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ABSTRACT

A research study shows the strong positive relationship between traditional personal values and academic success of students from various disadvantaged backgrounds. Four categories of values were examined: (1) the work ethic, (2) religious commitment, (3) parental support of success in school, and (4) peer group support of success in school. A sample of 11,885 tenth grade students from families whose socioeconomic status was below the national median were selected from 30,000 sophomore students in the 1980 nation-wide study, High School and Beyond Survey. Values of students whose GPAs were in the upper 20 percent of the nation were compared with those whose GPAs ranked in the bottom 20 percent. Comparisons were made within each ethnic and racial classification. Students in the top category of academic achievement tended to express much stronger support for traditional values than did those in the bottom GPA category. Furthermore, the students in the top category were much more likely to have parents and friends who supported success in school. This finding is the same for all disadvantaged populations represented in this study, which includes four racial or ethnic groups: Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites. This study suggests that development of character and intellect are intertwined. If teachers and parents collaborate to encourage positive values of students, they are likely to enhance academic achievement and success in school. (JP)

VALUES AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AMONG DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VALUES AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AMONG DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

A number of studies have suggested that the values of Asian students and their parents are a critical element in the amazing educational success of Asian students. The results from a new study by OPBE show that the relationship observed for Asian students generalizes to black, Hispanic, and white students from families with lower socioeconomic status.

The values examined in this research include: (1) the student's belief in the work ethic and religious values, (2) their parents' general level of encouragement and concern, and (3) their peers' educational values. Grade point average (GPA) is used as the measure of student performance.

The findings show that for each group of values and for all disadvantaged populations examined, stronger traditional values are associated with greater academic success. For example, high performers are:

- o 163 percent more likely to work hard in school;
- o 44 percent more likely to think that it pays to plan ahead;
- o 78 percent more likely to participate in church activities;
- o 131 percent more likely to have a mother who thinks they should attend college; and
- o 96 percent more likely to have friends in school who think well of students with good grades.

The findings of this study are based on a sample of nearly 12,000 disadvantaged sophomore students included in the 1980 High School and Beyond Survey.

These results suggest that schools and parents need to encourage positive values in students from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. These findings reinforce your public statement that the development of character and intellect must go hand in hand.

VALUES AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS AMONG DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

There is no elixir that will magically improve the achievement of disadvantaged students--those with lower socioeconomic or minority home backgrounds. However, the amazing educational success of many recent Asian immigrants (including students from families with minimal socioeconomic resources) has led researchers to seek the reasons behind the Asians' academic success. Much of the research on these children and their families has pointed to the high value they place on education and success in school.[1]

If values constitute a critical element in the Asian success story, then we need to learn whether these attributes are the source of success for children from other minority backgrounds or from low-income families who also perform well in school. Are they and their families also characterized by an especially positive set of values that promote hard work, self-esteem, and discipline?

An increasing number of experts have begun to stress the importance of such values and personal effort for the achievement of other minorities as well as Asians. Glenn Loury, a leading black economist, argued in Public Interest that black progress is dependent on the "values, social norms, and personal attitudes" of blacks.[2] Freeman and Holzer found that inner-city black youth who attended church more frequently had significantly higher school attendance and employment than other inner-city black youth.[3] And, in a previous study, we observed that the values of both black and white students, their parents, and their peers were twice as predictive of academic achievement as was family socioeconomic background.[4]

This study provides important new evidence showing the importance of personal values for the academic success of students from a variety of disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, we find that positive values generalize to successful students from all disadvantaged backgrounds. Promoting these values becomes, then, an important element in a truly comprehensive educational strategy for the disadvantaged.

Study Approach

In this study we drew a sample from the group of nearly 30,000 sophomore students included in the 1980 High School and Beyond Survey (HSB).[5] The sample of 11,885 students who were included in the study came from families whose socioeconomic status (SES) was below the national median. To measure SES, we used an index made available in HSB which contains five components: father's occupation; father's education; mother's education; family income; and possession of a number of household items (e.g., an encyclopedia).

The group of students from families with below average SES was further subdivided into four racial or ethnic groups: Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites. Thus, students who had the double disadvantages of minority status and low SES could be compared with white students with low-SES backgrounds.

Grade point average (GPA) was used as the measure of student performance. Students who were the most academically successful (those whose GPAs ranked in the upper 20 percent of the nation) were compared with students who were the least academically successful (those whose GPA ranked in the bottom 20 percent of the nation).

Within each racial or ethnic class, the values of students in the top and bottom grade point groups were compared. If values play an important

role in achievement, those students at the top of their class should exhibit significantly higher positive values than the students at the bottom. This study encompassed a broad range of student, parent, and peer values, including: (1) the student's belief in the work ethic and religious convictions, (2) their parents' general level of encouragement and concern, and (3) their peers' educational values. In the following sections, the relationship between each of these sets of values and the grade point average of disadvantaged students is examined.

