

4. Why do you think Paul never thought about being Chicano before? What kinds of ethnic studies would be important for students at different levels?
5. How can schools use the tremendously positive feelings about family that Paul and other Latinos have?

CASE STUDY

Ron Morris

“I just felt like the realest person on earth.”

Ronald Morris,¹ who describes himself as Afro-American, looks older than his 19 years, not just because of his 6'4" frame, but in temperament as well. He is eloquent, exudes self-confidence, and has a highly expressive face and easy smile. Ron has five siblings and lives with his mother, three sisters, three nieces, and two nephews in a housing development in Boston just a few blocks from the Antonia Pantoja Community High School, the alternative school he attends. The school was named for an educational leader in the New York Puerto Rican community who in the 1950s was the major inspiration for *Aspira*, an agency that promotes education among Puerto Rican and other Latino and inner-city youth.² Ron's older brother is in jail and his older sister, whom he describes as “dropping kids,” is currently living in a shelter until she finds an apartment. He says his neighborhood is “wild, very wild” due to the constant shootings and drug activity.

Ron's neighborhood was in the news recently because a nine-year-old boy was shot by gang members, and several of the students from the school Ron attends were grazed by the bullets. This kind of incident has become almost a daily occurrence in this community, and Ron has not been spared from the ever-present violence.³ Several months before he was interviewed, Ron was leaving the “T” (subway) station in his neighborhood with his paycheck in hand when a young man went after him, wrestling him to the ground attempting to get the check. Ron heard shots and suddenly found himself on the ground and wounded. The assailant put the gun to Ron's head, and, as Ron got up and ran, he was shot a total of six times. Miraculously, no vital organs were hit and most of the bullets left his body. One, stuck in his hip, is to be removed this month.

A kindergarten teacher's aide who retired four years ago, Ron's mother exerts a strong influence on him and gives him a great deal of support for continuing his studies, urging him to make something of himself. Ron has not seen his father since he was eight or nine years old. Ron's educational history has been a checkered one: He was held back twice, once in fourth grade and once in sixth, and he moved from school to school many times. He was thrown out of one junior high school and sent to another one, where he graduated from eighth grade. After that, he attended two high schools before being expelled and sent to his present school. Coincidentally, the counselor at the school Ron is now attending

was the eighth grade teacher he referred to in the interviews as the teacher of “the first real class I ever had.”

To graduate from the Boston Public Schools, students need to have accumulated 105 points, but, when he began classes at the Pantoja Community High School two years ago, Ron had zero points toward graduation even though he had been in high school for two years. Because this alternative school offers an accelerated program in which students can earn credit for their effort and performance in classes and through individual projects, he has been able to catch up with his points and expects to graduate by the end of this year. The school, a partnership between the Boston Public Schools, the city, and the community, offers a variety of educational, creative, vocational, and cultural opportunities for its 50 students, many of whom had no previously successful experiences in school. In addition to his regular classes, Ron is participating in a small tutorial—an advanced history class offered by a renowned retired professor who taught both at Boston University and Harvard. Ron loves this class because students get to examine original documents and tapes about the Cuban Missile Crisis in order to come to their own conclusions about what decision they would have made.

The multicultural curriculum of this alternative school is one of the features that makes it appealing to Ron and the other students. Other features include its philosophy of empowerment, democracy, and student and staff collaboration and participation. The school also has an active sports program, and the basketball team won all of its tournaments with other schools throughout the entire Boston area last year. Ron was one of the star basketball players, and he hopes to resume playing as soon as his injuries heal completely.

Ron’s lack of personal success with education had left him feeling disillusioned about his future, but his experiences at the Pantoja Community High School seem to be turning that around. Although his first goal was to become a professional football player, he has developed more realistic goals and is considering a future as a physical therapist, perhaps for a sports team. Staff at the school are helping him make decisions about his future by providing him with brochures and information on different professions and colleges. Ron had always thought he could not afford to go to a four-year college and instead had planned on a community college, but his advisers are giving him information on scholarships. They have also spoken to him about the possibility of later transferring to a four-year college. His future plans also include a nice house and a family.

