school. Although students discussed their relationships with parents and family responsibilities, as well as peer pressure and gang involvement, they focused primarily on perceptions of schooling and the influence, both positive and negative, of classrooms on their levels of achievement. Absenteeism, perceptions of racism, and personal relationships with teachers were major themes permeating the students’ dialogue. Furthermore, they talked extensively about the transforming influence that Emerson teachers had on their lives. Thus, the
dimensions of “good teaching” that students articulated are presented, including their recommendations for specific directions that they wanted the school to consider in order to ameliorate low levels of academic performance.

THE IMPACT OF HOME FACTORS

Of home-, peer-, and school-related factors, students discussed home influences least frequently as contributing to their school-related problems. When family issues were mentioned, they revolved around relationships with parents and home responsibilities. Students frequently discussed strained relations with their parents or guardians, many of whom worked late in the evening and, consequently, interacted only minimally with their children. Marianna, a 9th-grade Latina who said she had a difficult time transitioning into high school, identified a lack of order and rules at home for herself and her friends. She explained,

Sometimes the teachers send us up [to the Dean’s office] because they just can’t handle us. I think we have freedom so you know, at late [night], we get to go out and stuff. When we go to school, it’s like the teachers . . . they just make you do work. You just don’t want to do it, so you’ll just cut or sit in the classroom, nothing, just go to sleep or something. At home, I’m always fighting with my mom. She tells me how stupid I am, how ugly I am. She’s always calling me a bitch. So I just do whatever I want.

Several students further expressed dismay at the lack of role models at home. A few talked about parents who had drug or alcohol addictions, were verbally abusive, or were fairly neglectful of them and their siblings. However, students also discussed another extreme, that is, parents who were overly strict and controlling. Sarah and Tasha, two 9th-grade African American females with low grades who were suspended for fighting during their first semester at Emerson, talked about their contrasting home lives.

Sarah: See my family is the kind, they real strict, that they so strict they make you want to go out and do something.
Tasha: My family got problems, especially my mom . . . my dad. They not supportive at all. So I can’t even look up to them really. So I be
looking up to my grandma. But if my grandma die, I don’t have nobody to look up to. I mean, I be stressing a lot about the problems at home, but nobody gonna try to make them go away except my momma, and she ain’t even trying, so . . . That’s her, she gone, she can do whatever she want to do.

In addition to strained relationships with parents, many interviewees talked about the financial responsibilities they had to support their families. Several held service-related jobs, some of which were full-time positions requiring 40 to 50 hours of work each week. Tired and unfocused, these students conveyed little time for homework let alone showing up to school. When they did make it to school, they confirmed that they felt so disengaged and unable to concentrate that they typically fell asleep in classes and only attended part of the school day.

The complexities of the home environments of these low-achieving students are not intended to be simplified by such a brief discussion. It also should be noted that many discussed supportive families who encouraged them to do well in school, participated in school activities, and assisted their children with assignments and projects. However, it was also evident that dysfunctional familial situations could, obviously, exert a negative force on learning when students were preoccupied with responsibilities and problems at home. Virtually all of these students, though, as will be discussed shortly, called on Emerson to be not necessarily the site to solve such home-related problems but at least a place where students could feel safe, comfortable, and cared about.

THE IMPACT OF PEER FACTORS

A majority of the respondents claimed that peer pressure did not exert an influential force in their cutting, poor grades, or delinquency. Rather, they asserted their independence in making decisions about school matters, calling those easily influenced by peers “weak hearted,” “irresponsible,” or “looking for a scapegoat.” Still, they did concede two important related elements: the novelty of varying social groups and the attraction to gangs. Several interviewees acknowledged falling into the “wrong crowd” of students, particularly during their freshman year. Students’ developing identities
and need for group affiliation seemed to lead many to explore varying social groups, which at times led to sexual, alcohol, and drug experimentation. In addition, students said they frequently cut classes or failed to attend school to hang out with their friends.

Gang membership was also a prevalent factor in some students' lives. As a source of power, recognition, and status, gangs attracted some Latino, African American, and Asian American students who saw gangs as crucial social groupings for survival in their violent communities. Jesus, a 17-year-old Latino who only recently severed ties with his gang, explained how he believed gangs were necessary in commanding respect from others.

