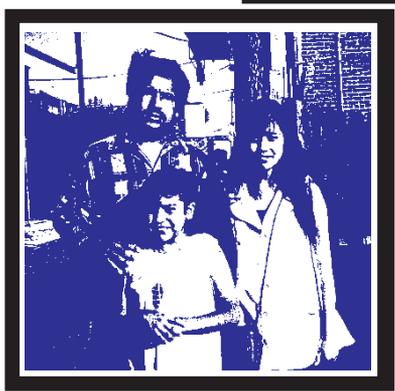


HELPING YOUR CHILD



**find
SUCCESS
at school:**

***A guide
for Hispanic
parents***

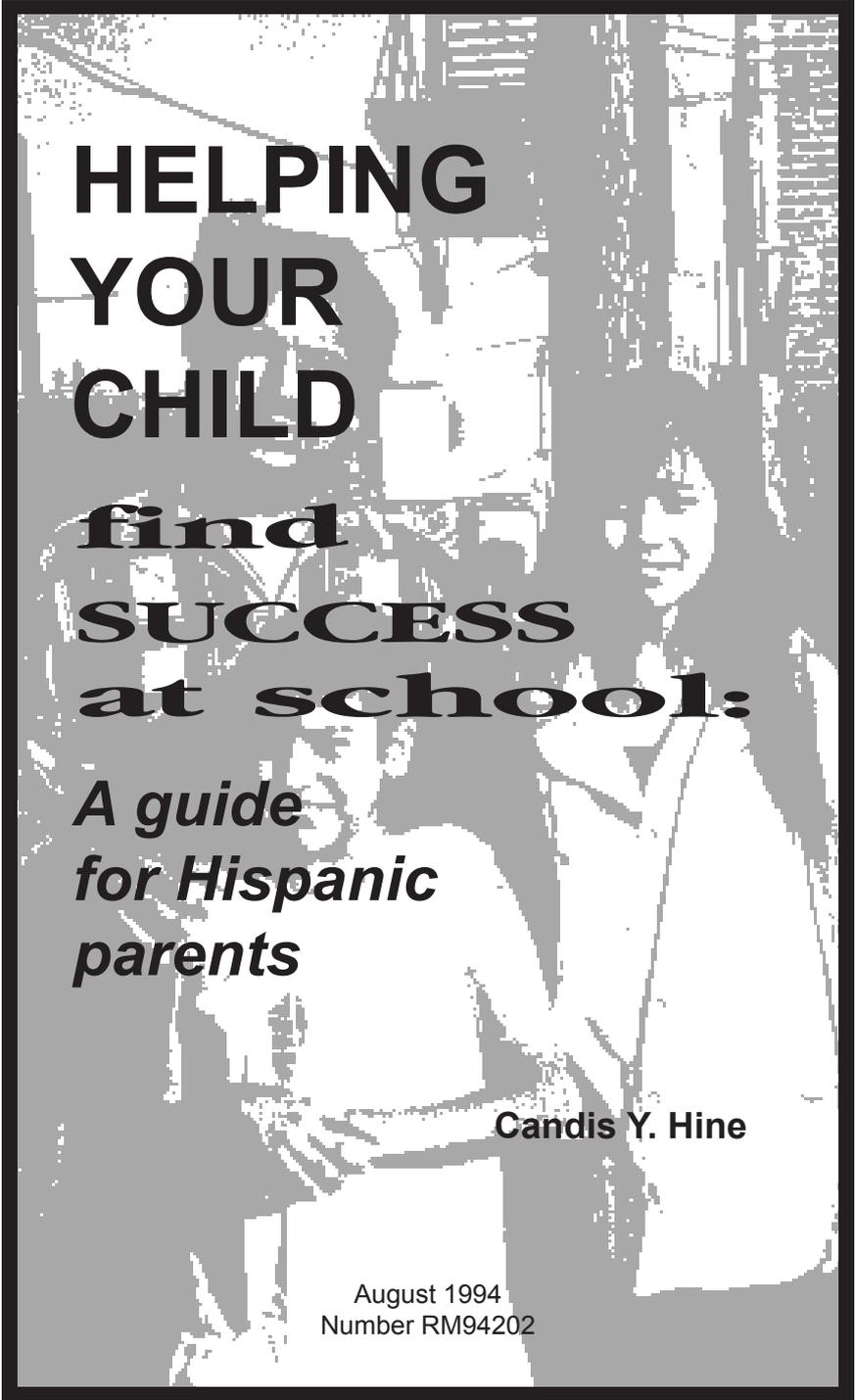
Candis Y. Hine

**NRC
G/T**

**The National Research Center on the
Gifted and Talented**

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Candis Y. Hine

August 1994
Number RM94202

THE NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

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Table of Contents

Introduction:

What Parents Should Know 1

What Parents Can Do:

Eight Keys to Open the Doors to Success at School

- #1 Let your child know you value achievement in school..... **3**
- #2 Help your child to develop strong language skills **8**
- #3 Parents must make their children understand that they believe their children will be successful both in school and, later, in the workplace **12**
- #4 Parents must provide a strong family support system for their children..... **13**
- #5 Parents who nurture a strong family bond at home help their children to develop a positive image of themselves and their culture and to gain the self-confidence necessary to meet the challenges they face at school and in the community..... **16**
- #6 Help your child understand that his or her future can be bright with preparation and hard work. Instant success stories don't usually happen in real life. The great majority of successful adults had to deal with many challenges and obstacles along the way..... **17**
- #7 Do not let your child use cultural biases, or prejudices held by people at school or in the community, as an excuse for failure..... **19**
- #8 Parents should become involved in their child's school and extracurricular activities. By encouraging a "social bond" with the school and the community, they will help him or her to grow in confidence and self-esteem..... **20**

Where Parents Can Seek Assistance 21

Research Study:

The Home Environment of Gifted Puerto Rican Children: Family Factors Which Support High Achievement23

References 27

Introduction:

What Parents Should Know

According to *America 2000*, a report published by the U.S. Department of Education, many children aren't learning in school what they need to know to live and work successfully in the world they will inhabit. The fact is that young children are *eager* to learn. Then why are so many failing in school? Unfortunately, many children do not find success in school because they are not *ready* to learn.

