SUSAN H. GARBER
"Hearing Their Voices": Perceptions of High-School Students Who Evidence Resistance to Schooling
(Under the direction of DR. NANCY KNAPP)

Although researchers have acknowledged the existence of resistant students—students who seem to have the ability to succeed but who choose not to achieve in school—for years, very few studies have been done in this field that focus primarily on resistant students' own reports and explanations. This study investigated factors which influence students' participation in school through the use of phenomenological interviews, teacher questionnaires, and a self-concept scale. Results indicate that resistance is indeed a slippery concept, and none of the participants was resistant to education in general. All had at least one subject that they enjoyed and in which they succeeded. However, several commonalities among participants suggest potential causes of student resistance to schooling: personal and family issues, extracurricular activities, the school environment, and teacher characteristics.

INDEX WORDS: Student resistance, Family factors, Teacher characteristics, High-school students, School environment

“HEARING THEIR VOICES:” PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO EVIDENCE RESISTANCE TO SCHOOLING

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is first dedicated to my wonderful, supportive husband Dave, who suffered along with me though the year I worked on this thesis project. Without him, I probably would have gone insane trying to juggle classes, research, and teaching.

It is also dedicated to my loving parents, who never put boundaries on my dreams and always encouraged me to test the limits of my abilities. Thanks Mom and Dad.

And, finally, it is dedicated to all of my students, some of whom were the inspiration for this project. I appreciate the challenge my students present to me everyday to see the world from a different perspective.

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

"I feel like everybody can get a good education, but some choose not to. It's not that they can't; it's that they choose not to (because of) their surroundings, some of them fall into the wrong crowd, or they want to do other things. I have cousins that get pregnant, and they feel like 'well, the whole world comes to an end'." (Evelyn)

"Some students just don't like doing work." (Chris)

"I didn't want to do all that, so I just basically, I just sat there the whole time…. It's so boring that I just give up, and I fail." (Jasmin)

"People I know drop out because they get more involved in being out in the streets and doing what everybody else is doing. They just say, 'Forget school.'" (Jamal)

Those statements will sound familiar to educators. Every teacher has encountered students who are resistant, who may be hostile or confrontational, and who often do not want to be in the classroom at all. They are a teacher's worst nightmare. "One resistant learner can ruin your day. Two or three can make you wonder if you chose the right career" (Ganzel, 1988, p. 42).

Teachers are trained to adjust curriculum and give extra help to students who struggle to learn. However, teachers are not as prepared to deal with students who resist learning—who seem to have the ability to do well in school (and who probably understand the material) but apparently *choose* not to complete assignments or participate in class activities and therefore choose to earn failing grades. This situation is often perplexing and frustrating for educators. Why would a student refuse to do work he or she is capable of doing? This study begins an investigation of that question by

interviewing nine high-school students nominated by their teachers as evidencing resistance to learning in at least one class.

SECTION 2

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

My interest in this topic stems from my experiences as a middle-school and high-school language-arts teacher. Like most educators, I have personally encountered resistant students—students who seem to have the intelligence and ability to achieve in my class but who, for one reason or another, resist my efforts to engage them in classroom activities. Some are students who may not complete a single assignment during the semester but who can (and sometimes do) easily pass any test or quiz the teacher creates. Other students who are unwilling to engage in learning activities do equally poorly on tests, whether from a continuing refusal to engage the assessment task (Johnston, 1992) or from an actual lack of understanding resulting from their resistance. Some actively try to disrupt classroom activities and discussions that the rest of the class is engaged in; others may passively sit in the back of the classroom and sullenly refuse to participate in any form. Researchers and educators have long recognized the existence of these students, and the dilemmas they pose for teachers, administrators, and reformers (e.g., Alpert, 1991).

My interest led to this exploratory study of these fascinating, albeit frustrating, students. I wanted to address the question: What is school like through the eyes of resistant learners? The purpose of this thesis is to explore and examine the answers to that question through a qualitative approach, using open-ended interviews with the students themselves to create a portrait of resistant learners and their perceptions of school.

SECTION 3

RATIONALE

Humans are born with a desire to learn about their environments (Paiget, 1970; Bandura, 1982). Babies and young children are usually very creative and purposeful—they actively create their own knowledge by persistently trying to predict and control the things around them (Holt, 1964). According to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need to understand is a fundamental need for all humans. After the so-called "deficiency needs" (food, water, shelter, love, safety, acceptance, and self-esteem) are met, then people are motivated to pursue satisfaction of higher-level needs, called "growth needs," that enable humans to develop psychologically (McCown and Roop, 1992). Therefore, students are always learning—sometimes they are learning the official school curriculum; sometimes they are learning their own curriculum. Teaching requires the consent of the learner, and will and free choice play a vital role in learning (Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Kohl, 1991; Kohn, 1993). A teacher cannot force someone to learn effectively or to care about what they are doing. As Gilbert and Robins (1998) suggest, "The reality is that students learn what they want, when they want, and where they want" (p. 10). Students have minds of their own; they are not clay to be molded or rocks to be broken and reshaped. They are people who make choices, "deciding which factors will affect them and whether or not to participate…. Whether teachers, administrators or parents like it or not, students decide whether they will learn. Students decide what they will forget…. Students make choices all the time" (Gilbert and Robins, p. 14).

Since student resistance is one of the most obvious forms of “student choice,” it makes sense to ask resistant students themselves how they perceive their experiences in school; what effect they believe their participation, or non-participation, in classes has on their current and future lives; and what they feel would or does motivate their learning in other settings, in or out of school. Yet Erickson and Schultz’s (1992) dictum that, in educational research, “rarely is the perspective of the student herself explored" (p. 467) continues to hold true in this area—few studies have been done in this field that focus primarily on resistant students’ own reports and explanations.

This project is important because this particular type of student is often misunderstood. Not only have researchers overlooked the students’ perspective, but teachers and administrators seldom take the time to probe the reasons a student is being uncooperative in the classroom, which only adds to the student’s frustration and alienation (Kulka, Kahle, & Klingel, 1982; Sheets, 1996; Trusty & Dooley-Dickey, 1993). This study will fill a gap in the literature by presenting a self-portrait of resistant students, how they view themselves and their world in their own words.

A phenomenological approach, focusing on students’ own accounts of their “lived experience” (Richardson, 1999) and aiming to identify the different ways these students perceive their actions and experiences in school, is most appropriate for investigating these issues. As Eccles’ (1983) work shows, a person’s interpretation of events is more significant than the events themselves as a determinant of action. Her findings indicate that a student’s self perceptions, needs, and goals determine the value he or she attaches to a learning task, his or her expectations of success, and his or her level of persistence. Another reason for working from this theoretical perspective is that phenomenological

research asks the researcher to set aside his or her prior conceptions of a phenomenon and be open to images and explanations from a new perspective; it calls into question what we normally take for granted (Crotty, 1998). I wanted to hear not the explanations given by teachers, administrators, parents, and education experts for students' apparent resistance, but rather the students' own explanations of their attitudes, beliefs and actions, in order to better understand these students' ideas and also consider commonalties and differences among students (Jennings, 1986; Mays, 1985). Delpit (1988) discussed how difficult it is for a person in power, like a teacher or administrator, to communicate with and hear the voices of those without power—the students:

> To do so takes a very special kind of listening, listening that requires not only open eyes and ears, but open hearts and minds. We do not really see through our eyes and hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (Delpit, 1988, 297)

Teachers often do not want to hear what resistant learners think about teaching and learning, maybe because they are fearful of what they might hear. As Cuban (1989) said, "The two most popular explanations for low academic achievement locate the problem in the children themselves ('they lack ability, character, or motivation') or their families ('they are poor, lack education, and don't teach their children what is proper and improper in the dominant culture')" instead of considering the role of school culture or the structure of the school (p. 781). While conducting this research study, I had to acknowledge my own subjectivities as a classroom teacher and consciously put aside my "educator persona" in order to hear what the students were saying, not what I expected

them to say. I hope that those reading my findings, especially teachers and administrators, will also listen with an open mind and gain a better understanding of students they may encounter in their own classrooms who exhibit many of the same characteristics. I hope that understanding will lead educators to better serve this often frustrating population.

SECTION 4

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I began my work on this project with one level of questioning (intervention) and gradually incorporated two other levels—causation and description. As a teacher, I began with a simple question—what can educators do to help resistant students learn and have more favorable attitudes toward schooling? With that question in mind, I conducted a preliminary review of the literature in the field, and I realized that there were many different terms for overlapping phenomena associated with resistant learning.

Terms Describing Resistant Students

Walker and Sylwester (1996) define resistance, or noncompliance, as "a generalized behavior pattern of active resistance to rule-governed behavior (i.e., to the behavioral expectations and demands of adults)" (p. 53). Moore (1997), Filax (1997), and Lindquist (1994) also use the term resistance in their studies, but Lindquist (1994) says the concept of resistance is slippery because it can be used anytime someone disagrees with someone else, and it is used to interpret a student's behaviors, attitudes, and motives, usually without investigating the cause of the student's resistance.

Kohl (1991) prefers to call the refusal to learn "willed not-learning" and says it is an intellectual and social challenge that consists of "active, often ingenious, willful rejection of teaching and attempts at remediation" (p. 10). He considers "not-learning" to be a positive and healthy action in many situations. It can be a response to racism, sexism, or other forms of bias, or it can be a way to "deal with unavoidable challenges to personal or family loyalty, integrity, and identity" (p. 15).

Delisle (1992) refers to students who are “nonproducers” in his discussion of low performance in gifted students. He makes a distinction between underachievement and nonproduction. According to Delisle, underachievers are psychologically at risk and do not understand the causes of their lack of school achievement. Deslisle considers nonproducers, on the other hand, to be mentally healthy students who can explain both the problem and possible solutions to their “underachievement”. Nonproducers are select consumers of education who are unwilling to jump through teacher-created hoops. They are in control of their academic lives; they are simply choosing not to perform.

Kohn (1993) talks about student disengagement, which is defined as “tuning out” or student apathy toward school. Natriello (1984) defines student disengagement as “choosing not to participate in the mainstream of school activity. These students have resigned themselves to functioning only on the fringes of school life” (p. 14). He notes three problems associated with student disengagement: (a) absenteeism, (b) apathy or low-level participation, and (c) delinquency and participation in negative activities, such as vandalism and violence. Resistance and apathy are closely intertwined concepts, and it is difficult to untangle them because the most common way students who are still in school resist is passively. (The students who actively disrupt school and are behavioral problems are usually sent to alternative schools or are expelled.) There is a long, documented history of oppressed people resisting by looking unintelligent and finding ways to avoid having to perform for their oppressors. For instance, Ogbu (1995) notes that “Black Americans have faced hegemonic domination since they were brought as slaves from Africa to America. The educational system has played a big role in the hegemonic domination” (p. 279). As an “involuntary minority,” Ogbu (1995) says Black

Americans have "cultural frames of reference that are oppositional" and "tend to be ambivalent about a process of schooling which involves crossing cultural and language boundaries" (p. 279). Willis (1977) recognized this phenomenon while studying young, disaffected males and their working-class counter-school culture in England. The participants in Willis' study had "entrenched general and personalized opposition to authority" (p. 11).

> "In a system where exchange of knowledge and the educational paradigm is used as a form of social control, denial of knowledge and refusal of it's educational 'equivalent', respect, can be used as a barrier to control. 'The lads' became 'ignorant,' 'awkward,' and 'disobedient'" (p. 72).

Related to disengagement is the concept of alienation, which Kulka, Kahle, and Klingel (1982) conceptualize along two interrelated dimensions: (a) negative attitudes toward school staff, fellow students, and education in general, and (b) lack of involvement and participation in school activities. Seldin (1989) and Calabrese & Poe (1990) also use the term alienation.

