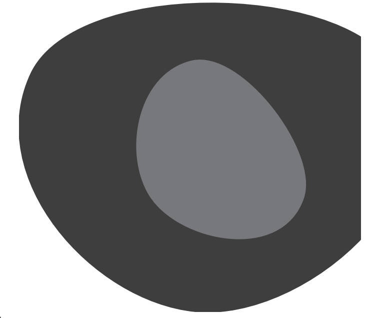

Case Studies and Snapshots

Selection of Students for Case Studies and Snapshots

The students interviewed for the case studies and snapshots were selected in a number of ways. Those doing the interviews usually attempted to find students through community or informal channels rather than through schools, although in some cases, we consulted teachers or counselors. Most students were interviewed at home or in a community setting away from school. The only requirement in selecting students was that those chosen be of varied backgrounds to provide the diversity we were seeking. To maintain confidentiality, we used pseudonyms for the students and for most towns or cities, except for large urban areas such as Boston or Los Angeles. The names of schools, teachers, and family members also were changed. All the students and their families gave us permission to tape their interviews and to use the results in this book.

Adolescents of secondary school age were selected because they generally are able to reflect on and articulate their experiences in a more analytic manner than younger students. They can also discuss both present and past experiences, providing an important continuity. Many books on multicultural education have been designed with an elementary school population in mind, and this has unwittingly reinforced perceptions that multicultural education is only for younger children, that it cannot be included in the more "rigorous" requirements of high school, and that it

is a frill unrelated to basic curricula. The focus on secondary school students challenges these perceptions.

The students in the case studies and snapshots are both typical and atypical of their ethnic, racial, linguistic, and social group. This is as it should be because, in this way, they may challenge and even shatter commonly held stereotypes. The issues and perspectives that these students brought up in their interviews are probably similar to those of other young people who share their identities. At the same time, each of their experiences is singular and should be understood as such. None of these students is a walking stereotype. The purpose of the case studies and snapshots is not to understand, for example, "the Black experience," "the Puerto Rican experience," or "the lesbian experience" as isolated and hypothetical phenomena, but instead to expose us to one of the many experiences within the broader context.

Academic Success and Failure

After reviewing the preliminary interviews and transcripts, we discovered that all ten of the students we had originally interviewed for the first edition of this book could be classified as successful. We thought more carefully about what it means to be a successful student and determined that we would consider them to be so if they met most of the following conditions:

- They were still in school and planning to complete high school or had recently graduated.
- They had good grades, although they were not necessarily at or near the top of the class.
- They had thought about the future and made some plans for it.
- They generally enjoyed school and felt engaged in it.
- They were critical of their own school experiences and those of their peers.
- Most important, they described themselves as successful.

Although most of the students had thought about continuing their education, we did not consider definite college plans essential for classifying them as successful students. For example, Manuel Gomes was graduating from high school and had thought vaguely about college, but he had no actual plans. Just the fact that he was the first in his large family to graduate from high school, the pride he felt in this accomplishment, and the importance he ascribed to education were enough to classify him as successful.

Although we do not consider college attendance the primary criterion for being a successful, intelligent, or well-adjusted person, we thought it was a necessary consideration because so many students of color and students from low-income families have been effectively denied the opportunity to receive a high-quality education or even to dream of college. That many of the students in these case studies had plans to go to college in spite of their schools' and society's expectations to the contrary is vital to explore if we are serious about providing educational equity to all students. The hope for a college education or another form of higher education is one indication that students believe that they are capable and worthy of the very best educa-

tion, and this is apparent even in the cases of the students who had not felt successful in school.

It was also clear that all the students believed that they were *entitled* to a good education, and they were eager to talk about problems with school. They felt free to critique their education whether or not they considered themselves to be successful in school. They were anxious to suggest ways to make school a better and more rewarding experience for all students.