During the first interview, Ron confided that he was about to become a father with two different young women. Although he said he was willing to take responsibility for the children and he had an ongoing relationship with one of the young women, he also seemed determined to continue his education in spite of his situation. In fact, it was at this point that he talked most fervently about wanting to go to Harvard University.

The major themes that emerged from interviews with Ron focused on how schools and his own attitude were complicitous in creating failure, on the key role of the curriculum in teaching young people about who they are, and on his growing sense of responsibility for becoming a better student.

Creating Failure

Depends on how I felt that day [whether I was a good student]. I could come to school and say, "Okay, I'm a do all my work. I ain't gonna mess with nobody." I have this will power. Nobody can make me do what I don't want to do. I do it because I felt like doing it. And sometimes I used to say, "Let me do this work." I come to school, kids be playing. They like, "Come on, Ron, come on, Ron. Let's play, let's go do this, let's go do that." I used to go, "Nah, man, chill . . . [I wanna] do my work."

Teachers used to be like, "Why don't you do this all the time? . . ." And then it was like a habit so the teachers knew it was like okay, one day Ron is gonna come in and do his work. For the rest of the week, he's gonna be destructive. And then it went to, okay, Ron is gonna come and do his work in two days and the rest of the week be destructive. Three days, and so forth, until it was, okay, Ron comes in every day and does the work.

And then the work started getting boring to me 'cause it started getting easier and easier. Then it was getting repeated and repeated. It was like, Ron's gonna come to school now every day and be destructive because he's not learning anything new. And I would have that in my mind. I would actually sleep on that thought: "I'm gonna come to school and I'm gonna destroy it. I will come to school and just mind be gone, just terror, terror." Worst student [that school] ever had for two years. They used to always tell me that. "You are the worst student."

It wasn't that [all] the teachers would tell me. It was this one particular person, the coach of the basketball team. He was Black. He was also either the dean of discipline or the assistant principal. He used to put us down, and then he'll come to us and try to teach this: "You shouldn't be acting like that. You're Black," and stuff like that. And I used to get offended. . . . Me and him used to go at it all the time. Basically, I think he's the reason why I got thrown out. He just didn't like me.

The first day [at the new high school] I got into a little problem with kids from the neighborhood, from another neighborhood. And they called me into their office like a couple of days later. And they were basically trying to tell me they didn't want me there because of where I lived and where most of the other kids who went there lived. Like the majority of boys who went there were from this other development.

I didn't really like [school]. I used to always want to skip and go home or smoke or come to class and create ruckus or something. You knew what you was going to class for. You was going to class to get taught really nothing. And I'm not just saying history. All classes are basically boring. Like, Okay, say you learn a new level of math after you pass. Like from the 10th grade down, math is repeated until you take algebra. . . . The problems may get longer, but it's the same thing.

Basically to me, everything is like a repeated pattern. Like science, you learn the same science till you get to high school. Instead of teaching you something different, they give it a new name. They call it biology. It's just earth science. They're just teaching you more about cells. You've learned about cells in earth science. And chemistry is basically an advanced form of biology. They just using elements. Everything repeats itself. . . .

You can get all the good grades in the world. What did you learn? You can take a straight honor roll student and take somebody like a bum off the street who lived life on the street. You can take the straight A student and they can be talking and I done seen

this happen. The bum just knows more. You look at the straight A student like them grades don't mean nothing. Like Chinese people aren't smart, they just apply theyselves to the work. They come to school on time. They do what they need to achieve that A. Who knows if they're learning anything? You can't say they smarter 'cause they get straight A's. They do what they have to do to get A's. I can get straight D's or straight F's and still know more than half the people in the classroom.

The Boston Public Schools, your reputation follows you. So if you went into one of the guidance counselors and said, "I want to get into college," the guidance counselor went, "Well, I'll talk to you later." And then later would be like too late. You're already graduated. You don't know anything. It's too late.