Two other terms are associated with resistance but actually describe a somewhat different set of behaviors. The terms *school phobia* and *school refusal* are often used to refer to children and adolescents who avoid school and who have attendance problems. Kearney, Eisen, and Silverman (1995) say "school phobia" is a behavioral symptom of general school-refusal behavior relating to overwhelming fearfulness, anxiety, and depression. School-refusal behavior is defined as the refusal to attend school on a regular basis and/or the refusal to remain in school for a full day (Kearney, 1993; Lee and Miltenberger, 1996). Cooper (1984) and Wade (1979) say school refusal behavior is assumed to be a "neurotic disorder indicative of disturbed family relationships" (p. 229).

For the purposes of this study, the terms “resistant learner” and “student resistance” are used because they seem to incorporate the main ideas of most of the other terms (noncompliance, “not-learning”, nonproduction, disengagement, and alienation). This study did not deal specifically with school phobia or school refusal since I was primarily concerned with student behavior at school. The students I wanted to target are by all indications capable of learning but have low grade point averages and are identified by their teachers as showing resistance to learning.

Implied Causes of Student Resistance to Schooling

Those different, overlapping labels imply differing theories of causation and led me to a second level of questioning—what causes student resistance to schooling? A number of possible (and, again, often times overlapping) causes of student resistance have been proposed. These suggested causes seem to fit into categories based on where the lack of achievement originated—within the student and his or her personal life, within the school setting, or within society.

Student-Centered Factors

Desire for Peer Acceptance. According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, one of humankind’s basic needs is the desire to belong and feel loved (McCown and Roop, 1992). All students have a need for affiliations, and peer relationships are often more important to students than academic achievement. Clark (1998), Valverde (1987), and Williams (1987) all found that peer-group identity is a major influence on whether or not students stay in school. Students who dropped out of school are more likely to have friends who did not value education and who dropped out themselves. In her extensive review of literature, Osterman (2000) found that many studies “come to similar

conclusions, finding that students' experience of acceptance is associated with a positive orientation toward school, class work, and teachers. Students who experienced a greater sense of acceptance by peers and teachers were more likely to be interested in and enjoy school" (p. 331). In his study of working-class counter-school culture in England, Willis (1977) discovered that "the lads," as his participants called themselves, defined themselves almost exclusively in terms of the peer-group. Within their group, they created a "zone of the informal in opposition to the school, the zone of the formal" (p. 22).

Feelings of Alienation. Students who are not accepted often feel alienated. Some researchers have proposed that dropping out of school is the result of a slow, steadily developing process of alienation from school (Brady, 1996; Child, 1996; Clark, 1998; Osterman, 2000; Trusty and Dooley-Dickey, 1993; Valverde, 1987; Williams, 1987). Calabrese and Poe (1990) discovered that there are significant differences in the levels of alienation among African Americans, Caucasians, and Latinos. Caucasians were found to have lower levels of powerlessness and isolation, and those differences were observed as early as eighth grade and maintained throughout high school. Krogness (1995) and Larson (1996) noticed that some students are resistant or reluctant learners in English classrooms because Standard English is not their first language or is not the language that is spoken in their homes or communities. Not knowing the rules makes students feel like a resentful outsider, like someone invited to a fancy dinner but not knowing how to dress or which fork to use. Kulka, Kahle, and Klingel (1982) found reciprocal causation between negative attitudes toward school (alienation) and misbehavior in school. Student reactions to school may be both a cause and effect of student misbehavior. "The data

imply the existence within our schools of a vicious, self-fueling cycle of alienation and deviance" (p. 273).

Out-of-School Concerns. Students do not leave their personal lives at the door when they walk into a classroom (Clark, 1998; Ganzel, 1998; Mahle, 1992; Seldin, 1989). Problems like family violence and parental divorce can be a big distraction and inhibit students' concentration in school. Krogness (1995), who worked with low-achieving, resistant middle-school students, believes the single biggest factor in student's academic achievement is the world in which they live. "Many of (my students') lives rivaled those of people living in a war zone" (p. 6). She said her students lived in dangerous neighborhoods, experienced a lot of transition, and had constantly changing family compositions (single mothers with multiple boyfriends, extended family members coming and going, etc.). Gilbert and Robins (1998) also found that students' outside lives negatively impacted their schooling. They prompted high-school students to write essays describing their school experiences. One student, Sean Kopeny, wrote:

> To some students, classes seem trivial in comparison to the hardships and demands they are facing from the 'outside' world…. Many adults see stress as an affliction that high school students do not suffer…. For those who question the reality of high school and the things that students experience, simply look at a sampling of what has happened to me: An acquaintance whose charisma I admired hanged himself, I babysat for a murderer, two fellow classmates were murdered along with five other people at a local fast-food restaurant… (p. 26).

Failure Avoidance Behaviors. Below-average students may protect themselves against failure by not participating in class because they feel they cannot win in an academic situation (Glasser, 1971; Holt, 1964; Krogness, 1995; Ponticell, 2001; Raffini, 1986; Williams, 1987). They would rather be seen as "bad" than "stupid." Raffini

suggests that students are even more willing to accept failure than mediocrity—they do not want to accept that they are not successful at something. Nicholls (1989) also noticed this phenomenon. He says after children understand the concept of ability as capacity (when achievement is equal, lower effort implies higher ability), feelings of incompetence are likely to be more aversive and make future failures seem inevitable. This leads students to avoid activities that might reveal their incompetence.

Self-Concept Issues. Haynes (1990) hypothesizes that a student's concept of his own behavior is the most powerful predictor of the student's general classroom behavior, group participation, and attitude toward authority. If students see themselves negatively—as incorrigible, lacking discipline, or ill-mannered—then they usually behave that way.

School-Centered Factors

School-Culture Issues. School activities might be a factor that requires students to cross an identity boundary they are not willing to cross (Dehyle, 1992; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Larson, 1996; and Sheets,1996). In 1971, Glasser realized that searching for an identity is a higher priority for many adolescents than school achievement, which leads some students to a conflict of interest with the school. "Schools still say that the goal, the task, and what we teach must take precedence; the student must subordinate himself and what he feels—his role and identity—to the job we say has to be done" (p. 20). Alpert (1991), Clark (1998), Lindquist (1994), Kohl (1991), and Ogbu (1994) all suggest that this type of resistance should be viewed positively and encouraged because the student's behavior is a challenge to the dominant culture and to the "hidden curriculum" (i.e. racism, sexism, and other forms of bias) in schools.

Schools not only have hidden curricula, they also have “cultures of power.” Students are compelled to follow someone else’s rules, study someone else’s curriculum, and submit to someone else’s evaluation of their abilities (Delpit, 1988).

> Schooling is typically about doing things to children, not working with them. An array of punishments and rewards is used to enforce compliance with an agenda that students rarely have any opportunity to influence (Kohn,1993, p. 10).

Willis (1977) noticed that the physical aspects of school subordinate and constrict students—small student desks, no private space, and locked-up or out-of-bounds rooms and cabinets. He also says that the social organization of the school helps assert the superiority of the staff and their world—carefully rung bells, compulsory attendance, control and dispensation of the valuable commodity of “knowledge” by the teachers, etc. Some students, whether by socialization or by temperament, are more compliant than others and are able to be more successful in situations where they have less control. Other students need more “breathing room."

Those without the power—the students—are more aware of the power structures inherent in schools than the teachers, administrators, and others who hold the authority. If the students come from a family that is not part of the “white, middle-class power structure,” then the students may not come to school knowing the “rules”, and “students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them” (Delpit, 1988, p. 287). Cuban (1989) and Erickson and Shultz (1992) also note that power relations inherent in the classroom social system and in the curriculum can affect student participation. “Certain classroom structures may be experienced by students as unjust, and certain contexts of learning may be experienced as demeaning to the self, family, or community” (Erickson & Shultz, 1992, p. 476).

Teacher Effects. The teacher's instructional style and personality can also contribute to a student's resistance to schooling (Child, 1996; Clark, 1998; Ganzel, 1998; Hauschildt & McMahon, 1996; Linton & Pollack, 1978; Ponticell, 2001; Strum, 1980; Wade, 1979). As Ganzel (1998) said, sometimes teachers "are more responsible for learning resistance than they like to admit" (p. 44). For example, several instructional factors seemed to influence the students in Ponticell's (2001) study. One student said, "Not every kid's the same. Some learn by hands-on; some by just looking and listening. In the best classes, you do both." As Ponticell concluded, "Hands-on work for these students included projects, researching, and figuring out information, solving problems, and identifying consequences—not 'all the routine stuff' where students were not expected to think but rather to sit and listen" (p. 6). Ponticell also found that students' relationships with teachers impacted the students' motivation to learn. "For these students, important characteristics of relationships with teachers were responsibility and trust…. Students indicated that they would 'give more' to teachers who expected students to do the right thing. Too many rules, too much 'getting after' students made students feel untrusted" (p. 8).

Curriculum-Related Issues. Clark (1998) and Linton and Pollack (1978) both found a repeating theme of dullness and boredom in student comments concerning schooling. As Ganzel (1998) points out, if a student is able to stay two steps ahead of the slowest learners in the class without working, why should she put forth any effort? In his study of working-class counter-school culture in England, Willis (1977) discovered that "the lads" felt that "school was a blank between opportunities for excitement" (p. 38). In Gilbert and Robins' (1998) book, one student, Amira Zaben, complains that the "school

atmosphere drains creativity and independent thinking…. School leaves me feeling confined and discontented" (p. 49). Gilbert and Robins' (1998) and Linton and Pollack (1978) both give examples of high-school students turning to part-time jobs for more than monetary reasons. The students said work provides "an emotional, social, and intellectual experience that is more real and engaging than school" (Linton and Pollack, 1978, p. 70).

School evaluative processes can also affect student engagement (Natriello, 1984; Raffini, 1986). Holt (1964) says that teachers and schools create students who fail by taking the fun out of learning and putting pressure on the students in the form of grades and peer comparisons. Several studies support Holt's assertion, showing that students who learned material in order to be tested had lower intrinsic motivation for learning and showed less conceptual understanding than students who learned material in order to put it to use (Deci, et al., 1991).

Students also do not want useless knowledge. In her comparative study of African-American dropouts and graduates, Williams (1987) noticed that more of the students who participated in vocational education programs stayed in school and graduated. She interprets this as evidence of a connection between the relevance of school content to the "real world" and the "holding power of the school" (p. 315).

Society-Centered Factors:

Society is a strong influence on students. Students want to be accepted by society and often have a clear perception of what our society values. They realize that having a job and earning money is the quickest path to gaining the material possessions others admire. In his study, Willis (1977) noticed that, to "the lads," work was more important

than school and thus they felt a sense of superiority to the teachers, who they felt did not know anything about the real world because they had been in schools or colleges all their lives. Bishop (1989) hypothesizes that while most students realize that there are benefits to staying in school and graduating, they also realize few benefits from working hard while in school because the labor market does not reward workers for high-achievement in high school, and admission to colleges is based more on SAT and ACT scores and extracurricular activities than on high-school grades.

Research Questions

After researching possible causes of resistance, I began to realize that most of the "causes" found in the literature are from the outside looking in at the student. Very few researchers (notable exceptions include Gilbert & Robbins, 1998; and Linton & Pollack, 1978) have delved into the students' perceptions of schooling. Since this study is a beginning, descriptive study to fill in a gap in the existing literature, I realized that needed to step back from the intervention and causation questions and start at the descriptive level—what does the phenomenon of resistance look like from the students' point of view?

My initial research questions included the following:

- *How do these students describe their experiences in school?* How do they perceive the interactions, materials, instruction, and assessment in classes?
- *What perceptions and feelings toward education in general do these students have?* What are the emotions they connect with the school environment? What value(s), if any, do they see in educational activities or attainment?

