

# **High School and Beyond**

## **Thoughts, attitudes and actions of students in an urban public school about life after high school**

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this action research project was to look at the academic and career aspirations of students in middle school and high school. Research indicates that there are many students that do not achieve their academic dreams and instead end up under-performing or under-achieving in school and after graduation. This project aimed to look at students in one urban K-12 school to try to understand some of the influences on aspirations and expectations. If children shoot for the stars, what makes them so optimistic and hopeful? Do these children really expect to become doctors and lawyers? And if children do not have lofty dreams, what are the causes for this? Students from grades 4, 6, 8 and 10 and their teachers were interviewed and surveyed for this project.

### **Research questions**

Based on past research that has shown that the 4<sup>th</sup> grade is a critical period in children's lives, this project began looking at students in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. It has been shown that children's attitudes toward future education and career plans, if they are to change, will begin to turn around the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. It would have been difficult to use students younger than this because younger children would have difficulty understanding and filling out the same survey as the 10<sup>th</sup> graders.

#### *Immediate questions*

- What are factors that affect how 4<sup>th</sup> graders think about college and their future?
- Do these factors change as students get older?
- Are these factors different for boys and girls?

#### *Over-arching questions*

- Do students' attitudes toward education and the future change over time?
- Would these students benefit from a college preparatory program?

### **Review of related literature**

The school that I was entering was a small public school in a typical urban setting. Public schools in urban areas, because of their location and because they offer free education, tend to attract students that would not be able to attend a private school. As such, urban public schools have become places that educate everyone and anyone regardless of financial status, family situation or academic ability. Because of white flight from urban areas, a very prominent factor in most northern cities, many urban schools have high concentrations of students of color and fewer white students. The public school at which I conducted my project was very diverse in terms of student ability, racial background, class background and virtually any other variable trait. I kept this in mind when I did background research of related literature.

Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, a group that focuses on economic inequality in the United States, has done extensive work

surrounding poverty, income and socioeconomic class as it relates to education. He has proposed that poverty in a family is a recurring, generational theme that is difficult to eradicate. “The large gap between rich and poor in student achievement and attainment translates into large differences in income and wealth among adults, which will, in turn, affect the life chances of their children.”<sup>1</sup> If the poor do not achieve academically and do not go to college, the chances that their children will go to college is greatly reduced. The fact that there is a discrepancy between the educational achievement of the rich and poor is supported by evidence of the growing income gap between the upper and lower classes.<sup>2</sup>

Kahlenberg’s ideas are supported by years of educational research. Sandra L. Hanson is one of the researchers that has done work in the area of educational achievement. Her study, “Lost Talent: Unrealized Educational Aspirations and Expectations among U.S. Youths,” looked at the educational goals of students in high school. Hanson wished to research the extent to which the United States has felt the loss of unused talent in the education system, with attention paid to the role that gender, race and class have played in this outcome. Present throughout her research was the discussion of ‘abstract attitudes’ and ‘concrete attitudes.’ Abstract attitudes are those based on the dominant belief system of most Americans about education and opportunity. This is the approach that emphasizes hard work to get ahead. Concrete attitudes reflect the empirical and perceived realities of the benefits of education. Most students have positive abstract values about education but those who observe inequitable opportunity structures in job markets are likely to have negative concrete attitudes. This can help to explain the disparity between aspirations and expectations among students Hanson says.

Hanson’s research showed that there was a significant amount of lost talent in this country. This related most significantly to the class background of the student. If a student came from a poor family they were more likely to have lower academic expectations and also lower academic aspirations. “Although all societies need to encourage high aspirations among their youths, they also have a tendency to replicate themselves in order to preserve the status quo.”<sup>3</sup> Because minority communities tend to be disproportionately represented among the lower class, those students that come from low-income families and have low academic aspirations and expectations are often students of color.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Claude Steele gives us one reason that low-income students and students of color might be academically underachieving. Kahlenberg and Hanson’s work is given more weight and truth by the cyclical theory of stereotype threat. American society, and we may even be able to say society in general, has learned the idea that people without money are less likely to do well academically or to advance to college. This has been shown generation after generation in the self-replication process of social classes. We have also taught ourselves that the fate of students of color is the same as students without money. To a lesser extent but still relevant, we have told ourselves that women are not as smart and will not do as well in school. These are all common conceptions held by many in this country.

