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Examining the Success Factors of High-Achieving Puerto Rican Male High-School Students

Tomás Garrett, René Antrop-González, and William Vélez

This article works to dispel the myth that Latino urban high-school students are not capable of performing at high academic levels. Whereas much educational research emphasizes the academic underachievement of urban Latino students, this article counteracts this research by describing the four success factors that three working-class Puerto Rican male high-school students attribute to their high academic achievement. These success factors are: (a) the acquisition of social capital through religiosity and participation in school and community-based extracurricular activities, (b) having a strong Puerto Rican identity, (c) the influence of these students’ mothers/sisters on their academic achievement, and (d) the potential for caring and sincere teachers and other school staff to influence high academic achievement. These findings have implications for Latina/o education and recommendations are provided.

Keywords: caring, extracurricular activities, high academic achievement, Latino education, mothers, parental involvement, Puerto Rican students, Puerto Rican males, religiosity, urban education, urban teachers

The Latina/o population continues to be the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. Census Bureau figures show that Latinas/os have surpassed African Americans as the nation’s largest minority group (Kane, 2003; Kent, Pollard, Haaga, & Mather, 2001). However, they have consistently lagged behind all other groups in terms of educational attainment. Latinas/os have higher high-school dropout rates and lower high-school completion rates than White and Black students combined. As the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) reported, “In 2005, the status dropout rate for Hispanics was 23%, higher than the 7% rate for Whites and the 11% rate for Blacks.” These significant numbers of students who fall through the cracks of our educational system each year are far more likely to be unemployed and earn less than those who complete high school. It is clear that if nothing is done to address this negative phenomenon, the life chances of students from this ethnic group will continue to be diminished. Unfortunately, most of the research conducted with Puerto Rican urban students has documented the causes of these students’ academic underachievements. Though this research is important, we wanted to document the stories of Puerto Rican students who do well in school. Taking these disturbing statistics and prior research into consideration, the purpose of this article is to describe the four success factors that three male Puerto Rican working-class urban high-school students attribute to their high academic achievement.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

High-achieving Puerto Rican students are largely missing not only from urban public high schools but also from the educational research. Over the last three decades, numerous scholars have written about the connection between the academic underachievement of Puerto Rican colonial subjects educated in the United States and socioeconomic/academic barriers, such as internal and direct colonialism, single-parent households, poverty, culturally irrelevant curricula, and the
nonacademic tracking these students face within traditional public urban schools on a continual basis (Nieto, 1998, 2000; Pérez, 1973; Spring, 1994). Although this scholarship is important, it places undue emphasis on the relationship between schooling practices and the academic underachievement of these students.

As a response to this overemphasis on underachieving Latino/Puerto Rican students within traditional urban school settings, several scholars have recently produced research that serves to deconstruct, reconstruct, and transcend the aforementioned scholarship by looking at factors that could foment the high academic achievement of Latino/Puerto Rican students. These factors include the importance of these students’ families, especially the role of the mother or grandmother, as support systems (Hidalgo, 2000; Hine, 1991; Rolón, 2000); these students’ acquisition of social capital and their participation in social networks, including churches and extracurricular activities with institutional agents (Ceballo, 2004; Flores-González, 2002; Gándara, 1995; Hine; Reis & Díaz, 1999; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001); and the importance of caring teachers and culturally relevant curricula within schools (Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

Researchers have also pointed to the importance of families, especially mothers, and their impact on the high academic achievement of Puerto Rican students (Hebert, 1996; Hidalgo, 2000; Rolón, 2000). Hebert, in his study of three gifted Latino males, described how extramural sources of support from adult role models and mentors related to the church and other sources played an important role in their resiliency. Hine (1991) interviewed 10 gifted Puerto Rican high-school students and their families to understand the factors that contributed to their high achievement. The students and their families revealed the importance of mothers and the support they offered their children. This support included monitoring their child’s success in school by checking their schoolwork, offering help with their child’s homework or finding someone who could help if they were not able to, and showing interest in the topics being studied in school. Other factors that were reported as having contributed to the high academic achievement of students included families who strongly encouraged their children to develop their linguistic skills in both Spanish and English, held their children to high academic expectations, and encouraged their children to use negative cultural stereotypes and low teacher expectations as a motivating tool; in other words, they encouraged their children to prove to others that Puerto Ricans can achieve academic success. Lastly, these families strongly encouraged their children to participate in extracurricular activities and socially bond with their classmates.