- *How do these students perceive themselves within versus outside these environments?* Do they feel they are competent and intelligent? What are their perceptions of their abilities in different academic and non-academic areas? What are the priorities in their lives? What is going on in their lives that may be more important or more time-consuming than school? What are their goals for the future? What role(s) does education play in those goals?
- *What do these students suggest should be changed about their classes, or about school in general, to allow them to learn or encourage them to participate?*

Those questions instructed the construction of my study and my interview protocol. Then, after all the interviews were conducted and I began the analysis process, two additional questions emerged:

- *Are these students resistant in all classes, to all activities, or is their non-participation selective*? If so, what can be learned from the variability in their participation?
- *How do students' family members and situations impact their participation or resistance*?

SECTION 5

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The population I was interested in studying consisted of high-school students who are by most indications capable of learning but who are resisting learning, as evidenced by a low grade point average (2.0 or less on a 4.0 scale). Participants included nine freshmen and sophomore students from a high school near a major Southeastern urban area which serves a high proportion of minority and low-income students. (My choice of school was directed by my literature review, which suggested students from minority cultures might have interesting motives for resisting schooling that might not be present in a suburban or rural setting.) All students were identified as showing resistance to learning through a combination of administrator and teacher referral and teacher responses to a short questionnaire on student-classroom engagement (see appendix).

I began the subject-selection process by contacting the school's principal to discuss the study, and he recommended working with the language-arts supervisor and her students. During our initial meeting, the language-arts supervisor was reluctant to nominate specific students to receive permission forms and an invitation to participate, possibly because she thought being singled out might negatively impact a student's self-esteem, even though the title of the study on the permission form was simply "Students' Self-Perceptions and Perceptions of Schooling" and only described the study as interested in "finding out what schooling is like from a students' point of view" (see copy in appendix). Instead, she wanted me to hand out forms to all of her fourth-period

students so no one would wonder why certain students were being pulled out of class. She rationalized this suggestion by saying, “I have at least 20 students in that class who would fit your study.” Therefore, I handed out the forms to the whole class and checked back with the teacher several times a week to see if forms were returned. When only four forms (Evelyn, Tamara, Deshawn, and Jasmin) were returned after three weeks, the language-arts supervisor put me in contact with another English teacher, and I repeated the procedure of handing out forms to the second teacher’s first-period class. Only one form (DeAndra) was returned from that group.

I should have anticipated a low return rate from the two English classes for at least two reasons. First, there was nothing personal about the process. The permission form was just another piece of paper given to the whole class, and individual students did not feel compelled to return it because there was no personal connection and no reward or grade attached. Second, the literature in the field suggests that resistant students are wary of any adult associated with schooling, which would probably include a university researcher. Some students may have been afraid that I would report their comments and criticism to the principal or to their teachers and get them in trouble.

I had better luck getting participants using a more personal method. My other four participants came from recommendations made by the school’s Junior ROTC commander, who did not share the English teacher’s hesitation to single students out. When I asked the commander fill out the teacher questionnaire for DeAndra, he began talking about how many students he thinks are “wasting their potential,” and he pulled out a notebook containing all of his students’ academic records, which he had the registrar print for his own information. I asked if he could recommend some students

whom he felt were intelligent but who had very low grade-point averages, and he quickly provided a list of 10 names because he saw my study as a chance for those students to reflect on their school experiences and possibly to realize the opportunities they were missing. I approached those 10 students individually, pulling each one out of class to pitch the study and stress that I really wanted their perspective on school. I checked back with those students individually over the next couple of days, and four (Damon, Matthew, Chris, and Jamal) returned the signed permission forms.

Data Sources

For the students who returned the dual permission forms, I approached all of their teachers and had them fill out the “Teacher Questionnaire" (see copy in appendix). I developed this questionnaire to gain insight into how different teachers perceived the student’s behavior in their class. The questionnaire includes 10 statements concerning student activities, such as “This student participates in class discussions” or “This student completes homework and other assignments on time and to teacher specifications.” The teachers indicated the student’s level of participation by answering “almost never,” “seldom,” “sometimes,” “usually,” or “almost always.” I also left room for the teacher to write additional comments concerning the student, and many added anecdotes or other information. These data were used as part of my analysis.

My primary sources of data consisted of one or two open-ended interviews with the students conducted at the students’ school. Interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were used to gain an understanding of the students’ conceptions of schooling, various classes and activities, and their own participation therein, as well as their interests outside of school and their goals for the future (see interview protocol in

appendix). I started off each interview by asking the students what they like to do outside of school. That question served as an ice-breaker, giving insight into the student's interests and priorities. Then I asked the student to "walk me though a typical day at school, beginning from when you wake up until you go to bed." As the student talked though his or her schedule, I would ask additional questions to elicit descriptions of individual classes and teachers. Next, I asked the student a series of general opinion questions—what are the best and worst things about school, what characteristics make a teacher a good teacher or a bad teacher, is this a good place to learn, are you learning important stuff, etc.—to determine the student's perceptions and feelings toward education. I ended the interviews by asking students what they would change about their school to make it a better place to learn. These interviews were recorded, completely transcribed, and verified before analysis. All names were replaced by pseudonyms.

In addition to the interviews, each student completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Fitts & Warren, 1996). This instrument was administered before the students were interviewed and was used to gain additional insight into the way the students perceive themselves. The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS:2) is a widely used instrument that has acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha of .73 to .93 on subscales) and concurrent validity (Impara & Plake, 1998). It contains 100 self-descriptive statements factored into nine subscales, including behavior self-concept, physical self-concept, moral-ethical self-concept, personal self-concept, social self-concept, and academic/work self-concept. The TSCS has been used with high-school populations in a number of studies, and it has been used with students who are not likely to enjoy or excel at school, such as juvenile offenders and underachieving college

freshmen. Like the interviews, all TSCS:2 responses and teacher questionnaires were coded with a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

Hyperqual (Padilla, 1991), a qualitative data management program, was used for analysis. In a process similar to Bogdan and Biklen's (1998) constant comparative analysis model, initial categories were drawn from the initial research questions and previous research cited above. Those initial categories included: alienation issues, early school experiences, favorite and least favorite aspects of school, goals, extracurricular interests, identity issues, values seen in education, school characteristics, teacher characteristics, explanations for resistance to schooling, and suggestions for improving the experience of schooling. Several additional categories emerged during analysis—areas of intrinsic motivation, descriptions of specific courses, fairness issues, family issues, frustrating school experiences, enjoyable school experiences, attitudes of peers, teacher-control issues, and teacher actions. Those categories were used to generate the two additional research questions listed above.

Reliability and Validity Issues

Several measures were taken to ensure that this was a valid and reliable qualitative study. First, I reduced threats to internal validity by recording each interview and using verbatim quotes and detailed accounts in my report (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Wolcott, 1990). Second, I have reported my sampling and analysis methods and included my interview protocol in my report (Silverman, 2000). Third, I used triangulation to improve the validity of my data (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). I compared the results of the TSCS:2 and the teacher responses on the "Teacher Questionnaire" to the student

responses from the interviews. Fourth, I have reported any discrepant cases (Wolcott, 1990) so that my readers may judge the validity and reliability of my data for themselves.

Limitations

One of the strengths of the phenomenological approach is that students were able to describe their views of school and why they are not choosing to "play along with" the school's rules although they are probably capable of obtaining passing grades. This descriptive study will, hopefully, help educators understand and meet the needs of this group of students. However, this strength is also a restriction. Since the majority of the data came from self-reports, it may be subject to errors in recall or inaccurate over- and under-representation, both on the part of the students and of the teachers.

Another potential limitation of this study is that I only interviewed nine students from one high school. The participants may not be representative of what most students experience. However, if issues like family problems and poor teaching are interfering with these students' education, how many more students in the general population are dealing with the same issues?

A third limitation of this study is that the most resistant students are probably not represented by the participants in my study in part because they would be unlikely to volunteer to participate. Also, this study only represents passively resistant students who simply do not turn in work or participate in class. Actively resistant students, those who are more confrontational, are usually quickly expelled from school for behavioral reasons or transferred to an alternative school. For instance, a sixth student did return the permission form in the first English class, but she was expelled from school before I could interview her.

SECTION 6

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The participant profiles are organized according to their teachers' comments regarding their level of resistance, starting with the ones described by the greatest number of teachers as evidencing resistant behaviors. It is interesting, though not surprising, that the students' teachers tended to attribute more resistant behaviors to the male participants than the female participants.

Jamal

"I hate ROTC…. We don't do anything in there.
We'll get done with something early, and we just sit there."

Jamal is an African-American male in the tenth-grade who transferred to this particular high school in October because he "got into trouble" at his other school. He has to ride two mass-transit busses to get across town to school each morning. During the interview, Jamal mentioned that he was having trouble getting along with his mother—"me and my mom aren't eye-to-eye right now." The TSCS:2 results also confirm this. He answered "5, always true" to the statement "I fight with my family," and his low family self-concept score "indicates a sense of alienation from or disappointment in his family relationships" (Fitts & Warren, 1996, p. 23). Jamal also indicated a possible interest in gang activity. His favorite video game is called "Rival Schools," and he was the only student who described the cliques in the school as being determined by territories—"they all hang out with each other based on where they live." He also said he would rather be at a school where "there's a lot of fighting and stuff."

Jamal has an overall grade-point average of 1.5. According to his teachers, he is not disrespectful or rude, but he also is not cooperative. Jamal seemed to be pretty ambivalent about school. His favorite part of school is "being around a lot of people." He said there was not really anything else he liked, but he also could not think of anything that he particularly dislikes about school. Jamal said he thought some of the information being taught was important, but he had trouble coming up with specific examples. He thought his current school was "pretty good, compared to some of the other school's I've been to" because "it's like teachers care."

Five of his six teachers said he evidences signs of resistance—seldom participating or completing assignments although they do not think he has trouble understanding the concepts. His English teacher said he is "rarely on task" and "an attention seeker." His world history teacher said, "He is happy in class because he is doing what he wants; he is not concerned about his grade or the work he is supposed to be doing." Three teachers said Jamal seems "bored" or "just there" (showing no emotion) in class. The only class that he seems to enjoy and excel in is Visual Art. That teacher said he works well independently, almost always participates and completes assignments, and almost always seems happy. Jamal wants to have a career in art, maybe as a cartoonist. However, he is unsure what it will take to get there and seems pessimistic about his ability to get a college degree even though he says he "hopes" he can get one. "I really don't know because I never heard of anybody without a degree going in trying to be a cartoonist.… I know a lot of people go in with a degree to be one." Jamal seems to be less secure and less optimistic than the other eight students. He did not share a vision of where he wants to be in 10 years. "It depends on what happens from now to here."

Damon

"In ROTC, I like the inspections but not the book work."

Damon is an African-American male in the ninth grade. After I got permission for him to miss gym class to conduct the interview, he would not walk beside me to the library, lagging behind so it would not appear that he was with me. He did not contribute lengthy answers; he wanted to just answer yes or no to many questions. I had to coax answers out of him and often asked the same question several different ways to get a multi-syllabic answer.

Damon has a 1.25 overall grade-point average. Comments by four of his six teachers indicated he is resistant, saying he "is not motivated towards high academic achievement," he "does not apply himself," and "he can do the work, but he is not concerned about his grade." He seldom or never completes assignments in those four classes—ROTC, math, science, and English. His science and English teachers describe him as a "behavior problem"—"always out of his seat," "has a short temper," and "is confrontational." The TSCS:2 results support this. He had a low moral self-concept score, which may indicate a problem with impulsivity, and his high satisfaction score might mean that he is unlikely to be motivated to improve his impulse control issues (Fitts & Warren, 1996). However, his history and health teachers describe him as "wonderful" and "fun" student to have "when he is focused and on-task." He usually does his work in those two classes.

