

## Chapter 9

# Minority Group Educational Success

## A Review of Research in the United States and Australia

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This paper examines the works of a small number of American and Australian authors who are concerned with minority group academic success. The American focus is primarily on African-American academic achievement but it includes studies on Native American students and Asian-American students and also makes cross-references to studies on Hispanic students. The Australian research focuses solely on various aspects of Indigenous educational success and includes an Australian Aboriginal and Navaho Native American comparative study. The paper concludes with a brief summary and discussion of the findings.

The authors include Rindone (1988), Ford (1992), Ford, Harrison III, Webb, Jones (1994), Sue and Okazaki (1990), Lee, Winfield and Wilson, (1991), McNerney (1994), Day (1996), Forbes-Harper (1996) and Gibson (1996). The work of each author will be outlined in the order in which they appear above.

The research of Pauline Rindone (1988) is largely concerned with the effect of culture on defining achievement and achievement motivation amongst Native Americans. She refers to the work of Maehr (1974) and Nichols (1980) who suggest that “success” or “failure” appear to be culturally and situationally determined rather than universal concepts. It was on this premise that she set out to examine the backgrounds of Navajo college graduates who had completed at least a four-year degree course to determine the “most influential” factors in the attainment of their degrees. The participants numbered 107 and were interviewed, through written correspondence, about factors such as family characteristics, educational background, socio-economic status, language background and demographic data. The results were as follows:

- Parents and family members were the driving force in the student’s desire to achieve.

- Socio-economic status bore little or no correlation to achievement motivation and academic achievement. The majority of students came from families whose incomes were very low, and the father's occupation was that of labourer.
- Parents generally had low educational levels.
- Approximately half (53%) the participants indicate that their teacher encouraged them to succeed in schools.
- Over two thirds (68%) stated that they desired to achieve academically.

On the last point, Rindone asserts that this is in contrast with the overwhelming amount of literature stating that minority students underachieve because of "lack of motivation" and "having no desire to excel" (Bryde, 1971; Kluckholm & Leighton, 1966 cited in Rindone 1988, p. 2).

Rindone infers from her findings that "It may be for Navajo families a stable family life with traditional values becomes a more important determinant of achievement" than more widely reported factors of higher educational and occupational family levels (1988, p. 3). She adds that in a similar study by Amodeo and Martin (1982), family encouragement was the most motivating factor in Hispanic students' academic success as well. She also contends that desire to achieve is high amongst Native Americans and other minority groups but that it is only recently that "these groups have been afforded the opportunities to express these motives via education" (1988, p. 4).

Donna Ford's (1992) study explored the social, cultural and psychological factors that can influence achievement among early adolescent African-American students in gifted and regular academic programs. A total of 148 fifth and sixth graders participated in the study. They came from a small, urban school district in north-eastern Ohio, USA. The school district was 99.9% African-American. Students were surveyed individually and responded to questions on a scale of 1-4, that is, strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. Ford's findings include the following:

1. Gifted students were more supportive of the American achievement ideology and less supportive of items that reflected pessimism about schooling than were average students.
2. Gifted students were more likely to hold positive ideas and values about education and democracy.

3. Students not identified as gifted were less hopeful and less positive.
4. These students tended to personify a paradox of underachievement more than did gifted students.

She concludes that educators need to place more emphasis on students' beliefs, values and perceptions and should encourage students to see the value of achievement ideology and of schooling.

Research by Ford, Harrison III, Webb & Jones (1994) presents a critique of Fordham's (1988) article on "racelessness" as a factor in Black educational achievement. They discuss peer pressure, and the phenomenon of "acting white" in educational settings as a strategy for achievement.

Signithia Fordham's definition of "acting white" is behaviour that is associated with denying one's Indigenous culture and assimilating into the dominant culture as a strategy for success. She questions the usefulness of such a strategy because it has high psychological costs.

Ford et al. (1994) support the assertion that "racial"/ethnic difference affects the psychological health of minority students, noting that some African-Americans have used the term "hellish confusion" (McClain, 1983) to describe the pressure of having to operate in two social cultural contexts which are embedded with dominant/subordinate power disparities. The authors also note that educational processes portray many negative perceptions of Blacks and their culture, so students often distance themselves from "Blackness" by "acting white" or underachieve or drop out. These writers assert too that the issue of colour may be more of an issue for Black students than for any other minority group (Cross & Thomas).

However, Ford et al. (1994) give another view of the racelessness theory by referring to the work of Banks (1979), Exum and Colangelo (1981), and others who have demonstrated that Blacks can successfully function in distinctly different cultures, primarily by "code switching". That is, by adapting to whatever cultural situation they find themselves in by modifying such things as speech and dress. This behaviour is not intended to minimise their "blackness" as they are proud of their cultural heritage. Rather, as reported by Hare (1965), "acting white" can be used as a strategy to break down discrimination. So quite often they are comfortably Black in the absence of Whites and "act white" in the presence of Whites.

