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ABSTRACT

This study examines influences on the high reading achievement of two low-income, African American fifth graders, both girls, and both of whom lived with their grandmothers. Data came from interviews with the students, their teachers, and their custodial guardians and from observations of the students at school and at home. Results indicated that while one of the students lived in dire poverty with no evidence of reading material around the house, and the other lived in poverty with reading material clearly present at home, both were high achieving readers who were significantly influenced by their grandmothers (who promoted high reading achievement). Both grandmothers stressed the importance of reading and education, and both grandmothers were involved in their granddaughters' education. Both girls had attended the Head Start program, and both attended elementary schools that promoted high reading achievement. Though the two girls had very different dispositions and reputations, they both possessed strong self-concepts as readers and as students, and both had long-term academic and professional goals. The elements that appeared to be of greatest influence in the academic success of these students were encouragement and high expectations from both family and teachers, along with early reading success and student motivation. (Contains 26 references.) (SM)

Literacy in the Face of Poverty:
Two Case Studies of High Achieving Low-Income African American
Fifth Grade Readers

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Abstract

Many researchers agree that low-income children are 'at risk' of school failure. All too often, poor academic performance in low-income African American children is blamed on a student being "socially disadvantaged," coming from a family that cannot adequately prepare the child for a school system based on mainstream culture. However, this explanation of failure does not address why some low-income African American children succeed in spite of the obstacles they face due to their low-income status. This study is an attempt to examine and understand some of the influences on high reading achievement of two low-income African American elementary students. The elements that appear to be most influential are encouragement and high expectations from both family and teachers along with early reading success and student motivation.

Introduction

African American children are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than White children. In fact, 32.7% of African American children under the age of 18 live in poverty as compared to 12.9% of White children (Youth Indicators, 1999). Academically, low-income African American children tend to lag behind the national average by up to two years (Comer, 1988, 1997). Because of this lag in academic performance, low-income African American children have become increasingly referred to as “at-risk” for school failure and “socially disadvantaged,” having parents who provide little or no literacy support in the home (Baumann & Thomas, 1997). However, despite the odds of poverty, some low-income African American children become high-achieving readers. (Comer, 1988, Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996, and Baumann & Thomas, 1997). What accounts for the reading success of some and the failure of others? Is reading achievement influenced by family members’ attitudes toward reading? The student’s attitude? What role do teachers play in a student’s reading success? In an effort to learn more about reading success in the face of poverty, I collected case study data in which I examined the question, “What can we learn about the particular circumstances of low-income African American fifth graders who become high achieving readers?”

There has been little research, at the intermediate elementary age level, on high-achieving African American readers from low-income backgrounds. This study is an attempt to bring issues specific to this little-studied population to the forefront and see how these children overcome odds that defeat many of their peers. Most research of high-achieving, low-income students has been conducted with young children in pre- and early elementary school or at the high school level. This research has centered on two areas. First, research on young children is often focused on the type and amount of parental involvement in literacy activities in the home (Edwards, 1999; Miller, 1982; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). While educators often subscribe to the notion that low-income families are unable to provide the exposure young children need to be successful in

mainstream schools, Miller (1982) suggests that it is the nonstandard language and social skills young low-income children learn that can jeopardize their reading achievement. Does this mean that the families of high achieving readers exposed their children to more mainstream language and social practices while they were young than those of low readers? Are children living with illiterate family members doomed to fail because they will not have the necessary literacy experiences to make them successful? In addition, how do Head Start preschool programs impact the many low-income preschoolers who attend?

Second, research on young, low-income children has also focused on student literacy gains from the type of instruction they receive upon entering elementary school (Purcell-Gates & Dahl, 1991). For example, Purcell-Gates (1995) found that most school curricula do not allow access to literacy for all students. Teachers have preconceived notions about which children will be successful and which will fail. In addition, instruction is based on prefocused, standardized curricula that are not sensitive to the needs of low-income children. In order to change this, Purcell-Gates suggests that teachers should be trained to see all children as capable of learning and curricula are changed to begin literacy instruction from the learner's "Primary Discourse." So, do currently successful low-income African American readers have teachers who believe in their abilities? Is the instruction they receive more tailored to their individual needs than their low-achieving peers?

Research conducted with low-income African American high school students has centered primarily on underachievement as a result of identity struggles (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) or social class issues (MacLeod, 1995). Fordham and Ogbu argue that many academically successful African American high school students are afraid of being viewed as White or "raceless" (Fordham, 1988) which results in diminished academic effort and underachievement. MacLeod also found that, in spite of high aspirations for academic and occupational success from both themselves and their families, African American high

school students from low-income backgrounds performed less well in school than would be expected.

Comer and Poussaint (1992) explain that as early as age ten (fifth grade), children begin to search for their personal identity and that it is then that peer-group culture becomes extremely influential. Peers often put pressure on one another to conform to ethnic stereotypes. If this pressure is placed on an adolescent, in this case a fifth grader, while he is struggling with his ethnic identity, the result may be diminished academic achievement (Comer and Poussaint). But do low-income African American ten-year-olds really begin to feel the identity and social pressures typically associated with academic underachievement at the middle and high school levels? Using the case study data I gathered, I investigated if feelings of racelessness have begun to surface in low-income African American intermediate elementary school students who are high-achieving readers.

Durkin (1984) conducted a study during which she interviewed highly successful, low-income African American fifth grade readers and their parent(s)/guardian(s) (henceforth to be referred to as “parents”), teachers, and principals. Durkin interviewed 13 principals, 11 teachers, the parents of 15 students, and 23 students; however, she only conducted one interview per participant and collected no observational data in either the students’ classrooms or homes. While Durkin found that 14 out of the 15 highest achievers planned to attend college and that the students’ families viewed reading achievement as important for “achieving the good life,” Durkin’s study leaves many questions unanswered. First, what type of reading instruction did each of the participants receive? Did the students appear motivated and attentive during reading instruction or did they appear off-task and disinterested? Second, did the participants read for pleasure and have access to literature in their homes? Did the participants own books, make weekly trips to the library, or did they only read at school? Durkin tried to address several of these questions in her interviews, yet with her relatively large number of participants, she had

little time to get to know the students individually and thus, little time to collect detailed data about the students' reading practices in their homes.