Recent research has also described the positive influence of mothers and/or grandmothers on the high academic achievement of Puerto Rican elementary school-aged children and female urban high-school students (Hidalgo, 2000; Rolón, 2000). Hidalgo interviewed four working-class Puerto Rican mothers of kindergarten students in Boston who were perceived as being high-achieving students by their teachers. These mothers revealed the strategies they used to start their children on the path to academic success. These strategies included monitoring strategies, communication strategies, motivational strategies, and protective strategies. The monitoring strategies these mothers used included checking their children’s schoolwork on a daily basis, checking their book bags daily, doing homework with them, and attending open house meetings at school. The communication strategies consisted of maintaining family bonds that nurtured the maintenance of Puerto Rican values, such as the use of Spanish at home, and encouraging a strong sense of Puerto Rican ethnicity. This communication and transmission of cultural values between mother and child also included the establishment of behavioral parameters, such as counseling against drug use and other negative peer influences like gang membership. The motivational strategies these mothers provided for their children consisted of positive messages like trying their best, working hard, and to keep trying even if their child received low grades.

Rolón (2000) interviewed 10 high-achieving Puerto Rican girls who attended an urban high school. These students revealed three key elements that contributed to their school success. First, they all perceived their mothers to be their driving forces for their academic achievement because they strongly encouraged them to succeed so they could better themselves economically. Second, they saw their school as being a second home because they had female teachers who embraced their ethnic and linguistic realities. In fact, these students referred to these teachers as “second mothers.” Third, they all aspired to earn a college education so they could obtain a middle-class lifestyle and become role models for their families and community. Scholars have also described the connections between these students’ high academic achievement and school-related factors like participation in scholastic clubs and extracurricular activities (Flores-González, 2002).

Flores-González (2002) used the concept of role identity theory to explain the multiple ways in which urban high schools structure inequitable opportunities for Puerto Rican students by influencing whether they adopt either a “school kid” or “street kid” identity. The high-achieving Puerto Rican students who she interviewed and classified as having a school kid identity were more likely to be sheltered in safe social niches with other school kids and encouraged by school staff to actively participate in extracurricular activities like athletic teams, church-related activities, and academic-based school clubs. These extracurricular activities also enabled these students to set themselves apart from the street kids. Moreover, these school kids were more likely to view postsecondary education as a way through which they
could become a member of the middle class. On the contrary, the low-achieving Puerto Rican students who adopted a street kid identity found it difficult to situate themselves within school-oriented peer social networks and the school staff did not encourage nor facilitate these students’ participation in school-related activities. Hence, the self-concept that children and young adults develop reflects their images of their future and what they hope to become and thus guides their actions in schools and other social institutions. Additionally, unlike the schooling experiences of high-achieving African American students in previous studies (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), the high-achieving Puerto Rican students who Flores-González interviewed voiced a strong Puerto Rican ethnic identity and thus revealed that they neither perceived themselves nor were perceived by other school peers as “acting White.”

Finally, explanations regarding the connection between religiosity and its impact on the high academic achievement of African American and Latina/o youth have been discussed (Jeynes, 2003; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003). Religiosity and active participation in church-related activities have been found to be an important source of social capital on two levels. First, church membership facilitates the possibilities for mentoring relationships between adults and youth that instill positive attitudes, values, and behaviors that promote school success and serve as protective measures against oppositional youth behaviors like gang membership, drug use, and truancy. Second, participating in church activities like retreats and conventions facilitates intergenerational closure (Carbonaro, 1998; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003). Intergenerational closure is defined as relationships established and maintained between youth and their friends’ parents/caregivers. These relationships are valuable, because they help these youth gain access to important resources like advice, mentorship, and other positive help-seeking behaviors that encourage students to pursue and maintain their high academic achievement.