His favorite part of school is "when we have pep rallies." The only other thing he said he really liked about school was "dissecting in biology." His least favorite part of school is "waiting in class for a long time without doing anything or listening to the

teacher talk." Damon said he thinks this school is a good place for people to learn because the classes and teachers are good. He said the most important subjects are "civics, math, and language arts" because they "help you in life."

Damon plays on the school baseball teams and is counting on getting a scholarship to play college baseball. He said he is not sure about a major, but "most likely it will be science." Damon sees himself playing professional baseball and, "if I don't make that, I want to become an entrepreneur." He did not specify what type of business he might want to own, just that he would be "trying to do something."

Deshawn

"Sometimes I just go to sleep.
I mean, we don't really do anything in (technology)."

Deshawn is an African-American male in the ninth grade. Although he was one of the first to volunteer to be interviewed, he did not seem comfortable. After I got permission to take him out of gym class to conduct the interview, he would not walk beside me to the library; maybe he was ashamed of being seen with me. We had to do the interview in the common area of the library instead of the conference room, and he talked very quietly, as if he was afraid of being overheard by others in the room. During the interview, Deshawn made several comments that indicated that he wants to be successful and avoids situations that frustrate him. For instance, he participated more in P.E. when they were playing volleyball and basketball, sports he said he "was good" at than when they were wrestling.

On the teacher questionnaires, four out of Deshawn's six teachers said he evidences resistant behaviors. His science teacher said, "He is one of the most frustrating students I have" and added that Deshawn had a 40 average in that class at the beginning

of May. His teachers say he seldom or never participates or completes assignments in technology, science, English, and math. Deshawn told me that math is "hard," and the teacher "doesn't explain it very well." He feels frustrated because he does not think middle school prepared him ("I just wasn't ready.") and because on the tests, "I'll be doing it right, and then I'll get the paper back and I got a lot of them wrong." This frustration was confirmed by the TSCS:2. He answered "mostly true" for the statement that said, "I don't do well in school, even when I try." Deshawn enjoys his social studies class, however, and respects that teacher, and he is passing that class. His social studies teacher said Deshawn usually participates in discussions and asks for help.

The best part of school, according to Deshawn, is "the interaction with other people." His least-favorite parts are "the time we wake up in the morning" and "sometimes the teachers," not all of whom he believes care about the students. Deshawn even said that some "teachers will call you something that they are not supposed to be calling you, like 'gay.'"

He said he feels he is learning valuable "skills on how to get a job when I get out of school." Deshawn wants to attend a junior college and study software engineering. He said he enjoys playing computer games and has even taught himself how to fix minor computer problems. He thinks he will need to start with a two-year college "Cause last semester I had failed three classes, and I thought that it will mess up my record."

Matthew

> *"I don't want to make everybody feel inferior, but we're actually the smartest kids in the school, in our grade level, so they placed us all (in advanced world history)."*

Matthew is an African-American sophomore with great intelligence, a lot of anger, and a 1.769 grade-point average. He attended a private prep school from kindergarten through the middle of his freshman year. Then his parents moved and put him into public school, and he is "hurt" and "mad" about that decision. He appears to be a wealthy student who is enrolled in activity after activity by his busy parents. He started taking martial arts classes at the age of 2, he plays soccer, he takes acting classes and has appeared in commercials and plays, and he has been boarded at a recreation camp the whole summer for the past four years, something Matthew did not seem happy about. He says acting is "very, very, very demanding. Some nights we won't even get home until like 3:00 or something in the morning because, like right now, we're working on a play called 'Director's Delight' that we have to be in. We have to attend acting classes every Saturday."

All of Matthew's scores on the TSCS:2 were in the "normal range," except his social self-concept score. That score was low, which is a "sign of social awkwardness related to perceived lack of social skill" and means Matthew "may have unrealistic expectations about how social interactions should unfold" and probably "often feels isolated" (Fitts & Warren, 1996, p. 24). Those TSCS:2 results are confirmed by Matthew's statements in the interview. He indicated that the school was just "one big popularity contest" and "if you're not popular then you're not known and your voice is

not heard, which is unfair to people because I think everybody should be treated the same." He only mentioned two friends at the school.

Matthew loves science and is achieving in that class. However, two of Matthew's teachers indicated that he evidences signs of resistance, and he is failing another class. His world-history teacher said Matthew "copies other students' work" when he turns anything in. He also said he "has too many emotional issues that get in the way of his ability." That world-history teacher also warned me that Matthew was "in an anger-management class" and "has a violent temper, which is dangerous with his martial-arts training." Matthew's English teacher says he "alienates himself" and "he has the ability; he's just not happy with something in his life." Both teachers said Matthew seldom participates and only sometimes turns in work. His math teacher said Matthew is "failing mostly because of the transfer grades from his other teacher" but that Matthew "asks for help but never shows up to actually get it."

Matthew has a very low opinion of his current school. When asked what he liked best about school, he replied, "About this school? Nothing!" He said he does not respect most of the teachers because "they don't know what they're talking about." He had a confrontation with his geometry teacher, who he described as being "very unprofessional" and "immature." Matthew said the principal did not do "anything about the issue of the teacher yelling and cursing at me." He also made several disparaging comments about his fellow students—"The class is so immature to me" and "No one knew how to do note cards or anything, and I was just like 'how did you get to the tenth grade without doing a research paper?'"

Matthew said he reads a lot of science and theology related books in his free time. He said, “Right now I’m reading a book called Astrophysics for Dummies." He also said, “I like reading about the different religions because it gives me insight on what’s different from all of them, actually. From what some people believe in and what some people defend and what others find offensive and other stuff like that.” He says he wants to be an “astrophysicist” because “it’s something that I don’t know a lot about.” He knows it will take “kinda like a lot of schooling” but he doesn’t mind because “it pays off in the long run. It’s something that I’m going to like doing.”

Chris

> *“Middle school, guess that was like um my wildest years.*
> *When I got to eighth grade, I was always going to parties.*
> *I would never stop going to parties.”*

Chris is an African-American ninth-grade student with a 1.75 grade-point average. He was very upbeat and chatty during our interview session, and he professes to enjoy all his classes (e.g. “Biology is a fun class” and “I love math.”). However, the results of the TSCS:2 suggest that the confidence he exuded may have been a façade. His total self-concept score (80T) was off the chart, and the TSCS:2 manual says such a high score suggests “deviance” and is “often found in conjunction with serious psychological distress.” It also said such an individual “may be experiencing a sense of failure and unhappiness because the magnitude of the discrepancy between their overall self-concept and actual level of functioning are too great…. These individuals find it difficult to consider the possibility that their own actions may have led to the difficulties or failures they encounter” (Fitts & Warren, 1996, p. 21). During the interview, Chris spoke of a family “bloodline” for playing football; he has two uncles playing professionally and

several cousins who played at the college level. He might be feeling intense pressure to follow in their footsteps and might not be matching up to the expectations, academically or athletically.

All six of Chris' teachers said that he "almost always seems happy in class." However, two of his teachers would classify him as resistant, and three say he is underachieving. His Civics teacher says he "sleeps a lot during class" and usually does not participate, although Chris does have "moments of brilliance" during discussions. He said that if Chris turns in work, it is usually copied from another student. In May, Chris' English teacher said he had a 23 average. He also said Chris is "smart enough. He just does not try." The biology teacher said Chris was "making a last-ditch effort to pass but was unconcerned all semester." However, that same teacher described an instance when Chris "recently went beyond the required work to figure out an algorithmic problem just because he was interested, not even for extra credit." In algebra, the teacher said Chris is "very bright but will probably only get a C." The ROTC commander said Chris "does not always expend sufficient effort."

Chris' academic problems might be related to several out-of-school activities. He plays football and runs track on the schools' teams. He also says he works 40 hours a week at Kentucky Fried Chicken. He said he normally goes into work around 5:30 in the evening and works until closing at 11:00. He does his homework in the back of the restaurant "when we're not busy." Chris also indicated that his mother "works a lot" and that since middle school (see above), he has "been used to being out all the time."

The best things about school, according to Chris, are that "we have nice teachers here" and that the principal is "a very nice guy" who "comes and supports like almost

every football game, track meet, everything." Chris also said he appreciates the way the young principal "talks to us about how we can do better." He said he thinks the school is "very much" a good place to learn and that he is learning important information in all his classes. His least favorite part of school is "the other administrators", who he says are "too strict." To illustrate his point, he told how the administrators made a "whole section" leave an honors assembly "because of a little group of people that they coulda picked out." Chris also talked about how he does not like teachers who are "too stict, putting you down for simple things" and who "try to put us in the underclass."

As far as goals go, Chris wants to be a professional football player. He also wants to be a psychiatrist because "in eighth grade, my teacher um, she put me into a program called 'Peer Helpers.' So, I joined that. I did the class, and it was pretty fun. I liked helping people with their problems." He has a goal of making "all A's" his sophomore year because he does not think his grades are "where they need to be right now" for him to get into college.

Jasmin

> *"I'm not good at test taking. I don't understand….(My social studies teacher) said he'd like to put me in his advanced class if I took tests as well as I should."*

Jasmin is an African-American female in the ninth grade. She said her parents are divorced, and her father lives somewhere in the Northern United States. However, she said they are close and that he calls her nearly everyday. She lives with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. She enjoys sports and wanted to play basketball or volleyball but was prohibited from participating in contact sports by her doctors and mother because of a medical condition. She played on the tennis team this year and hopes to play other

sports next year if "the swelling in my jaw is going down. My plastic surgeon told me they need to scrape out the cyst that's there now." Her father is very supportive of her athletic endeavors, and Jasmin indicated that she sometimes feels like the rope in a tug-of-war match between her parents—"my dad tells me to 'work on your sports' and my mom tells me to work on my academics. So I hear two different things."

Jasmin talked about how her clothes express her identity. "I went through this change in middle school that I was trying to find myself or whatever, and I started dressing like that because I just thought it was different, and I didn't want to be what I was in elementary school, like the peppy, all that stuff. I wanted to be different, you know." After middle school, Jasmin said she changed her look again. "I was growing up to be a young lady and I needed to dress like one."

Academically, Jasmin seems to be hot or cold. Three of her six teachers say that she has resistant tendencies, and the other three think she is a good student. Her technology teacher said she is "very capable" but is "not doing all she could do." On the resistant side, her Biology teacher said, "She currently has a 44 average (at the beginning of May) and she will take out photo albums and look at them instead of doing her work." Her Spanish teacher also said Jasmin "almost never" participates in class activities or completes assignments. All three of those teachers said Jasmin usually seems bored or dissatisfied in class, and her comments during the interviews support those teachers' observations. She said technology is boring and admitted to doing nothing during one unit because she "didn't like drafting." She feels like the biology teacher's lack of classroom management is "cheating me out of my education." She is also frustrated because she is basically repeating the same Spanish class she took in seventh grade. "It's

so boring that I just give up, and I fail." On the other hand, her social studies teacher said she is "a good student with a B average" who usually participates and almost always turns in her work. Her math teacher said Jasmin "is not passing" algebra, but that teacher did say she usually completes the work and asks for help when she does not understand. Jasmin admits that math is a difficult subject for her, and she says that she has been in remedial math classes since she switched from army base schools to public school in the second grade. That frustration was supported by her scores on the TSCS:2, where she had a low academic self-concept score.

Jasmin wants to be a lawyer because "I like to argue. I really do…. I think I'm like that cause my dad, he's a Republican and my mom's a Democrat and I was always around them arguing about stuff, so I kinda adapted it like that." Jasmin is not looking forward to all the academic requirements and years of higher education involved in getting a law degree, but "then I don't want to get stuck with a job that I don't like, you know. Like my dad. He hates (his job as a security officer for a company)." She also indicated that she has a natural interest in computers and has even taught herself how to upgrade and fix minor computer problems.