I started drinking since I was in the sixth grade and from there I went on. Sometimes I wouldn't go to class so I could go drink with my friends. In seventh grade, I joined a gang... just to stay powerful, be powerful in school, and I did, you know. There was always peer pressure to don't go to class, to do these bad things... drinking, smoking weed, selling weed. They put a lot of pressure on you, man. Most of the 9th graders that are going to this school, they want to be known, acting bad, other people respect them, they want to be popular. It's cool, it's fun... you get respect, man. You got to go fight this other gang. I got kicked out of school for one year because the first week of school I jumped this guy from this other gang and I fucked him up. Two months later, it happened again. I jumped another guy, fucked him up too.

Interestingly, students felt that schools did little to prevent their gang involvement and, at times, only exacerbated the sense of disrespect that contributed to their attraction to gangs in the first place. One of the five student researchers, Roberto, explained that gang members were categorically considered failures or "bad" students by teachers and counselors at Emerson. When students internalized these low images, Roberto believed, their esteem dropped even lower and, consequently, pushed them further into gang involvement. This phenomenon was solidified when students themselves began to feel a sense of hopelessness. One Vietnamese American male noted that by his freshman year, he believed that his gang fighting, criminal record, and low grades had already made it impossible for him to go to college. Students believed that adults,
who typically perceived gang members as trouble makers unwilling and incapable of learning, failed to make significant attempts to include these students in class activities. Although interviewees claimed that Emerson, in comparison to other high schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, experienced minimal gang activity, they still believed that the school did little to address gang issues, including working with gang members to stay in school, helping students to deal with peer pressure, and preventing other students from joining gangs.

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL FACTORS

Overwhelmingly, the students interviewed felt that school factors were primary influences on their level of academic achievement. All recognized that low achievement was a result of their individual cutting; failure to complete classwork and homework; and, at times, their inability to take responsibility for their own learning. However, they identified specific structures and practices of Emerson that also contributed to their behaviors: (a) teacher-centered classrooms, which students felt contributed greatly to their "addiction to cutting class"; (b) perceived racism and discrimination against students, particularly in assessment, teacher-student interactional patterns, and expectations; and (c) lack of personal teacher-student relationships as reflected in teacher apathy, lack of caring, and low expectations.

TEACHER-CENTERED CLASSROOMS

Cutting classes was a practice developed early on for many respondents during their freshman year and quickly developed into what several students referred to as an "addiction." Every student, when asked why they failed to attend classes, immediately responded that boredom kept them away. They argued that the dominance of lecture-based courses in which minimal communication, projects, or activities took place resulted in little engagement and, therefore, little learning. Students felt that too many teachers merely gave assignments in class without adequately explaining content to help them learn anything substantive.
Moreover, several students said they cut classes because of their failure to comprehend course material. They saw their teachers as impatient with their lack of understanding because instructors often failed to take the time to provide needed individual attention. Students often did not see the classroom as a site for exploration or reflection, especially when participant structures were confined to lectures or individual seat work. However, students were not particularly concerned about their absenteeism because they claimed that in classes taught by apathetic teachers, they could readily and frequently cut, receive no reprimands, and still pass their courses. Because they sensed a lack of immediate consequences to their cutting, most said they chose not to attend classes because they were “able to get away with it so easily.” According to the interviewees, Emerson had several exits on its school grounds, too early a start for first period classes, and indifferent security guards. Although many of them did not like the idea of moving toward a closed campus for the subsequent school year, which the administration had agreed on, some students admitted that an open campus did contribute to excessive cutting. One 12th-grade Latina, Alma, explained why.

Because here at Emerson, first of all, we have open campus so we have the liberty to go out and do whatever we want without having no one to stop you. And most of the security, they don’t care. They see you outside and they’re like, they don’t care. So if you have the facility to get out of school without no one telling you not to go out or nothing, without someone stopping you, you can just, you know, go out. There’s no one there to tell you to don’t go out, go to class, stay in class.

Despite little perceived immediate consequences to their cutting, most respondents saw their absenteeism as having damaging long-term effects, such as lower self-confidence, having to go to summer school to make up credits, and facing the threat of not graduating from high school—an accomplishment virtually all of the respondents said they wanted to attain. The cycle of cutting, however, was difficult to break because many felt so lost in their classes and appeared to give up. A few were quite apathetic about their attendance patterns—they seemed to neither care about their courses nor the results of their absenteeism.
PERCEPTIONS OF RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

When students were asked why they and others were having academic problems at Emerson Academy, many expressed concern over the number of teachers they perceived to be "racist." All respondents were able to provide specific accounts of classroom incidents that involved unfair treatment toward them solely because of their racial or ethnic background. For example, students recounted incidents in which Latino students were the only ones made to stand at the back of the classroom for frequent talking or copying answers; African Americans were admonished for speaking out in class, whereas their Asian American and White classmates were not reprimanded for engaging in the same behavior; or teachers grading students "based on race and not on work." Three African American students conveyed their individual experiences of racism, which they perceived in their interactions with teachers as well as counselors and administrators.

