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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper examined certain personality factors and dispositions characteristic of two types of inner city black high school students: those who achieve and those who fail to achieve. Interviews with eight black students from a ghetto high school in Chicago were analyzed. This analysis revealed six dichotomies which seemed to stand out in the behavior of inner city black students. The successful students demonstrated the latter characteristic in each of the following pairs: (1) "presentness" vs. realistic future orientation; (2) impulsivity and affective action vs. thoughtful reflection; (3) peer group conformity vs. independence; (4) nonconforming vs. conforming response to school demands; (5) negative vs. positive perceptions of authority; and (6) self contradiction and ambivalence vs. self confidence and autonomy. Excerpts from interviews with students are included in the paper. (Author/APM)

The Relationship Between Psychological Characteristics and the Achievement of Black Inner-City High School Students

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It is well known that urban schools, in alarming numbers, are currently failing to educate their students for meaningful participation in our complex society, (the Second Handbook of Research on Teaching has even devoted a chapter to investigating this "national dilemma" [Green, 1973]). To account for this "crisis" situation in inner-city education, it has become commonplace to charge the educational system with failure to meet the needs of minority group students. While there is no doubt that change-resistant ghetto schools, which reflect the subtle, yet powerful, biases of the larger society, have, in effect, "institutionalized" failure, the fact remains that at such schools not all students fail to make adequate academic progress.

The extent to which a school's instructional program is able to facilitate maximal student learning varies greatly from pupil to pupil; within the same school and among students of approximately equal potential, some pupils experience success, others failure. Such differences in achievement suggest that what the learner brings to the school setting in the way of values, habits, expectations, and personal dispositions is one important determinant of academic performance.

The purpose of this investigation, then, is to examine certain personality factors and dispositions characteristic of two types of inner-city high school students--those whose school experiences are characterized by learning and success and those whose experiences are characterized by minimal learning and failure--and to determine the relationship between these factors and achievement in school. It is hypothesized that what a student makes of his school experiences is related to whether his personal orientation toward school allows, or precludes, conformity to school-determined norms for success. If a student perceives that his own values and life style are more or less congruent with the school's expectations of students, he is able to function

with little conflict and can meet simultaneously his own and the school's requirements. On the other hand, if a student perceives that nearly every facet of his schooling fails to resonate with his own needs and expectations, he is apt to reciprocate with apathy, resistance to learning, and hostile acting out in order to thwart the educational missior of the school

The Study

The Setting and Its Ethos

This study was conducted at an all-black high school* where the investigator taught English for eight years. Urban High, a dreary, monolithic building with numerous boarded up windows and battered doors, is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side. The area reveals, with brutal clarity, the discrimination, crime, and poverty which work with untold force against education. Most of the school's 2,500 students come from nearby housing projects which overshadow the school both physically and spiritually. In many buildings of the housing projects, children outnumber adults three to one. Gang violence is a way of life, and even policemen and firmen are afraid to enter certain buildings.

Absenteesim and class cutting are very high; recent data indicates that class attendance is about 67 percent. Most students who come to class are late, and some may be so apathetic or under the influence of marijuana or alcohol that they sleep or respond in a very listless, often foolish manner. A walk down the hall will often reveal several classrooms with fewer than

*To insure anonymity, this school will henceforth be referred to as Urban High School.

ten students, and some of these students asleep or otherwise inattentive. Fluctuating attendance from day to day makes it difficult for teachers to establish course continuity--each class must be treated as though self-contained; today's students cannot be counted on to attend tomorrow.

The Subjects

The subjects of this investigation were eight students* selected from among 24 students enrolled in a junior English class the investigator had previously taught. As indicated by their ninth grade test scores (see Table 1), all eight students entered Urban High with reading and math scores decidedly below national norms. At Urban High, these students were placed in a "remedial" academic track for students at least two years below grade level.

On the basis of these test scores, one would predict that each student would perform about equally well in high school, (a slight advantage, however, given to Alice and Jane); and none would be expected to achieve above average grades. However, as Table 2 indicates, three of these students went on to achieve above average grades during their first two years of high school. In addition, the investigator gave them the vocabulary section of the California Reading Test, Level 5, Form A, 1970 edition, and found the same three students, Mary, Alice, and Jane (henceforth called the Achievers), to have vocabularies which, while still below grade level, were clearly superior to those of the other five.