Findings

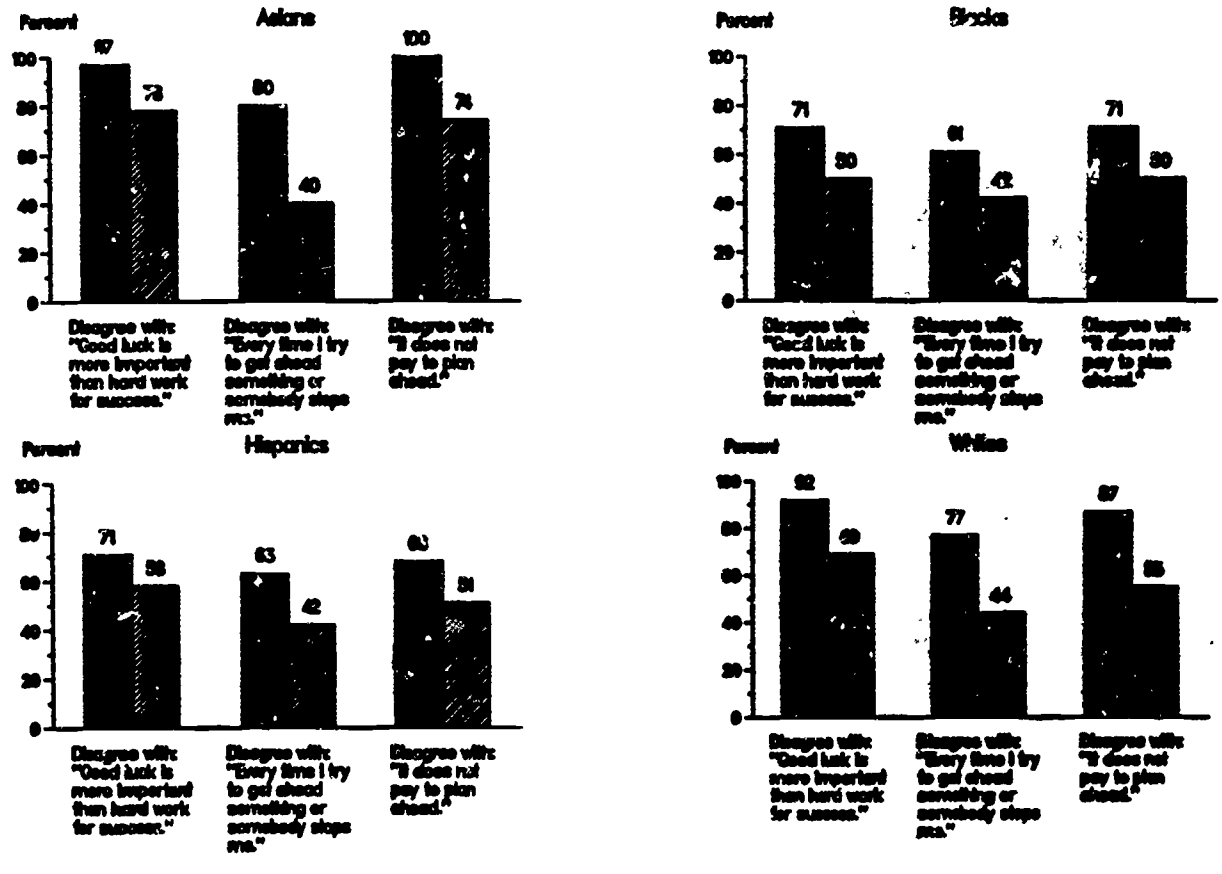
Student Values: Work Ethic. Few beliefs are more basic to the American ideal than the belief that hard work breeds success. According to this view, each person exercises primary control over his or her own destiny. But is this belief relevant to the performance of low-SES and minority populations? Have these groups become disillusioned over the American ideal? Have they come to believe that barriers to getting ahead loom so large as to negate personal effort? Although a few researchers have discovered that belief in the work ethic is associated with success in school, examination of this relationship in disadvantaged and minority populations is limited.[6]

Two aspects of the work ethic are examined in this research: the responsibility for one's success and the importance attached to work.

Three questions measure adherence to the work ethic as it pertains to responsibility for one's success; that is, whether a person's own actions and efforts, rather than fate or luck, determine his or her successes in life. Results presented in Figure 1 show that within each disadvantaged