Two or three years from now, you'll see that same guidance counselor. You may not be what you wanted to be, but you didn't sit there and take any old job. You went and got you a nice, good-paying job. You know, probably got a kid now or something. And then the same guidance counselor say, "Well, you've changed a lot." And you look at him and say, "Yeah, I woulda been better. I woulda went to college if you woulda paid me any attention."

When a teacher becomes a teacher, she acts like a teacher instead of a person. She takes her title as now she's mechanical, somebody just running it. Teachers shouldn't deal with students like we're machines. You're a person. I'm a person. We come to school, and we all act like people.

[I want teachers to know] that not all of us men are gang members and drug dealers, just a major stereotype. And our women aren't lazy. Things that they say bother us. I want [them] to know that even though we're still going through a little hardship, I'm still proud to be Black and we shouldn't be put down.

[In school], they didn't really teach anything. I went to school. I come in, you sit down, you learn. Like in history, you learn the same thing over and over and over again. I learned some sort of history in the sixth grade and some sort of history in the eighth grade. I get in high school and I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm going to learn a whole new history." I get to high school for the first time, I had the same thing I had in the eighth and sixth grade! You keep asking yourself why they keep doing this? Why they keep doing that? And you see it as "Okay, they don't want you to learn anything."

They talked about Christopher Columbus like he was some great god or something. . . . You went through three different segments of Christopher Columbus. You're saying now, Okay, he's got to be a fake. He's a fictional character. They just keep pumping him up. He's turning from this to this. . . . Then you just get tired. Okay, forget Christopher Columbus. . . . Who cares about Christopher Columbus? He didn't do anything.

You learned about all explorers and Malcolm, a little bit about Malcolm X, a little bit about Martin Luther King. You learned a little bit about slavery, a little bit about this. You learned a little bit about everything. You learned it just so many times.

You just want to say, "Well, isn't it time that we learned something different?" There's more than just what's in this book, 'cause what's in this book is not gonna let us know who we really are as people. So you have to give us some more, which they wasn't trying to give.

[Teachers should] probably just see what the students like and teach it how they would understand it and so that it's more helpful to them. . . . More discussion instead of more reading, more discussion instead of just letting things be read and then left alone. People read things and then don't understand what they read.

Like if school was more, not all fun and games, but it was more realistic than just reading and doing the work and then you leave. You sit there for 45 minutes doing nothing, just reading a whole book and the teacher is doing nothing but letting you read, and she's probably reading the newspaper or eating gum. And that's why the dropout rate is why [it is] because they just come to school and they ain't teaching us nothing, so why am I gonna sit here? I'm a just go somewhere, just drop out. It's the learning style. It's the way they being taught. They feel that they not learning anything so they don't want to be here.

Classes would be like at least an hour, hour and a half. You can't learn anything in 45 minutes. That 45 minutes go by like this [snaps fingers]. Classes need to be like an hour, hour and 45 minutes 'cause you need the time to read and discuss. You just don't need the time to read, give a paper, and leave. . . . These classes, you could take your time and think and talk about things. Then you do the work 'cause you have all the time. Classes have got to be structured like that, more discussion. Not all that sitting there and you read this, do the work.

Like I take Spanish and then after Spanish, I'll take Seymour [the Advanced History tutorial]. Spanish always ends too early. I don't get enough. I'll be dying to learn how to speak Spanish. . . . She'll be right in the middle of something real good and it be 12:15 and I'll be, like, "God!"

I like history and the way [Seymour] teaches it, and it's just that his method and the material that he has to cover the history, it's like the reading is so real. The message here is just so powerful. . . . Instead of just reading, we discuss. We'll read like a certain section and we'll discuss that section. Why was it written like this and what do I think it means? What is the real meaning behind what they're saying? And do I really believe that this could have happened, that could have happened? . . . And he makes sure that you understand it fully before he lets you go on.

Curriculum and the Challenge of Identity

My identity as an Afro-American—it's like I can never change that. I can never be anything different. I can never be another race. I'm always going to be Afro-American, and I'll always be looked at differently.