The striking differences in achievement here and the relative "stability" of the students' rank ordering for success/failure both before and after two

*The names of these students have been changed to insure anonymity.

TABLE 1

Ninth Grade Reading and Math Scores

	9th Grade Reading		9th Grade Math	
	Percentile	Stanine	Percentile	Stanine
1. David*	2%	1	5%	2
2. Ann	18%	3	17%	3
3. Bob	24%	4	2%	1
4. Sue	15%	3	13%	3
5. Don*	5%	2	10%	2
6. Mary	29%	4	6%	2
7. Alice**	36%	4	10%	2
8 Jane	18%	3	34%	4

Unless indicated, scores are for the 9th grade Test of Academic Progress.

*9th grade Differential Aptitude Test.
**8th grade Metropolitan Achievement Test.

TABLE 2

Students' Two-Year G.P.A. and 11th Grade Vocabulary

	G.P.A. (A=5.0)	Percentage of "F" Grades	Vocabulary G.E. for 11th Grade
1. David	1.35	65%	5.0
2. Ann	1.70	45%	5.8
3. Bob	2.10	24%	3.3
4. Sue	1.50	67%	5.4
5. Don	1.44	65%	6.8
6. Mary	3.25	0%	9.1
7. Alice	3.40	5%	9.1
8. Jane	4.35	0%	8.3

G.P.A. computed from a minimum of 20 quarter-unit grades in major academic subjects only.

years of instruction at Urban High cannot be attributed alone to the competencies, or deficiencies, of these students' teachers. Instead, as Christopher Jencks (1972, p. 256) contends, we must look to the students themselves for an explanation: "...the character of a school's output depends largely on a single input, namely the characteristics of the entering children. Everything else--the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers--is either secondary or completely irrelevant." The achievements of one student and the failure of another, then, are to be explained through the complex reciprocal interaction of school, community, and family as they are interpreted by the psychology of the individual student.

The Procedures

To assess their values, needs, and dispositions, the investigator interviewed each student for one hour, asking him about his perceptions of Urban High, its students and teachers; his plans for the future; and his values in life. The eight students were no longer in the investigator's class and appeared to have no anxiety about being interviewed--all seemed to respond to the interview questions openly, spontaneously, and, usually, at length.

The open-ended interview technique was chosen because it promised richer, "deeper" insights into students' motivations than might have emerged through the use of traditional pencil-and-paper assessment instruments. What the method lacked in emperical certitude, it was found, was more than compensated for by the flexibility it afforded the investigator as he sought to "get at" students' true dispositions toward their educational experiences. The taped interviews were then content analyzed for self-expressed values and attitudes which might bear some relationship to school performance.

The Results: Measures of Attitude

In his summary of D.E. Lavin's research on the prediction of academic performance, Jacob W. Getzels (1969, p. 517) states that

> Higher levels of performance tend to be associated with (1) social maturity in the school role, as reflected in better study habits and positive attitudes toward academic performance; (2) emotional stability; (3) cognitive styles involving greater flexibility in problem solving; (4) achievement via conformity; (5) achievement via independence, including more autonomy, more introversion, and less impulsivity.

While the interviews revealed that the Achievers' above average achievement was linked to the personal characteristics described by Getzels, the investigator chose to analyze the interviews in terms of a series of dichotomies which stand out clearly in the behavior of inner-city students. These dichotomies were formulated in light of the investigator's internalized, intuitive understanding of Urban High student culture as he had experienced it over an eight year period:

1. impulsivity and affective action vs. thoughtful reflection.
2. "presentness" vs. realistic future orientation.
3. peer group conformity vs. independence.
4. nonconforming vs. conforming response to school demands.
5. negative vs. positive perceptions of authority.
6. self-contradiction and ambivalence vs. self-confidence and autonomy.