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<sup>1</sup> Kahlenberg, All Together Now, 18

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. chapter 2

<sup>3</sup> Hanson “Lost Talent,” 179

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Stereotype threat says that in the presence of ideas discriminating against the performance of certain groups of people, such as women, people of color or people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those groups will perform significantly worse than non-stereotyped groups *simply because of the known presence of the stereotype*. In a situation where there is evaluation and expectations involved, the said groups know that there is a commonly held stereotype that they will perform worse than the rest of the group. They become so unconsciously enveloped in thinking about how they need to perform well that they cannot think about the task at hand and end up doing poorly. Eventually they begin believing in the stereotype themselves and may stop trying to do well.<sup>5</sup>

These three scholars and researchers gave me a foundation for what I might find when I went into the school to conduct my project. Based on what was written and theorized by these three, I expected to walk into a public school with high poverty, a concentration of students of color and low academic achievement. These three things were all present in the school, but the outcome of my project was not as I thought it would be.

### **Data Collection**

I used four different methods to collect data for this project. They are as follows.

#### *Student surveys*

The student surveys consisted of several basic questions regarding what the students thought about college, life after high school and the future in general. The survey was intended to obtain direct, unbiased information from the students themselves. There was no place for the students to put their names, so there could be no worries that a teacher or fellow student would see the survey and make judgments about the student based on the student's answers.

I gave this same survey to the 4<sup>th</sup> graders, the 6<sup>th</sup> graders and two combined classes of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders where only the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were asked to take the survey. The 10<sup>th</sup> graders were harder to find because they were not all grouped into one or two classes together. I went to a few different classes and asked for 10<sup>th</sup> graders, but they were dispersed throughout the day and were harder to track down. This resulted in fewer 10<sup>th</sup> graders taking the survey than 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

In the 4<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes, I talked to the teacher of the class before hand to see if I could give my survey in class. When I gave the survey, I introduced myself, told the students a little bit about my project, and then asked them if they would fill out a short survey. If they had any questions (of which there were several in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms) I told them they could raise their hand and I would come over to help them.

#### *Teacher interviews*

The teacher interviews were intended to provide another source of information and to give a valuable second perspective about students and their thoughts about college and the future. I interviewed only the teachers of the classes in which I conducted the interviews. I asked questions such as, "what do you think some of your students want to do after high school?" or "what do you think might account for different motivations toward education among your students?" From these points, the teachers generally began talking on their own and took the interview to areas that I never even thought to ask

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<sup>5</sup> Steele in Improving Academic Achievement by J. Aronson, chapters 14-15

about. It was from the teachers that I found out how important college was in this high school. They told me how much they stressed college to their students by repeatedly telling students that they should go to college. Interviewing the teachers proved to be an invaluable aspect of my project.

#### *Student interviews*

The student interviews were semi-formal and consisted of three questions to start with. I expanded and elaborated from these three questions if the student didn't understand what I was asking or was having a hard time answering. I interviewed students that had been suggested by teachers when I interviewed them. I asked teachers for a short list of students from their class that would represent a range of different abilities and aspirations for the future. The questions that I asked the students were very similar to the questions I asked them on the survey. When I interviewed them, however, I was able to get more details and information. This may have also biased the results slightly. Because the students knew that I went to college and came from a background of higher education, they may have inferred that I wanted them to go to college. Every student that I interviewed said that they were going to go to college when they graduated from high school. This may have been the truth for these students, as the majority of surveys indicated that students wanted to go to college after graduation; or the results may have been skewed by my presence.

#### *School Records*

The school records I was able to obtain from the school guidance counselor. She had not been at the school for all that long, so she was only able to give me the graduation records for the last three years. What she gave me was the total number of students that had gone on to college from 2004-2006. She included the seniors that had not graduated in those years, of which there were a few, so that the number of college-bound students of the total senior class was a smaller percentage than the number of college-bound students out of only the number of seniors that had graduated.

### **Data analysis and interpretation**

What I found based on my collection of data was much different than what I expected to find. I thought that most 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders would have high hopes for their future professional lives and think they would go to college but that by the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades many of these students would recognize that societal pressures were pitted against them and think that they would not go to college. This was not the case.