Most of my teachers are scandalous. It seem like they are trying to flunk me. All they do is complain on how I talk too much in class and the other students talk just as much as I do. And I'm the only one that gets in trouble. They never get in trouble. I think the only reason why I get in trouble and not them is because I'm Black. (Sean, 11th-grade student)

Some teachers just grade you by your color or sometime, the way you act. My gym teacher, I was good for the whole thing, then I just had one argument. [That teacher] just drop my grade right there, and then I got an F. [She] just got an attitude, you know how teachers be comin' in with bad moods sometime. And when you argue with them, they just gonna get off da' hook for just a little reason, try to give you a referral, send you to the office. (Keisha, 9th-grade student)

When I had that fight and the incident broke out in the yard, they um...just because that girl and them were like, "I'm a good girl and I don't do all this, and I don't do all that," and just because I was with the Black crowd, and they were talking about, "Well that bitch shouldn't a start all this and all that." And I was like, they suspended us, and took them [other girls] home! We had to call our mom, but they took them home! (Tasha, 9th-grade student)
Students felt that these racial tensions were caused by teachers’ stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings of different populations of students. All were adamant in asserting that members of every racial group were responsible for cutting, delinquency, and academic failure and were not confined to just African Americans and Latinos. The students believed that these assumptions were tied to teachers’ limited perceptions of who the “bad” students were at Emerson. As one respondent noted, “Hall walking, cutting . . . that’s the main thing they be thinking about us [African Americans]. It’s not all Black students, that’s what I’m talkin’ about. It’s Mexicans, Asians, whoever!”

This sentiment was reiterated by several others who argued that problems of delinquency and achievement were evident among all students but that the teachers, administrators, and staff of the school were apt to ignore the widespread difficulties across racial groups. Vicki, a sophomore of mixed African American and Asian American descent, said she felt that skewed attention was placed on certain groups largely because of differences in students’ communication styles with their teachers.

I guess the reason why some teachers say that Asians are doing best academically in the school is that, in my opinion, because I am also half Black, Black people can get an attitude. Asians can do what’s expected from them, I guess, probably. But there is that side of them that I see that they’re the ones who are cutting and everything. But the Black people can be doing their work and everything but they just don’t like being told . . . it’s like if they’re told something in a way that’s mean or demanding, they’re not gonna take that. They get in their teachers’ face too, I guess because it’s their mentality. I’m not being stereotyped because I see that in myself. I just don’t like people who are in my face. Teachers think that Asians do all the work, they do this, they do that, they’re good in school, they’re very smart in math. In my opinion, most of the Asians are the ones who cut! They’re the ones with the short dyed hair, big pants. I see them smoking on the side walks. I think that every race in this school is doing well. I don’t think they should categorize only the Asians as doing the best in this school because it’s not true. Asians themselves would not say Asians are doing the best.
The importance of these findings is in exposing students’ views and attitudes toward the school community and the ways in which those perceptions were influencing their academic experiences. Because several of the interviewees felt that racism and stereotypical attitudes overshadowed their classroom interactions, perhaps it was not surprising that they displayed resistance to attending certain classes and performing for certain teachers. Although a couple of interviewees said that students might claim racism merely as an excuse to absolve personal responsibility for learning, many refuted this notion, again pointing to numerous personal instances of differential assessments and reprimands that, from their point of view, were dependent on race. What is to be gleaned from these findings, nonetheless, is that feelings of discrimination were quite salient for several students at Emerson—experiences that must be addressed in order to foster learning situations where students discern the classroom to be a place of equitable instructional practices. There appeared to be a crucial and immediate need for dialogue around such issues because many students, in particular African American and Latino students, communicated a deep level of frustration and anger over their experiences in the school. They asserted that these feelings often led to altercations with teachers and staff because they continually felt disrespected in their interactions with adults. Sarah confirmed this observation, noting, “Teachers need to start paying attention to us [African Americans] and realize that students got feelings too instead of them giving their little attitude ’cuz students gonna turn around and do something.”