Impulsivity and Affective Action vs. Thoughtful Reflection

Within this dimension, the Underachievers, David, Ann, Bob, Sue, and Don, seem to be influenced greatly by their moment-to-moment feelings. For many Underachievers, the classroom tends to be a bland, emotionless place whose necessary cognitive orientation fails to stimulate. The Underachiever is apt to feel bored, apathetic, and sleepy in class, in need of a high level of affective arousal to "feel alive." And when aroused, the Underachiever is apt to engage in, much to the frustration of his teachers, competitive interpersonal challenging with his classmates. In his study of high school students' atti-

tudes, Herbert Thelen (1972, p. 123) describes quite well the Underachiever's orientation toward the classroom:

> The fourth factor, accounting for about 4.3 percent of the data, appears to be a combination of rational consistency with needs to exploit one's peers. There is great preference for "telling" and rejection of "listening"; moreover, what one tells about is himself, his feelings, his opinions. Working together for a common goal is rejected, as is acceptance of responsibility for one's own progress. There is preference for activities involving the class as a whole (i.e., in which one is anonymous, can't be checked up on easily, and can avoid responsibility). The most attractive value is sensual enjoyment. This factor is negatively related to IQ, and tends to be found with lower-class boys.

The Achiever, on the other hand, tends to eschew the emotionality of his fellow students and instead holds himself personally accountable for meeting school-imposed requirements. The Achiever is also apt to have more insight into his own motives and greater ability to live up to his stated values.

"Presentness" vs. Realistic Future Orientation

The Underachiever tends to be rooted in the immediate moment and to "take things as they come." When asked about his plans for the future, the Underachiever is apt to speak vaguely of a number of possibilities, often responding with stock, middle-class answers; or he might entertain grandiose expectations, possibly to conceal his own insecurity about the future.

For the Achiever, the future seems to be thought of more precisely and in terms that bear some similarity to his present situation. The Achiever also sees education as preparing him not only to get a "good" job but to live life more fully.

Peer Group Conformity vs. Independence

The Underachiever, particularly those who are male, are often

held in the strong grip of friendship groups. Though the Underachiever says he comes to school to "learn," he is very likely unable to resist the temptations offered by his crowd of friends or his "partners." In his study of the educational ethos of several high schools of which Urban High was one, Thelen (1974, p. 146) similarly found that "...in the inner-city general school (Urban High), there is considerable conflict between interpersonal relations and work as the means to survival...the teachers see the class as a place in which learning activities are carried out whereas the students perceive it more as a milieu for interpersonal relationships." By concentrating on social interaction in this way, the Underachiever, one has the impression, is able to sidestep much of the anxiety that must accrue with continued below average achievement.

School, for the Achiever, is definitely a place where one can learn--if he wants to. The Achiever tends to be critical of his less academic, more impulsive fellow students. For the Achiever, his major conflict seems directed not at the school per se but at his classmates who, he feels, hinder his learning.

Nonconforming vs. Conforming Response to School Demands

The Underachieving student tends not to conform to the expectations the school has of students. While teachers require students to attend classes, to be on time, to come prepared to work, to pay attention, and to be at least partially motivated to learn, the Underachiever resists complying with these requirements and views them instead as illegitimate incursions on his freedom.

In contrast to the Underachiever, the Achiever maintains positive, conscientious attitudes toward the school's role expectations for students. The teacher, so reasons the Achiever, may legitimately expect a certain amount of effort on the part of the learner. This difference in attitude is seen most clearly in the attendance rate of these eight students while enrolled in the investigator's class (see Table 3). Mary had frequent illnesses which caused her attendance to fit the pattern for Underachievers.

Negative vs. Positive Perceptions of Authority

The Underachiever is apt to view teachers with a certain degree of hostility and to feel that many teachers are not there to help him learn. In this regard, it seems as though the Underachiever is unaware of the role his behavior plays in provoking negative responses from his teachers.

While the Underachiever is often in open conflict with authority, the Achiever views teachers positively and feels they are doing the best they can, given the kind of students they are to instruct.

Self-Contradiction and Ambivalence vs. Self-Confidence and Autonomy

The statements of many Underachievers seem to reveal the inclination toward self-contradiction and ambivalence, a kind of internal disorganization or confusion about themselves. One has the impression, too, that some Underachievers hold erroneous notions about themselves in relation to the rest of the world or at least are unaware of how their actions might appear to others. Such confusion is most likely a reflection of the instability many of them experience in their daily lives.