Conceptual Framework

Aside from an individual's innate ability to learn to decode and comprehend text, there are three primary elements that influence elementary reading achievement (Slavin et al., 1996). First, the home environment plays a crucial role in the child's school readiness, motivation to learn, and the amount of academic support the child receives outside of school. Heath (1983) has found that the ways parents interact with their children greatly impacts a student's reading readiness. While "Reading in Roadville (a White community) is a frequently praised ideal, in Trackton (a Black community), almost no one talks about reading as a activity unto itself" (p. 231). Yet, it is this 'reading as an activity unto itself' during which children learn words from context, and it is learning words from context that accounts for the learning of approximately one-third of all new words that children are expected to master each year (Adams, 1990).

Slavin et al. (1996) also explain the importance of parental involvement in children's schooling. Traditionally, families from culturally diverse populations and the schools their children attend have viewed themselves as institutions that interact separately with children. However, this separation can actually be detrimental to a student's academic achievement (Slavin et al). Parents need to know how to communicate their concerns to their children's teachers and school. Likewise, teachers and schools need to continually update parents about students' academic performance. Slavin et al. and Comer and Poussaint (1992) state that parents' involvement with their children, the schools their children attend, and knowledge of curriculum are key components to a child's reading success. Without high parental involvement in schools, students have less motivation and less support to achieve high academic standards (Slavin et al., 1996).

The second element that influences student reading achievement is the type of reading instruction the student receives. A student who receives instruction in a classroom with a balanced literacy program is much more likely to become a high-achieving reader (Cooper, 1997). Cooper suggests that a balanced literacy program include activities that motivate students to perform their best in reading, skill instruction based on individual students' needs, and daily opportunities for students to read and write. Juel and Minden-Cupp (1997) would agree, after finding that students who receive varied instruction tailored to their specific literacy needs perform better than students who receive the same, non-specific, whole class instruction.

The third element that impacts reading achievement is a student's overall view of himself as a student and a reader. Students who feel accepted at school and believe that they can achieve academic success perform much better than those students who feel isolated and that academic success is unattainable (Comer, 1988). In addition, student beliefs about academic achievement and future success impact school performance (Durkin, 1984). For example, Durkin found that although high-achieving students did not like the skill-based work required in their reading classes, they did enjoy reading for pleasure. This led Durkin to attribute part of the students' reading success to the fact that they had positive views of reading that lead to greater exposure to reading materials, more reading practice, and thus, higher reading achievement.

One area of self-perception that is not understood at the intermediate elementary age is whether high-achieving students feel they must give up their cultural roots in order to be successful. Fordham (1988) found that successful African American high school students have a fear of being viewed as raceless. Comer and Poussaint (1992), suggest that high-achieving elementary students can feel alienated from their same race peers, as if they are relinquishing a part of their racial identity. Yet, they provide no clear evidence for this claim. Do successful, low-income, African American fifth-grade readers feel they are

giving up their race and selling out to mainstream White society if they are high-achieving students?

Parental involvement, reading instruction, and student self-perception each play individual roles in the reading achievement of low-income, African American children. Researchers have come to understand how each element alone can promote or deter reading achievement. However, it is the interaction among the three elements, the strength of the triangulated bond that appears to provide a foundation strong enough for students to overcome the obstacles placed in their way by poverty and racism (Slavin et al., 1996). But do all three elements have to stand together? Two? Or are researchers overlooking other factors influential to student reading success?

By conducting two case studies, I was able to collect in-depth data regarding the students' exposure to literacy activities and rituals in their homes, literacy instruction and support at school, and the students' feelings about the value of literacy for their lives. Evidence gathered for these case studies was analyzed to determine which literacy experiences and types of support the students received. While the results of these studies have not resulted in a formula for reading success for low-income African American students, the data I collected may provide insight into factors that influence high reading achievement in low-income, African American students.

Design and Methods of Study

In order to answer the question, "What can we learn about the particular circumstances of low-income African American fifth graders who become high achieving readers?" I gathered case study data about two high-achieving, African American fifth-grade readers from low socioeconomic backgrounds. I defined low-income as the students' qualification for free or reduced school lunch. I defined high reading achievement as the students performing at least one year above grade level in reading as evidenced by teacher reports, graded report cards, and standardized test scores.

My selection of study participants was not easy. Of the five schools I contacted, only one had African American students who fit the criteria of being both low-income and high-achieving readers. Both students in this school were female and similar in reading achievement level. However, one of the girls was homeless while the other lived in a stable living situation. As I had planned, initially, to conduct only one case study, I had to choose which of these students fit best with my criteria. Since my focus was on children usually thought to be disadvantaged or low-income, it was my preference to interview the homeless student. But while waiting for human subjects approval, her mother gave birth thus making it impossible to gather in-depth case study data about her family during the allotted data collection time. Thus, I selected the second girl, Samantha, as my first study participant.

Five months, and a new school year later, I collected case study data on a second student for comparative purposes. I contacted a different fifth grade teacher at the same school my first study participant attended. The teacher immediately thought of one student who fit my criteria of being both low-income and high-achieving and thus, my second study participant, Ramona, was named.

I chose to study fifth graders for two reasons. First, since elementary students tend to remain in one school from kindergarten through fifth grade, I believed there would be a lengthier, more accessible record of the students' high reading achievement than at the middle school or high school levels. While my theory of low elementary student mobility was accurate in Ramona's case as she has attended her current school since Kindergarten, it was disproved by Samantha who had attended 4 schools in 6 years. However, I did find Samantha's school records complete and was able to confirm, through an examination of report cards and standardized test scores, that both Ramona and Samantha had consistently been high-achieving readers. While some high-achieving fifth graders may have been placed into advanced or gifted programs at this point in their education, I did not consider them for this study. I was interested in high-achieving readers in typical public school classrooms.

My second reason for interviewing fifth graders was that of maturity. While many fifth graders may lack the skills necessary for communicating their thoughts and feelings during an interview, I believed that I was more likely to find a fifth grader who was able to discuss issues about her reading success than one of her younger schoolmates. Because fifth graders can be somewhat guarded in their talk with adults, I met with Samantha informally and talked to Ramona over the phone to discuss the study and get to know them. I have several years of experience in teaching and tutoring fifth graders and during those years, developed friendly relationships with most of my students. Samantha and Ramona were no different. We developed easy, comfortable relationships immediately, allowing for smooth interviews and straightforward data collection.