LACK OF PERSONAL TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

In further describing their relationships with teachers, many respondents pointed to a salient perceived aspect of Emerson’s teaching community. Lack of caring, reflected in teacher apathy and low expectations, was a consistent theme in virtually all of the students’ characterizations of teachers that they displayed resistance toward. Students emphasized that such traits certainly did not apply to all of their instructors but were reflective of many. The student interviewers posed the question, “Do you feel the teachers at
Emerson know you well?” to which a majority were unable to name a single teacher whom they felt knew them on an individual level. Equally, the students admitted that they in turn did not know their teachers very well, many of whom seemed to prefer to be “traditional” teachers who remained somewhat distant. However, the students perceived this social and personal distance as a glaring lack of caring. They said teachers rarely said hello to them when passing in the halls, talked with them outside of the classroom, or conveyed a sense of liking or wanting them in the classroom. Jesus, for instance, commented,

They don’t give a fuck about me. Nowadays, people care more about themselves than other people. Hell no! All the teachers care about is getting paid, just get the money. They don’t give a fuck about students. If they did, they would have all these fuckin’ students graduating. All they care about is getting paid.

Moreover, actions that might have been perceived as strictness or maintaining order and standards from teachers’ perspectives were apparently often interpreted as a lack of caring from students’ perspectives. Several mentioned incidents in which they believed teachers easily got mad at them for things they were not doing. Students said they knew when they were being disruptive or disrespectful toward teachers, but they also believed that teachers’ memories were unwavering because they carried negative perceptions of them into other nondisruptive contexts. One African American junior, Terrence, talked about his experiences.

I think they should help us out a little more instead of just thinking that if we’re doing bad already, that we can’t improve. You know that they just don’t care about us. But I think they should help us out more and do more things to keep us on track even though that’s my responsibility, too. But they don’t make the class interesting and it seems like they don’t care about me.

Thus, perceptions of teacher apathy developed in cyclic fashion because student apathy could follow or precipitate such awareness. Because students also felt a sense of powerlessness against the authority represented in the adult-governed structures of schooling,
their relationships with teachers appeared to be further strained. Two African American students, Chanda and Latonya, discussed these links.

Everything that come out of your mouth probably ain’t [going to be seen as] true because you know grown up, they got more respect and more power over you. So they probably gonna’ believe what a grown up say over you. That’s what teachers say, “I’m gonna win anyway, so why you sitting there arguing?” Oooh! It’s a lot of teachers in this school that’s always saying, “I can sit here and not give y’all nothing and I don’t even gotta teach y’all and I still get paid!” (Chanda, 10th-grade student)

‘Cuz I really think that teachers think that it’s like a chore to be here, you know, like they don’t really wanna be here. Like some teachers, oh Ms. X! She’s always complaining how she doesn’t wanna wake up in the morning and see our faces in the morning! And you swear we wanna’ see hers?! (Latonya, 11th-grade student)

Students’ perceptions of a lack of caring within Emerson seemed linked to their awareness of the level of achievement that teachers expected from them. Respondents declared that they knew that teachers had low perceptions of their ability to learn, which was communicated through direct references to ability as well as through mere silence. Being told, for example, they would end up in only minimum wage, service-related jobs at McDonald’s or Burger King, students said teachers often made explicit reference to perceived limited thinking, computational, and language skills. Rather than viewing such statements as motivators to come to class, or even as jokes, the respondents instead said that they interpreted them as signs that adults had given up on them.

Although students conveyed that such direct statements about ability or future potentials were hurtful, teacher silence appeared to exert an even stronger message about perceived competence. That is, lack of encouragement and support for students with academic difficulties was interpreted as a teacher’s disbelief in the ability to improve despite past problems. Students said they wanted, and needed, teachers to “keep on them,” to continually push them to do their work and to come to class. Such encouragement was resented when students felt it was communicated in the form of a lecture but
said that they were motivated when support was presented in a stern yet caring and consistent manner.

Although some students seemed to be externalizing blame on their teachers, most did come to acknowledge in their interviews that the ultimate responsibility resided within themselves to decide if they would go to class, do their work, and seek out help when they needed it. Certainly, some degree of student apathy was evident. A few said they didn’t care about their classes, teachers, things their parents said, going to college, or doing well in school. Students recognized that teachers could not solve the complex problems of gangs, home problems, peer pressures, and other stressors, particularly when “students don’t want to help themselves.” However, they urged teachers to also take responsibility for making classes more engaging and becoming more involved in their students’ lives. Sonia, one of the student researchers, reached the following conclusion after conducting her interviews with students:

I think that students need to motivate themselves and to keep up their own hopes and goals in life. It only weighs down on you in the future. But I also think that students need to feel wanted at school and comfortable. I know from my experience that one of my teachers keeps on pushing me to do more and believe in myself and to think of my goal in life and to be sure to accomplish it. I won a poetry contest because of her and had my poem published. She is still there for me this very day. I ask her for help all the time. She is very strict, but good and direct.