Being Afro-American is a challenge. . . . It's just proving to yourself every day in life. You always prove to yourself, "I can do better than what they want me to do." Knowing that they just threw you out in the jungle just to die anyway. . . . I don't want to die because I couldn't survive out there. I want to die because I got old and it's time to go. Heart just stopped kicking, of natural causes.

We need more Black people in politics. We don't have no spokespeople in the Senate and City Hall and the Congress. Nobody's up there speaking for us and if there are Black people up there, they're not speaking for us. . . . We don't have no voice. Our voice is just like whispers. They can't hear it. There's too much noise, too much confusion.

Proud to be Afro-American? Well, yeah and no. Yeah, I'm proud to be Afro-American because I'm a Black male and all this and I have so many dreams and so many ways of being, that I come from a great race of kings and queens who went through slavery and our race still survives and all that.

And no, because I have to accept the term Afro-American because I was born in America. I wasn't born where my ancestors come from. I'm not as pure as my ancestors were because your family's been raped and developed these different things. . . . Sometimes that makes me sad when somebody can say, "Well, look at you. You got a White person's nose," or you got this or you got that.

Even though [White students] sit there and White history is the basic history, they don't really know anything about White. They look at it as White people have always been on top, which is not true for about—they don't know about before five, six thousand years ago. Nobody even knew who White people were. To me, that's crazy. Everybody's running around not really knowing who they are. People think they know who they are. . . . They think they know what their history is.

[I felt comfortable in school] once in eighth grade. Just this case, a history class I had. Just made me want to come to school and made me want to say, "Okay, now that I know there are so many false things in the world and that there's so much out there for me to learn, stop bullshitting."

It was a Black African history class. It was titled that. It was just so different from the textbook style. . . . It was no books. It was just documents and papers and common-sense questions and commonsense knowledge. You'd just sit there, be like, "This is real! This is really what it is." And this Black history class, like people was thinking, the school system, at first they wanted him to teach it 'cause it was like okay, he's just trying to make the Black people, pump 'em up and stuff like that. But they was never in the class.

It was basically about Black people, but it showed you all people instead of just Black people. It showed us Latinos. It showed us Caucasians. It showed us the Jews and everything how we all played a part what society in any country is like today. I just sat in that class, and I used to go to that class once a week 'cause it was only a once-a-week class. I'd sit and just be like, I was just so relaxed. I just felt like the realest person on earth.

Taking Responsibility for Becoming a Better Student

My mother wants me to become the best Black man that ever lived on the face of this earth! That is her. She'll start every conversation off with me, "What are you gonna do now? Go get a job. Go to school." I mean, I could wake up in the morning late for school. . . . "All he does is sleep, hang out all night. . . ." I be upstairs and I wish this woman would shut up! But she's right. I gotta do something. I got to get out now. I have to. It's time for me.

Me and my brother were like the biggest burdens on my mother, 'cause even though my oldest sister was having these kids, but me and my brother were like, he was on the streets. We were doing bad. She knew we was doing bad. Always called, like every other weekend, in jail: "Mom, we're in jail. Come get us out." And things she used to do like she used to leave us in jail. . . . One time I was in jail for like three months. She didn't come visit me. She didn't write. When I called, she didn't even want to speak. I was like 13, 14.

And then. . . it just popped in my head: I was like, "If we was acting more like men, we wouldn't be in jail doing all this dumb stuff, you idiot!"

The difference between me and my brother, if my brother was sitting here talking to you, the only thing you would notice different between me and him would be the way he

looked. Me and him were the same people. We thought the same. We knew what each other wanted.

I go to my brother for advice when things go bad. I like to talk to my brother. . . . Like I could talk to my mother about it, but like she never ran the streets. My brother ran the streets. He sees things how I see it, and he can talk to me.

We used to go to court. . . . I used to get up and just say something and they would release me. Personal recons [recognizance]. Then I'd go home. You know, just come back to court. I'd go back to court and just beat the case, period. And then I'd always think about, "Why do I keep going to jail? Why do I always keep . . . doing all this stuff to my mother?"