- *How can you prepare your child to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available at school?*
- *How can you help your child become actively involved and successful in the learning process?*

It is no secret that almost all parents want their children to enjoy school and to do their best academically. This pamphlet is designed to guide parents in helping their children to find success in school. The advice provided is based on a study of high achieving Puerto Rican high school students. Although the students came from a variety of social and economic backgrounds, they had a great deal in common when they were asked what factors led to their success in school. All of the students described specific family factors which supported and nurtured their academic achievement.

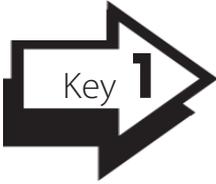
The keys to their success are presented here. We hope this information will provide you with specific strategies you can use to help your child get the most out of school and be ready to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

Eight Keys to Open the Doors to Success at School

1. Let your child know you value achievement in school.
2. Help your child to develop strong language skills.
3. Parents must make their children understand that they believe their children will be successful both in school and, later, in the workplace.
4. Parents must provide a strong family support system for their children.
5. Parents who nurture a strong family bond at home help their children to develop a positive image of themselves and their culture and to gain the self-confidence necessary to meet the challenges they face at school and in the community.
6. Help your child understand that his or her future can be bright with preparation and hard work. Instant success stories don't usually happen in real life. The great majority of successful adults had to deal with many challenges and obstacles along the way.
7. Do not let your child use cultural biases, or prejudices held by people at school or in the community, as an excuse for failure.
8. Parents should become involved in their child's school and extracurricular activities. By encouraging a "social bond" with the school and the community, they will help him or her to grow in confidence and self-esteem.