Students expressed tremendous opposition to classrooms in which they perceived teacher-centered structures, racism and discrimination, and a lack of personal teacher-student relationships. However, Sonia’s comments reiterate what many students expressed, that is, that there were several effective teachers at Emerson that had a positive impact on students’ lives. But what characterizes those classrooms in which students felt a connection with their teacher, in which they were more likely to do their work, and in which they felt that they were learning curricular content? In the next section, this article turns to the dimensions of effective teaching at Emerson Academy articulated by the respondents.
DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING

To assume that students defined effective classrooms as those that incorporated field trips, little homework, and comedic teachers would be erroneous because their comments about effective teaching revealed more complex sets of interacting instructional traits. Specifically, in responding to questions regarding those teachers that they “learned a great deal from,” and that “knew them well,” the respondents provided descriptions that could be mapped along three dimensions of instruction: challenging curriculum and high expectations, interactive learning, and closer relationships with students.

CHALLENGING CURRICULUM
AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

This dimension of effective teaching included teachers’ ability to present content information in clear and understandable ways within a challenging curriculum. More specifically, students said they learned a great deal when teachers took the time to present concepts and ideas in multiple ways to ensure comprehension of the material. Several effective teachers were described as employing varying media to present information, including lectures, group work, visual aides, manipulatives, varying texts, and even music. However, these practices were only effective if teachers were patient. Students explained that only certain teachers were willing to answer frequent questions, to explain material at varying paces depending on student comprehension, and to offer individualized assistance to ensure that most, if not all, students received the attention they needed either during class time or outside of class.

Students also noted teachers who upheld rigor in their curriculum. Although they did not always keep up with class work or homework, the respondents admitted that they learned from those teachers who demanded a great deal by way of assignments, class work, projects, and tests. What distinguished these teachers from those who also held high standards but for whom students seemed unwilling to perform was that such rigor was maintained in a
flexible yet creative manner. Lorena, a 12th-grade Latina who often missed classes because she had to care for her baby, provided an example.

I have one teacher—he’s pretty cool, he’s funny. He tries to teach us. And if we need help, he’ll help us and usually he understands if I can’t hand in something, I’ll hand it in the next day. That’s why I usually don’t cut his class ’cuz he knows the fact that I have a baby and it’s hard to get everything done in time, so he’ll give me a break.

Similarly, other students said that even though they might cut a particular class at times, their teacher continued to work with them in helping them to learn the material in class, providing extra time for individualized help at lunchtime, or allowing them to perform extra credit assignments. Students didn’t always use this extra assistance but they knew it was available to them because their teacher was a stable source of support. Classes, then, that maintained high expectations for performance were recognized as sites for significant amounts of learning, but only when teachers integrated interesting material and presentational styles along with varying media, a patient demeanor, and flexibility in assessments.

INTERACTIVE LEARNING

Respondents also emphasized the social aspects of classrooms that they identified as effective contexts for learning. Specifically, they explicated features of interesting, interactive, and cooperative-oriented classrooms in which teachers not only displayed enthusiasm for content material but also tapped the social nature of students’ peer culture.

Students consistently reported that they enjoyed those classes where teachers incorporated fun and interesting materials, presentation styles, and activities. They claimed that they were more likely to attend and complete assignments when their teachers abandoned lectures and straightforward teaching from the textbook and instead developed more creative ways to teach. All of the students discussed instructors who actively engaged them in learning (whether it be in activities, projects, or discussions) rather than
relegated them to passive, individual tasks that engendered boredom. Moreover, interviewees said that they positively responded to their teachers' humor and enthusiasm about subject material, which often sparked their interests. For example, with the incorporation of block scheduling at Emerson, some students felt that they learned a great deal during extended 2-hour classes if the teacher was able to capture their attention and structure interactive activities. Serena, an 11th-grade Latina student, commented.

When you really wanna learn something and you're having fun in your class, I like the block schedules 'cuz it gives you more time. Like when we're in math class, and we finally understood the concept or something, we can't even like work with that, we have to go. The bell rings and we're like, "Damn, we have to go back and do it later."