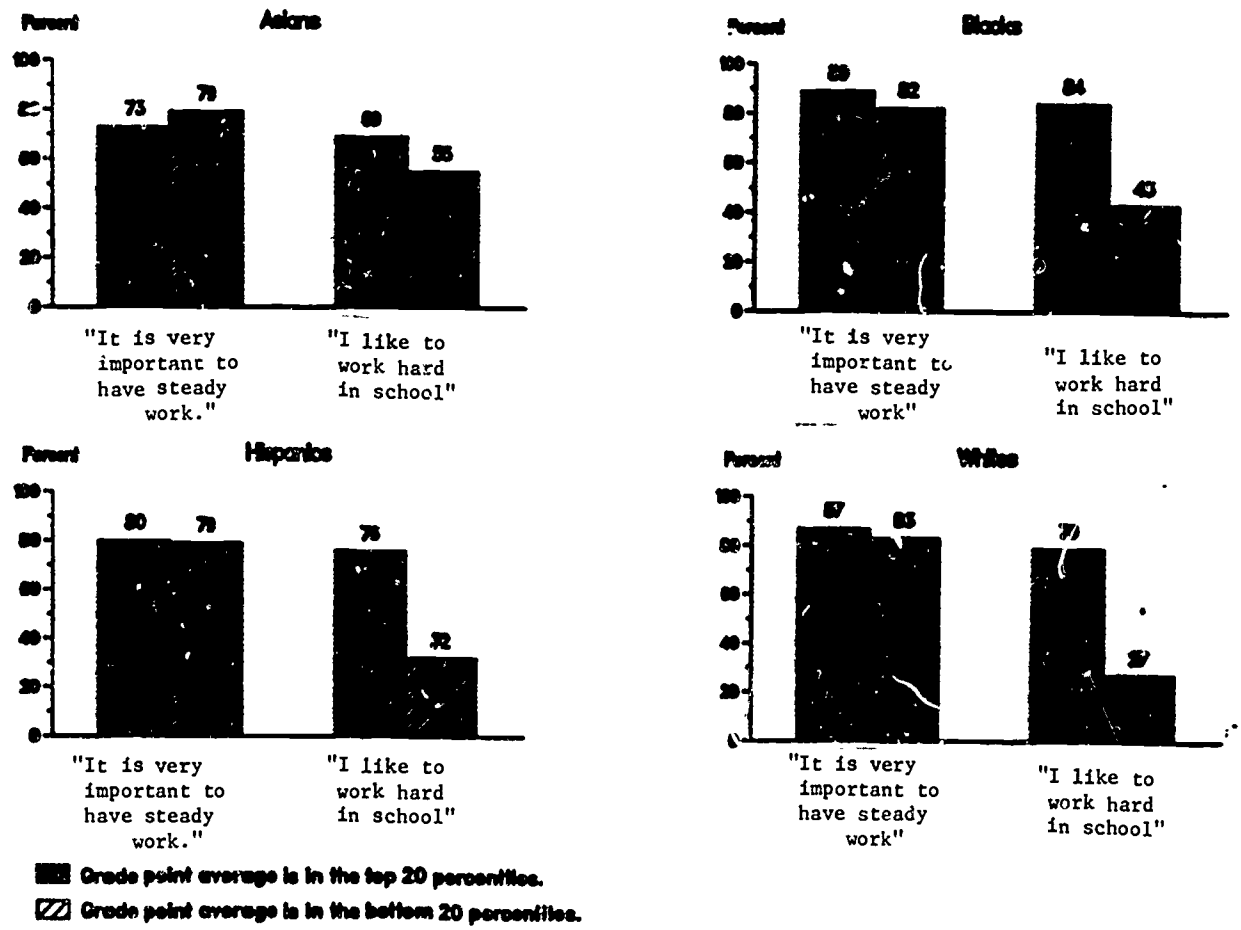
group, whether Asian, black, Hispanic, or white, high performers more frequently than low performers supported the notion that they exercise considerable control over their own fate. (The table on which this and other figures are based is included in Appendix A.)[7]

Figure 1: Differences in Work Ethic (Responsibility for One's Success) by Grade Point Average and Ethnic Group for Students from Families with Low Socioeconomic Status



A second dimension of the work ethic is the importance the student attaches to work itself [see Figure 2]. Two questions measure this dimension, and the different patterns of response are instructive. On the first question, which concerns the importance of steady work outside school, the answers of high and low performers did not differ substantially. In fact, among Asian students, low performers were actually somewhat more inclined to stress steady work than were high performers. On the second question, which emphasizes hard work in school, high-performing students of each

Figure 2: Differences in Work Ethic (Importance Attached to Work) by Grade Point Average and Ethnic Group for Students from Families with Low Socioeconomic Status



group most often agreed that they liked to work hard. For three of the groups--blacks, Hispanics, and whites--high performers were twice as likely to endorse hard work in school. These findings could suggest that any attempts to encourage work values in high school should stress working hard at in-school work rather than at out-of-school work.

Student Values: Religious Convictions. Religion is a basic dimension of life for many Americans. Many religions advocate hard work and discipline as an important part of their moral teachings; the "Protestant ethic" has even become synonymous in common parlance with the work ethic ideal.

Despite the significance of religion in American life, research relating religion to school achievement is sparse and has generated inconsistent findings.[8] Most studies are concerned with the existence of religious affiliation rather than the strength of religious beliefs, and few have focused on disadvantaged students.