[My brother] was caught in a deep thing. He was selling drugs. He has two kids like I do from two different women. And he was trying to take care of his kids and sell drugs at the same time, but had little petty cases. And I used to tell him like, "Come on, man, chill out. You got two kids, man. Stop selling drugs. Get a job. The little petty cases are gonna catch up to you." He didn't graduate from high school. He got his GED [general equivalency diploma] in jail.

And my mother used to always, she like, "Y'all two are stressed. Y'all two are killing me." And she used to be like, "When I'm gone, there ain't no other mother in the world. Nobody gonna treat you like Ma did." She used to just say things. It was like she was talking to us as our mother.

I didn't want to be one of the kids who was always living with their mother. I always wanted to show my mother I could survive on my own because those are the things that she taught me. She taught me responsibility. She taught me how to survive. She taught me these things.

I'm trying to get into Harvard. . . . My mother told me I could do it. . . . She'd say things like, "If them women [the two women who were pregnant with his children] really understand what it is for you to be the correct father to your children, they won't burden you. They'll let you become these things, and they'll let these things happen so their kids won't have a typical Black future," as if they're still living in the same house and I'm working making \$6 an hour and killing myself and child support is taking all the money. And it's like them women really don't want that type of atmosphere for their kids and stuff, which I don't want, then they got to let you achieve.

[I want] to provide for my kids. I need the education. I have to. I can't just graduate out of high school and stop going to school, to just accept a diploma. It's nothing. . . . I need a real job.

At least I can take one of my kids away from what I lived through. And the other one, I can show the other one to be proud to say, "That's my father, ex-gang member and ex-this and ex-that. He became something in life." So my kid can say, "I'm gonna grow up to become somebody."

I don't want my kid to say, "Okay, my father graduated high school. That's the end of my father's life. He's nothing. He doesn't make enough. I don't get everything I want at Christmas." It's scary sometimes. I don't want my kid to wake up like that.

[Pantoja Community High School] is more out to help you achieve instead of just sitting there doing nothing.

Now I'm not in that, "They're not teaching me nothing, why should I come to school?" type thing. Here, as a difference in Boston Public Schools, it's more direct. It's more learning. You learn more. You learn differently. . . . I'm not learning what the book wants

me to learn about Christopher Columbus. I'm learning what, who Christopher Columbus really was, what he really did. I don't want to know what people *thought* he did and what they thought he *should* of did. I was learning a better structured history. . . . [Now I'm studying] the Cuban Missile Crisis and Native Americans in two different history classes.

It's realistic and my beliefs as an Afro-American are respected. If I come to class and don't like the class being taught because it's like that, you're not gonna say, "Well, you got to sit there and learn anyway." At least I had the chance to talk about it. . . . It's not like the Boston Public Schools. . . . "So, you don't want to learn about this class? Who cares? . . ." It's more realistic. If you don't want to learn about that, you have the option of talking about it or not.

[Teachers here] understand my identity and culture. They respect it. . . . When I go to Sandy's class [Humanities] and I'm sitting there sometimes, and like she gets these things and we be reading and discussing it. And then it never ceases to fail. Somebody always has something to say about White people. . . . She's White and we're Blacks and Latinos, and we're just trying to dog her. But she doesn't sit there and get all stressed on it. . . . She respects, she know this is how you feel, and if that's how you feel and that's what you say, say it, okay? You go, "All right," and you just speak about it and she accepted it.

She gives us funny little things. Like she gave us this one thing called "The Day that Wasn't." And at first, I was like, "Come on, now. This is kids' stuff." And I was reading it. And I kept reading it. You know, as you went along, it was like, "Yeah!" 'Cause it was like about identity, 'cause the people kept telling the bear that he wasn't a bear. Finally he just believed that he wasn't a bear. And so the winter came around and then in wintertime he noticed he was always tired. And then he went to sleep in a cave. And then he finally figured out that, "Hey, I'm really a bear!"

That's like some people. Some people don't believe just who they really are. Some people want to be different people. Some Blacks want to be White. Some Whites want to be Black. Why [not] accept what you got? You can't change that. . . . It was like, "Come on, Sandy. Why do you want us to read this?" Then it occurred to me.