> It's something that I really enjoy cause when I first got it I was like 'a computer, wow, you know, I can do my schoolwork here'; right? ... But, then I started getting into it, like my Dad started buying me stuff like microphones and a web cam. And now, like we've gotten to the point where like I'll sell my tower, and I'll buy a new one, an improved one, and I'll add onto that, and I'll sell it over again.

Jasmin said the best things about school are "friends. Sports. That's about it." She said the worst things about the school are "some of the teachers and some of the students." Jasmin said some of what she is learning is important, but she said she could

not understand why she needed to learn Spanish and drafting because she would not use them in her everyday life.

DeAndra

> *"I have like four best friends in this school, and I don't even consider them friends (on weekends) because I hang out mostly with my cousins and people that I know from outside of school."*

DeAndra is an African-American female in the 10th grade. She is a full-figured young lady with bright red hair. She claims to be comfortable with her appearance (and her physical self-concept score on the TSCS:2 was in the normal range), but during the interviews, she talked about how other students, and even her grandmother, would "make comments" about her size. DeAndra appears to be a natural leader. After I interviewed her, she seemed to give other students approval to work with me. For instance, DeAndra was in the ROTC room when I stopped by to see if Matthew had returned his permission form. He looked at her, and when she nodded, he got the form out of his backpack.

She said she has a number of demands on her time. DeAndra said she is responsible for watching out for her younger brother in the afternoons and evenings, but DeAndra also said she spends a lot of time at church, singing in the choir and doing other activities. She throws the shot put for the track team, attends all the ROTC-sponsored activities, and is a member of the "Ladies of Distinction," a group "for ladies that want to be, become or want to be more inspiring to their peers or whatever. Showing that a lady can act like a lady not acting like somebody in the streets."

Like Jasmin, DeAndra seems to have a split personality academically—she achieves in half of her classes but is failing the other three. Her Spanish teacher said she "could have a 100 average, but she is failing because she has an attitude problem. She

wants things her way and sulks if she can't get it." That Spanish teacher also said that DeAndra physically bullies some of the male students. In physical science, the teacher said DeAndra seldom participates and usually seems bored. The math teacher said DeAndra has "the ability to succeed" but is "more interested in other things that are outside of school." According to her teachers, in English, ROTC, and social studies, DeAndra is a completely different person. Those teachers describe her as "almost always happy in class." They say that she usually participates and does her work. DeAndra wants to enter the military after high school although she might just join ROTC while she attends college. "I'm going to follow in my brother's footsteps, and his dad's. Going into the marines." She said she became interested in the military after attending her brother's military graduation. "I saw how they have everything in order. We went to my brother's barracks, how their beds had to be made a certain way, had to be so tight or whatever, and I liked it." DeAndra also wants to be a lawyer. "If I didn't decide to go into the military, I was just going to go do my four years and then major in um criminal justice. Or, if I was in the military, I was going to major whatever they have in the military for lawyers for whatever they have in the military."

She said the best thing about school is "just coming around and being with people, being able to interact with others." She said her least-favorite parts are "teachers who give you work and don't care" and students who are "two-faced" and "trade on you." DeAndra said math and English are the most important subjects and that history is the least relevant. She transferred to her current school from another school in the district and said she prefers her old school because "they have more activities and (the students) are more involved in the school."

Evelyn

"I like history because it's stuff that I never knew,
and (I like) learning stuff about my history."

Evelyn is an African-American female who is old enough to be in the 11th grade, but she is having to repeat a number of freshman- and sophomore-level classes that she failed. She transferred from another area high school in the middle of her sophomore year, and she seems to be working hard now to make up for past mistakes. She said that her parents expect her to graduate. "My mother, she tells me all the time, 'go to school, do your work, pass your classes.'" Her energy is not focused exclusively on school, however. She also works approximately 23 hours a week at McDonalds. When she is not "working, sleeping, or doing school work," Evelyn said her favorite activity is to read "all kinds" of novels.

Only two of Evelyn's current teachers said she shows signs of resistance. Her business-law teacher says she "is not performing much," is "tired and sleepy in class," and "almost never completes assignments." Her science teacher says Evelyn is "very moody; she has recently put in more effort, but even when she does the work, which is seldom, she could have done better." Her other teachers say she almost always participates, although she might not always turn in her assignments. Evelyn still doesn't know what she wants to do, but if she had to pick right now, she'd be a lawyer because "it's something I've always wanted to do. I wanted to be a judge. I wanted to be an F.B.I. officer, or I always wanted to do anything that had to do with law." She does know that she wants "to go to a two-year college first and then a four-year college."

She showed signs of metacognition, especially in relation to mathematics. "I used to make terrible, terrible grades in math. That was not one of my good subjects at all….

But (this year) I learned by being in that (mixed) math class that I can do the work. It's not that I couldn't do it; it was just that I needed to be taught in a different method." Her favorite part of school is variety of classes offered, and her favorite classes have been "practical classes" like criminal justice, business law, and computers. Her least-favorite part of school is when teachers mishandle situations and are unfair, but, overall, she thinks the school and the teachers are good. "I feel like everybody can get a good education (here), but some choose not to." She said some students think the school is "lame" but she feels like "all schools are lame, and you should go there to learn and not be worried about how much fun you're having because that's not going to help you pass your classes and graduate."

Tamara

> *"In the morning, there's this white table. All the white people sit there. And then they look at me weird 'cause I go sit at another table. I go sit with all my friends, and they're all black. I have no white friends at this school."*

Tamara is a European-American ninth-grade student. She seems to have a lot of distractions, especially with her family. Her father died two years ago, and her step-father, who Tamara calls "racist" is moving the family further out in the suburbs. This move seems to be a source of friction. In the interview, Tamara mentioned that she doesn't want to move and leave the friends she's had since kindergarten. On the TSCS:2, she had a low family concept score and answered "always true" to the statement "I fight with my family."

Personal identity issues seem to be important to Tamara. Tamara said she prefers to learn things on her own instead of being shown how to do something. "I can't learn like that. I have to do it on my own, or I won't ever learn it. I would feel like I'm

copying somebody or something." Tamara also said when she got to middle school, "it started mattering who you hung out with, and then that's when I became my own self. If you didn't like me, oh well."

Tamara said she does not participate in any extracurricular activities at the school and does not have any real hobbies outside of school. (She took gymnastics lessons for four years but then quit.) Her primary goal is "to have fun" by going to the movies, spending the night with friends, and going to non-alcoholic night clubs where teenagers can dance and socialize. Tamara was very concerned about social issues, for instance the different cliques at the school, and racial issues. She considers herself to be a "reversed oreo" and said she doesn't mind being the minority. "I love it here because I can always laugh, and I have a lot of friends here." However, other statements (like the one above) indicate that she may not be as comfortable with the racial dynamics at the school as she would like to appear. She spent a lot of time talking about how white students "get so much more punishment than if a black student was in the same situation."

Five of her teachers think she is an average student who is just underachieving. Her social studies teacher said she is "a good student who works well with others." Her biology teacher said, "She's passing with a 74, but it could be an 84." Her band teacher and English teacher both said that she usually participates and asks for help when she needs it. Only her math teacher differed in her description of Tamara's performance; she said Tamara seldom participates or completes work and that Tamara does not ask for help and often seems bored. Tamara blames the teacher for her lack of success in math. She said the teacher "stands up there and does all the odd problems, and she just like does them over the overhead and doesn't explain anything."

Tamara did not say many positive things about the school. She said she has fun with her friends, and she did say she likes and respects her social-studies teacher and her language-arts teacher because both of them "know how to talk to teenagers" and both have control of their classes. However, she described her other teachers as "not knowing how to teach, in my opinion." Tamara also said her school does not "have the best standards in education," and she feels like "a lot of grownups look down on this school."

In the future, Tamara wants to go to Florida State University because "I just love Florida. I love it so much. That's probably where I want to live, too. I just love beaches and the people there." She is unsure about what she wants to have as a major, but she's interested in being a heart surgeon or a writer.

SECTION 7

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

How do these students describe their experiences in school? How do they perceive the interactions, materials, instruction, and assessment in classes?

Views of Classroom Participation

The descriptions that the students and the teachers gave of the same classroom were sometimes very different. For example, Damon's math teacher described him as someone who "usually seems bored, seldom participates," but Damon described the same teacher's class as being "fun, and we get our work done at the same time." Evelyn's business law teacher said, "She is not performing much; she is tired and sleepy in class and is very preoccupied with social issues. She only participates in class discussions if I really try to draw her into it. She almost never completes her homework and almost always has trouble with the concepts because the textbook is on a college level." Evelyn, who seems to be able to read on the college level since she said she read Shakespeare's Othello on her own and could give a reasonable plot summary, said business law "is not a bad class" and that she is interested in the subject matter. She seems to be paying more attention in class than the teacher thinks because Evelyn was able to tell me about every topic they covered during the year. Unlike her teacher, she thinks the problem is that the teacher did not explain the information enough and gave too many quizzes and tests. "We'll have to read it ourselves, and then she'll give an evaluation to be sure that we read it." Tamara's math teacher said Tamara seldom participates or completes work. She said Tamara never asks for help and often seems bored. Like Evelyn, Tamara also blames the

teacher for her lack of success in math. She said the teacher "stands up there and does all the odd problems, and she just, like, does them over the overhead and doesn't explain anything."

Effects of School Environment

Several of the students do not like the appearance of the school, especially the fact that it has no windows. Chris said it looks like a "bomb shelter," and Jasmin and Matthew both compared it to a "prison." Chris elaborated, "It's so isolated. Not to be funny or anything, but the windows play a big factor because it's almost a psychological thing. It's like if you're here too long, you can feel the tension in the students." He said the prison effect is amplified by the administrators using "a bull horn to yell at you" and "a guy who walks around here with a gun cause he's a cop."

Effects of School Culture

Violence and fighting are big issues at this high school. As Tamara said, the school could be a good place to learn, but "a lot of people won't let it be that way. Because, like I said, all the pregnancies and the weapons that are, that are in the school, fighting…. A lot of people in the school carry razor blades in their mouth and knives in their purse." (As previously mentioned, one of the students who returned the permission forms in the first language-arts class was expelled from school before I could interview her. She had cut a male student multiple times with a razor blade she had hidden in her mouth, and the administrators found a box of razor blades in her purse.) Deshawn, Tamara, DeAndra, and Jamal all talked about how "there's a lot of fights that go on." Tamara and Matthew both said they think there should be metal detectors and stiffer

punishments for fighting. Tamara said, "I think a lot of people would feel more safe here (if there were) because I don't feel safe at all."

Reactions to School Policies

Several students mentioned that they felt some of the school rules and policies were unnecessarily cumbersome and/or ineffective. In this school, the students have to go to the commons area (the cafeteria) as soon as they get to school. They cannot go to their lockers or to a classroom unless they have special permission. Evelyn said that policy makes most of the students think the school is "lame" because "another school might have certain privileges that we don't get to have." She had transferred from another area school, and she discussed some of the differences.

> I noticed that we had certain privileges that they don't have here, like we could go out and leave for lunch or we could hang around outside. And, in the morning time, we don't have to stay, we didn't have to stay in a specific area. We could walk around and stand up around the school.

Evelyn said she does not understand why the administrators restrict where the students can be in the morning. "If it's to keep the problem down, it's not really helping any. Kids are going to be kids, and they are going to find a way around them and do stuff." Another school policy the students objected to is the prohibition against backpacks. DeAndra had attended another high school where "they let you carry your book bag with you, but you had to carry the little mesh, see-through book bags…. I liked that cause you could put all your books, most of the books that you needed for the first couple of periods and then right before lunch you go change the books and go get your lunch and go back to class and then you have all your books for the rest of the day."