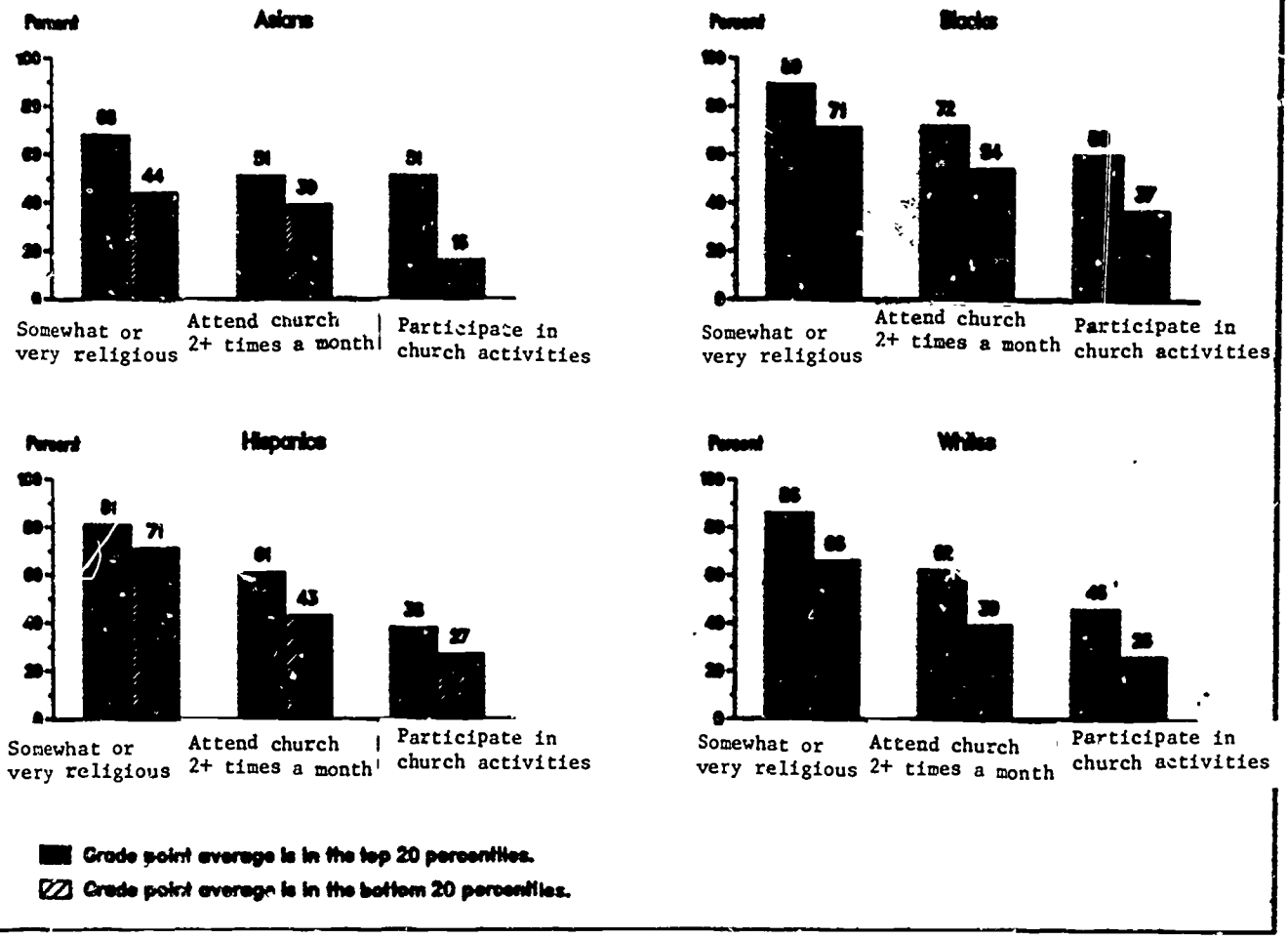
The HSB survey provides new insights into the potential influence of religion through a set of three questions on students' religious beliefs and activities. These questions concern the students' self-report of the strength of their religious belief, their attendance at religious services, and their participation in church activities other than religious services.

As the results in Figure 3 show, for each disadvantaged group, students with the highest grade point averages demonstrated more religious commitment than students with the lowest averages and this relationship held across all three measures of religious convictions. Among the three questions, participation in church activities discriminated most between high and low

performers. Presumably, students who participate in church activities beyond customary religious attendance are among the most religiously committed.

Parents' values. Education begins at home. In the words of the National Commission on Excellence, parents are their child's "first and most influential" teachers.[9] Virtually all experts agree that the attitudes and values of parents have a considerable impact on their childrens' achievement.[10]