TABLE 3

Student Absences During a Year-Long Junior English Class

	Absences (Total Days=180)
1. David	50
2. Ann	42
3. Bob	18
4. Sue	57
5. Don	32
6. Mary	32
7. Alice	6
8. Jane	3

An analysis of the Achievers' interviews reveals greater self-confidence and less ambivalence and indecisiveness about the most appropriate course for their actions. The Achiever seems to have greater emotional maturity and to have achieved more complete integration of the disparate elements of his personality.

The "Data": The Students Speak for Themselves

The Underachievers

David

Seventeen-year-old David lives in the housing projects with his mother, three brothers, and three sisters. His father has not lived with the family for three years, but, says David, "He still kick us down or whatever."

Of the future, David says:

> Well, I plan on being a big-time business man, and, ah... going to school for a while, you know. Whenever I can get out of here. Yeah...a big-time business man. Insurance policy or something like that, or president, you know. See, I got to be president...of the office. I'm thinking about going to Kennedy-King (a Chicago public junior college) in August ... ah...it should be very interesting.

A moment later, however, David modifies, and reduces, his expectations for the future:

> If I could find a nice little--right at the moment, at the age I am now--if I could find a nice little trade to get into, you know, I go on and check it out. Electronics, you know. I'm kinda interested in engineering too.

David's perceptions of Urban High are not entirely oriented toward education and learning:

> (Urban High)? Well, I think it's just ah...just a trip, really, in itself. Cause everybody just...some of the people just wild. And the teachers, half of em's all right, then again half of em not. I know from my four year's experience at (Urban), it's really been wild and exciting. For instance the lunchrooms, you know, like they have riots and stuff. Half the people not going, you know, not comin to classes,

> gettin F's and all that. But me, myself, I'm not really interested in them. I'm interested in me first, then I'll probably look out for the students.

The excitement or "wildness" which David feels he should condemn has, nevertheless, been appealing:

> Yeah, it's very exciting. It's all right, yeah. My four years going here, you know, it's kinda hard for me to keep away from it (the wildness). Well, it just came naturally, you know. I was just growin up, you know, and just being with the crowd. We messed around the school. We play running around the school, you know, running around in the school, around the school...just being part of the crowd with some kinda excitement.

And in the projects where David has lived for seven years, the excitement is still valued: "It's just exciting. Just wild, or whatever you want to call it. I...I kinda like it, though. I done really got used to it."

Whether or not David attends his classes is based on concerns of the moment rather than on long-term considerations:

> It depends on, you know, how the day going for me or something. I wake up in the morning...find out what's happening. Then...just can't seem to make it (to class). But that's not regular. It wasn't ever regular.

Similarly, David's general orientation toward life seems to be one of impulsive pleasure-seeking and affective gratification:

> Partying, messing around. Doing whatever's fair. Just being with the crowd. Whatever the crowd getting into. If you dig new peoples or whatever. Get in whatever they're getting ready to get into. Partying, you know, activity. That's having a nice time. But the main thing is... is the money. That's what makes the world go round. You gotta have that. I work and, ah...coupla womens come through for me every now and then, you know, but it's nothin to brag on. It ain't what anybody else'd call it. It's just a nice relationship. I get high every now and then, too, you know. I don't make it no habit...reefer and a little beer.

While David does feel conflict between his life style and what is necessary for survival in a competitive world, he is rather vague about his need for self-discipline:

> I feel that...that you're only up here (in school) for one reason. That's to try to get education. But if you think otherwise, the choice is you. You have to make your own decision or what you want to do. And the school itself, you know, the teachers they have a lot of things to

do with it. But you know what's happening with you, so you gotta deal with it that way.

Ann

Ann, who has seven brothers and one sister, lives in an apartment with her mother. The fatherless family is supported by the mother's part-time salary and public aid.