What Parents Can Do:

Eight Keys to Open the Doors to Success at School



Let your child know you value achievement in school.

Parents must be aware of their child's progress in school. Parents of high achievers reviewed daily papers and report cards carefully, and offered praise and small rewards (often in the form of a special privilege) when their child did well in school. They encouraged greater effort when they felt their child was not working up to his or her potential. If the parents felt report card grades or the work the child was bringing home did not reflect his or her true ability, they were not afraid to call the teacher to discuss the situation. The teachers and school personnel were clearly made aware of the *high* value both student and parents placed on outstanding achievement.

Juan R., a high school senior, spoke about how proud he was to bring home a report card of "As" and "Bs." But one term, he got a "C" in history which was one of his favorite classes. He explained that he was part of the "Upward Bound" program, and they kept taking him out of history class to attend meetings. Juan's mother was very concerned about the grade and she was

determined to do something about it. According to Mrs. R., “He got a ‘C’ in the last term and I said, ‘Come on. You can make a better job.’ He told me that it was that Donna T., the counselor for the Upward Bound program... I spoke with Donna saying, ‘Try to take him out in another time or another class’.”

Thanks to Mrs. R.’s phone call, the situation was changed. Juan no longer was pulled from his history class and his performance improved right away.

Alicia, also a high school senior, said that her parents were always on top of her grades in school. They praised her and made her feel good about her abilities. Alicia described a reward system for doing well in school.

“It’s a lot of reward basis. You do good and you get a reward. Privileges and other things also. You know they’re the ones who buy everything for me. I have a very tiny job. But, like, they bought me my class ring for doing well, for making high honors. And special things, like help pay for proms.”

• • •

Parents should offer help to their children in completing difficult homework assignments, or guide them in finding appropriate help from others.

Whenever Marcos (a high school junior) needed assistance, his parents offered guidance. His father explained, “Sometimes he does need help. ‘Look, I’m going to do this paper on this and what do **you** think?’ That’s normal and I’m glad he can come and talk about it.”

Juan's mother said that when her children were little she always helped them with their homework. Once they reached high school, however, she didn't know enough about biology or algebra to be of any assistance. But she always made sure her children went to the teacher and sought out extra help if they were having a problem with the work.

• • •

Help your child to establish realistic academic goals.

When your child is working on a school project, offer guidance by discussing with your child such questions as: What do you hope to accomplish? What resources are necessary for you to complete this task? How much time should you set aside, and when will you fit this into your schedule? How can I help you get started?

When setting long term goals, make sure your child is laying the necessary foundation to make reaching those goals possible. For example, if your child has dreams of entering a particular profession, it is most important that he or she is taking the appropriate coursework to prepare him or her to enter that field. Meet with your child's guidance counselor and make sure you have knowledge of your child's long range plan of study.

Juan simply stated, "If I want to be a mathematician, how will I be one if I don't do math? That rule I've been following for years and it works!"

Monitor the time your child spends on homework, especially during the elementary school years, and help establish good study skills.

According to Elena, a high school senior, “When I was younger, my parents used to monitor my time spent on homework and make sure I did it. Now my mom doesn’t have to tell me to do my work. She knows I will get it done on my own... if I didn’t, I know she would be watching.”

Marcos’ father says parents should teach their child good study skills through “supervision from a distance.” Marcos’ mother added, “I think we did help him set the time when he was younger. Here’s the place for you to study. I think that after sixth grade, he was ready to do it on his own.”

*Simon, a high school junior, would add, “I see that no one [in my family] is wasting time. **Everyone** is studying. Some people like to put a lot of time into TV. But that doesn’t bother me. I was brought up that if you have homework, when you get home you do whatever, like get changed, and then you sit down and do your homework... It’s just a good habit.”*

• • •

Let teachers know that you, as a parent, will offer support at home for activities occurring in the classroom if you are given the proper guidance.