Each case study consisted of interviews and observations of each participant's classroom and home. I conducted interviews with Samantha, her fifth grade teacher (Tanya) and her custodial guardian (her great-grandmother, Grace). I interviewed Samantha two times and interviewed both Tanya and Grace one time. Similarly, I conducted interviews with Ramona, her fifth grade teacher (Andrea) and her grandmother, Joan. I interviewed Ramona two times and interviewed both Andrea and Joan one time.

Interviews conducted with Samantha and Ramona were less structured than those conducted with the adults. My experience is that fifth graders respond more positively to conversational interviews than being asked a list of questions. Likewise, the interviews with the grandmothers were less structured than those with the teachers. As a seventy-four year old great-grandmother raising five children between the ages of 5 and 15, Grace's wisdom came through when I asked a question and allowed plenty of time for her to respond in a conversational manner. Similarly, Joan (also in her seventies, helping to raise two grandchildren) gave more detailed and informative responses when allowed sufficient time to respond without interruption.

Interviews of each participant were semi-structured with open- and closed-ended questions. Questions concerned the students' views about reading and reading instruction

and the students' reading habits and literacy backgrounds. I also asked general questions about reading in the participants' homes and school to uncover any reading rituals, the girls' exposure to age/level appropriate reading materials, and the reading habits of their peers and family members.

The interviews conducted with the fifth grade teachers were also semi-structured, but each took on a more clinical, professional quality, as if we were two teachers conferencing about one of our students. Information about the students' specific reading skills, as well as their performance on classroom assessments, was obtained through teacher reports during the interviews. I was given access to each girl's standardized tests scores after the classroom observations. The interviews with Samantha, Ramona, Grace, and Joan were audio taped, transcribed, and coded for evidence of trends in family literacy support and student self-perception as a reader. Tanya asked that I not audio tape our interview but instead take notes on what she had to say. I conducted my interview with Andrea over the phone and, as with Tanya, took notes. These interview notes were coded for evidence of classroom and school support for Samantha's and Ramona's reading achievement.

I also collected observational data for this study. I took field notes about both Samantha and Ramona in school during classroom reading instruction. I visited each student's classroom for one 30-minute session. I looked for student participation during reading instruction. Was Samantha paying attention? Did Ramona appear interested in what the teacher was saying or doing? I also looked closely at the type of instruction occurring at that time. How much reading was actually occurring during reading instruction? Did the instruction appear to be at Samantha's and Ramona's level? Did it fit their needs?

In addition, I observed both students in their home environment. I did not expect the girls or their families to demonstrate any literacy activities. However, I looked for evidence of reading material and any natural occurrence of reading that took place during my visit. I also looked for evidence of school involvement (e.g. flyers on the refrigerator,

the children's schoolwork posted somewhere in the home) to try to determine the amount of family involvement in the girls' schooling.

I also observed Samantha as she chose two books that were a gift for her participation in this study. Samantha chose to go to a large bookstore near her home that she had passed many times but never been inside. It had been revealed to me that Samantha had never been inside any bookstore, so I was interested to see her reaction upon seeing so many books. I was also interested to see how Samantha determined what books she wanted to read. Would she only look at the cover? Would she read the book summary? Would she choose books at her level or look primarily at lower or higher level books?

Ramona chose not to visit a bookstore with me. Ramona explained there was only one book she really wanted (IR102, #9) and that she would be more comfortable with me bringing that book for her and conducting a second visit to her home.

Analysis of Data

To answer the question, "What can we learn about the particular circumstances of low-income African American fifth graders who become high achieving readers?" I collected case study data in the form of observational field notes, interview notes, and audio taped interviews. In order to arrive at findings and conclusions related to this question, I analyzed data to answer several sub-questions. First, what are the students' home environments like? What evidence is there of exposure to literacy in the home? What role do family members play in the students' reading achievement? In what ways, if any, are family members involved in the students' schooling? Is there evidence of a significant person who has influenced either student's literacy success? Second, what types of reading instruction do the students receive? Is instruction varied and tailored to their specific needs? Third, what do Samantha and Ramona say about themselves as readers and students? Do Samantha and Ramona feel accepted at school? What are Samantha and Ramona's self-

concepts as readers and students? How do issues of race appear to influence Samantha and Ramona's reading achievement?

In order to fully analyze the collected data, I began to examine transcripts, notes, and memos using an open-coding scheme. Keeping in mind my sub-questions, I examined the data for in-vivo codes and generated memos to help me think about my data more analytically. I found that my two data sets (Samantha's case and Ramona's case) could be divided into two categories: 1) behaviors that support Samantha's/Ramona's reading achievement and 2) verbal reports that support Samantha's/Ramona's reading achievement. I reduced the data to fit these two categories within the areas of Family, School, and Samantha/Ramona. After entering the data into each category, I found that the majority of Family data for both girls was about their grandmothers. However, there was also significant data about various other family members that were important for analysis. Thus, I further reduced my data by splitting the area of Family into Grace/Joan and Others. Similarly, I divided the data about School into the two groupings of Early and Recent (see Table 1). When I reentered data into the new groupings, the result was a striking pattern of evidence supportive of propositions in my conceptual framework.

Additional data consists of non-supportive behaviors of family members. While there is no evidence of non-supportive behaviors in Ramona's family, non-supportive behaviors in Samantha's family include her own behavior difficulties at school, an uncle's unwillingness to allow Samantha access to his newspaper, and the lack of reading material evident in the home. However, none of these behaviors appears to negatively impact Samantha's reading achievement. These data will be discussed further in the 'Findings' section of this paper .