A focus on academically successful students was not an intentional objective of the original research, but it emerged as a result of the interviews conducted for the first edition of this book. In fact, it was surprising to us that all the students whom we originally sought out, and who agreed to speak with us, were successful. On closer reflection, it seemed logical that students who are successful in school are more likely to want to talk about their experiences than those who are not. To explore what it was about these specific students' experiences that helped them learn, we began concentrating on issues such as home, school, and community resources, as well as on students' attitudes and activities. Because the students reflect a great deal of diversity, these issues may be different for each one. Notwithstanding these differences, you will see that most of the successful students reported similar conditions, albeit within a broad range of environments, that had helped them learn.

The focus on academic success is a counterpoint to much of the research during the past several decades that has focused on "failure." The result has been an entire industry of researchers who have made their living by documenting how and why students fail. In spite of the problems that emerge from focusing on failure, emphasizing only successful students also has its drawbacks, including a tendency to overlook the legitimate problems that many students have in school. Students who do not succeed academically can too easily become casualties of educational systems that cannot "see" them because their problems remain "invisible." Thus, although a focus on academic success is a good way to think about what works well in schools, we also need to pay attention to what can cause academic failure. For this reason, we have also included case studies of some students who have had problems in school. Their voices, as eloquent and intelligent as the others, need to be heard if schools are to become places in which all students belong and can learn.

An unexpected outcome of participating in the original project was that the interviews themselves were empowering for the students. In every case, they enjoyed and looked forward to being interviewed. They eagerly accepted the opportunity to discuss their families, school experiences, and cultures. More than one mentioned that it was the first time anyone had ever asked them these kinds of questions. The questions became sources of dialogue and awareness for the students. This is a good example of what Concha Delgado-Gaitán and Henry Trueba have termed the *ethnography of empowerment*, that is, using ethnographic research methods to frame educational reform and to empower teachers and students.[1] The fact that empowerment can take place through dialogue should not be lost on teachers. Not only can we learn something from students about their cultures and languages through interviews, but dialogue of this kind can and should become a useful pedagogical strategy

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in itself. This also has implications for using oral histories in the development of literacy and fostering family and community involvement in the schools.[2]

Researching and Developing the Case Studies and Snapshots

The process used for researching and developing the case studies and snapshots differed somewhat. Each case study begins with a contextual description of the individual under study: a sketch of the student's family, school, community, and ethnic group, along with other information that we thought was relevant to include. Following each contextual description is a transcript of the student's own words, categorized according to the three or four themes that emerged from the interviews.

The themes that emerged in the case studies were often quite similar from student to student; they concerned family, language, culture, and community. The guiding questions we used for the interviews centered on these particular issues to determine how they might have affected the students' schooling. (The questions are included at the end of this Appendix.) We tried to make the interviews themselves informal, and we used the questions primarily as a guide and springboard for further dialogue. We interviewed most students several times for a total of two to four hours, although some were interviewed for shorter periods of time. Interviews for the snapshots tended to be shorter, and the primary data were the students' own words.

Most of the interviews were transcribed by the interviewers, but we clustered the students' words according to the themes that emerged. We used ellipses to show that one statement was not said immediately after another, and new paragraphs generally indicate related statements made at separate points in time. This method makes clear the concerns each student emphasized. In addition, we omitted most common interjections such as *well, um, you know, and*, and *but* statements, as well as false starts. We gave the draft of the case study to the member of the research team who had done the interview for review and corroboration of the data and themes as well as to share with the interviewee. When the interviewer felt that the student had been portrayed appropriately and that we had caught the essence of the student's message, the case study was deemed complete. Members of the research team also made a number of suggestions for revision, inclusion, or removal, most of which we accepted.

Guidelines for Developing Case Studies

Throughout the years, professors who use this book have told us of the many ways in which they make use of the case studies: They assign particular students to study and in effect "become" the young people in the case studies; they ask students representing each of the young people to have a dialogue about identity, school, and family; they suggest that students keep a journal, focusing on their reactions to the case studies; or they ask the students to develop a case study of a young person in their own school or community. The latter assignment has been especially powerful for many students because it helps to create a practical, concrete foundation for their understanding of diversity.