Although the previously mentioned scholarship is important, much work remains to be done for several reasons. First, a majority of the scholarship that has been done regarding the experiences of high-achieving Puerto Rican students has concentrated mainly on gifted elementary-school children (Hidalgo, 2000; Hine, 1991). Second, when the scholarship has addressed Puerto Rican high achievers at the high-school level, it has focused exclusively on the experiences of female students (Reis & Díaz, 1999; Rolón, 2000). Third, the limited amount of scholarship that has explored the experiences of Puerto Rican high achievers at the high-school level has been done using a single theoretical framework, namely, role identity theory (Flores-González, 2002).

**METHODS**

This study was driven by our interest to add to the limited literature that addresses the factors that Puerto Rican male, urban, high-school students attribute to their high academic achievement. Additionally, we decided to focus our study on Puerto Rican students because they comprised the majority of the Latina/o students at the school site where this study was conducted. Consequently, we decided to focus this study with the following research question in mind: What factors influence high academic achievement in Puerto Rican male high-school students enrolled in an urban high school?

**Study Site and Participant Criteria**

This study was conducted during the fall and spring semesters of the 2001–2002 academic year at Diversity High School (a pseudonym), which is a large comprehensive high school located in a large Midwestern city. This high school currently enrolls 1,500 students from Grades 9 through 12, of which 55% fall below the federal poverty line. Approximately 70% of the high school’s students are of color, with 15% of these students being Puerto Rican. This school is also regarded as one of only two of the district’s best high schools because its curriculum offers many advanced placement (AP) and honors level courses and because 70% of its graduates go on to pursue some sort of postsecondary education.

Because the purpose of this study was to make sense of the factors that Puerto Rican male high achievers attribute to their academic achievement, we wanted to purposefully select our participants. Therefore, besides being Puerto Rican and male, the students who were recruited for this study had to meet the following four criteria: First, they had had to be enrolled in Grades 11 or 12, because the majority of Puerto Rican students drop out of school by the 10th grade (Nieto, 1998). Second, the students must have had a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 or higher, because this was the required minimum GPA to be placed on the school’s honor roll. Third, our participants had to be enrolled in at least one AP or honors course. Finally, the students must never have dropped out of school because we wanted this study to focus on nondropouts.

Using these four criteria, a Puerto Rican guidance counselor at the school facilitated the recruitment and selection process of the participants, because she knew the students well. Three male students met all the criteria and they all agreed to participate in the study. (Please see Table 1 for participant profile) We then approached the students, so we could explain to them the purpose of the study. Although we were only able to interview the students over a short period of time, we nonetheless elicited rich descriptions pertaining to their high academic achievement. Each student selected a pseudonym, and the interviews were individually conducted in an empty classroom during school hours. Finally, the students’ backgrounds and previous schooling experiences varied.
Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In the philosophical tradition and method of phenomenology, in-depth interviews were the primary method of data collection used to conduct this study. Phenomenology “attempts to understand participants’ perspectives and views of social realities” (Leedy, 1997, p. 111). Because the main data collection tool of phenomenology is the in-depth interview (Tesch, 1994), we (first and second authors) structured our conversations with each student using the three interview series (Seidman, 2006). We interviewed each student three times, and each of these three semistructured interviews lasted approximately 2 hours. The interviews were spaced one week apart.

The first interview, called the focused life history interview, elicited the students’ descriptions regarding their family backgrounds and previous schooling experiences. The second interview, known as the details of experience interview, focused on each student’s current schooling experiences. Thus, they were asked questions meant to elicit descriptions of their current relationships with teachers, their peers, other school staff, and community members. Finally, the purpose of the third reflection on the meaning interview was to have each student compare and contrast their previous and current school and home experiences and discuss their future life aspirations. Our interview protocols elicited responses to questions that mainly focused on having participants describe their previous schooling experiences (see Appendix A).