The students also seemed to feel that the administrators' "lock-out" procedure was ill-conceived. "Lock out" means that students who are late to class or who are out of class without a

pass have to spend the rest of the period in the cafeteria with an administrator. DeAndra said she had "never gotten the tardy table thing" because "how are you going to sit at the table and learn something when you are supposed to be at school? … You sit and you can't learn nothing." Matthew agreed. "If they want you to score well on these tests, and they want you to make good grades, why do they lock you out of class? Why don't you have the students stand for the class period or write or do extra homework? But don't lock them out of the learning environment because that's just not helping them."

Sensitivity to Inequality

Two of the students, Tamara and Matthew, were very sensitive to and angry about perceived injustices in the school. Tamara says the administrators treat white and black students differently. "I've followed it and watched it happen. Everything dealing with white people here they get so much more punishment than … if the same situation and a black student went in." She also said that the police officer and the administrators "will stand up anytime for an upperclassman rather than an underclassman." Matthew, an African-American student who had previously attended a private school, said the school is "a big popularity contest. If you're not popular, then you're not going to get anything…. if you're not popular then you're not known and your voice is not heard, which is unfair to people because I think everybody should be treated the same." Matthew also noticed that some organizations get more support than others. For example, the orchestra doesn't "even have our own room," but members of "Men of Distinction," a group sponsored by the principal, get special treatment. "They gave me ISS for walking out of the guy's class who started yelling and cursing at me. When one of the Men of Distinction men got into a fight, they got nothing. The other guy got sent home for like four days."

Effects of Administrators

Chris, Damon, and DeAndra all said that the principal was instrumental in creating a school climate. Like DeAndra said, schools are "basically the same but then different principals or whatever have their different ways of running things." They all said that the principal was a "positive role model" and that he calls assemblies and challenges the students. Chris said, "If we have a certain percent flunking, he'll like talk to us about that and how we can do better at it." Jasmin said the principal "lets us know that you have to do certain things to become what you want to be. They're not going to hand it to us."

Effects of Teachers' Personalities

The students also spent a significant amount of time explaining how teachers' personalities affect their attitudes and participation in school. As Tamara said, "The teacher helps me a lot. If I don't like the teacher, then I don't like the class." Surprisingly, these students do not want teachers who will let them "get away with stuff" or "slack off." They don't like "too strict" teachers, who, as Chris says, are "always putting you down for simple things; like you get up to throw something away, and then you're in trouble." Matthew echoed Chris' sentiments, saying he tuned out in classes when the teacher's "disciplinary action thing" is "stricter than the learning, meaning they focus more on you being quiet and you not talking and you being still and sitting down" than they did on teaching the lesson.

However, they are very critical of teachers who "don't have control over the class the way they should." Seven of the nine students mentioned teachers who did not have control over their classes. Of those, only Chris said he did not mind having a class like

that. Tamara summed up the importance of teacher control: "I mean a lot of times some teachers don't know how to handle the class, and they just don't teach a lesson that day or skip a lesson, and when it's time to come for testing, you don't learn all the stuff and then you fail tests." Tamara, Deshawn, and Jasmin all described the same biology teacher, who they say "doesn't know how to deal" with student behavior. Deshawn said, "She has a hard time explaining stuff to us because somebody is always interrupting the class. …They get out of their seat. And then she'll tell them to sit down, and they'll get smart with her. And she just gets mad, and then maybe she'll stop doing what she was doing." Jasmin said she is annoyed by teachers who do not have control because "they're cheating me out of my education."

The students said that they really like and respect a teacher who "pushes us" and "urges us to do our work." Their favorite classes were the ones in which the teacher clearly drew the line between having fun and doing work. DeAndra said in her math class, the teacher will wake everybody up by teasing and joking, then "he'll get serious and everybody knows that he's serious, so we'll start doing our work." Damon said all the good teachers he's had "made us do our work…. They told us what time was it to play and what time it was to get down to doing what we were supposed to do." (Two students, Chris and Deshawn, also said that they listen to and respect male teachers more than female teachers. As Chris said, "It kinda makes a difference to have a male role-model around.")

These nine students appreciate teachers who care about them as individuals. Jasmin really likes her English teacher because "she's like your mom. She wants to see you do well. She'll tell you when you're not, what you should do and what you shouldn't

do, what you need to stop doing and what you should keep on doing. And that's just wonderful." Jasmin, DeAndra, and Deshawn all recounted instances when a teacher took the time to pull them aside and talk to them about problems they were having at the time. Deshawn said his "best teacher of all time" was the elementary school teacher who "separated me from all the kids and then put me on the side and asked me why I was (being bad)." DeAndra said she started gaining weight in elementary school and felt very self-conscious. She decided that she was not "gonna do nothing. I'm just going to sit here and not going to talk to nobody," but her teacher wouldn't let her withdraw. "She just always talked to me. She didn't care if I was in a bad mood, she would just come over and say, 'you'd better smile in my class.'" That teacher even gave DeAndra her home phone number if she ever needed someone to talk to.

These students say they want teachers who are willing to help them learn, who don't "say it's 3:15 and I've got to get out of here," but "will help a student when they need help." They say they can tell if a teacher "really likes what they are doing" and if "they really want to be here." Evelyn described one of her "really good teachers" as trying to "take you step-by-step. She gives examples. She may sing a little song to go along with it." Evelyn said she has had teachers who did not seem to want to explain concepts to her, even when she asked for help. "They'd get frustrated and stuff, and I don't feel that's right, because if I'm willing to come in here and I'm at least asking, trying to understand, then you could at least go over it with me." Deshawn doesn't like teachers who teach "like everyone in the classroom knows what she's talking about, and most of the time we don't. Only three or four people in the class can understand what she's talking about." He prefers his social studies teacher, who "takes the time to explain

stuff to us better than all the other teachers." DeAndra said she's never really liked English as a subject until this year. This teacher is different, she says, because "she makes it more comfortable…if you want to ask a question or something like that, she'll come and she might even talk to you privately when you need more help, and that's why I think I started to like that class." DeAndra also says it is easy to tell that a teacher is dedicated to the students because "even if they have children of their own, they're still coming in early in the morning and staying later in the afternoon just to help you out."

They are very aware and disparaging of teachers who do not know their subjects, who, as Chris said, "will give you something to do, and when you need help, they're completely lost," or those who "don't really teach" but just "give you work and then sit down and go to their computer." Evelyn laughed at her environmental-science class, which she said is "a give-me class that nobody should fail" because "we basically spend the class period talking" while the teacher hides behind her computer. They are also critical of teachers who get "an attitude with people" and are "always mad at somebody or something." They want teachers who "get along with everybody" and "show us they cared about their students." They want teachers who trust them and give them the benefit of a doubt. Evelyn described a situation in which a teacher lost a student's paper. She said the teacher can either let the student redo the work or say "well, you can't do it over because I don't remember you handing it in."

Effects of Teachers' Instructional Styles

They also like teachers who "make class fun." However, as Ponticell (2001) found in a similar study of at-risk students, "fun did not necessarily mean that the work of classrooms stopped. Rather, fun supported work. Students appeared to see teachers who

had fun with students as respectful of students as people, as interacting with students in the most human of ways" (p. 13). Tamara spoke glowingly of her social studies teacher, who "knows how to talk to teenagers" and who "laughs" and enjoys his students. DeAndra likes the way her math teacher recognizes that all of his students are tired during sixth period, so he "wakes everybody back up" by joking around. Damon said another way teachers made class "fun" is to "let us have a free day and do whatever if everybody finished their work and stuff."

These students seem to respond best to interactive classes where they do not just have to sit and take notes or do worksheets. Damon seemed to equate "waiting in class for a long time without doing anything" with "listening to the teacher talk." As Jamal said, good teachers "try to teach without losing the interest of students" by doing "hands-on activities." For instance, Chris and Damon enjoy dissecting things in biology. Chris loves to debate in his civics class because "you get to yell." Damon and Evelyn spoke about classes that were "fun and we get our work done at the same time" because they play review games, like math bingo. The students like working in groups and having a chance to teach the class. For instance, DeAndra appreciated the way her Spanish teacher had them review for the final exam by breaking "us into groups. And we each do like a chapter, and then we have to make a lesson plan and a quiz to see how much we know." Jamal and Damon especially expressed a dislike for "waiting in class a long time without doing anything or listening to the teacher talk."

Frustration in School

Frustration with learning difficulties were described by six of the students. Deshawn said his math class was "hard" because "last year, we did a whole lot of

different when we was in the eighth grade. …We did a lot of different stuff from what we are doing now, and I wasn't ready for it." Deshawn also indicated that he has trouble taking tests, which has led to some test anxiety. He said he feels like he understands the material but gets all the answers wrong on the tests. Jamal said math was "pretty cool" in elementary school but when he got to seventh grade and pre-algebra he was confused—"where did all this stuff come from?" Tamara said her social studies project was "really hard" and that she "hasn't even started" on her project yet because she couldn't find any information on Ireland. Evelyn said she used to be "terrible" at math because "the old teachers try to take short cuts, and that can really lose some students" because "when you do it on your own, you won't see where you made the mistake at when you take the short cuts." Jasmin said she "hated" the drafting unit in her technology class because "it was drawing lines and stuff. I hated that. I'm not great at math anyway, and he was telling us to draw 4 inches. I didn't want to do all that." Even though Matthew is very intelligent, he is finding some subjects are difficult. "I really don't like the teachers here cause I don't feel like they're teaching the material right…. It's gotten to the point that where the work is starting to become difficult, and I'm like 'I know this but you're teaching it the hard way.'"

What perceptions and feelings toward education in general do these students have? What are the emotions they connect with the school environment? What value(s), if any, do they see in educational activities or attainment?

Eight of the nine students said they felt education is valuable and gave fairly reasonable explanations for why different subjects are important to learn (Tamara never

gave an answer to this question. Instead, she kept talking about what she did not like about the school.). Chris said math is the “most important subject” because “without math, you don’t know anything. You have to learn how to add and all that.” He also said that health is important because “if you don’t know about your health, then it’ll be some other person lying six feet under.” Deshawn felt he’s “learning skills on how to get a job when I get out of school.” DeAndra said English is especially important because it helps you present yourself to the world in the best way. When “you go into the real world," you need to "know how to use the right words, or writing letters, knowing how to use the right punctuations and things like that.” Damon thinks “civics, math, and language arts” are the most important courses because they “help you in life,” but he did not elaborate further. Evelyn says “right now school is more important” to her than anything else. She also said that “pretty much everything (taught in school) might be helpful because there are many different jobs out there.” Jasmin said, “I know academics are number one cause I have to have good grades to play sports.” Jamal questions the value of some of his subjects, but he said other topics, like learning about complex and simple machines in physical science, will be useful in the future.

<u>How do these students perceive themselves within versus outside these environments? Do they feel they are competent and intelligent? What are the priorities in their lives? What are their goals for the future?</u>

Most of the students did not describe themselves as resistant. (Only Jasmin admitted that she found one class “so boring that I just gave up.”) None of the students indicated that they planned to drop out of school. In addition, although Jamal was not

optimistic about his chances of going to college, all of the students expressed long-term goals involving higher education.

Although teachers may have characterized the students as evidencing resistant behavior on the "Teacher Questionnaire," the students tended to describe the characteristics of the teachers and classes rather than discussing their own actions. For instance, several students said, of different classes, "we don't do anything in there" or "he doesn't really teach." Jasmin said she does not like technology class because "the computers are so outdated." Tamara said she dislikes biology because the teacher does not control the class. "I don't like it because everybody throws paper and spitballs in it, and she doesn't know how to deal with it."