Findings – Case One

The Backdrop of Poverty

As I entered Samantha's home, I was struck by the overpowering smell of decay. The entrance to the house was piled with boxes holding an assortment of gadgets and rags. Samantha led me into the kitchen where her great-grandmother, Grace, was putting the finishing touches on dinner. I was offered a cup of coffee, instant coffee in a paper cup served on a china saucer. Grace commented that the clothes, piled four feet high in a corner of the kitchen, were clean but that she is just too tired to put them away anymore. Three cabinet doors hung crooked from one hinge while the rest of the cabinet doors were missing. A television, lost in the clutter of dishes, empty boxes, and clothes on the kitchen counter, rang out with cartoons. One more stir of the pot and Grace would be ready to talk to me. She carefully wiped her hands on a dishtowel, asked Samantha to take me to the living room, and returned to her pot on the stove.

From the kitchen, I followed Samantha back through the entranceway and into her living room where rap videos blared at an ear piercing level. Samantha invited me to sit on a well-worn love seat and went to fetch her great-grandmother. As I waited, I noticed the floorboards could be seen through threadbare carpet throughout the living room. The furniture in the room consisted of an old sofa and love seat, a television stand holding the TV, and four oxygen tanks in the far corner of the room. (I later learned that several family member have severe asthma and need easy access to oxygen.) A lone picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. hung on the wall near the television. Samantha's uncle entered, we shook hands, and he turned down the television to a lower volume level. He left and began sweeping cobwebs from the dining room ceiling. Still permeating the air was the staggering smell of rot. Yet, most noticeable of all, was the stark absence of reading material anywhere in this primary living area.

Family

Samantha is one of the African American children referred to as “at-risk” and “socially disadvantaged.” Samantha is poor. She sees her father occasionally and has only recently resumed contact with her mother who has been ‘away’ for a couple of years. At ten years of age, Samantha has grown up close to issues typical of many inner-city youth (drug use, teen pregnancy, etc.). Yet, Samantha excels academically. Specifically, Samantha is a high-achieving reader with long term goals for both her education and future career. So what is it about Samantha that makes her achieve while other children in her circumstances fail?

Samantha’s family, in spite of living in poverty, is supportive of her academic success and tries to ensure that Samantha is not “socially disadvantaged.” Samantha’s 74-year-old great-grandmother and custodial guardian, Grace, has seen to it that Samantha has her own private room in which she can do her homework and read. Grace signs homework when necessary, asks Samantha about her school day, and lets her “just sit” when she sees Samantha reading in the dining or living room. Grace is also verbally supportive of Samantha. Grace is very candid when she says that Samantha is the smartest in the family. Grace tells Samantha how proud she is of her and seems genuinely impressed by Samantha’s reading success. Grace tries to ensure that Samantha behaves and continues to excel academically by being in contact with Samantha’s teacher, Tanya. Grace encourages Tanya to “stay on Samantha and keep up the good work.” (IG428-#97-98) and reminds Samantha to listen to her teacher because “If that’s what they teachin’, that’s what you have to learn!” (IG428-#33-34)

Grace also expects Samantha to think through and make some decisions about her own schooling. When Samantha’s fourth grade teacher wanted to test her for the district’s gifted program, after much discussion with Grace, it was Samantha who ultimately made the decision to take the test. Similarly, Samantha was involved in the decision as to where she would attend middle school. Samantha had the option of staying at her current school

that houses Kindergarten through eighth grades or attending a standard middle school that houses only grades 6 through 8. Samantha decided she was ready to make a change. “I’m ready to be with some big kids. I’m tired of having to watch myself around all the little kids all the time. I like the little kids, but I want to be in a school with kids more my age.”

(IS428) Grace had no objections and allowed Samantha to plan on transferring to Jefferson Middle School for sixth grade.

One of the influences on Samantha’s reading achievement appears to be Grace and her view of reading. Grace explains:

“When you’re studyin’ readin’ it’s important because this way you can learn. If I tell you everything, you’re not going to learn it ‘cause I told you how to do it. But if you read it, you learn it and you can explain it to somebody else.” (IG428, #39-43)

Grace has tried to instill in Samantha an internal reason to excel in reading. I do not know if this was instilled in Grace by her two aunts who were schoolteachers, or if Grace sees education as a way for Samantha to follow a different path than some of her struggling family members. However, it is apparent that Grace wants Samantha to lead a happy, successful life and that Grace believes it is high reading skills that will open the doors Samantha needs in order to accomplish this.

Other members of Samantha’s family are also behaviorally supportive. Samantha’s uncle often helps when Samantha has a question about her homework, while it is Samantha who helps her older and younger sisters with their reading. Unfortunately, Samantha’s family does not always recognize when they could be more supportive. For example, Samantha enjoys reading the comics and sports sections of the newspaper. However, the paper is not always available to her because her uncle keeps it in his room. Samantha also wonders why some of the members of her family choose not to read. Samantha explained, “Everyone can read, but not everyone likes to. I don’t know why they wouldn’t want to. I think everyone should read.” (IS503)

School

Samantha's reading achievement has also been supported and encouraged by the school reading programs and teachers she has encountered over the years. As mentioned earlier, Samantha has attended four schools in six years. This high-mobility does not bode well for high literacy success. But Samantha does not appear to be affected by it. Samantha is very positive about her schooling experiences and attributes her early reading success to the Head Start preschool program she attended for two years. Samantha suggests that Head Start taught her letters, letter sounds, and eventually how to read words. Samantha speaks highly of Head Start and credits the program with her early success in reading. Samantha also had very positive school experiences in first through third grades. She was a high reader in her classes, enjoyed her teachers, and developed a love of various authors including Beverly Cleary.

Samantha's recent school experience has also been positive. Samantha has attended her current school for the past two years and remained a highly successful reader. Her fourth grade teacher made sure Samantha participated in the Global Reading Challenge (a district-wide reading competition for fourth and fifth graders). This program stretched Samantha's beliefs about her capabilities as a reader and she is proud of the work she accomplished. Samantha's fourth grade teacher is also the one who asked that Samantha be tested for the Highly Capable gifted program. Although Samantha was not accepted into the program ("She did very well and I think she only missed 3 or 4 of those questions," Grace, IG428, #12), she remains proud of the fact she was given the opportunity to take the test. Samantha's fourth grade teacher also frequently contacted Grace about Samantha's high performance in reading. "He used to call me quite often and tell me how proud he was of Samantha. He said he wished everyone in his class was like her because she did so well at her work and helped others with their work. That makes you feel pretty good." (IG428, #7-9)

During this past year, as a fifth grader, Samantha has continued to excel in reading. Her current teacher, an older African American woman named Tanya, is very supportive of Samantha and sees her as an “innately smart girl...who will do very well (in life).” (IT427, #4) Samantha’s classmates are from diverse backgrounds, but the majority of her peers are African American. Samantha has had some behavioral difficulties this year that are attributed to the recent return of her mother. However, Samantha’s reading skills have not been affected and she continues to make consistent gains in reading (Tanya, IT427). Tanya structures her reading program so that each student is challenged at his or her level. Tanya has students read a variety of different materials during reading instruction. Tanya requires reports on each genre of literature throughout the year, provides daily opportunities for silent reading, and tailors reading instruction to the needs of each student (Tanya, IT427).