The objective of the phenomenological data analysis process is to identify and examine recurring meaning units, which are the “the smallest segments of texts that are understandable by themselves” (Tesch, 1994, p. 148). Moreover, phenomenological researchers “do not establish categories, but aim at discovering the ‘themes’ in the data” (Tesch, p. 148). Thus, we used two forms of data analysis for this project, general coding and the phenomenological process. In general coding, we found eight general codes relating to educational outcomes. These were (a) academic orientation, (b) academic support, (c) peer influence, (d) teaching characteristic, (e) family involvement, (f) aspiration, (g) identity, and (h) race or gender reference. We then individually went through each transcribed article and labeled each code where appropriate. This coding procedure was used initially to sort our data into general categories so that themes could begin to emerge. We used the constant comparative method, which consists of joint coding and analysis simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND FUTURE RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

The limitations of this study are its small number of participants and the number of school sites studied. Although our study participants elicited rich responses regarding their schooling experiences in relation to their high academic achievement in the context of an urban high school, we cannot generalize these findings to all Puerto Rican male students in urban high schools in the United States. In terms of future research considerations, we recommend that researchers interview more male Puerto Rican high achievers across multiple school sites. Additionally, we encourage researchers to include Puerto Rican male students across multiple social class categories.

FINDINGS

The Influence of Religiosity and Extracurricular Activities on High Academic Achievement

Two of the three students we interviewed voiced a connection between their high academic achievement and their ties to a religious community and/or other extracurricular activities. They stated that the main benefit of participation in these activities consisted of targeted recreational activities for youth. These activities also contributed to their establishment of social capital through the community or social networks that facilitated their access to school-related resources like homework help and mentorship. Daniel commented:

Growing up my mom always took me and my sister to church and she always had us involved in youth groups as far as you know, Sunday school and we went on trips with our church groups and that always helped me keep on a straight path.
In addition to his church involvement, Daniel’s participation in sports and athletic teams also played a major role in his high-school career, because it helped him gain much access to positive help-seeking resources like information regarding college, mentorship from his coach and teammates’ parents, and access to computers at his friends’ homes. This intergenerational closure (Carbonaro, 1998), marked by social and informational networks comprised of Daniel’s friends and their parents, proved to be valuable for Daniel, because he now is very confident that he has the information that he needs to become successful in college, get a job after graduation, and obtain a middle-class lifestyle. He commented:

A lot of my friends who I play with on the teams are a lot better off than me. Like, David’s parents live out in the suburbs and both his parents are college psychology professors and make a lot of money. They both have been a great influence on me because they’ve talked to me about what I need to get into college and be successful in college. They helped me make the decision on which university to apply to. I like their advice because I see that they have become successful. I want to follow their examples and also have a big house and nice cars like them one day.

Angel also spoke about the importance of his church involvement and multicultural social networks and their influence on his academic achievement:

I go to church on Sundays … they had this program like where they took us out of town to visit colleges and stuff. We went to Chicago for like a couple of days and they had all these different schools, I met people from different countries, a lot of new people.

Strong Puerto Rican Identity

Our participants described the positive impact that their Puerto Rican identities had on their academic achievement. In fact, their ethnic identities served as tools for proving that they felt were held toward them by virtue of being Puerto Rican. As Jordán stated:

I’m proud to be Puerto Rican and bilingual. But, you know, White people stereotype Puerto Ricans and think that we’re not serious about our education. I want to prove them wrong.

Angel also commented on the negative stereotypes that people hold toward Puerto Ricans and other minorities. When asked how it has been for him being a Puerto Rican living in Brew City, he responded:

Sometimes it’s hard being puertorriqueño because people are like racist towards you know, Black and Puerto Rican and Hispanics. It’s hard to deal like with the police because they come and just harass you for no reason. Me and my friends, we’re always getting searched or they will always like check on us when we’re not doing anything but working hard in school.

Thus, these students expressed pride in their Puerto Rican ethnicity. For us, then, it was clearly evident that the students we spoke with felt marginalized at school, but these feelings of marginalization were used to prove to doubting peers and teachers that they had the potential to be good students.

The Influence of Mothers and Sisters on Students’ Academic Achievements

Although two of the three students we spoke with mentioned they came from traditional two-parent households, all of them talked about the three distinct roles their mothers and/or sisters played in their school and home lives. First, these mothers often took it upon themselves to help their sons with schoolwork. When the mother felt she could not directly help with schoolwork, she actively sought out the necessary resources that would facilitate her child’s learning process. Second, our participants felt compelled to make their mothers proud of them by getting good grades. Third, they commented that their mothers and/or sisters served as their friends or mentors in times of need or personal crisis.