From the student surveys, I found:

- Most students knew the importance of a college education. Students across the grade levels said they would need a college education, even for jobs that would not require it.
- Most students also said that they *would* go to college. This held true in all of the grade levels as well. The 10<sup>th</sup> graders were the most consistent in their desire to go to college. 100% of the 10<sup>th</sup> graders surveyed said they would go.
- Most 4<sup>th</sup> graders said they wanted to go to college. The factors that affected the 4<sup>th</sup> graders were varied and inconsistent.
- There were four main reasons that students gave for why they thought they would/would not go to college. Reasons they gave for why they thought they would go were:

#1 because they thought they were smart

#2 because college is the best way to get a good job and make money

#3 because they had support from families and parents

The only consistent reason they gave for why they thought they would not go to college was that they did not have enough money.

- The reasons that the students gave for why they would/would not go to college remained the same across the grade levels.
- There was no significant difference in desire to go to college between boys and girls.
- There was also no noticeable difference between boys and girls in the reasons that they wanted/did not want to go to college. The factors in their decisions were roughly the same.

From the student interviews, I found:

- Students overwhelmingly thought that they would go to college when they graduated from high school. Even those students that had failed a number of their classes indicated that they would go to college.
- Reasons that students gave in interviews for why they thought they would go to college were similar to those they had given in the surveys. In the interviews, however, the role of parental and teacher support became more apparent. There were also a number of students that indicated that they already had promises of help from scholarships and aid programs.
- There was no significant difference in desire to go to college between boys and girls.

From the teacher interviews, I found:

- Teachers at the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades did not talk to their students about college and did not know what their students wanted to be when they grew up.
- Teachers at the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade levels were highly encouraging of their students and repeatedly told their students that they had to go to college. College was something that teachers talked about frequently and always encouraged their kids to do, regardless of their family's economic standing.
- Teachers thought that perhaps the most significant factor in whether students would go to college or not was the family and culture that the student came from.

From the school records, I found:

- Over the last three years, an average of 64% of the senior class has gone on to college.

The data that I collected showed that students at this high school were thinking about college and going to college much more than I expected they would be. Compared to other public schools similar to this one in the area, this school sent a higher percentage of graduating senior directly on to college. Within the school district, an average of 58% of graduating high school seniors went on to college the next year.<sup>6</sup> On a national level, an average of 67% of high school seniors that have graduated enroll directly in college.<sup>7</sup> Neither of these figures, however, can be directly compared with the 64% from the school that I was in. There is a slight difference in how the numbers were registered. In

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<sup>6</sup> St. Paul Public Schools Data Center <http://datacenter.spps.org>

<sup>7</sup> National Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.org>

the area and national figures, the percentage reflects the number of high school seniors that have gone immediately to college *of the total number that have graduated*. The percentage for the school that I was in reflects the number of seniors that have gone to college but as a percentage of the total numbers of seniors, including those that have not graduated, which is a larger number. If those seniors that had not graduated were taken out of the total, the percentage would be higher. This puts the school even a little more above average than what it appears to be at first glance.

The question that remains to be asked, then, is “why is this figure so high at this particular school?” I believe that one of the biggest reasons for such a high percentage was the encouragement of the teachers. From what was said by both teachers and students, emphasis on college by the teachers was an ever-present, very consistent element in the school day. One 10<sup>th</sup> grader I talked to said that one teacher alone had told him at least ten times that he needed to go to college. The teachers also said that they were always talking about college in general without directing their comments to anyone in particular. Just the presence of this talk was likely a positive influence on students’ attitudes toward college.

The other thing that must be considered an influential factor in this situation was the students’ families. Because I did not do any research about families in this project, it is impossible to tell whether the families of these students were exceptional in their support of their children.

### **Action plan**

From here, the action plan would be three-fold.

#### *College preparatory program*

If the students at this school showed such a positive response to the support from their families and teachers, they would benefit even more from some type of college preparatory program. The school had no immediate plans for such a program but teachers were interested when I mentioned the possibility. Such a program would get students thinking even more about life after high school and would help them access the tools and resources necessary in finding and applying to colleges.

#### *Further action research*

More research should be done to learn exactly what it is that makes students at this school so likely to go on to college. Because the results of this action plan are not what would be expected, teachers and researchers might be wary of the results. There are some key questions and results that should be answered and examined. Some methods that could be tried include:

- Follow students graduating from this school through college. Do they finish college or do they end up dropping out, making their college experience not as valuable?
- Talk to students that have already been interviewed in more depth. Conduct longer, more structured interviews with them to better understand what motivates them to want to go to college. Instead of being asked about themselves, they could be asked about other classmates, which would encourage them to present information that they might not give about themselves. For example, “What do you think about your classmates? Do you think that they will really go to college? What do you think motivates them to go to college?”