While sixteen-year-old Ann plans to further her education, she doesn't know where she'd like to go to school where she plans to major in "everything": "Well, I want to go to a junior college. And then...just...be a housewife. Just study and go to school." When asked what she likes about school, Ann says, "Nothing. It's all right to come, but sometimes I get tired. It's too hot to be sittin in school. You're supposed to have a summer vacation, not go to school all year round," (Urban High, at the time, was on a 45-15 year-round schedule).

Of her classes, Ann makes the following observations:

> Some classes are boring. You just sit in there and listen to the teacher. You go into class, and the teacher, she'll be...first it'll be all quiet. She'll be busy. Everybody'll be sittin down lookin at each other. The teacher'll get up and say something. They'll start (she sighs loudly) going on like that. They'll start sighing and stuff. That makes it boring. Sometimes it be boring because it be hot outside, and it be hot in here. You know, like you pick a subject. That subject's going to be boring. Everybody just be looking at each other and drifting around. Sliding down in the chair and stuff like that. You can expect it every year while you're in high school. Sometimes I just feel like getting up and leaving. And I do, sometimes.

To feel activated, Ann apparently needs a level of arousal that the typical classroom can't deliver: "I just like to see a lot of excitement, you know. I can't explain it."

Ann's attitude toward her teachers is neither positive nor facilitative of her own learning:

> They (teachers) are all right, some of em. You know, they have their attitudes, something like that. Some of em snap at you when you say something. But those're the main classes I don't go to. If I go, I don't say anything.

While Ann wants an education, she evidently goes to school more out of adherence to external social cliches about education than out of internal conviction:

> I need an education. Everybody need an education. I don't know why, but I need one. You just need to learn. Learn about things that...like places you never been. You might decide to go someday, so it's best to go to school and know about it before you get there. It wouldn't be right without it.

Bob

Bob is eighteen and lives in the projects with his mother, father, five brothers, and two sisters. Two additional brothers are on their own. Neither Bob's father nor his mother work; the family is supported by public aid.

Bob's plans for the future, while they include some definite intentions, are rather vague and stereotypic:

> Well, I'm trying to go to college and trying to take up a business course. Course I'm gonna try to play some sports, you know. Like baseball, basketball. I really want to try to make it in the pros, really. But if I don't make it in the pros, I got something to fall back on like salesman or architect or, you know, like that.

His classes, Bob notes, have often caused him to feel bored and unmotivated:

> I felt that way a lot a times. I mostly feel bored when it get hot like now, you know. In the late spring. By winter time or by spring time, I don't hardly feel bored. I would be ready to come (to class). Prepared to work and do.... In fact, if the class was boring, I wouldn't put my head down...I just be thinking a something, just be daydreaming. That's what I be doing. You know I never.... Pretend like the class is boring.. I might be staring like this, but I be daydreaming a lot. Like...only tu I get bored is when it's hot outside. That's the only time I get bored.

Bob tries to avoid the boredom or ennui in his life through escapes other than daydreaming:

> I used to come to class high. It ain't no different cause you still go see the same teacher. I do my work whenever I'm high. Sometimes I do better, sometimes not. To me, coming to class when high ain't no better than coming like I am now. Cause if I come to school high when it's hot, I'll probably feel better. If I was to come to school sober now, I'd probably fall asleep. And if I was high, I wouldn't fall asleep because I won't be thinkin about the hot weather. You see, high sometime make you concentrate...like you gotta read a book and it's not too interesting, like that. You see, that's the way marijuana is, but people don't know too much.

Bob wants to excel in the future, but his image of success, most likely shaped by the mass media, is one that few ghetto youngsters can hope to attain:

> The most important thing in life is to be ahead. To be somebody. To be successful. Like you might see somebody you know a long time ago, and he might be real popular. He might be a recording star, an athlete, a doctor you'd hear of or read in the papers. You know, have money, car, bank account, like that.

Bob's overall attitude toward Urban High is negative and, tragically perhaps, he waits until his "time is up":

> When I get out of (Urban High), I don't want to come back. Teachers're nice, but it's the way some of the students are. Plus the way the system is. You walk down the hallways--hall guard tell you, "Go downstairs, so and so." For example, there's some of the hall guards...some of em be pushing on you and stuff, forcing you to do things you don't want to do. It's a nice school to stay here, but I wouldn't like to come back after I leave it. I'd like to just forget about it. Cause I did have some experiences I didn't like over here. But I don't mind...I'm gonna stay here till my time is up.