Jordán expressed how his mother made sure that he stayed on track academically by monitoring his friendship circles. While he perceived his father as the dominant disciplinarian, his mother called the shots when it came to keeping him safe, even making the choice for the family moving to a neighborhood that she felt would keep him safe.

I used to always get into trouble outside of school. My mom didn’t want me with a lot of my friends. She figured they were the problem. Um … there’s too much drama out there, people, gangs and drugs and stuff. I was around a lot of that stuff. That’s probably why I moved.

Students also spoke about the power of their mother’s influence and expressed the desire to do well in school to make their mothers proud of them. Daniel commented:

My mom has been my inspiration to do well in school. I remember that I used to make bad grades in school and my mother would become sad. When I started to bring report cards home with As in them for the first time, I remember the happy look in my mother’s eyes. When I saw that look in her eyes, I just felt that it was much more rewarding to get good grades. I also remember going to family picnics and my mother would be talking about my grades. The rest of the family would then start talking about me. They were all proud of me.
Daniel was driven to do well in school to make his mother happy. It was also important for him to be the pride of his family. He also mentioned that his school did not do much in the way of helping him select a college or fill out financial aid or admissions forms. Although his mother was not a high-school graduate and, therefore, had never been to college, she took up the role of helping him acquire and fill out the necessary forms he would need to go to college.

Sisters were also recognized as purveyors of advice and support when it came to the academic achievement of these high-achieving students. Angel commented when asked of the importance of his sisters:

Yeah . . . they are important to me. I couldn’t have gone through the stuff I did you know. They’re the ones who talked to me and stayed with me you know and like I pay attention to the people you know? It’s what you got to do.

These Puerto Rican males discussed the important roles their mothers and sisters played in their lives, which facilitated their academic achievement. These women played active roles in sustaining their male counterparts, as they are raising them into academically successful young men.

Caring Teachers: Incongruency Between Participants’ Definitions and Their Teachers’ Actions

The males in our study talked about the potential impact that caring teachers could have on their high academic achievement. The recurring theme of caring was especially prevalent in their descriptions of good teachers. Our participants, like the high-school students in previous studies (Antrop-González, 2003; Nieto, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999), defined caring teachers as those individuals who were interested in getting to know them on a personalized basis, who could be trusted enough to talk about their personalproblems and seek advice, and who would hold them to high academic expectations. Our participants also mentioned that they felt it was important for students to be able to rely on teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators for obtaining information or assistance with important tasks like applying for college, tutoring, or successfully securing part-time employment. Jordán defined a caring teacher in the following way:

Someone who likes to teach, some of the teachers here act like they don’t . . . like they’re here for the money. They don’t really care about teaching students. Somebody that likes to teach, that doesn’t get mad when you ask them a question about something you don’t understand. Someone who knows how to explain things.

Daniel also defined a caring teacher as one who held their students to high expectations and being constantly encouraged him to do high-quality work.

My ideal teacher was active in class which kept you interested, he was sincere in his teaching, he wanted you to learn, not just regurgitate information that’s on a sheet, like memorize this and then put it on a piece of paper and I’ll grade you on it. He actually wanted you to learn it and understand it and absorb it and comprehend it and he cared a lot. If you don’t know it or not some teachers will just like, “you don’t know, here, you get a D,” but he hated to see kids not understand so he did everything he could to make you understand and like I said he was really active, he was an exciting teacher. He wasn’t one of those boring teachers that just handed out assignments. So, he was really great, he was the best teacher I ever had. So that’s my ideal teacher!