- Conduct more in-depth teacher interviews. Present the results of this action plan to teachers to see what they think and whether they think the results tell the true story of the seniors graduating from their school. What do they think are the reasons that students from their school go to college at a higher rate than students from similar schools in the area?
- Conduct action research in other area schools to compare the results. By looking at the results from different schools next to each other it would be easier to tell what one school was doing well and what another school was lacking.

#### *Make known results*

If results from more action research are in agreement with this project and its findings, the results of this and the other projects should be made known to other teachers and administrators. If students at this school are so positive in their post-high school plans, this information should be shared with other schools. Teachers and parents elsewhere should know what an important role they play in encouraging students to go to college.

#### **Final thoughts**

It is not clear what the most significant factors were in these students' plans for college. What is clear is that they were very positive in their outlook on college. Nearly every student surveyed and interviewed said that they planned on going to college, and nearly 2/3 of the students over the last three years have actually done so. Something that is being done in this school seems to be working tremendously well. More time and research should now be dedicated to finding out what this school has been doing correctly to so encourage its students to go on to college.

#### **Annotated references**

Kahlenberg, Richard (2004). All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Kahlenberg's book focuses on how to achieve socioeconomic integration in public schools. The second chapter in his book, "American Schools Today: Falling Short of Our Goals," talks about how the public school is not living up to the goals that we set for it. Part of this chapter talks about the achievement gap between rich and poor and social mobility.

Hanson, Sandra L. (1994). Lost Talent: Unrealized Educational Aspirations and Expectations among U.S. Youths. Sociology of Education. 67, 159-183.

Hanson's study on lost talent in the United States is centered on three variables: gender, race and class. She found that the most significant barrier to academic achievement was class. Students that came from poor families were more likely than other students to not reach their academic potential or to achieve their aspirations.

Rauscher, Frances H. (2002). Barrier of mistrust: how negative stereotypes affect cross-race mentoring and Cohen, Geoffrey L. & Steele, Claude M. (2002). Toward a resolution of an American tension: some applications of the helping model of affirmative action to schooling. In J. Aronson (Ed.), Improving Academic Achievement: impact of psychological factors on education. New York: Academic Press.

These two chapters in J. Aronson's Improving Academic Achievement talk about the presence of stereotype threat in schools. Stereotype threat is something that many teachers do not even realize exists and its presence is thus not able to be countered in their classroom. This can lead to decreased performance of students at risk in their class, which may include students of color, students from low socioeconomic background and female students.

St. Paul Public Schools Data Center <http://datacenter.spps.org>

This is the webpage for statistics about the St. Paul Public School system.

National Center for Education Statistics <http://nces.ed.gov/>

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), located within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences, is the primary federal site for collecting and analyzing educational data.

## Appendix A

Student survey

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender (circle one) male female

Grade \_\_\_\_\_

What do you think you will do after you graduate from high school? (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> travel	<input type="checkbox"/> get a job
<input type="checkbox"/> go to college	<input type="checkbox"/> get married
<input type="checkbox"/> other (what? write in)	

What do you think you might want to be when you are older? (profession). List as many things as you can think of for yourself.

Will you need to go to college to have this job/profession?

Do you think you will go to college some day?

Why do you think you will/will not go to college some day? What are some of the things that make you think you will/will not go to college?

**Appendix B**

Student interview

1. What do you think you will do after you graduate from high school?
2. Do you want to go to college some day?
3. Do you think you **will** go to college some day? Why or why not? What are some of the things that make you think you will/will not go to college?

Teacher interview

1. What grade do you teach (what was the grade level of the class in which I gave the survey)?
2. What do you think are some of the aspirations (academic, professional, career or otherwise) of your students?
3. Do you notice any difference in attitudes toward education between the girls and boys in your class?
4. Do you notice any difference in educational motivation or academic aspirations between boys and girls in your class?
5. What do you think might account for different motivations, aspirations or attitudes toward education among students in your class (between boys and girls but mainly between students in general)?
6. Could you suggest 3-5 students from your class that would represent a range of different abilities and aspirations? I would like to talk to these students briefly if they are willing to see what they have to say about this matter in more depth.

**Appendix D**

Patterns of high school seniors over the last three years			
	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
4 year college	12	9	10
2 year college	6	7	5
Unknown	9	8	11
Total	27	24	26
Percent of total at college	67	67	58