Under-estimations of Academic Difficulties

Several students did say that they were not happy with their grades or were currently having trouble in certain classes. For example, Chris expressed concern that his grades are not "where they need to be." Deshawn thinks he will need to start with a two-year college "cause, like, last semester I had like failed three classes, and I thought that it will mess up my record." However, all of them seemed to underestimate the extent of their academic problems. For example, Tamara admitted that she misses a lot of school but said, "I make up all of my work because I know if I don't, I'll end up failing." That seems to be true in three of her classes, but in the other three, her teachers said she "only participates if she wants to" or she "seldom turns in assignments." Chris estimated that he was "making Bs and Cs, and I think I have like a D, too, so I need to get them up." In actuality, his biology, history, and literature teachers all said he was failing.

Deshawn seemed to epitomize the under-estimation of his academic problems. He told me he had a B average in technology class, but his teacher reported that he seldom does work and "will ask to do something else when the work is too hard, which is often." Deshawn also told me that he would pass all but one class (math) for the spring semester, but most of his teachers indicated that he would fail. For instance, his Biology teacher told me that Deshawn had a 40 average in Biology at the beginning of May. Deshawn also seemed to project some of his behavior onto other students. He told me that in his biology class, "every day somebody doing something to get us in trouble." However, the biology teacher noted that Deshawn disrupts the class more than anybody; she even said he threw dissecting knives at other students. Deshawn also talked about "some students who should have been held back who were passed on to the ninth grade" but he was quick to add "that wasn't me" although he said he "wasn't ready for ninth grade."

Feelings of Alienation

Four of the students indicated that they feel alone or different, either because they had few friends at the school, felt like they had no one to turn to, or felt like the "odd-man-out." For example, when asked if there was anyone at the school he felt he could go to for help on anything, Deshawn said, "No. I wouldn't, I would just keep it to myself. Try to work it out on my own." Tamara spent a lot of time talking about racial issues, and she seems to feel out of place among students of her own race. She seems to identify more with the African-American students and their culture. At one point, she said, "In the morning, there's this white table. Like all the white people sit there. And then they look at me weird cause I go sit at another table. I like go sit with all my friends, and

they're all black. I have no white friends at this school. And people just look at me weird, like 'why don't you have any white friends?'" DeAndra said she only has "like four best friends in this school" and that she doesn't even consider them friends outside of school "because I hang out mostly with my cousins and people that I know from outside of school or whatever." DeAndra also indicated that she is teased because of her big size, which might explain why she does not make friends with her classmates.

> I'm big…. That's why people might say something to me, and I'll be like 'OK.' And, but the next day, they be in your face, it might be like they're birthday and they be like 'You going to give me a dollar? Didn't you bring me anything for my birthday?' And I'll be like 'What did you say to me yesterday?' And they be like, they smiling in your face. That's like two-faced.

Matthew also does not seem to have many friends in the school. When describing what he does before school if he cannot go to the ROTC room, he said he would go to the Commons area. "Mainly that's where a bunch of the kids come, and they talk. They just talk and eat breakfast or whatever. I just sit there and wait til the bell rings."

Are these students resistant in all classes, to all activities, or is their non-participation selective?

As Lindquist (1994) says, resistance is a slippery concept. All of the students, while not participating or performing in some classes, did have at least one class which they enjoyed and in which they achieved, based on both their own and teachers' reports. None of them are resistant to education in general. They seem more likely to be resistant to a particular teacher, a particular subject, or a particular school. For instance, Jasmin did not like her Spanish teacher because the teacher is "too nosey." Deshawn admitted that math is "hard" for him, and therefore, that is not his favorite subject. Matthew

"hates" this school because he had to transfer there from a private prep school and has had a hard time adjusting. He indicated that he has had a hard time making friends at his new school and railed against perceived inequalities. He feels that certain clubs and students are given preferential treatment and that everyone else is ignored. Matthew also repeatedly remarked on the ineptitude of the teachers, "who don't know how to teach, in my opinion, and he described a confrontation he had with a geometry teacher, whom he and his parents considered to be "unprofessional." After the confrontation, Matthew said he and his parents "could not get anywhere" with the principal or the counselors, who refused to move him to another teacher's class.

After comparing the students' descriptions of their classes and teachers with the teachers' descriptions of the students' performance, it appears that enjoying a class is a necessary but not sufficient precursor to participating in that class (see examples cited above). Sometimes liking a class or a teacher translated into increased performance (18 instances); sometimes it did not (16 instances). However, there did seem to be a relationship between disliking a teacher and lack of performance (15 instances). Only two students appeared to be making passing grades in a class that they profess not to enjoy.

How do students' family members and situations impact their participation or resistance?

Family Conflicts

Four of the students described conflicts with their parents. Tamara, the only white participant, said her real father died just two year ago, and she is upset that her stepfather, who she described as being "is a little bit racist," is forcing her to transfer to

another school further out in the suburbs. "I don't want to move cause I've been here since kindergarten." Matthew is very unhappy that his parents pulled him out of his private prep school to send him to a lower-income public school. "We had to move. I was really, really hurt…. It's unfair. You can take me out of my karate, but don't take me out of (prep school). But they took me out and made me come here." DeAndra's parents also do not live together, and she said, "my dad, I don't want to talk about him." Jamal took a zero on a social studies project, which involved creating an edible flag or other symbol of a country, because "I didn't get a chance to make the cake cause me and my mom aren't eye-to-eye right now…. I couldn't really find anything in the house that I could use."

Non-Academic Priorities

Some parents seem to send a message that school is not a priority. Tamara's teachers say she has an absence problem, that she "goes right up to the absence limit every semester." Tamara said, "Some parents are just like 'you can stay out,' and if they know about it, then they will let you stay out. That's what kind of parent my mom is." She also said her mother "writes notes" for her absences. Jasmin said she gets conflicting messages regarding priorities from her divorced parents. "I hear two different things, and it's kinda hard sometimes." Her father tells her to "play this, that, and the other and work on your sports" while her mother tries to get her to pay more attention to academics. Many students indicated basic disengagement from school on the part of their parents, saying things like, "She works a lot now," or "She hasn't really ever been up here (at school)."

Home Responsibilities

Others indicated that, because of parents' work schedules, they had to take primary responsibility for their own daily care, and often that of younger siblings. Deshawn said, "After school, I just go home, clean out my room, wash my clothes. Work. Sit down and watch TV or sleep or do my homework." Jasmin said she has to fend for herself in the afternoons and evenings because her mother does not get home until after 6:30. "My dad's up North, so, you know, it's just me and my Mom and her boyfriend's living there right now. But when they come home, they eat dinner by themselves cause I've already eaten." DeAndra is responsible for watching her 12-year-old brother after school because her mother's work schedule often involves nights and evenings. She has to "make sure he does his homework, make sure he reads his books, … he can't watch a lot of TV cause my mother doesn't really like that, so I do that. I make sure he eats and he washes before he gets ready for bed. (I) cook or whatever." However, none of the students directly attributed their academic problems to their added responsibilities at home.

I will be discussing my final research question—what do these students suggest should be changed about their classes, or about school in general, to allow them to learn or encourage them to participate—in the implications section.

SECTION 8

CONCLUSIONS

All of the students in this study were unique, and several idiosyncratic factors seemed to be contributing to their lack of achievement in school. The fact that Jamal travels across town to attend school is probably a big reason he has trouble concentrating in school. Damon seems to be focusing on his expectation that his athletic ability will get him into college. Teacher comments suggest that Damon may have attention-deficit disorder (ADD). Evelyn seems to be working hard now to make up for past mistakes, but she indicated that she has not always valued education. Deshawn seems to be a frustrated learner, and his teachers suggested that he may even have a learning disability. Jasmin also indicated that she has test anxiety. DeAndra's feelings of alienation from her peers make her uncomfortable at school, and she seems to have power issues—she wants to be in control and likes things her way, not the teacher's way. Tamara's family issues seem to be a big distraction, and her parents' preoccupation with racial issues also seems to have rubbed off on her. As stated earlier, Chris' responses on the TSCS:2 indicate that his cheerful, positive attitude may be covering up "psychological distress." I have several theories about Matthew's resistance. First, he has a high impression of his own abilities and may act out to cover his insecurities and fear of failing. Second, he may be failing classes on purpose so that his parents will send him back to a private school. If that is the case, he may be getting his wish. He said his parents are considering sending him to a school in Alabama next year. Third, Matthew may be an intellectually gifted student who is very bored and not receiving an appropriate education. He evidences

several characteristics of giftedness (Davis & Rimm, 1998)—superior language ability, keen observation, advanced interests, high career ambition, fascination with books, emotional sensitivity, and interpersonal difficulties.

However, there also seem to be commonalities that suggest several more general potential causes of student resistance to schooling. First, many of these students have personal and family issues that interfere with learning. Family conflicts, such as Matthew and Tamara's resentment of their parents' decisions to make them transfer schools, can be a big distraction to students. Parental expectations and values concerning school also seem to have a tremendous impact on these students. Tamara's mother seems to be sending a message that school is not a priority when she allows her daughter to stay home from school when she is not sick. Jasmin reported that her father emphasizes athletics over academics, and several students said their parents do not take time to visit the school or get to know their children's teachers. These students' parents seem not only to be too busy to participate in school activities, they also seem too busy to monitor their children's daily activities and ensure that they do their homework. Instead, many of these students are responsible for taking care of themselves and their siblings, including cooking and cleaning.

It is interesting to note that two of the male participants mentioned that they were more motivated by male teachers than female teachers. Hébert and Olenchak (2000) found that mentors can help reverse the pattern of underachievement in gifted male students by supporting the student, nurturing skills and intelligence, and serving as a model for achievement. Mentors may also be important for underachieving minority

students in regular-education classes, especially male students who may not have a strong male role-model at home.

Second, students seem to be drained by extracurricular activities or jobs. The jobs may be a necessity to help their families pay for monthly bills, and outside activities might be more rewarding than classroom activities, but both are outside distractions that limit the amount of time students spend concentrating on classwork. Even practicing for a school team takes up a lot of time in the afternoons. As Jasmin said, “When I did have practice, I would go straight to practice after school." She said practice would last from 3:30 until after 6:00 most evenings.

Third, some elements of the school environment are increasing these students’ resistance to schooling. They want a caring community environment, but students repeatedly described the school as a “prison” or a “bomb shelter”—a place without windows where a policeman patrols the halls with a gun and the administrators yell at the students using a bull horn. Chris was correct when he described the school environment as having a psychological impact on the students. During my visits to the school, the students seemed tense. My impression was that this school is not a place where academic risk-taking and creativity were encouraged. Instead, it seems to be a school concerned first and foremost with maintaining order. The students are not allowed to carry backpacks for security reasons, and they are penned up in the cafeteria until the first bell rings in the morning. They cannot go to a classroom or to their locker without a special pass before school starts, and they are herded out of the school building as soon as the dismissal bell rings in the afternoon. Students who are tardy to class are locked out and kept in the cafeteria under the supervision of an administrator for the remainder of the

period. Most of the students in this study felt such blanket policies were burdensome and ineffective. Rules are necessary, but when rules subordinate students, students can become resentful and possibly resistant to schooling.

Fourth, teachers are clearly a major factor discussed by these students. Emerick (1992) also found this to be true when she studied gifted students' perceptions of factors that reversed their pattern of underachievement. In both studies, the students were more likely to achieve in a class that they enjoyed and for teachers that they felt cared about students as individuals and who were willing to talk to students about personal problems and come early or stay late to help students with academic difficulties. They applauded teachers have high expectations for their students' achievement. They did not like teachers who seem to teach just to draw a paycheck, who arrive at school as late as possible and leave school as early as possible. (I can confirm that a number of teachers did not spend much time in their rooms before or after school because I had a difficult time tracking some of them down to fill out the teacher questionnaires.) In my study, the students emphasized that they wanted teachers who are able to control the students in their classes. They felt that teachers who do not have good classroom-management skills "cheat students out of an education." They spoke glowingly of teachers who know their subject matter, enjoy their jobs, and try to make learning a fun, interactive experience. The students' eyes lit up when they talked about such teachers, even though the teachers did not always see that same enthusiasm in the classroom. The students were listening and absorbing information in those classes, even if other factors were interfering with their studying or completing assignments. In other words, enjoyment of the class and

respect for the teacher are necessary for achievement to take place, but in and of themselves, those factors are not sufficient to guarantee success.