I'm learning like in a more accelerated way because not only do I get the opportunity to teach myself because of the material I have to teach myself with, but the teachers are there actually to help you learn too. . . . I may read a book and be like, "Okay, what do they really mean?" And then I talk to one of my teachers and maybe one may not know it, but somebody will be able to tell me. It's not just the teachers. It's the staff, everybody. . . . Everybody's there for each other.

I could be getting a better [education] if it wasn't for me. I'm the only one holding me back, just me. The little things that I do just hold me back. Being late, just little things. The little dumb things that I do hold me back. I have to just stop all that foolish stuff that I be doing. I have to put that stuff behind me. I'm too old now.

My friend Ernie is like, he's focused. If I could just borrow his head for a couple of months, I would be just like better off than I am now. But since I can't borrow his head, I can like borrow ideas from him. Me and him talk a lot.

[I'm a good student] almost. Not there yet. Have to work on being on time. That's the key thing, being on time. . . . Still very talkative, very talkative. Oh, I could talk a whole class!

When I start college, I'll have to get out of that late mentality. Always wanting to be late. Always knowing, okay, I don't have to go to school today but if I go tomorrow, I know I'm good and fast enough to make up for today's work. But then college isn't like that. . . . It's much like harder, 'cause like college, every day they're teaching you something different. So I'm a know I have to be more on track.

I would have to try to take care of my responsibilities to the fullest, but I know that I don't. So I have to take care of my responsibilities more. And stop being a pain to my mother. I don't think she like that. She's getting tired of that.

I'm not perfect. I wouldn't call myself a good student. I call myself an all right student. I know what's right and what's wrong. I just have to apply [myself] to it.

If you'd asked me about two, three years ago, I'd a told you I didn't have the slightest idea why I came to school. It's stupid. It's boring. They don't teach me nothing. I don't learn anything. I should just stay home. But you're asking me that now in the Pantoja [Community High School]. . . . You'd have to ask me a two-part question: What do I think about school then, and what do I think about it now? Now I think about it differently because I'm not in the Boston Public Schools. I'm here, I'm learning. I'm learning more from people who know. It's not a book. Boston Public Schools give you a textbook. Here it's, "I can teach you through experience, through documents, through this, through that."


Once you change like from that childhood atmosphere, 'cause you're older now. You're like, "Okay, I'm 17, 18, think I can still act like a kid and get over in life?" This [school] teaches you that acting like a kid all your life ain't gonna get you over in life unless you're gonna be a comedian. If your goal is not to be a comedian, then why would you want to act like a kid all your life?

Boston Public Schools didn't train you for life. All they train you for is to know what they want you to know so you can only get so far as what you got. Meaning, if you believe that what they taught you was all real and all this, and went to college and got a degree or something, just went through life thinking what you learned at Boston Public Schools was right, what you learned in your regular high school was the real deal, you would probably be a confused soul. You'd die wondering why everything is like this.

I'm learning how, instead of planning for the day, like you would normally do, I'm planning for the future.

COMMENTARY

Educational failure is not created by young people alone and is not simply the result of poor academic skills, poor parenting, lack of proper nutrition, or even abject poverty. Nor is educational failure simply the result of disruptive and violent students or overcrowded schools. For African American students, racism and low expectations can also be formidable barriers to school success, and all of these conditions can combine to result in academic failure.⁴ Ron seems to understand that failure is created by a multiplicity of conditions, which can include some of those just listed as well as stagnant pedagogy, lack of financial resources and commitment, and a disinterested public, but can also include students' own attitudes and behaviors. This understanding helps place in bold relief the responsibility that must be borne by all who claim to care about the educational health of our society.