Ford et al. (1994) also point out that Fordham's study was conducted in "racially" integrated settings where "acting white" is a survival strategy which has greater immediacy in its responses. In contrast, they refer to Ford's (1992) study in an almost one hundred per cent Black school environment which found that Black youth did not necessarily equate acting white with achievement, success in life or even behaviour unique to white students. Instead, they associated acting white with certain social behaviours, such as speech and dress, rather than with academic achievement. Consequently, the concept of race rejection may be less pressing and less academically and psychologically deleterious to early adolescent Black students in predominantly or all-Black school districts.

They stress that it is important for educators to teach Black students how to cope effectively with feeling different, inferior and otherwise isolated from both cultures. They also believe that educators are advised to speak openly with Blacks about racial issues. They quote Kochman (1981) as saying that Blacks prefer to speak openly about racism and discrimination rather than to ignore or avoid such discussions. A positive identity or enhanced self concept is critical for academic, social and personal success. They conclude that "achieving a measure of success in society is, by and large, a far more difficult task for blacks than it is for other Americans. All of society—educators, parents and community leaders, have a role to play in enhancing the racial identity and achievement of black youth. A positive racial identity may result when black students are freed from the racial stereotypes others impose on them" (Ford et al. 1994, p. 29).

Asian-American students are the subject of research authored by Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki (1990).

Asian-American students are amongst the most highly achieving students in America of all groups, and academics have tried to explain their success against the backdrop of minority group status and racism. These authors put forward the concept of relative functionalism to explain this group's success. That is, Asian-Americans have pursued education as the only viable means of upward mobility because they have experienced limitations and restrictions in other achievement endeavours which do not rely on education.

Sue and Okazaki say that researchers, in trying to explain this phenomenon, have presented two contrasting hypotheses, one being inherited differences in intelligence between Asians and whites and the other being Asian cultural values that encourage education. These authors support neither of these hypotheses as they are not convinced by the data presented and they believe that education for Asian-American students takes on a greater importance than can be predicted from cultural values. They argue that “educational success, increased numbers of educated Asian role models, and limitations in mobility in other areas contribute to performance, above and beyond that which can be predicted from Asian cultural values” (Sue and Okazaki 1990).

Valerie E. Lee, Linda F. Winfield and Thomas C. Wilson (Lee et al. 1991) focused their efforts on identifying individual family and school factors that influence high-achieving African-American students. They also paid special attention to identifying particular academic behaviours displayed by these students. The target group was 661 African-American eighth-graders who scored above the population mean on reading proficiency. The comparison group was 1894 African-American eighth graders whose reading proficiency level was below the population mean. Their findings were organised under the headings of background differences, school differences and academic behavioural differences.

The findings from this study can be summarised as follows:

Most of the African-American students were relatively poor and had working mothers, although the higher achieving group had better financial circumstances than the average group of students. As well, high-achieving African-American students read considerably more, completed homework and watched a little less television—they generally made better use of their time. Schools conducive to achieving higher grades tended to offer a more disciplined environment, an enriched curriculum including science, art and music and rigorous reading remediation programs. Consequently the authors concluded that school-based factors rather than family background factors accounted more for the differences in higher and lower achieving students.

### **Australian Research Findings**

Although there appears to be very little research into successful academic achievement with Indigenous groups in Australia, we have

located four studies and will discuss each in turn. McInerney and McInerney (1994), Day (1996), Forbes-Harper (1996) and Gibson (1996) explore the topic of academic achievement across a diverse age and cultural cross-section of Indigenous students.

McInerney and McInerney (1994) explored the application of achievement goal theory in their cross-cultural research with Australian Aboriginal children and Navajo children. These writers examined the topic of achievement goal theory with two Indigenous minorities, New South Wales Aboriginal Australians and Navajo Indians of the United States. The focus of the research was to assess the relevance of achievement goal theory across distinctive cultural school settings. The researchers asked the following questions:

- Are the dimensions of the *Maehr* model (multiple goals and sense of self) relevant to the Australian Aboriginal and Navajo groups?
- What are the most important motivational goals of Australian Aboriginal and Navajo students derived from this model and how do these relate to extant literature?
- How do these goals relate to important criteria of school motivation such as school confidence, perceived value of school, desired occupation after leaving school, GPA (grade point average), absenteeism and intention to complete schooling?