Sue

Eighteen-year-old Sue lives in the projects with her father, one brother, and five sisters. Sue's mother died five years ago. Her father is supervisor of their building, and Sue also works in the same building.

Sue's perceptions of Urban High are vague, and, like other Underachievers, she connects her attitude toward school with such questionably relevant matters as the weather:

> Well, I don't like the 45-15. It's all right, you know. It's just that you got to go to school in the summertime, and it be too hot up in here to do work. Before we went on 45-15, I liked it then; it was nice to me, you know. I learned a lot. But now, since it's hot, I don't like it.

Her teachers, Sue feels, are not really helpful, nor are they interested in her progress:

> Well, some of the teachers, you know, they're all right, but most of em got their little attitude when you ask em something. They try to get all seddity (act superior) and stuff. I guess they don't want to be bothered at times. It seems like mostly when you ask them for something, you know, most of em just look at you. But, it's all right....

Like most Underachievers, Sue frequently feels bored and uninvolved in class. She prefers, as do the majority of Underachievers, to spend time in class writing (little more than copying material from textbooks) rather than reading which evidently evokes considerable anxiety:

> It just seems like there don't be nothing to do. You just get sleepy and drowsy and stuff, and you be trying to find something to do, but, you know, you can't. I like a class, like when the teacher.... I like to write a lots. That's what I like to do. But, you know, when you read a lots it makes me sleepy and everything. When some peoples be readin, they be takin their time. And, you know, I believe I need glasses, because it be hurtin my eyes and I just get tired.

When asked about her future, Sue's response is vague and rather aimless before she latches on to a typical middle-class answer: "Well, I haven't thought about that (the future) yet.... Well, I want to be an airline stewardess. That's about all...." For Sue, the future seems devoid of any real possibilities; when she graduates, she says:

> First, I'd try to get me a good job to start me off right. Then, I'd save me up enough money in the bank. Then...I don't know. It's hard.

Much of Sue's aimlessness and indecisiveness about life is likely the result of her very unstable, chaotic home background. Of her life in the projects, she says:

> I don't like it. It seems like it's dangerous up in there. Everytime you look around somebody's shooting or killing somebody. Robbing or sticking up. It make you feel like you're in prison with them bars up. I don't like that.

Don

Don lives in the projects with his mother, father, four brothers, and four sisters. Don's father owns two trucks which he uses to deliver steel to factories, and his mother is a supervisor at a candy factory. The family, says Don, is "very close."

Very personable and outgoing, nineteen-year-old Don is an unusual Underachiever. What he lacks in academic ability, Don seems to make up for through his winsome personality and desire to succeed; and it may be that in the ghetto

culture one's personal elan is a more valuable asset than academic talent.

Don's plans for the future are well cemented and involve sports, his major pursuit while at Urban High:

> After I graduate August 29, I'm going to San Antonio State College, and I'm going to major in business administration. They're going to give me a baseball scholarship, and a cat told me after the season if I feel like playing a little football for him, I could do that if I wanted to. But I guess I'll deal with that when I get down there.

Don is critical of his fellow classmates who find school boring, yet one wonders if any teacher is capable of allowing Don the kind of keen self-expression he seems to feel is necessary for him to learn:

> They put their heads down on the desk. All right...if they participated in things that was happening in class, it wouldn't be boring. And if they come all the time like they supposed to, then you could make a class exciting. Cause...in some ways, like you can come to class and, you know, just psyche yourself out. Wow, this is the class! This is it! Hey, yeah, I come here every day. It ain't like no other class! That's why I can come and be me and have a good time. I want to learn something. If you can find a class like that, it'll turn out to be one of the best classes you ever had. But, you know, if you don't do that, the class, like they say, is boring. You gotta put more of yourself into it, get something out of it.