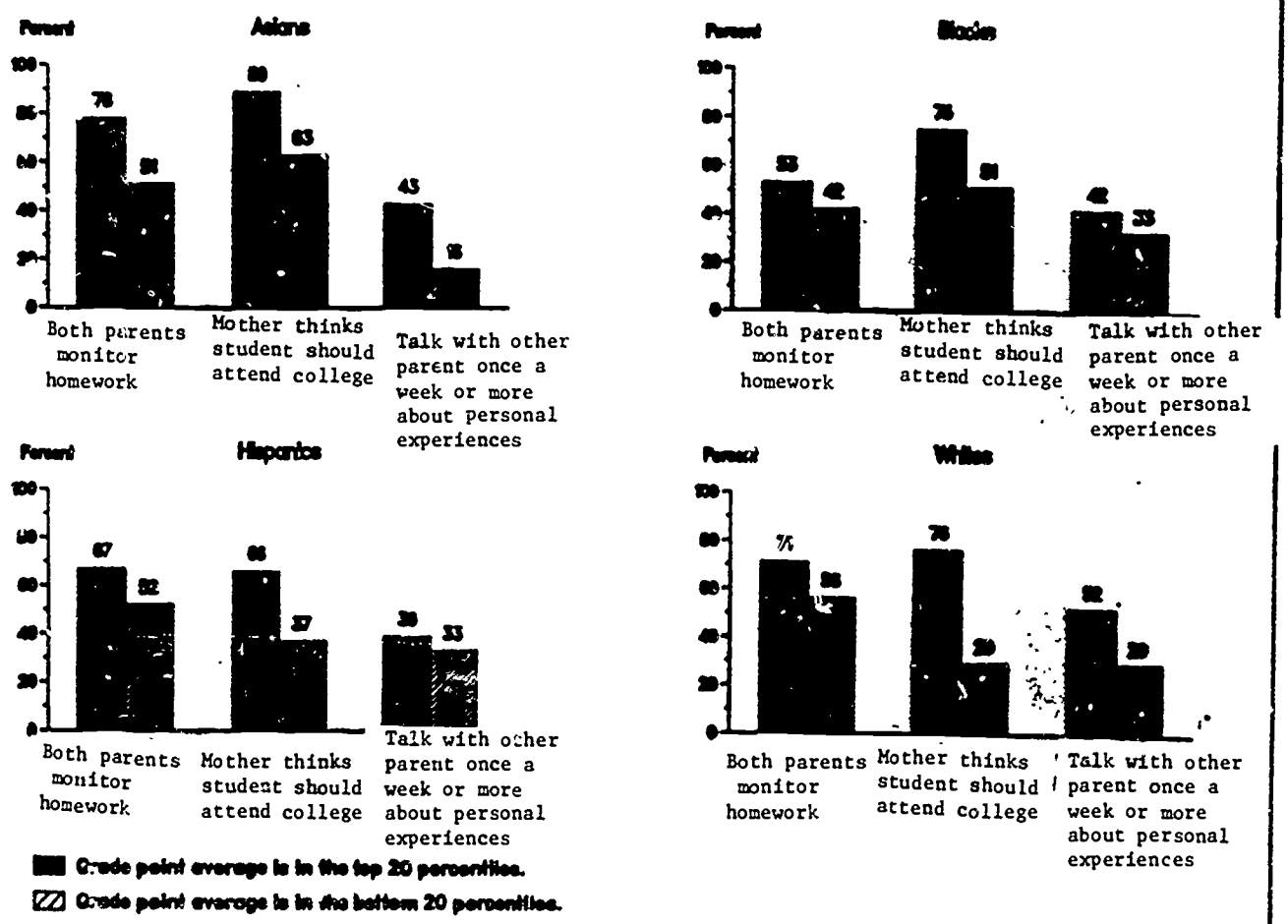
Figure 3: Differences in Religious Values by Grade Point Average and Ethnic Group for Students from Families with Low Socioeconomic Status



Yet our society seems to have sent mixed signals to parents from disadvantaged backgrounds. These parents are often type-cast as inadequate role models and as people who are unable to help their offspring get ahead. The message to minority and low-income parents is inescapable: society faults these parents for failing their children, but doubts that they could, in fact, contribute to their children's education.

In our study we examine the extent to which more successful students who came from "disadvantaged" backgrounds had parents who provided positive

Figure 4: Differences in Parents' Values by Grade Point Average and Ethnic Group for Students from Families with Low Socioeconomic Status



