

CHAPTER 1

Academic Achievement

Academic achievement in Watts is a volatile topic, volatile because inner-city students all too often receive an inadequate education, suffering from what I call academic poverty. This problem is one of long standing. After reading Herbert Kohl's *36 Children*,¹ a student in the teacher preparation program in which I now teach remarked to me how wonderful it was that the book was still current in that it continued to reflect inner-city and ghetto education after twenty-five years. No sooner had he made the remark than its pernicious implications hit him: inner-city education was too often a travesty in 1967 and continues in many cases to be a travesty today.

This chapter focuses on academic achievement in Watts, the reasons for students' academic successes and failures, and the educational opportunities for inner-city youth beyond high school.

HIGH SCHOOL

By the year 2025, minorities are expected to make up nearly 40 percent of the eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old population in the United States, yet the academic preparation of African American and Latino high school students is still well below that of whites.² This was especially clear at Medgar High, where the attrition rate remained consistently high and achievement and SAT scores remained consistently low. The lack of academic preparation of minorities in this country gives rise to doubts as to how well the United States will be able to compete in the world market if academic preparation for all groups does not improve in quality.

Students in kindergarten through eighth grade in Watts were often passed from grade to grade without regard for the level of skills they demonstrated. Thus, a child in the second grade who was having trouble reading at grade level was passed on to the third grade and to the fourth and fifth, until eventually she wound

up in a class at Medgar High. Her skills may have slightly improved; perhaps she could read at the fourth- or fifth-grade level. At the high school, she was confronted with a very different educational system, one in which she had to actually demonstrate competence and pass the courses in which she was enrolled to be able to go on to the next grade and to graduate. Such a transition from being passed along to being held accountable for attainment of skills and units was often overwhelming and confusing. I talked with students who returned to class from the counseling office expressing anger and complete bewilderment at the news that they were not actually in tenth grade, although they had attended the ninth grade at Medgar High. They did not have sufficient units to qualify as a sophomore and were still considered ninth-grade students. "I don't care what she says," they routinely fumed, "I am not a ninth grader! I'm in the tenth!" They had been passed through the system for so many years that the notion of being held accountable for attaining skills and passing classes was a foreign one. By being passed along without having to demonstrate academic competence, students were not able to make the connection between hard work and earned academic achievement. Students perceived that they indeed were competent when they were not. Because they were being advanced to the next grade each year, they assumed that they were academically successful. I had students remark to me after a year in the ninth grade, "I used to be smart before high school."

Beyond the injustice of this sudden change of the rules was the injustice these students suffered by being allowed to slip through the educational system without acquiring skills. Imagine the fear of Wally, a ninth-grade student in one of my classes, who read at the second-grade level. He was afraid that his inability to read and write would be exposed. He refused to do work because it was easier to pass off his inability as bravado. For Wally, saying "I don't want to do it" carried a very different message than saying "I can't do it." The latter would have been too damaging; the former was a good bluff.

Referral to a special reading program gave Wally little assistance and could not reverse the damage already done to his self-esteem. He felt he had no control over his environment, lived in uneasiness, and eventually left school, where the message that he was a failure had become too repetitive and overwhelming. Once out of school, he found he lacked marketable skills, and he even-

tually became involved in a long series of petty crimes. The question remains as to how he survived nine years of school reading and writing at the second-grade level.

Unfortunately, his case was not unique. During my first year in Watts, the combined average reading levels of the ninth-, tenth-, and twelfth-grade students enrolled in my English classes was the sixth-grade level. Many of my students' parents were illiterate; with marginal and functional illiteracy in this country claiming some 60 million adults,³ this fact in itself was not surprising. Wally was one of many students at Medgar High who suffered from one or another form of academic poverty.

Educators may be less demanding of students in inner-city schools like Medgar High because they are all too aware that their students have not "had the advantages" that some of them had as children. Many of my students' parents, concerned with survival needs, did not have the funds necessary to enjoy the luxury of providing their children with books, educational games and toys, computers, music lessons, and tutors. In what may have been intended as a sensitive response to the knowledge of their students' lack of early educational opportunities, teachers often lowered their expectations of the students at Medgar High. This kind of thinking, however, has led to a real decline in academic excellence in inner-city schools⁴ and to the sad and omnipresent phenomenon of students lacking even the most basic skills.

Inner-city schools often carry a standard "attrition rate" hovering around 45 percent, and Medgar High School was no exception. This means that 45 percent of the student population at the school left for one or more of many reasons. Some students were transferred to another school as a disciplinary action or a voluntary measure, such as for protection from gangs or for perceived better educational opportunities. Some were incarcerated, joined the military, or moved their residence. They may have reached majority age and voluntarily left or were asked to leave because they had not shown sufficient academic progress. Many simply "dropped out."

The picture becomes even more disturbing. Such statistics on high school attrition rates do not take into account the startling number of students who drop out prior to high school and who never appear in descriptive statistics at Medgar High and other inner-city high schools because they were never there to be counted. The education offered to so many of these inner-city stu-

dents failed to interest them and to provide them some realistic projection of future use.

Students, like those at Medgar High, who are at risk for leaving school prior to completion have special characteristics in common. They may feel that what they are being taught in school has little relevance to their lives, feel detached from school, lack motivation, have low self-esteem, and have difficulty making cognitive connections among their school subjects and between what they learn in school and real life.⁵ In view of this lack of motivation and self-esteem, lack of relevance of school to the "real world," and lack of a connection between the students themselves and school, it did not seem unreasonable that these students decided to leave school before graduation. School seemed a place which had nothing to offer them and with which they felt no bond.