In one class Don found boring, he tells how his need for affective arousal and self-expression was satisfied:

> The classroom was boring. Cause, you know, sitting there and everything. And, all right, we ran across the book and everything. But then after we ran across the work, didn't nobody do nothing. They just sat there. Didn't nobody say nothing. I said, "Hey, what's this? We at a funeral or something? Somebody die? Hey, where the noise at? Hey, like, you know, no noise. But you go out in the hall, wow, all the noise you want! Playing the music and everything." But, you know, everybody just sat there. But then the noise...it started gradually growing and everything, you know. I was making noise, keeping things going. Then everybody just started getting involved. And they felt the same way that I did.

In his attitude toward life, Don, a former member of the student council, has strong competitive feelings:

> ...when I was there (in the gym), the coach was always askin, "Why are you always killin yourself? Take it easy like all the rest of em." I said, "Well, you know, if I take it easy, then I'll be just like the rest of em. But I feel, hey, I don't want to be like them. They just like living life as it comes. But I feel like, wow, the world's a

challenge, and I'm gonna be there to meet that challenge when it comes." Yet, moments later, Don contradicts himself; now he plans to "live life as it comes":

> To me, the most important thing in life is just being me. Don't try to be somebody else, or don't try to put myself up on another category where I have to be competing with another person. If I can just live life as it comes and to challenge it. That's just it. That's me right there.

The Achievers

Mary

Seventeen-year-old Mary, who lives in the projects with her mother, brother, and two sisters, presents one pattern of ghetto school "success." She responds to the school's demands with passive, withdrawing acquiesence. Achievers such as Mary, while always attentive to their teacher's words and willing to do their work, are so retiring and withdrawn that it is difficult for their teachers to define them as real flesh-and-blood students. Consequently, during her interview, Mary offered only the barest indication of her orientation toward school.

Of the future, Mary is hesitant to plan much: "I was thinking about going to college. But then I just think I'll go to a secretarial school to be a secretary. I don't think I could make it through college."

Mary does not wish to reveal to me her feelings about Urban High; she says only: "It's O.K. to me." Similarly, she responds to my questioning about teachers: "They're O.K. I don't hate any of them." And, the students are "O.K. I have some friends here."

Mary, whose only comment about her feelings when in class is that she feels "like a student," says the student's job is to "listen to the teacher and learn what they can, because they might need it further in the future."

In addition to enabling her to get a "good job," an education is important

to Mary because it will allow her to "...better my life in the future, and do what I want, and be what I want."

Alice

Alice's family came to the United States from British Honduras about ten years ago. Alice now lives in an apartment with her mother, stepfather, one sister, and two brothers. Her father is a carpenter and maintenance man for a Chicago hospital, and her mother monograms clothing at home.

The oldest of the children at seventeen, Alice is well poised and pretty. She speaks confidently of her future: "Right now, I'm going to modeling school, and I plan on being a model and a secretary." Later, she adds that she would like to "move up in business."

Alice's impressions of Urban High, though initially negative, are now favorable:

> Well, the first time I was supposed to come up here, I didn't want to. The way people talk about it, you have a bad impression about it. But when you come over here and see what they try to do for you, and the way people are, you do get to like it. Right now I like it. I like the system that they have, and the teachers. I think the teachers are doing a pretty good job.

Alice is aware that most Urban High students differ from her in their dispositions toward school, and she doesn't hesitate to be critical:

> Well, some of them (the students) are all right, and some of them try to take advantage of the nice teachers. They want their freedom to do whatever they want to in the classroom. And I think that's wrong. If you come to learn you should be able to listen to the teacher and do what he or she tells you to do. It's boring to them because they're not participating in the work. They just come in and lay down, and they can do that at home. So I guess it's boring at home too. They just go home and sleep and not do anything.

At times, Alice's motivation to achieve comes into direct conflict with her fellow students' attitudes:

> Today, one of the students said I was frantic, you know, cause I got through with all my work. I felt funny about it, cause here I am trying to do all my work, to try and get an A because we're supposed to finish eleven units for this marking period. I'm really trying and they're putting

me down because I'm ahead. They're not really trying, and they don't like to see people get ahead of them. I will go ahead, though. I'm going to be somebody to look up at. And if you just listen to somebody say "Oh, she's this and she's that," you shouldn't listen to that. You should make up your own mind and do whatever you want to do. Don't listen to what other people say.