Alicia’s father (Mr. C.) only completed ninth grade in school but this did not hinder him from playing an important role in helping

his daughters find success at school. His oldest daughter, Lysette, knew very little English when she entered school. As a result, he was advised early in the school year that Lysette would most likely have to repeat first grade. Mr. C. went to the teacher and borrowed books and resources he could use at home to help his daughter practice English and reading skills, and to reinforce what was happening at school. As a result, Lysette was ready to move ahead at the end of the school year. Alicia proudly added that her sister eventually graduated as valedictorian of her high school.

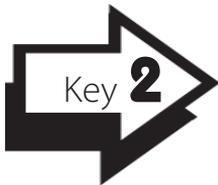
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It is important for parents to show interest in topics their child is studying in school. Help your child understand that what she or he is learning in school is important and you are proud of how much wiser and more competent she or he is becoming every day.

Cynthia, a high school junior, said her mother always took a strong interest in what she was learning in school. “From the time I was little, and even now, my mother says, ‘How did your day go? What are you learning?’ ” As a result, Cynthia always felt that school was an important place and it was important for her to learn as much as she could and do her best.

Praise your children for their efforts and let them know that it's okay to make mistakes along the way. Failure can be turned into an important learning experience if you can recognize what went wrong, reassess the situation, and then move ahead.

Peter, a high school senior, described how he developed his talent in art. "I used to draw pretty badly when I was little and my parents would say, 'That's really quite good.' And now I can draw pretty good because they would encourage me and I would keep trying. So now I've gotten to the point that others see me as a good artist. If you don't encourage your kids when they are little with good words, they're just going to put it off to the side and forget it. And that could have been a talent! You just have to let the kid know that you are there and sometimes you have to put them on a high horse. You have to bring a lot of pride within them and stir them up."



Help your child to develop strong language skills.

Reading, conversing, and singing to your young child are important ways to help build vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension skills. As your child builds confidence and takes command of the language, he or she will be able to use his or her mind to explore and to open the doorways to new knowledge.

Elena's mother stated, "Ever since she was a baby, Elena loved to ask questions. She always wanted to know about everything. I always read to her and talked to her. I brought her books and tried to answer her questions."

Maria's mother reminisced about her daughter's preschool years. "She was always curious since she was born. When she was little, I used to sing in the choir in the church. She would ask me to get the book. And she was about three and a half and she came to me with the songs. 'Mom, I want you to sing to me.' And what I noticed in her was how she did imitations of the words and then say, 'That's the one. I like that one.' and I started discovering that it was good to teach her."

• • •

Parents should encourage their children to read and to discuss what is being read by other members of the family.

Carmen has always read everything she could get her hands on. She said that her parents helped her develop this good habit from a very young age. "My family has always helped me because when I was young they bought me books and used to help me find information about things I was interested in."

Marcos' parents also encouraged reading and discussion with their son. Marcos' father was very proud of his son's continuing quest for knowledge. "Our son has read and continues to read about all matters that interest him: biology, science, world affairs. He pursues knowledge beyond the superficial means available to most. He

has accumulated an impressive expertise on and about world affairs: social, political, economical, and scientific. Marcos is a fine observer of human nature and expression and is able to perceive subtleties not seen by most.”

• • •

Parents should encourage correct language usage of both English and Spanish.

Alicia emphasized that even though her parents' native language was Spanish, they made sure she developed good language skills in both English and Spanish. Alicia's father decided to teach her English before she entered kindergarten. "Lysette [an older sister] and my father helped me a lot. I remember many nights staying up and having my father and Lysette help me with reading and with words."

Alicia's mother, however, read to her in Spanish and encouraged her to learn her native tongue. Both of Alicia's parents felt it was important for their children to learn good language skills in Spanish while becoming proficient in English and developing the skills to be successful in school.

Cynthia also felt it was an advantage to be able to speak correctly in both English and Spanish, and she gives credit to her mother for making this happen. While Cynthia was developing her facility in English, her mother made sure that her daughter did not forget her Spanish. According to Cynthia, "She's always been fussy about the way I pronounce Spanish words and if I'm using them correctly."