Tanya’s philosophy of “Do it ‘till you get it right!” keeps Samantha on task during class. Once this year, Samantha was forced to redo an assignment that she had completed incorrectly because she had not listened to the directions. Tanya’s class structure has since helped ensure that Samantha stays involved in instruction. During whole class instruction, Samantha was at the ready when Tanya asked the class questions. Typically, Samantha played in the braids piled on top of her head. Then, when she knew an answer to a question, her hand was right there to put up. It seemed to be a way for Samantha to raise her hand first when she knew the answer but avoid being called on when she didn’t know an answer. Samantha could be heard twice saying, “Oh, I just had my hands in my hair,” during my classroom observation.

The experience seemingly most influential to Samantha’s reading achievement this year was when she was chosen to read to Nelson Mandela during his recent visit to her school. Mandela gave Samantha an autograph that she cherishes. However, most important to Samantha was that Nelson Mandela thanked her for reading to him. Samantha was very proud to have been chosen to read to Nelson Mandela and sees that her high reading achievement is what allowed her this incredible opportunity.

Samantha

To substantiate Samantha's test scores, Tanya explained that Samantha's behaviors are indicative of a high-achieving reader. For example, Samantha uses a variety of strategies to figure out new words. When she cannot sound out a word, she tries to use context to help her. If she still cannot figure out the word, she will use a dictionary or other reference tool. Finally, if she still cannot get the word, she will ask an adult. (Tanya, IT427) Samantha also has excellent metacognitive skills. She knows when she doesn't understand what she is reading and tries to reread until she does understand. Samantha is attentive and fully participates in her classroom reading instruction. Samantha is clearly one of the class leaders in reading. (Tanya, IT427)

Samantha reads a variety of materials, from joke books to biographies to science fiction (all three of which were in Samantha's desk on the day of my visit). Samantha likes to be entertained by books. Samantha also reads for different purposes. She reads mostly for pleasure, but also gets information from newspapers, magazines, and her school textbooks. Samantha's favorite book of all time is The Cay and she has fond memories of Superfudge and other titles by Beverly Cleary. Samantha is an avid football fan and tries to read the sports section of the newspaper every day.

At home, Samantha goes to the library several times a week. She reads at the library but does not bring the books home. When I asked her why she didn't want to check out the books she replied, "I like to read there, but I don't like carrying a bunch of stuff home." (IS428, #48) Samantha also frequently visits the Central Area Youth Association to get extra help with homework. Samantha helps her younger siblings with their homework most afternoons. She also helps her older sister, who is in eighth grade, with her reading homework. Between all of this, and helping Grace with dinner, laundry and cleaning, Samantha tries to find some time to read novels and the newspaper at home for her own enjoyment.

Grace has raised Samantha to be proud of her cultural background, and she is. When questions arise about racial tensions in the world, Grace takes the time to explain the civil rights movement to her great-grandchildren. (IG428, 62-72) Last year, Grace allowed Samantha to travel with her Godmother to Atlanta for a family reunion. On that trip, Samantha went to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s graveside and a museum devoted to Mahatma Gandhi. During our interviews, Samantha often recounted observations of her trip to Atlanta ("I got to see Martin Luther King's preachin' robe and the bars from his jail cell," IS503) and remarked what great people she thought King and Gandhi were.

Samantha has a good view of herself as a reader. She believes herself to be a good reader for her age, yet says, "I wonder what level I'm readin' at. I know I'm a good reader 'cause I read a lot of books. But am I readin' at middle school level, high school level, what?" (IS503, 57-58) She knows she is above grade level, but seems to want to know just how high she is.

Samantha did not have much trouble in choosing which books to pick for her study participation gift. At first, Samantha looked at the covers of books to see if they looked interesting. I showed her one book that I knew most of my fifth graders had enjoyed reading in my class. Samantha recognized the book, flipped through the pages and read several lines from the middle of the book. She said it looked good and tucked it under her arm. Samantha continued to look at the covers of books, read a few lines if they seemed interesting, and move on to another book. Samantha eventually had three books in her hands, with two by the same author. Samantha noticed the duplicate author and decided to put one of those books back.

I found it interesting, but not surprising, that the two books Samantha chose for her study participation gift were both about young African American female protagonists who were independent and working to overcome struggles such as racism, abuse, and poverty. I believe Samantha saw a bit of herself in each character and that she sees herself as an intelligent, street-wise girl who will be successful as an adult. Samantha plans to be lawyer

and knows there is a great deal of reading involved in that profession. But Samantha is not intimidated, she just knows she will have to work hard.

Findings – Case Two

A Different Backdrop of Poverty

Entering Ramona's house was very different from entering Samantha's. The screen door was open and I could hear the faint hum of a television in the background. Ramona politely held the door open for me and showed me into her living room. The gold wall-to-wall carpet was worn but clean. Light shown in through three large windows covered with white lace curtains. Spilling out from the fireplace like a drift of snow was an enormous pile of what looked to be discarded mail waiting for fire to melt it into oblivion. African and African American figurines were placed on tables and shelves throughout the living room. There were boxes set about, filled with what looked to be old toys and clothes. A trio of pictures, Nelson Mandela in the center flanked by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, stared down from the entranceway leading straight ahead to the dining room. Family pictures, both old and new, were hung randomly around the room.