Furthermore, students identified the importance of other interactive aspects of the social dimensions of effective classrooms. Teachers who allowed for freedom of expression helped students to find their individual voices in grappling with ideas and concepts. That is, respondents talked about classes in which they were encouraged to express their opinions and experiences related to the topics under investigation. Several students felt constrained and bored when communication did not drive the curriculum, especially because strict lecture formats clashed with the social norms of students' peer culture. In particular, most of the interviewees said that a factor in determining their attendance patterns and participation in class was whether they had friends enrolled in the class and, equally important, whether the teacher allowed for dialogue with them. One 9th-grade Asian American student, Steven, explained.

I think school is just a place to meet friends. I don't think it's really a place of learning. Actually it is, but we have more friends than learning. Why do people go to school? To have friends. If you're in school by yourself, just one person, why would you go to school? You know, that's why we talk to each other because there's someone to talk to. If you're there by yourself, you'll be like, dying. That's why they make classes with a lot of people, so they could talk to each other. So it's like you want to come to school. So when they make you like don't talk to each other and then you don't go to
school because it's not fun. Let us talk to each other! They're depriv-
ing us of our natural talents!

Students conceded that dialogue infused in a curriculum had the potential to lead to significant amounts of off-task talk and chaotic environments. However, they pointed to effective teachers who could maintain control and organization by being stern and focused. In fact, when teachers implemented and monitored group work, these students said it helped them tremendously in learning content material. One student, Vicki, said that withdrawing group work meant eliminating an important learning resource.

I like working with people because if I'm by myself, it's harder to learn for me. I guess it's like when I'm with other people and if I don't understand something I can go to them and ask for help or vice versa. Two brains are better than one . . . or three, or four.

CLOSER RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

The personal, affective dimensions of effective teaching seemed crucial to these low-achieving students' positive schooling experiences. Teachers who routinely assumed a greater emotional and personal role in their students' lives by displaying concern about their progress and spending extra time with them came to motivate these learners to see the importance of schooling in their individual lives.

Teachers attending to the personal elements of teacher-student relationships conveyed a strong sense of caring for their students. The key to this display was constant and supportive feedback with students and their parents. For example, respondents discussed teachers who continually interacted with them to determine how they were doing academically, socially, and personally. Marianna discussed her relationship with her social science teacher:

Last semester, he ask me how come I was flunking most of my classes and I talked to him, and he helped me out for me to graduate this June on stage. He always worry about me. He wants me to graduate on stage. He wants me to go to college. He wants me to get a good education, so he's always caring about me. He always call my parents to see how I am doing at my house, and he's really into
my life, trying to know, trying to find out if I’m doing good or bad at school. He knows a lot about my life.

Teachers such as the one Marianna described were willing to spend additional time to interact with students before and after school or at lunchtime. They were highly accessible to discuss academic-related difficulties as well as family and personal issues. These teachers encouraged students to go to class and to complete their assignments despite their prior histories of cutting, fighting, or low grades. Just as students said they sensed the low expectations that certain teachers held of them, they also recognized the high expectations others maintained. By continually “keeping on students,” teachers communicated a sense of hope and belief in their students’ ability to achieve. One student asserted,

My freshman year, I had this one teacher. She noticed that I wanted to do good and all . . . but I was slacking . . . like I was cutting and all that. So she just, like, keep on putting pressure. Not pressure, but she made me see that I could do well and all that. She was kind of like there, like really involved in all my life, rather than a teacher who just sits there and lectures all day. (Michael, 11th-grade African American)

Moreover, teachers encouraged students to establish goals for themselves and worked with them in figuring out how best to accomplish them. These teachers encouraged risk taking, assuming leadership roles, and trying out new academic and recreational activities. Race and culture were not deterministic factors in identifying these effective teachers. Although students felt a sense of closeness to those who shared their cultural backgrounds, histories, and experiences, they also discussed several teachers from dissimilar racial backgrounds who had a strong, positive influence on their lives because they went out of their way to get to know students and the causes of their academic difficulties. These instructors called or visited homes, talked with other teachers about such students, and created a classroom context in which students felt cared for.

Perhaps the most powerful story of an Emerson teacher influencing a student’s life came in an interview with Jesus, a former gang member suspended several times for fighting at Emerson and
for attacking his teacher at a former school. Now attending most of his classes and having raised his grade point average to approximately 2.3, he maintained that it was teachers, in combination with his girlfriend and family, that helped him to understand the importance of education.

Without school, you can’t do shit anymore. It was a teacher who made me realize how important school is right now. They put pressure on me to do my work, to turn in my work on time. They talk to me. Even though they give you a lot of homework, they’re okay. They teach good. They explain things. I’m not an A student or anything like that, but I pass all my classes. Better than an F.