Parents should encourage their children to maintain Spanish proficiency while learning English. Contemporary studies have shown, in fact, that exposure to more than one language during upbringing may be a scholastic asset. Bilingualism has been associated with superior performance on both verbal and nonverbal tests.

Marcos' father, who is an elementary school teacher, feels that too many Puerto Rican students are giving up Spanish before they are proficient enough in English to function well and find success in the school learning environment. In fact, Spanish maintenance allowed the present group of high achieving students to expand their knowledge base and further develop their general cognitive abilities while learning English. And, even after the students became fully proficient in English, they continued to develop language skills in Spanish. The academic success of these students lends support to the benefits of native language maintenance rather than complete transition to English.

“We have those that come to the States, and they learn only English at home. And they don't remember Spanish. I don't think that's good. I think that closes more doors than it opens because when they're older it's harder to learn a second language. It's easier to learn a second language when they're younger.” (Marcos' mother)

Simon's father, who is a high school guidance counselor, believes that all people should be multilingual. He stated, “I think it is a

benefit to a nation if the citizens speak not only two but three or four languages. I think that it is important for the United States to try to promote people to keep their native languages plus learning English and using English well. I think it is more helpful than harmful.”



Parents must make their children understand that they believe their children will be successful both in school and, later, in the workplace.

Parents of high achievers had high educational and occupational aspirations for their children. They let their children know they expected them to do well in school and to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for a good occupation. Parents stressed the importance of getting a good education to reach these goals. They often mentioned their own employment situation and personal aspirations which served as a role model for their children.

“My mom plays the biggest role in my achievement in school. She married my father when she was a junior in high school. Due to his influence, she couldn’t go to college. She told me that and said, ‘Don’t commit the same mistake that I did. Finish high school, then go and finish college. After that, then get married and make a life.’ These words I’ll remember today, tomorrow, and always.”

(Juan)

“...Since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a teacher. My mom was happy about that because she wanted to be a teacher. She will be very proud if I become a teacher.” (Elena)

“That’s what I say to Maria. I don’t want to see you in a factory working hard, killing yourself, working for some others. And you’re not going to use your potential. And she said, ‘Ma, I’m not going to be a factory worker.’ She always said that. We always say, ‘You have our support. We sacrifice ourselves and whatever we have to do, we’ll do it.’ I’m always proud of her. I will be proud of her to see she’s a doctor.” (Maria’s mother)



Parents must provide a strong family support system for their children.

Informal conversations of everyday events are an important aspect of family life. Let your children know you care about what is going on in their life. In turn, show them respect by sharing the little things that are important to you.

Juan’s mother emphasized the importance of keeping the lines of communication open with her children when she said, “If anything happens to them, come to me, not to anyone in the street. You know, they’re having a problem, tell me what’s happening. You know that’s the way I treated them.”

Try to involve your children when making family decisions that affect them. As you brainstorm ideas together and search for solutions by discussing alternatives, you will be teaching your children important life skills in decision-making.

Although Cynthia's mother usually makes the final decisions at home, all of the family gets to have a say in what is being considered. According to Cynthia, "My mother makes the decisions but we sit down, my sister and us, the kids in the family, and we have a say in what's going on. And we discuss it. And she considers that."

• • •

It is important for parents to monitor their children's free time. Even with teenagers, it is important for parents to always be aware of *who* their children are spending time with, *where* they will be, and *when* they will return home. As children demonstrate responsible behavior and follow through on obligations, they can be rewarded with greater privileges.

When Alicia discusses how her parents monitor her free time, it is evident that she is happy to know how much they care. Alicia described how every time she goes out with friends, her parents have to know "where I'm going, what time I'm going to be back, who's driving, who's going to be there." At the same time, however, she has confidence that her parents would always be there to back her up. "I would never hesitate to call them if I found

myself in a situation, even if I was at a disruptive party and, say, we were arrested. I'm sure that at first they would be very upset and disappointed but they'd be there for me."