Ironically, although these students had clear definitions of what it meant to be a caring teacher, only one Puerto Rican Spanish teacher and a Puerto Rican guidance counselor fit their definitions of caring teachers. These students’ other teachers, per se, were not described as caring. Consequently, our participants did not feel compelled to seek or maintain meaningful, interpersonal relationships, advice, or mentorship with the majority of their teachers. In other words, though our participants’ teachers were passionate about their content areas, they were not willing to establish meaningful, interpersonal relationships with them outside the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LATINO/PUERTO RICAN EDUCATION

These students’ voices reinforce the previous research that shows religiosity (Jeynes, 2003; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Sikkink & Hernández, 2003) and participation in extracurricular activities (Flores-González, 2002) have a positive impact on the academic achievement of Latino/a high-school students. Our findings also suggest that involvement in church and other school and community-based extracurricular activities serves a dual function. First, church involvement serves as a protective measure for these students by encouraging them to become involved in activities that may serve to develop their positive self-concept and discourage them from participating in oppositional youth culture like gang life, which impinges on their scholastic endeavors. Second, their involvement in church-related activities contributes to high degrees of social capital by way of intergenerational closure between these students, their friends, and their friends’ parents (Carbonaro, 1998), which allows for sustained access to mentorship and advice.

The high-achieving students whom we spoke with were also very clear about their Puerto Rican identity, always stating to their friends that they were Borica (indigenous, Taíno word for Puerto Rican) or puertorriqueño (the Spanish word for Puerto Rican) and proud about it. This particular finding challenges the belief held by other researchers
(Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978) that being a good student of color is essentially tantamount to “acting white.” In her study, Flores-González (1999) also documented that the high-achieving students she interviewed did not hide their Puerto Rican ethnicity. In fact, although our participants were English-dominant bilinguals, they spoke about their multicultural approach in their school peer networks, as they expressed the importance of their friendships with Latinos/as and other friends of color like African Americans and Mexican Americans. Hine (1991) also found that the negative stereotypes held by others served as a motivating tool for the Puerto Rican high achievers she spoke with to do well in school. Additionally, we believe this phenomenon reflects the successful utilization of these students’ ethnic identities, because these students were able to easily make the transition between their home and school worlds. However, our participants frequently expressed their frustration about how Puerto Ricans were often negatively stereotyped in their schools. In turn, they thought that their high academic achievement could have the potential of dispelling these negative stereotypical images.

Our participants attributed four success factors to their high academic achievement. Taking these success factors into consideration, we offer several suggestions for teachers, school policy makers, and scholars. First, it is imperative that large comprehensive high schools encourage more Puerto Rican/Latino students to participate in school-sponsored and community-based extracurricular activities. Whereas previous research (Flores-González, 2002) shows that these activities do much to instill proschool behaviors, we also saw an important link between this participation and these students’ acquisition of social capital and intergenerational closure (Carbonaro, 1998; Muller, 2001), which was evidenced by the sharing of important college-related information and mentorship between the high achievers, their friends, and their friends’ parents. By only entitling Puerto Rican/Latino students with good grades to participate in extracurricular activities, schools only exacerbate the inequitable access to the social networks and subsequent information that these students need to be academically successful.

Second, it is crucial that students’ racial and ethnic identities be nurtured, respected, and viewed as assets rather than problems. The findings from this study and others (Flores-González, 1999, 2002; Hidalgo, 2000) show that high-achieving Puerto Rican male students do not find it necessary to “act white” or deny their identity to academically succeed. On the contrary, these students were more likely to affirm their Puerto Rican ethnicity and use it as a way to prove to others that they have the potential to be successful regardless of the negative stereotypes and low academic expectations that some of their teachers and peers may hold. Moreover, similar to the study (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002) that shows that urban school districts in California inequitably grant access to Chicana/Latina students for AP classes, our participants were the only students who were enrolled in these types of classes. Hence, we strongly suggest that teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors establish higher academic expectations and encourage enrollment in AP and honors classes for Puerto Rican/Latino students.

Third, it is evident that families, especially mothers and sisters, play a central role in the lives of their children and siblings. Like the mothers highlighted in previous studies (Hine, 1991; Rolón, 2000), our participants’ mothers spent time with their children, helped them with homework or found them homework help when they could not provide it, and offered encouragement in times of personal crisis. Therefore, contrary to the belief systems of the deficit theorists, it is of the utmost importance that teachers understand the important role that families, and especially mothers and sisters, play in the lives of their children and siblings. Schools need to rely more on their wisdom and understand that families are indeed involved in their children’s lives and care about their education.