Ramona led me into the dining room. I could see the kitchen, clean and tidy with tile floors and intact wood cabinets. I looked to my left, across the dining room and over three laundry baskets of unfolded clothes. There sat a china cabinet stacked with random pieces of glassware, one place setting of 25th wedding anniversary china and a yellow construction-paper folder decorated with purple crayon flowers. A fish tank sat in front and slightly to the right of the china cabinet. More figurines were set on a table next to the aquarium. Another aquarium containing a turtle and a homemade sign that read "Bubba" sat behind me on a shelf. A dining table shown beneath Jet and TV Guide magazines, two children's books, and several piles of unread mail. Ramona carefully slid the collection of reading material to the side, clearing a space for my notepad and tape recorder, and offered me a seat.

Family

Ramona, like Samantha, is qualified to receive free or reduced lunch at her elementary school and thus, is considered to be of low socioeconomic status. Therefore, Ramona is also considered to be “at-risk” for school failure. However, Ramona has been a high-achieving student since she entered elementary school. Like Samantha, Ramona is a high-achieving reader with educational and career goals. So, what are the circumstances that have allowed Ramona to excel academically while other low-income African American children fail? Are there similarities between Samantha and Ramona’s lives that help explain how these two fifth graders have begun to overcome the odds of poverty when so many other children have become its victims?

Ramona’s family has gone through some difficult times over the past few years (Andrea, IA930). Ramona lives with her maternal grandparents, mother, and her 19 year-old sister in a house her grandparents’ have owned for almost fifty years. Ramona’s elementary school is three blocks from her home. Ramona’s father does not live with the rest of the family, but she sees him frequently, often two or three times a week. When asked about Ramona’s family, Ramona’s teacher (Andrea) explained that over the past three years they have all become increasingly supportive (IA930, 15-17). Ramona has received help on her homework from all of her family members at some time, although it is her mother and grandmother who most often help Ramona. Each of the family members have met with Andrea and have expressed their willingness to help Ramona succeed academically. Ramona has a fully supportive family, but my interviews and observations have revealed that one family member, Ramona’s grandmother, Joan (who is “in her seventies”, OH925), stands out as the most consistently supportive of Ramona’s reading achievement. Ramona credits Joan with helping her learn to read and explains that when she was first learning, Joan made Ramona place a book on a table and use her fingers to follow each word as she read. (IR925, 24-26) Joan then explained that Ramona also used to read and follow along with books on tape the family had at the house. (IR925, 29) It was Joan who

recognized Ramona's early reading potential and enrolled her in, and paid for, private preschool when she was too young to attend the local Head Start program. (IJ925, 41-42) It was Joan who bought Ramona "all the Sesame Street books there were" (IJ925, 12, IR925, 33) to ensure Ramona had age-appropriate reading material at home. And it is still Joan with whom Ramona climbs into bed to read aloud from her latest novel. (IJ925, 15-18)

Joan has supported Ramona in her reading achievement since Ramona was a toddler. In addition, Joan continues to set a positive example for Ramona by bringing reading material into the house and spending leisure time reading books and magazines. (IR925, 56 & IR102, 34-36) There is a great love evident between Joan and Ramona. Joan does not treat Ramona as if she can do no wrong but instead parents Ramona with a gentle firmness. During my visit, Joan scolded Ramona for not having changed out of her school uniform as soon as she arrived home. Yet, they laughed together as they discussed how Ramona has to elbow Joan awake sometimes when Ramona is reading aloud to her in bed. Joan has clearly guided Ramona throughout her life, and Ramona seems to understand how instrumental Joan has been in her reading and academic success.

School

Ramona entered Kindergarten at her current school when she was 4 four years old. Prior to Kindergarten, Ramona attended private preschool for one year, then Head Start the next. As Joan pointed out in our interview, that means Ramona had a full two years of preschool before she entered Kindergarten. Joan explains that when Ramona was young, "I used to read to her and she would pick up on some books and read them herself. She was sittin' around here with me just wastin' all of her knowledge. So, I said, 'She needs to be in school.' I figured she could do better in one of these schools than sittin' here with me." (IJ925, 35-37, 40-41)

This is Ramona's third year with her current teacher, an older White woman named Andrea. Ramona's classmates are from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but the majority are African American. Andrea tries to ensure that Ramona is challenged in her class by providing reading materials and instruction that force Ramona to stretch her capabilities. (Andrea, IA930, OC928) Ramona and Andrea have a good relationship but Ramona is beginning to feel smothered by the attention lavished on her by her teacher. (IR925, 10-16) Andrea often points out what a wonderful student Ramona is or how well Ramona completed one of her assignments. Ramona explains,

"I don't want to be admired by anyone. But she still talks about us (Ramona and her friend Ella) over and over again, and the other kids do well but she still talks about us. I'm a good student. Leave it there. Grade my work and give it to me. You don't have to tell everyone what I get." (IR102, 51-54)

In spite of feeling uncomfortable at times, Ramona enjoys freedoms in Andrea's class not afforded to other students. For example, Ramona was one of only a handful of students given the opportunity to meet Nelson Mandela when he visited her school. Ramona recalled, "He patted me on the head and asked, 'Are you the principal of this school?' I said, 'No.' It took me a while to figure out what he was saying." (IR925, 62-63) During our interview, Ramona pulled the yellow construction-paper folder decorated with purple crayon flowers from its place of prominence in the china cabinet. Inside was a newspaper clipping about Ramona and Mr. Mandela's conversation. Clearly, this was an important event in Ramona's life that she might not have experienced had it not been for Andrea and her faith in and hopes for Ramona.

Ramona

Ramona's reading skills are excellent. Her word attack and comprehension skills are very high as evidenced by Ramona's performance during reading instruction and on both Andrea's classroom assessments and standardized tests. Ramona also has good

metacognitive skills and, “if she gets stuck, she’ll reread until she figures it out. If she knows she won’t be able to figure it out, she’ll ask for help.” (Andrea, IA930, 19-20). Ramona’s homework is always complete and well done, and she is attentive and well behaved in class. (IT930, ORA928) Ramona does not like to receive a great deal of attention and, though praise is important to her, she would prefer to receive that praise individually, rather than set up as an example for her peers. (IR928) Ramona has plans to attend a grade 6 through 8 middle school next year (Jefferson Middle School, the same school Samantha now attends), and she hopes to enter an advanced placement math class. She does not want to enter the advanced placement reading class, however, because “They read too much. I wouldn’t want to have a hundred, three-hundred page books that I have to read by the end of the week!” (IR102, 70-73) After high school, Ramona plans to attend college to become an accountant or pediatrician.