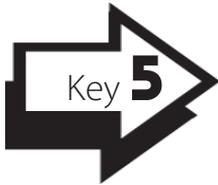
Marcos' father described how he and his wife guided and nurtured their son towards independence. "Marcos is a very open young man and I think that's good. He's got to make the ultimate choice. It's his life and he's got to do it. I don't think that as a parent you should just abandon the child when he is six or seven and let him have his own key and do what he wants. I don't believe in that. But Marcos is a very responsible young man and, according to his abilities, he gets his responsibilities. He has his obligations, too."

• • •

Regular parental explanation and advisement play a vital role for children who are developing everyday life skills and moving towards independence. Helping children to distinguish between right and wrong, and to judge appropriate limits are important steps to growing up successfully.

Alicia stressed how important it is to her that she can talk to her parents. Ever since she was little, they were always there to answer her questions and offer support and guidance. "My mother gives me good advice. And I'm like an advice column at school. They come to me with their problems and sometimes I'll come back and ask her opinion. "What do you think this

girl should do, Mom? She's in this situation.' She'll tell me her advice and I've learned. It has helped me a lot because she has given me her moral support and she's always there... My father may work but he's there at night. My mother has always been there. It's really hard for a kid to come home to nobody. And they've been there for my joys, my tears, and my frustrations."



Parents who nurture a strong family bond at home help their children to develop a positive image of themselves and their culture and to gain the self-confidence necessary to meet the challenges they face at school and in the community.

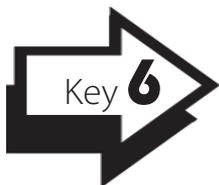
Aspects of a strong family bond described by these high achieving students included a sense of loyalty to family and culture, family pride and motivation, and closeness of family ties. The parents taught their children about the Spanish language and their Puerto Rican heritage while they strove to become successful in the larger culture. Both parents and students felt it was important to understand and feel positive about one's

heritage in order to develop a strong sense of self. The parents demonstrated to their children that they were willing to make sacrifices now to prepare for a better future. They took a great deal of pride in what members of the family had accomplished. In many cases, because students were the “first” in various areas of achievement (finishing high school, attending college), they felt honored to serve as role models for younger siblings or cousins.

“The Spanish fathers should show their children the island over there. We’ve been a couple of times. But some families just forget it. They don’t want to go there for nothing.” (Alicia’s father)

“You share a lot in Spanish families. Things like family comes first. Don’t forget who you are, where you’re from. I think that’s true in almost any minority. The fact that you are a minority and you have to let the world know that we can do just as much as you can.” (Peter)

“I will be the first person on my mother’s side of the family to attend college; therefore, my cousins look up to me as a role model. This responsibility has helped me to continue working hard to excel.” (Elena)



Help your child understand that his or her future can be bright with preparation and hard work. Instant success stories don’t usually happen in real

life. The great majority of successful adults had to deal with many challenges and obstacles along the way.

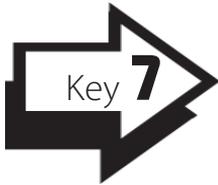
The following testimonials provide examples of this optimistic outlook:

“Just the other day I was hearing the conversation of a few Puerto Rican friends that were complaining of their grades. They were saying, ‘Why do we come here if we know that we can’t handle it? To make fast food we don’t need a high school diploma.’ That might be very well true, but without a good education, they won’t move farther than the corner. I want my life to be a good one, with a very good job; not all my life behind a kitchen.” (Juan)

“She [Maria] knows that we will make a strong effort to help her do what she wants to do. Back home it didn’t matter if you were smart or motivated, or whatever, but the economic situation was so bad. And, in my case, my mother wanted me to go to college but I didn’t. I never wanted to go. I knew they weren’t able to come up with the support so I just wanted to go and start working right away. I think I wasted my talent because I didn’t go to college. And now, she has the chance for it. That’s why we tell her to keep going.” (Maria’s father)

Do your best and don’t allow anyone to put limitations on you. You set your own

limitations and you can't blame anyone. Because if you want to do it, you can do it. I think that's what you have to tell your kids." (Peter's mother)



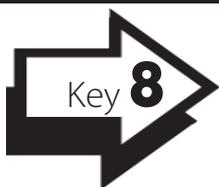
Do not let your child use cultural biases, or prejudices held by people at school or in the community, as an excuse for failure.