According to Ron, his failure was created by a boring and irrelevant curriculum, a lack of trust on the part of teachers and guidance counselors of his capability to learn and succeed, the lure of the streets, and his own negative attitude about learning. Especially critical of the curriculum, what he calls “a repeated pattern,” Ron feels it is based on myths that prevent students from developing a critical perspective about who they are and what they are learning. His distaste for traditional school curriculum leads him to question the value of grades, and even to suggest that “a bum off the street” might be more intelligent than a straight A student. Ron also criticizes the pedagogy of traditional schools and offers suggestions to help make the curriculum more helpful to students: longer classes, more discussion, and primary sources as the basis of the curriculum. These suggestions are strikingly consistent with the thinking of current educational reformers.⁵

Strongly tied to the irrelevance of the curriculum, in Ron’s eyes, is cultural identity. He speaks poignantly about the challenge of being Afro-American, but he also ponders the miseducation received by all students of all backgrounds (“They think they know what their history is,” he says of White students). In one of the most telling moments of the interviews, Ron described the Black African History class he had in eighth grade as “This is real!” and, “I just felt like the realest person on earth.” The fact that the teacher of this particular class was not only a gifted educator but also African American cannot be underestimated, although Ron quickly pointed out another Black teacher whom he felt was the reason he was thrown out of one of the schools.⁶

How families contribute to the academic success of their children was the subject of an ongoing study of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children’s Learning Project. Three important and recurring themes emerged in the preliminary findings that give insight into how families prepare and support their children’s academic achievement. African American families of academically successful children provide extended family and community support, provide racial socialization, and act as teachers in the home.⁷ Ron’s mother raised him, he said, to be responsible and proud of himself. He said, for example, “My mother wants me to become the best Black man that ever lived on the face of this earth!”—a good example of what is meant by “racial socialization.” Like many African American families, she felt a deep sense of responsibility to prepare her children to face obstacles in society by emphasizing pride in their race. However, in spite of the historic importance of extended families in African American culture, in most communities they are quickly becoming a relic, and many parents, especially single parents, are forced to cope with the burden of raising their children alone, with few resources and little community support.

Ron’s newfound enthusiasm for school and his emerging educational success is consistent with a comprehensive survey of young African American men in four cities that found that caring teachers, appropriate youth programs, and part-time or summer jobs, in conjunction with parent involvement, are conditions that support their high school graduation.⁸ Specifically, they found that those who stayed in school were more likely to be in an academic program, and almost three-quarters of

those who stayed in school reported that their teachers were interested in how well they were doing in class and gave them hope for the future.

In spite of his mother's guidance and her insistence that he go to school, study, and be serious, Ron ran the streets with his brother and got into trouble for years. He is finally taking responsibility for his life and his education. At present, he is doing well in school and planning for the future, and he reflects critically on his past activities and how they held him back. His attitude about school has changed dramatically, and the alternative school he is attending is no doubt at least partly responsible for this change. Staff at the school respect his culture, he says, and they provide stimulating activities, both curricular and extracurricular. He enjoys this school because he is treated as an adult. Ron is committed to completing his education and has high hopes of attending college.

Ron is also facing formidable challenges in the months and years ahead. He will become a father of two children soon, and he seems oblivious to how this monumental change will affect his life; he still talks, for example, of being able to attend Harvard. Although he says he wants to shoulder some of the responsibility for at least one of the children, it is unclear how he will do this, graduate from high school, go on to college, find meaningful employment, and be on his own, as he says he wants to be.

The complex and competing messages that Ron Morris has picked up from his family, schools, peers, and society are evident in his interviews: Be proud, become somebody, trust in yourself, be tough, be a man. How he resolves some of the contradictions he is facing, especially how to become both a good student and a responsible father at such a young age, will certainly be major issues for the decisions he will make in the near future.

TO THINK ABOUT

1. What does Ron's case study teach us about the reasons for students' lack of academic success? How can you apply what you learned through his case to the situation of other students?
2. Why do you think Ron called the Black African history class "the first real class I ever had"? What do you imagine was the content of this class, and how did it differ from other history classes?
3. Culture and identity are major issues for Ron. What implications does cultural identity hold for school curriculum?
4. What do you think about Ron's ideas for the future? What would you tell him if you were his guidance counselor?
5. Before attending this alternative school, Ron had not experienced a great deal of academic success. What features of this school do you think might be useful for nonalternative schools to know about?