Teachers who were successful in orchestrating these defining dimensions of effective teaching pushed students to achieve in school, to think about their future, and to develop greater self-confidence. These dimensions may not be effective in all contexts given different student backgrounds and needs as well as differing teacher instructional styles. Respondents in this study recognized that all teachers could not be comedians or social workers; however, they urged teachers to be creative in making their classrooms more interesting and to communicate greater compassion in their interactions with students. Roberto, one of the student researchers, summarized this as follows:

I believe that there is no way to make all the students want to come to class and learn. There are students that just don’t want to take the responsibilities as students and learn. That’s something that not even parents can take care of at times. There are also subjects that students are not interested in at all, and to them, those subjects would be boring. I believe that a teacher doesn’t have to be a comedian or anything to entertain students and teach something to them at the same time. As long as the teacher is fair to all the students . . . don’t give preference to a certain race . . . is able to keep order in the classroom . . . and make sure that students are doing their work. I don’t believe that all teachers have to act as social workers and become involved in students’ personal problems. But students sometimes feel motivated after they have talked to somebody about their problems, and they also feel that there is at least somebody that was willing to ask about their problems, and they feel like they could study because the teacher does care about their learning and being someone in life.
STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

According to the students, the impact that these teachers had on their lives was indeed far-reaching. They respected and admired such teachers and firmly believed that more instructors needed to incorporate challenging curriculum, interactive learning, and personal relationships with students. When asked what changes they felt the school should make to help low-achieving students, the respondents offered a series of recommendations for teachers, staff, and administrators to consider in future reform planning: (a) creative modifications to instructional practices, (b) repairing teacher-student relationships, and (c) building a stronger sense of school community.

CREATIVE MODIFICATIONS TO INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Students challenged the school community to assume the commitment and dedication needed to reach those who were having extreme academic problems. They acknowledged that students needed to be better prepared upon entering Emerson and to maintain their own goals, motivations, and responsibilities to succeed. Yet, they also placed responsibility on teachers to abandon teacher-centered instructional methods for equitable and participatory practices. The following lists, in the students’ own words, the recommendations most frequently offered to change classroom instruction:

- more group work
- more enthusiasm in teaching class material
- more interesting, upbeat lectures and discussions
- more communication, discussion, freedom of expression
- more culturally relevant materials
- more activities, projects, field trips
- greater student voice in deciding classroom topics
- classroom materials that directly relate to real life
- fair grading practices that don’t favor certain racial groups
- grading based not just on tests and quizzes but also on projects, papers, and individual improvement

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- ongoing feedback on performance in class
- student evaluations of teachers
- later starting time for first-period classes

REPAIRING ADULT-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

The social distance many students experienced from the teachers, staff, and administration was seen as a major aspect of Emerson that needed to be repaired. Students believed that issues related to racism, low expectations, and teacher apathy needed to be addressed to mediate perceived strained relationships. Specifically, they recommended the following:

- get to know students on an individual level both inside the classroom and out
- be more encouraging of all students despite what they did in the past
- improve communication with students by asking them if they need more help, why they’re having trouble, and how they can help
- provide more individualized attention and tutoring to students
- communicate that they believe in students and that they have the ability to learn
- hold the same expectations for all students regardless of race
- interact with all students in the same way regardless of race

BUILDING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The interviewees expressed concern about a weak sense of community at Emerson and its impact on low-achieving students. They wanted teachers, counselors, and deans to delve deeper to understand the factors contributing to student delinquency and low levels of achievement rather than merely punitively reprimanding students. Respondents maintained that working together would help them to feel that the school functioned as a community that systematically intervened to understand the origin of problems and to develop strategies for reaching solutions. Within this process, students said they would come to feel that “everyone cares, gives a damn . . . in trying to help you . . . in making you feel wanted at Emerson.” Specifically, they most frequently called for the following:
• more collaboration by teachers and staff to work on student problems
• get more parents involved at school
• more communication with families about positive and negative things about students
• more counselors, including personal, health, and at-risk counselors
• more bilingual counselors and teachers to work with immigrant students and their families

IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM PLANNING

How can the voices of students inform reform planning in ways that will promote achievement? At the very least, findings such as these can spark discussions around issues of power, diversity, and resistance that can underlie performance. The findings from this investigation were presented to all members of the Emerson community, including teachers, staff, and administrators, during a staff development day at the end of the school year. Although some teachers felt that the study framed students’ responses as unwarranted attacks on teachers, most said the findings were thought provoking in shedding light on how students were perceiving them and experiencing their classrooms. For example, several European American teachers admitted that they did not feel any strong connection to students of color and wanted to talk more extensively about bridging cultural gaps in the classroom. One math teacher expressed his concern at the staff development session:

I have to admit that I don’t always feel connected to my students, especially the Black kids. But what does a White, middle-class teacher do to reach them? Where do I go from here?