The significant finding of this research was that Aboriginal and Navajo children's school motivation were linked to "sense of self". In addition, the research also found that Aboriginal and Navajo parental attitudes towards school greatly influenced children's perceptions of school and continued interest in school. Students were more likely to achieve at school if they got the message from their family that school was important and worthwhile. Successful Aboriginal students had parents who monitored their school work and provided resources that helped their children's education. As well, it was important that students got clear messages from the school that they could succeed and were given challenging and interesting work. The study clearly recognises that further research is needed to take into account culturally specific factors or motivation.

Day's (1996) ethnographic study examined the academic success of six Indigenous high school students in Darwin, Northern Territory. His question was: What are the "specific and powerful factors that contribute to success for Indigenous students?"

His study revealed the following key characteristics pertaining to successful academic achievement for secondary students.

- Strong personal and Aboriginal identity. For example, all students and their parents were very proud of their Aboriginal culture and heritage and at the same time students valued individualism and claimed the right to be accepted for who they were.
- Display of academically purposeful learning behaviour. For instance, students had a strong desire to succeed at school; most had clear, long-term career goals; and most put study before family or peer obligations.
- Positive relationship and support within the family. That is, all students seemed to have good relationship with their parents and had strong support from their family to do well at school.
- Parents and students possessed some school and Western cultural knowledge and attitudes which were important for success at school. These included students' consciously choosing friends on the basis of their attitude toward school; parents and students understanding the importance of homework; and parental support in the provision of a quiet study space at home (Day 1996).

Forbes-Harper (1996) and Gibson (1996) approach the notion of successful academic achievement differently from the other writers, in that they both sought to assist the reader to identify giftedness among Aboriginal students rather than explore the phenomenon of Indigenous students succeeding academically.

Forbes-Harper (1996) looked at identifying giftedness, and critiqued the prescribed ways in which giftedness has been determined by non-Indigenous values. Her examination of students at Kormilda College in Darwin highlights the extreme Indigenous cultural differences that need to be considered when determining giftedness amongst students. Forbes-Harper also discusses the role of Indigenous people in defining their own giftedness and success criteria. Gibson (1996) essentially recommends a ten-point measure of giftedness which was developed by Frasier (1996) from her minority group research in the United States. Forbes-Harper (1996) reminds readers that although identifying giftedness amongst culturally different students is a difficult and often conflicting exercise, schools should not avoid their responsibility to cater for all students.

## **Discussion**

Often successful Indigenous students are overlooked or classed as exceptions to the rule. However, why these students achieve in spite of, and possibly because of, the barriers that plague Indigenous students, is not fully understood. Indigenous education has extensively explored the reasons for academic and school failure of Indigenous students but limited research has been invested in attempting to understand successful academic achievement. The main findings of this analysis indicate the following key themes which might be the subject of further research on this most important topic:

### **Student Characteristics**

- Strong personal identity
- Strong cultural identity
- Clear long-term goals
- Parental support of educational goals
- Strong student motivation to succeed academically
- Positive student beliefs about the value of education
- Student and family prioritisation of school demands such as completion of assignments and homework
- Effective use of time
- Familiarity with and ability to operate effectively within the culture of the school

### **Structural Characteristics**

- School support for student cultural identity and strategies for coping effectively with feeling different and perhaps, sometimes, isolated from both cultures
- High teacher expectations of all students
- Support for students in setting and achieving goals
- Strong emphasis on reading proficiency programs, culturally relevant content and appropriate feedback
- Teacher emphasis on understanding students' beliefs, values, and perceptions about the value of school
- Teacher encouragement for students to see the value of school achievement
- Importance of identifying and supporting gifted students



- Issues related to poverty need to be addressed to increase students' opportunities to succeed

Key lessons for Indigenous Australians might include ongoing support for programs which encourage family involvement in the school such as Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness (ASSPA) as well as urgently encouraging high teacher expectations of Indigenous abilities. They might also include concentrating the numbers of Indigenous students in higher level academic school programs to minimise chronic stress caused by the pressure of being different and being perceived as inferior. It is clear from the research that individual progression through a white majority school is psychologically stressful and inhibitive to Indigenous achievement.

It can also be inferred from the research that financial support for Indigenous students pursuing education would be a contributing factor to Indigenous academic success and still needs to be addressed on a number of levels. As reported, minority group students in America, who managed to succeed despite their low family incomes, were still considerably better off than academically average students. At the very least, economic support should be reflected in maintaining DETYA programs for Indigenous education rather than continuing the perceived current trend of cutbacks and mainstreaming of Indigenous funding programs.

Indigenous people somehow manage to be successful despite the compelling odds which are stacked against them, and little is understood of how this is so. It is hoped that a focus on factors pertaining to success will significantly add to our knowledge of improving Indigenous educational outcomes and will greatly enhance the relatively slow rate of change.

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