The following passages show how high achieving students and their parents reacted when confronted with stereotypical attitudes:

"I am the only Puerto Rican who took four years of honors English. Now I am in the AP [advanced placement] class. Sometimes I found it very hard and I felt I had to work even harder than the other students to prove that I could do it. But I want to do well in school because it gives me confidence and pride in what I accomplish." (Elena)

"We always tell them [our children] that people from other nationalities, like Italian, are basically successful. And Puerto Rican, you don't see too many going to college. We tell her [Maria], you should try to change that. You are one of our people that is going to be different... Maybe she could be a role model for other kids if she tries hard." (Maria's father)

"If someone expects you to fail, well, then you're going to prove them wrong. That's the way I am." (Peter's mother)



Parents should become involved in their child's school and extracurricular activities. By encouraging a "social bond" with the school and the community, they will help him or her to grow in confidence and self-esteem.

All of these high achieving students were actively involved in both school and extracurricular activities, and their parents encouraged and supported this involvement. Being "involved" helped them to develop a positive self image and a sense of commitment to school and community.

Alicia summed it up best when she advised, "Go out and do things for other people. It helps you communicate with the community itself. With the 'Student Senate,' I became president. My sister was president, also. That shows your leadership. Encourage them to reach out for those things. I reached out and I was secretary of my class for three years. Those things helped me a lot. They've given me self-confidence. The first time I ran for something, it was like, 'There's no way I'm going to get this.' But when I got it, I worked hard. And doing other clubs, other organizations. It's diversity. It's variety. Not just one thing. I

helped found the 'Students Against Drunk Driving.' And getting involved has helped me to be proud of being a Puerto Rican. Being able to say, 'Yes, I'm a Puerto Rican. And I'm here helping my community'."

Where Parents Can Seek Assistance

Parenting is one of the most difficult *and* rewarding tasks in the world. Every parent wants to do their best for his or her child.

There are people and resources right in your school and community that you can turn to for advice on how to help make your child's school experience both positive and rewarding.

1 Your child's teacher is probably your first and most important contact. Regular conference times are normally provided by the school, but be sure to contact your child's teacher when a problem or concern arises. At the high school level, conferences are usually not set up unless specifically requested by the parent. But teachers are very willing to discuss a child's progress or parent concerns. A phone call or note will initiate the process.

• • •

2 Your child's guidance counselor (secondary level) is an important resource person for both student and parent. The guidance counselor should make you aware of your child's plan of study and contact you whenever any modifications are made. He or she is also a contact person when problems arise and can work as a liaison between

you and school personnel. The counselor should be aware of your child's postgraduate plans and help your child make the necessary preparation towards that goal.

• • •

3 The school psychologist's main function is to handle nonacademic problems that might interfere with your child's learning. For example, if a child is dealing with divorce at home, the death of a loved one, or any other unusual circumstance, the psychologist is there to offer support and counseling.

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4 Bilingual teachers and counselors are often hired by larger school districts to work specifically with bilingual parents and students. If your English skills are limited, these specially trained people should be available to help you communicate with other members of the school community.