Such discourse can promote critical reflection on teacher assumptions and expectations, instructional planning, and issues of diversity and learning (Delpit, 1995; McLaren, 1995; Moraés, 1996). Indeed, the administration indicated that the recommendations of students themselves needed to be actively incorporated into future planning around all school-related policies, including curriculum, instruction, assessment, school governance, and integrated services.
Disparities in perceptions of the causes of achievement between students and teachers are not mere differences that should be linked to the oppositional nature of peer responses to school structures and policies (Ogbu, 1987). More important, these differences should be viewed as sources of conflict affecting why certain students are willing to perform in certain contexts yet are less willing to do so in others (Erickson, 1987; Fine, 1991). How philosophies of teaching and learning manifest in the classroom, how cultural diversity is conceptualized, and how cultural differences influence interactions between adults and students (Nieto, 1992) often preclude, or at least should preclude, discussions of specific models of school restructuring. For Emerson Academy, the development of career pathways, the increase of graduation requirements, and the use of portfolios were not policy decisions to be carried out in isolation from the voices of students. Rather, their experiences should be embedded within every step of the reform process, including the designing, implementation, and evaluation of restructuring efforts.

In attempting to ensure educational equity for ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority students, schools must examine the issue of how much of the reform design process should be controlled by educators through such mechanisms as preplanning and instructional management (Martin, 1988). But efforts to delineate a science of reform design may be futile in not taking into account the diversity that exists among individuals, communities, and schools. In particular, if a primary goal of reform is to provide schooling based on democratic principles of learning for all learners, then schools need to provide students with the opportunity to have a voice in discussing reform agendas that they perceive to be critical and essential (Farrell et al., 1988).

CONCLUSION

Spotlighting the voices of students in a study exploring academic failure can be a precarious matter. Many of the values, attitudes, and behaviors that students display are often shaped in direct
response to the organization of the adult-governed world, including the authority and power associated with the structures of classrooms (Dyson, 1993). Students often display forms of opposition and resistance to school, thereby placing tremendous responsibility on teachers, counselors, and administrators for their academic problems. Thus, it remains crucial to recognize the constant demands that are placed on the time and efforts of staff who cannot be expected to solve the larger socioeconomic, linguistic, and political realities associated with academic failure. Nonetheless, these realities should not prevent schools from examining low achievement from students’ frames of reference and to consider the critical, at times scathing, voices that they use when discussing their school experiences (Wasley et al., 1997).

Not only is the process of tapping student experiences important for studying the causes of academic failure but it is also essential as a research tool to inform reform planning. Ultimately, Emerson Academy must work with students to be more respectful toward the school, its adults, physical structures, and materials; to assume greater responsibility for attending class and completing assigned work; and to seek out assistance when they fail to understand what is being taught in the classroom. At the same time, the school will need to consider the curricular, relational, and resource changes that students called for, which could entail significant time and effort to implement. However, failure to address these recommendations could further limit opportunities for meaningful learning for all students as the school continues its transformation into an academy. The need to challenge all members of the school community toward this commitment was perhaps best expressed by Sonia, one of the student researchers, who provided these final thoughts at the conclusion of this study:

I think the only thing that I want teachers to know on behalf of the students and myself is that if they want to be here, we do. If they make the class fun and interesting, maybe we will be more fun to teach. I know that this statement doesn’t go for all teachers or students, but we do want to learn. We don’t want lectures all day and take notes. We want you to make learning fun and interesting. Now if a student doesn’t want to be there, I think it takes a lot of
dedication from a teacher to help out that student. And I think that that’s what some of the teachers lack—dedication. I know but a few teachers here at Emerson that I could say I truly liked. One is fun and interesting, and the other teacher is strict but keeps on the person so if they need help, they have it, and they are there to help you.

NOTES

1. For example, during the fall 1996 semester, one third to one half of 9th-grade African American and Latino students at Emerson received letter grades of D, F, or incomplete across content areas.

2. All names of students, teachers, staff, and administrators are pseudonyms to protect individual identities.

REFERENCES