When she isn’t busy with after-school activities such as Bible Study (Tuesdays) or cheerleading (Wednesdays and Fridays), Ramona likes to play with her friends who live next door. Ramona is quiet in school and at home, yet she speaks her mind when she has something to say. For example, when Andrea was chastising the class for not wanting to participate in a school letter-writing activity and being selfish, Ramona said, “What do you mean, ‘Some of you were thinking only of yourselves?’ That (because we don’t feel like writing a letter) doesn’t mean we think only about ourselves!” (ORA928, 10:14)

Ramona does not know at what level she reads, she just loves reading. Ramona gets most of her reading material at her school library. She does not appreciate many popular series books such as Goosebumps or Sweet Valley High, or books about science although science is her favorite subject. Instead, Ramona likes to read “real interesting fiction.” (IR103, 31) She likes to read stories about all kinds of people, as long as she enjoys the story. Right now Ramona is engrossed in the second book of the Harry Potter series. She was thrilled I gave her the third book in the series for participating in this study because now she will not have to borrow her friend’s copy as she has done with the first two books.

Neither my interviews nor observations lent much insight into Ramona's view of herself as a young African American girl. Ramona did mention that her grandfather grew up in the south and that they have discussed how things have changed since he was Ramona's age. However, Ramona seems to have gotten most of her information about African American history from school. Ramona's family is obviously proud of their heritage as evidenced by the assortment of old and new family pictures in their house and the great number of African and African American figurines placed in the living and dining rooms. Ramona's views on her cultural roots, however, remain a mystery.

Discussion

Samantha's family lives in dire poverty with no evidence of reading material. Ramona's family also lives in poverty but has reading material clearly present in the home. However, *de la Durkin* (1984) who found that a "significant other" plays an important role in the high reading achievement of low-income African American fifth graders, both Samantha and Ramona have significant others who promote high reading achievement.

Evidence provided about Samantha's home and family clearly points to Grace as being Samantha's significant other. Grace's actions show Samantha that she should value reading and continue to work hard to be a high achieving reader. Grace's words about Samantha and her reading ability show that Samantha has someone who believes in her and believes she can be successful. Grace is supportive, but realistic. Grace knows Samantha's strengths, and she knows Samantha's weaknesses, often reminding Samantha that she "goes to school to learn, not to teach somebody else!" (IG428, 89)

Likewise, Ramona's significant other appears to be her grandmother, Joan. Joan began early, teaching Ramona the importance of education and literacy and continues to support Ramona in her academics. Joan has also played a crucial role in helping Ramona see that reading can be enjoyable and social. Joan and Ramona have spent hours together

reading story after story. They share many fond memories and much laughter about their numerous special times over a good book.

Slavin et al. (1997) suggest that to promote high reading achievement, parents and teachers of low-income children must continually communicate with each other about a student's performance. Comer & Poussaint (1992) claim that parents' involvement with their children and their children's schools are key to a student's reading success. Analysis of the case study data presented about Samantha and Ramona, their homes, and school, also supports both of these theories.

Grace is involved with Samantha's schooling, supporting the theories of Comer & Poussaint (1992) and Slavin et al. (1997). While there is little observable evidence of school involvement in the home, interview data clearly demonstrates Grace has consistently had open communication with Samantha and her teachers about Samantha's reading performance. Additionally, through their communication, Grace and Tanya have given Samantha opportunities that have helped her gain confidence in her abilities and provided her the tools necessary for reading success.

Evidence of Joan's involvement in Ramona's school is quite evident. The phone numbers of Ramona's teacher and school are posted next to the phone. Both Joan and Ramona's mother have spent time on the phone with Andrea to try to help Ramona figure out her homework. (Andrea, IA930) Although Ramona's grandfather does not show the same amount of awareness about Ramona's schooling as Joan (he thought Ramona was doing poorly in reading and that I was there to help her), the family is well known at her elementary school and both Ramona's family and school are working together to ensure Ramona receives the best education possible.

One area not to be overlooked is the role that Head Start preschool may have played in both Samantha and Ramona's reading achievement. While there is evidence that children from Head Start programs enter school close to national norms, maintain their early achievement through first grade, and are less likely than non-Head Start graduates to be

placed in special education programs, most students lose the advantage Head Start afforded them by second or third grade. (Washington & Bailey, 1995) Samantha credits Head Start with teaching her to read. Joan believes that Ramona benefited from her Head Start program by providing her with an additional year of schooling. So, why did Samantha and Ramona appear not to have lost the advantages they may have gained in Head Start?

One of the primary criticisms of Head Start is that there is no continuation of comprehensive services that keep the home and school connected. (Washington & Bailey, 1995) However, this was not a problem in Samantha or Ramona's homes. Grace and Joan were involved in Samantha and Ramona's reading achievement before they entered preschool, and that did not end with the girls' graduation from Head Start.

In regard to elementary school, despite different mobility rates (Samantha has attended 4 school in five years while Ramona has attended the same school since kindergarten) both girls received reading instruction that promotes high reading achievement. A la Langer (1998), both girls received varied reading instruction based on a balanced literacy program approach. Both girls also received literacy instruction based on their individual needs as Juel & Minden-Cupp (1997) suggest is necessary for high reading achievement.

Finally, student self-concept did appear to promote high reading achievement for Samantha and Ramona. The two girls have very different dispositions and reputations. Samantha is a streetwise, tough-minded girl, while Ramona is considered to be a dream child. However, both clearly possess strong self-concepts as both readers and students. Neither student hesitated to label themselves as a good student and good reader. Also, both have the long-term academic and professional goals (Samantha wants to be lawyer and Ramona wants to be a pediatrician) of students who are academically motivated.