Success in school should be a reality for all children. We hope the advice given in this pamphlet will offer you some concrete ways to help your child develop his or her talents and abilities, and be ready to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

The material presented in this publication is based on the following study which was conducted by the author:

The Home Environment of Gifted Puerto Rican Children: Family Factors Which Support High Achievement

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of ten gifted Puerto Rican students and their parents to identify family factors which may contribute to high achievement. The methodology used was qualitative and phenomenological. Data were collected through written questionnaires and in-depth interviews, and inductive analysis was used to uncover eight common factors which supported students' academic achievement. Four additional factors described by individual subjects were identified as variant themes. Explanations of the roles the factors played in supporting high academic achievement were also derived from the data.

Overview and Background of the Study

Recent research (Davis, Haub, & Willette, 1983; Diaz, 1984; Hodgkinson, 1985) has shown that Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing student population in the United States. In fact, demographic studies confirm that the American Hispanic population increased by 61% from 1960 to 1980 while the general population grew only by 11% (Hodgkinson, 1985).

Of concern to educators are indications that Hispanics may be the most undereducated group in America. According to Hyland

(1989), measures of educational attainment (i.e., number of years completed, standardized test scores, grades, nature of courses taken) indicate that Hispanics are significantly behind the general population.

Many contemporary theorists (Armor, 1972; Bradley & Caldwell, 1984; Clark, 1983; Coleman, 1975, 1990; Comer, 1988; Halsey, 1972; Laosa, 1982; Midwinter, 1977; Walberg, 1984) have suggested that in order to reduce differences in achievement, programs must address not only the children's inherent abilities (trait theory) but also their family environment (situation theory). Although much research has been done to determine how the family environment affects achievement, few researchers have directly studied minority populations. Current research of general Hispanic groups (Ascher, 1984; Fernandez & Nielsen, 1986; Goldenberg, 1987; Laosa, 1982; Soto, 1988), however, reveals some important information. For example, in their study of high school students, Fernandez and Nielsen (1986) found that proficiency in *both* English and Spanish was positively related to achievement but frequent use of Spanish at home was negatively associated with achievement.

In order to enhance academic achievement among the growing Hispanic population and to ensure equal access to and fair representation in gifted programs, it is important that we examine and attempt to understand which factors within the family environment may support high achievement.

Information concerning home background of high achieving students could be utilized to (1) counsel parents in ways to promote their children's academic growth; and (2) help

educators understand and support successful home environment strategies.

The major research question addressed in this study was: What factors in the family learning environments of gifted Puerto Rican high school students support high achievement?

Research Methods and Procedures

Due to the investigative nature of this study, purposeful sampling was employed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The subjects for this study were ten Puerto Rican high school students (ages 15–18) who were presently achieving at a superior level academically as evidenced by grades, teacher observation, awards, and honors. The small number of subjects enabled the researcher to concentrate on depth and richness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to understand if certain cultural values cut across socioeconomic groups and gender, female and male students were chosen from both urban and suburban school systems in Connecticut.

The methodology used in this study was qualitative and phenomenological. Data were collected through both written questionnaires and in-depth interviews of each student. In addition, parents were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire and were interviewed as a follow-up to the questionnaire. Finally, the researcher visited each high school guidance department, spoke with counselors who had nominated the students, and examined the cumulative file for each student. Therefore, multiple sources of information were used to triangulate the data (Guba, 1978).

Results and Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that high academic achievement among Puerto Rican high school students can be attributed to eight factors. Five of the factors, press for achievement, high educational and occupational aspirations, strong family support system, optimistic outlook/lack of defeatism, and school and extracurricular involvement/social bonding, appeared to be generalizable across racial, ethnic, and social groups as factors supporting high achievement (Clark, 1983; Marjoribanks, 1979; Soto, 1988). A sixth factor, press for language development, was modified by the researcher from the factor labeled by Marjoribanks (1979) as “press for English.”

Two factors, “family bond” and “discomfort with cultural stereotypes/reaction to teacher and community expectations,” seem to be unique to the Puerto Rican subgroup.

Finally, four variant factors were described by individuals as having an important effect on academic achievement. Those factors were: (1) role models outside of the family; (2) outstanding teachers; (3) consistently high teacher expectations; and (4) an intrinsic drive to succeed.

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