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Before undertaking your own case studies, however, you need to carefully think about the ethics of doing this kind of research. All research is fraught with problems related to intellectual integrity, and case studies are no exception. Thus, for example, you need to think about your own identity and how it might influence the person you interview, particularly if she or he has an identity different from yours. What biases do you bring to the interview? How does your identity influence your attitudes toward the interviewee? How might your voice, inflection, facial gestures, or posture affect her answers? How might you inadvertently be putting words in his mouth? How might you be manipulating her thoughts? In addition, you should follow traditional protocols for conducting case studies (i.e., requesting and obtaining permission from the students and their parents or guardians and assuring anonymity).

Some recommendations for conducting interviews and writing case studies follow:

- Select a young person of the approximate age that you will be (or are currently) teaching. It is probably best not to select a student whom you know well.
- You may choose a young person from a background with which you are not very familiar. The assignment can provide a rich learning experience for you, and this is most likely to occur when you interact with, and do additional research on, a person from a different background. Alternatively, you may choose a young person from your own background because being an "insider" can help you relate more powerfully to the interviewee.
- As a class, develop and agree on a list of questions. What most interests you about young people? What do you, as a group, most want to know? Think about issues related to identity, culture, school success, and the role of teachers and family in young people's lives.
- Decide how many times you will meet to interview the young people. It is generally better to meet for several short sessions of one hour or less than to conduct an interview during one long session of 90 minutes or more. Dividing the questions into groups by topic is recommended.
- Make certain to meet the parents or guardians of the young people you plan to interview. Speak to them about the purpose and scope of the interviews and assure them of their child's confidentiality. Secure written and oral permission from them (on an audiotape), and let them know that they have the right to pull out at any time. Also tell them how you will be using the interview and how you will share it with the family when it's completed.
- Get as much information from the family as you will need to develop the case study, but be sensitive to the family's privacy and feelings. Do not impose yourself on them, and be discreet.
- Select a comfortable, quiet, and stress-free environment for the interviews. Meeting away from school—in a community center, the student's home, the park, or a place where you can have a refreshment and relax—is recommended.
- Try to make the interviewees as comfortable as possible during the interview. Ask the young person for permission to audiotape because that will give you the most accurate record of the interviews. Don't ask questions in a monotone or as if you're trying to get through an assignment; give

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your interviewee time to respond completely and then follow up with additional relevant questions. Ask the interviewee if he or she has any questions or concerns.

- Transcribing all the tapes is very time consuming and labor intensive, and it may not be realistic to do complete transcriptions for a one-semester course. Instead, you may want to do short snapshots like those we have included in this book. However, even if you don't have much time, you can still develop effective, although less extensive, case studies. First, listen to the tapes several times. Then try to determine the most important themes that keep cropping up. After you have done this, you can transcribe the parts that seem to be the most intriguing or relevant for the student you interviewed.
- Do some research on the context in which the student lives. Find out about his or her ethnic group and the group's history in the United States; look for information concerning the city or town in which the student lives; try to get some data on the school the student attends (number of students, types of programs, and so on). Also ask interviewees if they would like to share writing samples, such as poems, letters, or essays, with you.
- Write up the case study. Begin with an introduction to the young person, including pertinent information about the individual and his or her family, community, cultural group, and school experience. Then use the young person's own words to create a narrative based on the most salient themes that you heard her or him address. Include any other information such as the interviewee's writings or other material the person may have given you.

Each case study is different, and there is no ideal model to follow. The guidelines will get you started on creating a convincing case study—or, if you want to develop a brief study, a snapshot—of a young person. The process may also help you develop valuable insights about the lives of young people. As you will see throughout this book, students can teach educators many things, and entering into a dialogue with young people through the development of case studies is one way to begin to learn from them.

Student Interview Questions

Below are the questions we used in interviewing our case study and snapshot students. You may want to use these or develop questions of your own.

1. Describe your early school experiences.
   - **a.** Where did you go to school?
   - **b.** What do you remember best about it?
   - **c.** Did you feel comfortable in school? Why or why not?
   - **d.** Do you remember any actual incidents that made you feel good or bad about school?
   - **e.** Were you a good student? Why or why not?