Alice's drive to excel seems to be a stable part of her personality, and her aspirations for herself do not seem contradicted by her actions:

I just want to be me. I just want to know a lot. People not to look down on me, but look up on me. And I want to know a lot and do a lot of things. To do that you have to come to school and really work hard. That's the way I was ever since I was little. I always want to be ahead in life.

And finally, in commenting on the importance of her own education, Alice expresses a degree of insight and maturity infrequently found in Urban High students:

It's important for you to learn whatever you want to learn. They teach you different things that you want to know, so whenever you get older you can always look back on these things to help you do whatever you want to do.

Jane

Jane, who was adopted at birth, now lives with her aunt and older sister in the City. Her mother, father, and a fourteen-year-old brother live in a country house about fifty miles from Chicago. Until recently, the family had lived together in a Chicago home; the home, unfortunately, burned down. Alice's father is a retired janitor, and her mother works part-time taking care of children.

Influenced by her mother's work with children, Jane has definite plans for the future: "I would like to go to college and major in work with younger kids, maybe the handicapped."

Like Alice, Jane's first impressions of Urban High were based on the school's bad reputation:

I had doubts about it at first. (Urban High) is bad. Those girls will get you in the bathroom and beat you up. But if you don't start off hanging with those kind of people, you won't end up like that.

Because Jane was selective in choosing her friends, she now feels positively about her school:

> I think it's a really nice place. I mean most of the people try to put down (Urban High). But I say it's not (Urban High) or anything like that. You can learn at any school. It's just the people. If they want to learn they can learn. A lot of the people say (Urban High) ain't nothing. (Urban High) ain't this. I say, "Hey, (Urban High) has got some pretty nice people." I feel that I can learn something. I have learned something. I've learned a lot from (Urban High). The teachers are pretty good here.

Jane is opposed to the Underachiever's attitudes toward school and teachers:

> Well, they don't hardly come anyway from the beginning. And then they come out of class and say that teacher didn't teach them anything. I say, "Hey, you haven't been there, and then didn't try to do anything the times that you did come. You just went to sleep." I say, "Don't try to put down the teacher. The teacher did try with you."

Furthermore, Jane is critical of girls whose life styles conflict with her own:

> They're always talking about when they beat up somebody and what they did. How they went and got high and everything. And that's not, especially for a girl to put herself in that position...talking about how she went and got high and she had a fight with somebody. That doesn't even look right.

In addition to being influenced by her mother, Jane has also found an "ego ideal" in an older woman who is studying to be a nurse:

> She says, "Yeah, Jane, you're really nice." You know people tell me, "You know, you got a nice disposition about yourself." I say, "Why, thank you." They say, "You should go on ahead and finish school and do whatever you're going to do. That would be nice for you to come out of high school and stuff. And Ma would really be proud of you."

Jane possesses an admirable degree of insight into her motivations and, perhaps more importantly, she has the willingness to behave in accord with this insight. Here, she comments on a period when she felt like slipping into some of the behavior patterns characteristic of the Underachievers:

> I could say the last half of my jnior year, no, the end of it when our house caught on fire. That's the only house I've ever known for us to live in. Like I didn't care anymore about anything. I just really wanted to give up on everything. But then I thought about it. I said no,

I shouldn't even be that way. So this year I'm really going to try harder.

Postscript

In my description of the values and aspirations of two types of inner-city students, there is one dimension of personality that I have not discussed, though I have long learned to respect it--and that is the human being's capacity for change. While I have assigned these students to categories which in many ways may be labeled "good" and "bad," I am not presumptuous enough to predict what each of these young people is capable of becoming--to do so would be miseducative in the deepest, most profound sense. I wish instead to say that I respect and, in many ways, admire all eight of these students as I have witnessed them trying to adapt to their often confusing lives.

Though I have willfully supported Jenck's assertion that "the characteristics of the entering children" determine a school's output, there is the danger that this focus may be too narrow, thus creating a stereotype for teachers to use against students. Instead, teachers must accept and value their students <u>as they are</u> and encourage a vision of what they might become through continued learning.