Fourth, the students we spoke with defined caring teachers and the potential impact they could have on their education. Caring teachers are those individuals who held their students to high academic expectations, knew who they were as individual human beings, and made classes interesting, engaging, and relevant to their students’ lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995). What we also found interesting was that although all of these students were academically successful, they did not credit most of their success with the influence of school-related factors, such as teachers and other institutional agents. On the contrary, these students attributed a large part of their success to home and community-related factors like the influence and advocacy of their mothers, the importance of their ethnic identity, and their acquisition of social capital through community-based social networks like churches and extracurricular activities. The experiences of these high-achieving Puerto Rican male students led us to believe that large comprehensive urban high schools are still inequitably structuring opportunities for Puerto Rican/Latino male students by not tapping into the funds of knowledge that these students bring to school (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Additionally, our informal observations clearly revealed the high school’s subtractive schooling practices. Subtractive schooling practices refer to the ways in which schools attempt to divest students of their first language and culture in an attempt to assimilate them to White, middle-class ways of being (Valenzuela, 1999). Thus, we noticed that very little effort was made to weave these students’ linguistic, historical, and sociocultural realities into the curriculum. We are led to assume, then, that this subtractive curriculum may be a major reason why there are not greater numbers of high-achieving male Puerto Rican students at this school.

Moreover, although the young men we spoke with provided clear descriptions of the characteristics of caring
teachers and explained their potential influence on their academic lives, they also made it clear that only a few teachers fit their definitions. Based on these findings, we encourage schools, teachers, and administrators to provide opportunities for Puerto Rican/Latino students with extracurricular programs that can mimic the positive activities that the religious youth groups offer. These programs can offer mentoring and college preparation materials and advice, as well as career training. This will help to instill a scholarly identity and facilitate the acquisition of social capital. Schools and teachers should also foster their students’ ethnic identities. Contrary to studies that focus on the schooling experiences of African American students and other urban youth of color (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1978), the Puerto Rican males in our study did not find it necessary to “act white” in order to achieve academically. Instead, our student participants used their cultural pride as a motivational tool to fight oppression and prove to others that they can succeed academically.

Finally, schools of education should train teachers to be culturally sensitive and have high expectations of all students regardless of their racial/ethnic and/or linguistic backgrounds. Also, developing and supporting ways for teachers and students to interact in more informal ways (e.g., field trips, social events, mentorship) would be beneficial to all students. Only by incorporating these students back into the classroom can we expect all Puerto Rican/Latino students to be high achievers, not just a select few.

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## APPENDIX A

**Focused Life History Interview**

1. Can you tell me about yourself?
   - Tentative prompts:
     * Where are your parents originally from?
     * How long have you lived in Brew City?
     * Why did your family choose to live in Brew City?
     * In which neighborhood do you currently live?

2. Please tell me about your experiences before coming to the high school?
   - Tentative prompts:
     * Where did you previously go to school?
     * Tell me about your past teachers.
     * Talk to me about the kinds of classes you are currently taking.
     * Talk to me about the kinds of things you learn about in your classes.
     * Tell me about the way you view or identify yourself at the schools that you have previously attended.

3. How do you identify yourself now?
4. Has being a Puerto Rican living in Brew City made you see life in any particular way?
5. What has it been like to be a Puerto Rican living in Brew City?

## APPENDIX B

**Details of Experience Interview**

1. Why did you choose to come to this high school?
   - Who helped you choose this high school?
   - Who do you usually go to for academic (ACT, SAT, etc.) support within the school?
   - Who do you go to for support concerning personal problems?

2. Talk to me about your experiences being a student at the high school.
   - Prompts
     * Tell me about your current teachers.
     * Tell me about your home life.
     * Tell me about your experiences with your classmates.
     * Tell me about the types of activities that you may participate in outside of school.
     * Talk to me about any positive experiences that you may have had at this school.
     * Talk to me about any negative experiences that you may have had at the school.

3. Since being a student at the high school, how have you come to see yourself?
4. What advice would you give to another Puerto Rican student who is thinking about leaving/quitting school?

## APPENDIX C

**Reflection on the Meaning Interview**

1. What do you think it means to be a student at this high school?
2. How are the educational experiences that you have had here going to affect you in the future?
3. What does the future hold in store for you?
4. Where do you see yourself in 15 years?

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