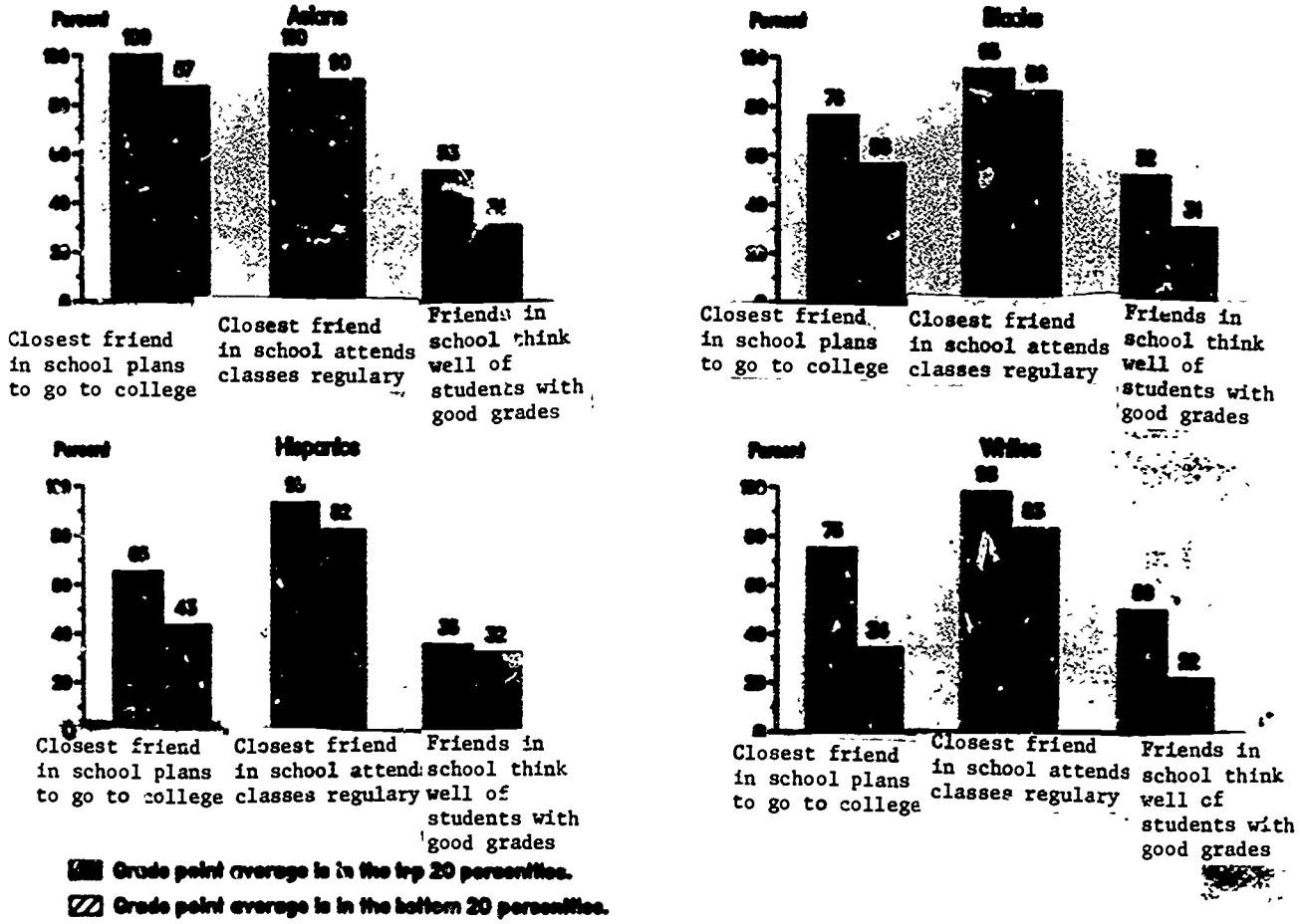
guidance and support of the kind that we have come to expect from nonminority or higher-SES parents. Three aspects of parental involvement were addressed: (1) involvement of both parents in the child's homework (this is only examined for children in two-parent families); (2) the mother's expectation that the child will go to college; and (3) parental discussion with the child about the child's experiences during each week.

The findings presented in Figure 4 provide evidence that parents in low-SES white and minority families can contribute significantly to the academic success of their children. For each disadvantaged group, parents of superior students were more likely to monitor their homework, think their children should attend college, and converse with them about the children's experiences. With this supportive home environment, it is not surprising that such students did better in school.

Friends' values. Truth adheres to the adage that you can tell a person by the friends he or she keeps. This is especially true of impressionable high school youths whose value structure is easily influenced by the priorities of their associates. Thus, youths whose friends place a high value on education are themselves more likely to achieve academic success.[11] In addition, high-achieving students are likely to associate with other high-achieving students whose behavior further reinforces their own high-achieving behavior.

Three questions from the HSB survey were used to characterize friends' views on education. One question concerns college plans, a second deals with regular class attendance, and a third, attitudes about students with good grades. Once again, a consistent pattern emerges. Within each disadvantaged group, the most academically successful students were more likely to have

Figure 5: Differences in Friends' Educational Values by Grade Point Average and Ethnic Group for Students from Families with Low Socioeconomic Status



friends who responded positively to each question. It is of some concern, however, to note that even among the best students, only half had friends who thought well of students with good grades.

Summary. Although the relationship between values and academic success has been widely observed for Asian students, we in fact found it to generalize to students from other minority backgrounds and to white students from

low-SES backgrounds. For each value and for all disadvantaged populations we examined, stronger traditional values were associated with greater academic success. For example, we found that high performing students were 163 percent more likely to like to work hard in school, 44 percent more likely to think that it pays to plan ahead, 78 percent more likely to participate in church activities, 131 percent more likely to have a mother who thinks they should attend college, and 96 percent more likely to have friends in school who think well of students with good grades.

Additional considerations. Before drawing further implications from the relationships that have been noted, it is important to mention two methodological issues: whether the findings would be different if additional controls were introduced for the relevant background factors that influence achievement, and whether the causal relationship runs from values to performance or vice versa.