The students' and teachers' differing descriptions of what is happening in classrooms brings up an interesting question--is what we have been calling resistance actually resistance or is it simply the student's response to what they feel is irresponsible teaching? Ponticell (2001) suggests that "what teachers perceive as a lack of motivation in students may be an incompatibility between students' motivation and classroom learning experiences and interactions." Orange and Horowitz (1999) found a similar phenomenon when they compared the literary task preferences of minority male students to the preferences of those students' teachers. "We studied the apparent causes of the differences. Closer inspection revealed an emergent theme of 'academic standoff' or mutual resistance, in which teachers and students each had perceptions that clearly counterbalanced those of the other. Teachers felt that students did not care, and students felt that teachers did not care" (p. 26). The teachers may be missing the students' interest and abilities because they are focusing on behavioral markers, such as turning in all assignments or sitting quietly in their seats. A follow-up study might use classroom observations in addition to teacher and student issues to help clarify what is really happening in these instructional situations.

In reviewing what these students are looking for in a teacher—the ability to control their students, a caring attitude, a willingness to help, a knowledge of their subject matter, and an attempt to employ diverse instructional techniques and materials—I realized that what these students are asking for is nothing more or less or different than good, committed teaching.

SECTION 9

IMPLICATIONS

What can preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and administrators learn from this preliminary analysis of the perceptions of students who evidence resistance to school? There are many factors that schools cannot control—family problems, out-of-school activities like jobs, etc. Educators need to concentrate on school and classroom factors mentioned here that can contribute to the learning success of "at-risk" students (e.g. Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989), such as giving students caring, creative teachers who want to be there and want to help the students succeed. Teachers should also include authentic and meaningful tasks in the curriculum.

The students in my study had some insightful suggestions to make school a better place to learn. First, they want a pleasant environment to work in, not a prison atmosphere. Five of the students said all schools should have plenty of windows so "you can get some sunlight" and "see outside." They want a clean environment and don't want to "walk into a classroom and see roaches and spider webs."

Second, they want a safe environment. Several suggested stricter rules, more policemen, and metal detectors to "cut down on the violence." That suggestion seems contradictory in light of earlier complaints that the administrators and some teachers are "too strict." The students expect school personnel to prevent fights and ensure that weapons are not brought into the school. However, they do not want teachers and administrators to regulate every student action and create little rules about everything.

Third, Matthew recommends school uniforms to reduce competition and make the students feel more like a community. He said he has "seen what (uniforms) can do. They can really change a school. Most people think they're just pants and a shirt, but after you have about 2,000 kids walking around looking the same, they tend to bond more."

Fourth, earlier I discussed the students' desire for caring teachers, and two of the students had practical policy suggestions for how to get quality teachers and administrators into schools. DeAndra suggested that schools give practical evaluations, not just paper-and-pencil tests to prospective teachers. She said part of the interview should be to put the teacher "in a room with a group of people, with like a class, and you observe them and make sure they're qualified." Chris suggested a similar system for choosing administrators, except he would have a longer trial period where "they'll be watched (often), and after your trust is finally prevailed, then you'll get the job." Finally, two students suggested curriculum changes. Jasmin thinks block scheduling would be helpful. "If you spend two hours in a class, I think that you understand it more than spending 45 minutes." Jamal would like to see schools have special classes to prepare students for standardized tests.

Again, when you look at the ideas these resistant learners had for making schools better places to learn, many of their suggestions are the same as the recommendations being made by educational reformers.

SECTION 10

NEXT STEPS

More research needs to be done focusing on resistant students' perceptions of and experiences in the classroom. On one hand, this study shows how the students' perceptions can reinforce our understandings of what students need. On the other hand, this study, as well as others, indicates that the students' point-of-view can be drastically different from that of teachers or administrators in a specific situation. Students, even the ones most teachers consider resistant and uninvolved, pay close attention to their teachers' actions and attitudes and are sensitive to the school climate. They see things most adults overlook, and their opinions should be heard. What they have to say just might make schools a better place for all students to learn.

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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL CONSENT FORM

I agree to allow my child, (Student's Name), to take part in a study titled, "Students' Self-Perceptions and Perceptions of Schooling", which is being conducted by Ms. Susan Garber and Dr. Nancy Knapp from the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Georgia (770-465-6879). I do not have to allow my child to be in this study if I do not want to. My child can stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have the information related to my child returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

- The reason for the study is to find out what schooling is like from a student's point of view.

- My child may understand his or her own motives better after participating in the interviews. He or she will also have the satisfaction of knowing that someone is interested in his or her ideas. The researchers hope to help improve education by helping teachers and administrators better understand their students' ideas and viewpoints and better meet their students' needs.

- If I allow my child to take part, my child will be asked to complete the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and be interviewed by Ms. Garber approximately three times during the spring semester. These interviews will be audiotaped and scheduled at my child's convenience. My child will not miss important instructional time.

- The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale has been used with high-school students in many studies. During the interviews, students will be asked to express only their own ideas and opinions and will be free to determine the scope and content of their answers, so there should be little risk of stress or discomfort. The interviews will be recorded only for transcription purposes. Only Mrs. Garber will listen to them.

- Any information collected about my child will be held confidential unless otherwise required by law. Tapes and written instruments will be labeled using a pseudonym (a fake name) for each child, and only pseudonyms will be used in reports of this research. All data will be kept in a secured location for an indefinite amount of time for the purposes of education or research.

- Ms. Garber or Dr. Knapp will be happy to answer any questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. They may be contacted by telephone (Ms. Garber--770-465-6879; Dr. Knapp-- 706-542-4255), by email (susan_garber @ gwinnett.k12.ga.us or nknapp@coe.uga.edu), or by mail (329 Aderhold Hall, UGA, Athens, GA 30602).

- I understand the study procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to allow my child to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

_____

Signature of Researcher. Date

_____

Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

Questions or problems regarding my child's rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia D. Alexander, M.A., Institutional Review Board, Office of the Vice President for Research, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

I , (Student's Name), agree to take part in a study titled, "Students' Self-Perceptions and Perceptions of Schooling", which is being conducted by Ms. Susan Garber and Dr. Nancy Knapp from the Educational Psychology Department at the University of Georgia (770-465-6879). I do not have to be in this study if I do not want to. I can stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have the information related to me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

- The reason for the study is to find out what schooling is like from a student's point of view.

- Students who take part may understand themselves better after participating in the interviews. They will also have the satisfaction of knowing that someone is interested in them and their ideas. Ms. Garber also hopes to help improve education by helping educators better understand their students' ideas and viewpoints.

- If I decide to take part, and my parent or guardian also consents, I will be asked to complete the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and I will be interviewed by Ms. Garber approximately three times during the spring semester. These interviews will be audiotaped and scheduled at my convenience.

- The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale has been used with high-school students in many studies. During the interviews, students will be asked to express only their own ideas and opinions and will be free to determine the scope and content of their answers, so there should be little risk of stress or discomfort.

- Any information collected about me will be held confidential unless otherwise required by law. Tapes and written instruments will be labeled using a pseudonym (a fake name) for each student, and only pseudonyms will be used in reports of this research.

- Ms. Garber or Dr. Knapp will be happy to answer any questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. They may be contacted by telephone (Ms. Garber--770-465-6879; Dr. Knapp-- 706-542-4255), by email (susan_garber @ gwinnett.k12.ga.us or nknapp@coe.uga.edu), or by mail (329 Aderhold Hall, UGA, Athens, GA 30602).

- I understand the study procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to take part in this study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

_____

Signature of Researcher Date

_____

Signature of Student Participant Date

Questions or problems regarding my rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia D. Alexander, M.A., Institutional Review Board, Office of the Vice President for Research, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Intro: I'm doing a study of what students think about school and themselves and how they think schools could change and be better places for different kinds of students. I'm really interested in your ideas and what you think. Everything we talk about is basically for your ears and mine, unless you tell me something that might mean someone could get hurt (for instance, if you say something that sounds like you are going to beat someone up or if it sounds like you might hurt yourself). Then I would probably try to get you to talk to someone else about it. At the end of all these interviews, I am going to write a paper about what kids think about school , but no one will ever know who told me what, because I'll change the names, and I never share any of what you say with your teachers or anything. Is it OK with you if we talk this way?

1. Before we talk about school, what kind of things do you like to do outside of school; how do you spend your time?
   P: (Leisure or favored activities)

   **What things are most important to you right now?

2. How about in school? What do you do in school?
   P: (Walk through typical day, from waking and discuss each class individually)
   P: What's kind of good in school?
      P: What do you like about that? (Get descriptions of any classes, teachers, or activities the student for which expresses enthusiasm.)
         P: (If student mentions only lunch) What about the rest of school? Are there any other parts you kind of like?
         P: (If student says 'nothing') Well, is there any part that's better than the rest, that isn't too bad? (suggest options, but don't push!)
      P: What's not so good? Are there parts that aren't so great?
         P: What is it that makes that not much fun? (Get descriptions of all classes, teachers, or activities student dislikes,)
         P: How do you feel in that situation?

   **What kind of student are you? What kind of grades do you make?

3. Is this school a good place for people to learn stuff?
   P: Do they teach important stuff?
   P: Do the teachers help people learn?
      P: Are different teachers different?
      P: Is it different for some kids vs. themselves?
   P: Do you think the teachers in this school like kids and want to help them? (same probes)
   P: What about the other adults in this school?
   P: Would you say that there is anyone in this school who is particularly helpful to students? Particularly <u>not</u>?
   P: What do your parents (?) think about this school?

4. What about the other kids in this school? What are they like?
   P; (probe peer relationships & groups—is there a "slacker" group?
   P: Do you think they feel the same as you? Why?
   P: Are there some students who feel differently? Why?

5. Do you think most schools are like this?
   P: What about like middle school or elementary?
      P: (earlier history)
      P: Did you ever have a good teacher/bad teacher?
      P: (did they every feel differently about school?)

6. What do you want to do when you get out of here?
   P: (When and how are they leaving?)
   P: (fun plans)
   P: (career plans)
   P: What do you need to do that? (i.e., academic degrees)
      P: (detail and realism of plans)
   P: What do your parents think about all this?

7. If you could change anything about this school, what would you change?
   P: What else (keep asking)?
   P: How would you make a school that was a really good place to learn?
   P: (if they would close it) What would you do instead?

APPENDIX D

TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Colleague,

I am a language-arts teacher in Gwinnett County. For my master's thesis, I am conducting a study of students' attitudes and self-concepts in school. A student in one of your classes, (Student's Name), has been suggested as a possible participant in this study. In order to finally determine whether this student is appropriate for this study, I need your input. Please complete the following 10 indicators concerning this student's activities in your class, and add any comments that you feel would help me understand this student better.

1. When in class, this student participates in class discussions.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

2. When in class, this student works well independently.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

3. This student completes homework and other assignments on time and to teacher specifications.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

4. When in class, this student is cooperative.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

5. When in class, this student just acts like he/she is working.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

6. When in class, this student works well with other students.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

7. When trying to learn, this student has trouble understanding the concepts presented in this class.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

8. This student asks for extra help with assignments when necessary.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

9. When in class, this student seems happy.

   Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

10. When in class, this student seems bored or dissatisfied.

    Almost never Seldom Sometimes Usually Almost always

11. Comments (please use back of sheet if necessary):

Please return this form in the school office when complete. Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Your professional opinion is important to me.