2. Tell me about your experiences in school now.
   a. How do you feel about school?
   b. What are you studying?
   c. What's your favorite subject? Least favorite? Why?
   d. Are you a good student? Why or why not?
3. What do you think is the reason for going to school?
   a. Are you accomplishing this purpose?
   b. Is it important to you? Why or why not?
   c. Why do your parents (or family) want you to go to school?
   d. What are you getting out of school?
4. What do you see in your future? What plans have you thought about?
5. Is somebody in school helping you to plan your future? How? What kind of help do you think you need?
6. Do you have plans for a family in the future? Tell me what they are.
7. Are grades important to you? Why or why not? Are they important to your parents? What do they look for?
8. What kinds of activities do you participate in at school? Are you in any clubs? Sports? Why or why not?
9. Do you participate in any community activities? What are they?
10. How do you describe yourself (ethnically, racially, culturally, etc.)?
    a. Is your culture (identity) important to you?
    b. If so, how? If not, why not?
    c. Is your identity important in your school? How do you know?
11. Do your teachers understand your culture? Your language? If so, how do they show you they do? If not, how do they show this? Can you give some examples? What could they do better?
12. Do you think anything is holding you back from getting a good education?
13. Are your parents involved in your school in any way?
    a. If so, how?
    b. If not, why not?
    c. What do your parents (family) think about school?
    d. How do you know?
    e. Does it matter to you whether or not your parents are involved in school?
14. Many people say that your parents are really their first and most important teachers. What you have learned from your family? What have you learned from them about your culture (identity)? About what it means to be ________ (race, ethnic group, religion, sexual orientation)?

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15. Describe your parents to me. What do you like most about them? Would you change anything about them if you could?

16. What is it like being a member of your family? How is it different from other families?

17. What holidays do you celebrate with your family? How?

18. Do you go to church/temple/mosque or other religious services? Is it important to you whether you do or not?

19. What do you talk about with your parents (family)? What kinds of conversations do you have with them?

20. Tell me what it's like being ________ (ethnic/cultural group). How would you describe it?

21. How is it different from being a young person who's not ________ (cultural/ethnic group)?

22. How can you tell if someone is ________ (their cultural/ethnic group)?

23. Let's say a new ________ (cultural/ethnic group) student came to your school. What advice would you give her or him about being a successful student in your school?

24. What are some of the things you'd like teachers to know about ________ (their cultural/ethnic group) kids?

25. Of all your teachers, who's the most helpful to you? How?

26. Who's the least helpful? How?

27. If you could be your teacher, what kinds of things would you do to make you like school better?

28. Have any of your friends dropped out of school? Why? What's happened to them?

29. Describe three of your friends to me [you don't need to use their real names]. What are they like? Are they like you or different? Why do you like them?

30. Who else do you hang out with? Why?

31. What are some of the things you enjoy doing with friends? Tell me what a good time with your friends is like.

32. Make believe I've never been to ________ (name of city, town, or community where they live). Describe it to me.

33. Do you ever leave your community? Where do you go? Are there other places where you would like to go?

34. Do you think you'll live in this community when you're an adult? Why or why not?

35. Tell me a little more about yourself.

   a. What kinds of foods do you like to eat? To cook?

   b. Do you eat special foods on holidays? What are they?

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- **c.** What kind of music do you listen to? Who's your favorite musician? Do you watch TV? What are your favorite programs?
- **d.** Do you like to dance? What's your favorite dance?
- **e.** What music do your parents (family) listen to? Do you like it?
- **f.** What about magazines—what do you read? Why?
- **g.** Who's your favorite actor/actress? Why?
- **h.** Who is the person you most admire in the world? Why?

36. Tell me what you like the most about yourself.

37. Complete the following sentence: When things go bad . . .

38. Complete the following sentence: I'm most happy when . . .

39. Do you think of yourself as successful? Why or why not?

40. What do you think you have to do to become successful later in life?

41. If you were the principal of your school, what would you do to make it better? How would you make it a place that you would look forward to going to every day? What changes would you make? (Give specific suggestions related to teachers, books, classes, counselors, etc.)