Although our analyses took into account two critical background factors, socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, we did not control for other critical variables in the study reported on here. In a separate study that did not focus primarily on the low-SES population, however, we employed a multivariate structural equation model to investigate the relationship between a number of values-related variables and school outcomes. In addition to SES and race (the study was limited to black and white students), this analysis controlled for home background variables such as single-parent status and number of siblings, as well as for a number of out-of-school behaviors such as time spent watching television and doing homework. The

total effects of value variables were found to be about twice as important in predicting student performance as were variables representing family background. Thus, the multivariate findings corroborate findings from the study reported on here in which we focused on the academic success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As for the causal relationship between values and student performance, in a separate study, using longitudinal data from the 1982 HSB follow-up survey, we were able to test for the time ordering of the values and school outcome variables. Controlling for initial student performance, the analysis showed that initial values significantly affect later student performance, supporting the causal ordering assumed in this study.

Implications

Secretary of Education William Bennett has stated that the development of character and intellect must go hand in hand. Our results support this premise for disadvantaged students, who are often considered to operate under a values orientation different from that of students with more advantages.

The findings from this study have direct implications for school, home, and community. Schools need to reconsider the appropriateness of using a deficit model as the basis from which to design instructional strategies for disadvantaged students. This is not to say that children from impoverished or minority homes do not require special attention and more resources; many do. Our findings show, however, that encouragement of positive values is essential for higher achievement. Remediation alone does not foster high aspirations to achieve educational excellence. If

disadvantaged students are to believe that they can succeed outside school, they must also be challenged to achieve success in school.

In addition, educators must realize that low-income and minority parents can help develop their children's educational potential. Unfortunately, schools and parents have become increasingly remote from one another. Family mobility, the changing nature of the American family, and school arrangements that make parental involvement difficult have all worked to diminish a sense of cooperation and involvement. Often, schools do not view parents, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as an essential resource. Simultaneously, too many parents have turned over responsibility for the education of their youngsters to the schools.

Research shows that if schools try, they can successfully promote parental involvement with their children. As Joyce Epstein, an educational researcher who has carefully studied the issue, has testified: "If teachers had to choose only one policy to stress, these results suggest that the most payoff for the most parents and students will come from teachers involving parents in helping their children on learning activities at home."[12] Educators representing both minority and majority interests have recently emphasized recommendations for home-school-community partnerships for education.[13] Given the findings of this study, these recommendations represent an important step in the right direction.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nathan Caplan, John Whitmore, Quang Bai, and Marcella Trautmann, "Scholastic Achievement Among the Children of Southeast Asian Refugees," June 1985 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Institute for Social Research of the University of Michigan); Nobuo K. Shimahara, "Japanese Education and Its Implications for U.S. Education," Phi Delta Kappan, February 1985, pp. 418-421.

2. Glenn C. Loury, "The Moral Quandry of the Black Community," Public Interest, 1985, pp. 9-22.

3. Richard B. Freeman and Harry J. Holzer, "Young Blacks and Jobs--What We Now Know". The Public Interest, 1985, pp. 18-31.

4. Sandra L. Hanson and Alan L. Ginsburg, "Gaining Ground: Values and High School Success" (forthcoming).

5. National Center for Education Statistics, High School and Beyond 1980 Sophomore Cohort First Follow-Up (1982), contractor report. Data File User's Manual, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

6. See N. J. Entwistle and T. Brennan, "The Academic Performance of Students," British Journal of Educational Psychology, 41: 268-276; and J. Coleman, E. Q. Campbell, C. J. Hobson, J. McPartland, A.M. Mood, F.D. Weinfeld. and R. L. York, Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966).

7. In Appendix A the low-SES group is created using the median as the cut-off point. We avoided using a cut-off point which was lower than the median in creating our low-SES group since this reduces the sample size for Asians considerably. However, we do present findings based on a sample of students from families whose socioeconomic status was in the bottom quartile in Appendix B. Findings for students with families in the bottom quartile on socioeconomic status are very similar to those for students from families whose socioeconomic status is below the median.

8. See N. J. Entwistle and T. Brennan, "The Academic Performance of Students," British Journal of Educational Psychology, 41 (1971): 268-276; and S. Dessent-Geller, "Personality Characteristics: Levels of Cognitive and Academic Achievement of Junior College Students" (National Institute of Education, Educational Resources Information Center), 1981.

9. The National Commission on Excellence in Education. A Nation At Risk (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).

10. See W. Sewell and R. Hauser, "Causes and Consequences of Higher Education: Models of the Status Attainment Process." American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 54 (1972): 851-861; A. Walberg, "Improving the Productivity of America's Schools," Educational Leadership, May 1984, pp. 19-27; and V. Levine, Time Allocation at Home and Achievement in School, (Montreal: American Education Research Association, 1983).

11. W. Sewell and R. Hauser, "Causes and Consequences of Higher Education: Models of the Status Attainment Progress." American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 54 (1972): 851-861; and H. Walberg, "Improving the Productivity of America's Schools," Educational Leadership, May 1984, pp. 19-27.