The concept of racelessness was not evident in either Samantha or Ramona. While Samantha's teacher was African American and Ramona's teacher was White, both teachers taught their students that academic achievement and school success were important to their

future. To the children in Tanya and Andrea's classes, to succeed was a great thing! (OS426, OC928) Thus, neither Samantha nor Ramona may be experiencing the negative peer pressure Comer and Poussaint (1992) suggest results in diminished academic achievement of successful African American students. Ramona does struggle with Andrea's comments about her high reading achievement and how those comments make other children in her class feel about themselves (IR925). However, at this point in the school year, any peer pressure created by Andrea's comments does not appear to decrease Ramona's efforts to succeed. But, Samantha and Ramona are still young. Comer and Poussaint also explain that extremely influential peer pressure does not begin until around age ten. Thus, Samantha (ten years old) and Ramona (nine years and eight months old) are on the edge of identity development and may not yet have begun to search for their personal identity. Issues of racelessness that are not currently evident may surface as Samantha and Ramona mature and enter middle school.

Clearly, the data in this case study support the notion that parents and schools need to work together to ensure student reading achievement. Yet, there is something more to both Samantha and Ramona's stories than their families and teachers. First, there are Samantha and Ramona. These young girls have overcome incredible odds to get where they are. Samantha doesn't have to listen to Grace when she tells her how important reading is for her future success. Ramona doesn't have to work hard in school and challenge herself in reading. In fact, they could both throw up their hands and say, "Life is just too tough right now and I don't care about school or learning or reading." Many children choose to give up in the face of adversity. But it hasn't happened to Samantha or Ramona. Yes, they both have support, far more support from home and school than many individuals will see in a lifetime. What I find important is that both girls accept that support and to listen to those around them. Samantha and Ramona are both strong enough to look outside their current situations in life and ahead to what could be very bright futures.

Was Tanya correct in saying that Samantha is just an “innately smart girl?” Is Andrea correct in saying that Ramona is “truly a gift from God?” Would another child, given the support and experiences afforded to Samantha and Ramona, be as successful as they have been? My guess is no. Not all children would know what to do with the opportunities these girls have had. Samantha and Ramona somehow seem to have helped create their worlds. There is an inner drive within each child that keeps them focused on their future. Thus, the individual student, whether it be from survival instinct or an ability to focus on a better life, must be considered as a key piece in the puzzle of success in the face of poverty.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is the fact that I am a White researcher interviewing and observing two African American children and their families. I am concerned that I will first be perceived as a White researcher coming in to “fix” something in an African American community. However, my hope is that the people who read this research will understand that I am searching for the positive forces at work in the lives of children whom many wrongly assume will fail by nature of their race and economic status.

A second limitation is that I am a middle class researcher interviewing families living in poverty. During my nine years as a reading specialist and classroom teacher, I have worked in schools with majority low-income African American populations and had to discuss personal issues around the area of literacy. Throughout my career, I have had the ability to bridge racial and social status differences when discussing academic and reading achievement with school colleagues, students, and the students’ parents. Yet, I have never lived a life of poverty and cannot fully comprehend the impact poverty makes on families and their children.

A third limitation to this study is that I could only thoroughly examine two cases. While I am not trying to generalize to the population and so do not necessarily need a large

sample base, it is still important to examine comparative aspects of my findings. For example, do my findings hold across genders? Do low-income African American boys living in situations similar to Samantha and Ramona achieve a similar level of reading success? Is there a reason that I only found females as potential participants in this study? Also, are there differences in low-income, high-achieving homeless students as compared to Samantha or Ramona's living situations? What are the circumstances of students living without an elder or extended family? Do homeless high-achieving low-income African American students show the determination to succeed that Samantha and Ramona, both with stay-at-home grandmothers, do? These are questions that still need to be explored to truly understand the forces at work for high-achieving, low-income African American readers. To this end, several more cases must be studied.

Finally, a fourth limitation is that I could not observe Samantha and Ramona in the various settings they weave through during their days. I would like to have seen them both at their local libraries. Do they read books? Do they socialize? How exactly do they use the library? Also, how do they spend their recesses? Do Samantha and Ramona play sports, talk with their friends, read? Observations of these circumstances might lead me to better understand Samantha and Ramona and their drive to succeed.

Conclusion

“The notion that intelligence and will alone determine outcomes implies that everyone has similar opportunities and faces similar obstacles. It suggests that the cream rises to the top through superior intellect and exertion.” (Comer, 1997, p. 5) Yet, educators know that many intelligent children fall victim to the virtually insurmountable obstacles that poverty puts in their paths. However, there are a few students, such as Samantha and Ramona, who overcome those obstacles of poverty and do well in school. Those students see beyond their circumstances and look forward to a different life than that in which they've been raised. But how do these children make it? What is different about them and

their lives than their peers who fail? What accounts for the differences in performance between students of similar backgrounds?

This case supports the notion that the students who succeed are those who have support from both their families and schools. Parents need to know what is happening with their children in classrooms. Parents need to support teachers in their efforts to prepare children for their futures. Likewise, teachers need to understand what is happening in their students' homes. Teachers need to support parents in their efforts to prepare children for their futures. Then, parents and teachers need come together to communicate their concerns and goals for their children. They must find a way to meet in the middle so that their children receive the most support possible. Students must not be forgotten; they must become central to their own education.

It's hard to know the source of Samantha and Ramona's drive to succeed in reading. It could be that they both had grandmothers who stayed at home before the girls entered school and provided them with the literacy experiences necessary for their future reading achievement. It could be that Samantha and Ramona are quick learners who both have an innate ability to decode and comprehend the written word. Finally, although no conclusions can be drawn about the benefits of the girls' participation in Head Start, their preschool experiences may be one of the influences on their high reading achievement.

I have begun to think of Samantha and Ramona, and the three forces that come together in these case studies, as a lesson in structural engineering. When one looks at the construction of a stool, three legs must tilt inward toward the center. These outside legs, supports, are Samantha or Ramona's family, school, and self-concept leaning inward to show their concern for each girl's well-being and future success. Yet, it is Samantha and Ramona who are holding their stools together. Samantha and Ramona are the seats who keep their individual stools from collapsing. These two stools would not exist without either strong, supportive leg of family or school or the students' own self-concept. Yet

both stools would crumble without Samantha or Ramona's strength and will, her drive to succeed, holding it all together.

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