12. J. Epstein, "Improving American Education: Role for Parents." Testimony for the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. House of Representatives, 1984).

13. See David S. Seeley, Education Through Partnership (New York: Ballinger Brothers, 1981); William Raspberry's articles in The Washington Post, e.g., "Why the Low Test Scores?," September 1985, and "Great Expectations-for Black Children," September 1985; Glen C. Loury, "The Moral Quandry of the Black Community," Public Interest, 1985, pp. 9-22; and Dorothy Rich, The Forgotten Factor in School Success: The Family (Washington, D.C.: The Home and School Institute, 1985).

APPENDIX A. VALUES CHARACTERISTICS OF ASIAN, BLACK, HISPANIC, AND WHITE HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORES FROM FAMILIES WITH LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (BELOW THE MEDIAN), BY PERCENTILES ON GRADE POINT AVERAGE

	Total		Asians		Blacks		Hispanics		Whites	
	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile
STUDENTS' VALUES										
Work Ethic (Responsibility for One's Success):										
Disagree with:										
"Good luck is more important than hard work for success"	81%	46%	97%	78%	71%	50%	71%	58%	92%	65%
"Everytime I try to get ahead, something or somebody stops me"	70	43	80	40	61	42	63	42	77	44
"It does not pay to plan ahead"	78	54	100	74	71	50	68	51	87	55
Work Ethic (Work Importance):										
Agree with:										
"It is very important to have steady work"	86	82	73	79	89	82	80	79	87	83
"I like to work hard in school"	79	30	69	55	84	43	76	32	79	27
Religiosity:										
Somewhat or Very Religious	85	67	68	44	89	71	81	71	86	66
Attend Church 2+ Times a Month	44	41	51	39	72	54	61	43	62	39
Participate in Church Activities	48	27	51	16	60	37	38	27	46	26
PARENTS' VALUES										
Both Parents Monitor Homework	65	54	77	51	53	42	67	52	71	56
Mother Thinks Should Attend College	74	32	89	63	75	51	66	37	76	29
Talk with Mother or Father Once a Week or More About Personal Experiences	46	30	43	16	42	33	39	33	52	29

Note: Numbers represent the weighted percentage of students in that achievement group who have a particular value characteristic. Achievement groups were created using the total distribution.

Appendix A (continued)

	Total		Asians		Blacks		Hispanics		Whites	
	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile
FRIENDS' VALUES										
Closest Friend in School Plans to go to College	73	38	100	87	76	56	65	43	75	34
Closest Friend in School Attends Classes Regularly	96	84	100	90	95	86	93	82	98	83
Friends in School Think Well of Students with Good Grades	47	24	53	31	52	31	35	32	50	22

APPENDIX B. VALUES CHARACTERISTICS OF ASIAN, BLACK, HISPANIC, AND WHITE HIGH SCHOOL SOPHOMORES FROM FAMILIES WITH LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (FROM BOTTOM QUARTILE), BY PERCENTILES ON GRADE POINT AVERAGE

	Total		Asians		Blacks		Hispanics		Whites	
	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile
STUDENTS' VALUES										
Work Ethic (Responsibility for One's Success):										
Disagree with:										
"Good luck is more important than hard work for success"	75%	63%	85%	50%	71%	51%	69%	56%	88%	67%
"Everytime I try to get ahead, something or somebody stops me"	66	40	54	39	60	41	65	41	75	40
"It does not pay to plan ahead"	73	52	100	74	69	51	64	47	86	52
Work Ethic (Work Importance):										
Agree with:										
"It is very important to have steady work"	84	82	54	66	87	82	77	76	88	83
"I like to work hard in school"	81	32	100	36	84	46	78	33	78	29
Religiosity:										
Somewhat or Very Religious	82	65	86	56	87	67	78	67	81	64
Attend Church 2+ Times a Month	58	39	71	38	65	57	57	42	50	35
Participate in Church Activities	46	26	69	0	58	35	37	26	40	24
PARENTS' VALUES										
Both Parents Monitor Homework	56	50	70	50	44	39	63	47	65	52
Mother Thinks Should Attend College	69	29	100	50	71	47	65	36	70	24
Talk with Mother or Father Once a Week or More About Personal Experiences	44	29	17	27	39	30	38	32	58	27

Note: Numbers represent the weighted percentage of students in that achievement group who have a particular value characteristic. Achievement groups were created using the total distribution.

Appendix B (continued)

	Total		Asians		Blacks		Hispanics		Whites	
	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile	80th Percentile or Higher	Lower than 20th Percentile
FRIENDS' VALUES										
Closest Friend in School Plans to go to College	68	36	100	94	72	59	64	43	67	29
Closest Friend in School Attends Classes Regularly	95	85	100	97	96	86	91	83	97	85
Friends in School Think Well of Students with Good Grades	47	24	86	11	5[illegible]	34	38	35	51	20