During my first year at Medgar High, a counselor revealed her frustration with the school and the reasons for that frustration. She said that in the previous year 73 percent of the freshman class did not pass to the tenth grade. Of the tenth graders that year, 68 percent were retained. The figures for the juniors and seniors were somewhat better, but the classes had already been severely reduced by then: 39 percent of the juniors and 23 percent of the seniors were retained. This level of failure became graphic when the ninth-grade students with whom I had entered the school graduated four years later. At a ninth-grade class assembly in the beginning of that year, the students in this class nearly filled the auditorium. When their class graduated four years later, they fit on a stage seated in folding chairs.

The causes of such massive failures in education were numerous. The family was one contributing factor; family background is considered the most important determinant of educational attainment.⁶ Research shows that higher family income is associated with greater likelihood of school completion,⁷ which has obvious implications for schools like Medgar High serving low-income communities like Watts. Children living in a female-headed household are further at risk in terms of school participation: their odds of dropping out of school by sixteen or seventeen increase by 30 to 50 percent.⁸ With so many children in Watts living in poverty in female-headed households, some of the underlying reasons for the high attrition rate at Medgar High begin to become clear. In Los Angeles Unified School District, several of the causes of students being behind grade level dealt directly with

family issues, including large family size, low socioeconomic status, and female household headship.⁹ These factors could be applied to many of my students' families.

Community members who had attended Medgar High during earlier decades spoke of the high value placed on education by their parents, the strong commitment in the family to academic achievement, and the abiding expectation held by their parents that their children work hard to succeed in school. The African American family structure, so strong in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, underwent major changes in the 1970s and 1980s from a traditional two-parent structure to female household headship. Without the necessary structure from which to instill such values as a desire for education or achievement, the gains made earlier by African Americans in the area of education slowed to a halt.¹⁰ The Medgar High graduates from earlier decades with whom I spoke pinpointed the family as a major cause of the changes in the student population at the high school.

Some of my students' parents, both African American and Latino, did not express a strong value for education. As a consequence, their children studied late at night or hid under their bedcovers using a flashlight to read their textbooks or do homework. These parents felt that their children's time was better spent in taking care of the house and their siblings or in getting a job outside the home. Often this had a practical application, since such active participation in child care, housekeeping, and employment was needed for survival of the family.

Research shows that parents who have abdicated the major responsibility for their children's education to the public school system will be more likely to see their offspring leave school with inadequate preparation prior to graduation.¹¹ Parent involvement at inner-city schools is often minimal, and this also contributed to the unchecked continuation of many of the problems at Medgar High. Parents who were not involved in their children's education in Watts cited a variety of reasons: lack of knowledge about the school's functions and their own rights to participate in their children's education, lack of understanding as to how they could be involved, fear of intruding where they may not have been wanted, embarrassment at their own lack of education, other pressing family responsibilities and obligations, and the demands of their jobs. It was difficult for some of my students' parents in Watts to be involved in their children's education in light of the tremendous

obstacles they battled daily, including, for those who worked, long hours of labor that precluded the luxury of visits with their children's teachers. Those parents who did not speak English had the added burden of attempting to communicate with the largely English-speaking staff of teachers and counselors. Further, a lack of intercultural competence on the part of school personnel and faculty and an exhibition of condescension by some staff members may have inhibited rather than encouraged parental involvement. For example, staff members repeatedly joked that the way to get parents to come to school activities was to provide free food. Such an attitude could not help but be communicated to the parents, some of whom felt degraded by such perceptions. Since the parents' involvement in their children's education was essential to maintaining quality education and preventing abuses, parents needed to be welcomed at the school site and treated with respect. All too often, this did not occur.

This is not to say that all parents were equally interested in being involved in their children's academic lives. Back-to-school and open house functions were poorly attended no matter what time they were held. It was not unusual in my first two years at the school to have only a few parents come to my classroom during parent-teacher functions. The administration offered prizes to teachers who were able to bring in the largest number of parents to the school for such occasions, and some teachers would give their students rewards of extra credit points or posters or buttons if their parents were in attendance. Teachers were encouraged to call all of their students' parents or guardians to ask them to attend the functions, an activity that was beyond the realm of the possible for many teachers. Thus, some of the responsibility for parental attendance was transferred from the parents to the teachers, a move that caused some grumbling among the already overburdened faculty.

Toward the end of my time at Medgar High, more parents began to attend these parent-teacher functions. Some people maintained that the parent attendance was up because of the shifting demographics at the school: the increase in the Latino population was cited as the reason for the increase in parent participation. Such reasoning, of course, did not take into consideration the cultural differences between those individuals in Watts who were well established within the community and who had experienced long-term discrimination and poverty and those who were new

voluntary immigrants to both the country and the community and who still viewed education as a sure method of achieving success in the United States. In short, staff members at Medgar High who put forth the viewpoint that the influx of Latinos into the school was good because the Latino families would be involved in their children's education (as opposed to a lack of involvement of African American families) seemed unaware of the racist implications of their statements and of the need for a deeper analysis of the issue, including the effects of a legacy of oppression, racism, and a lack of opportunity.

Others at the school cited the increased efforts of the administration to send out fliers and telephone messages to the community as the cause of the increased parent participation. Still others said that moving the functions to the evening rather than the daytime enabled many more parents to attend. The functions had been held during school hours because of the safety issue for teachers traveling out of the neighborhood at night.

Because many of my students' parents had not finished high school, they had few successful academic role models. These students observed people with money who often came by their wealth through illicit means rather than by completing their education. It was a common refrain with some students I knew who had trouble reading or writing or doing basic mathematical calculations that they did not need an education because they could get money through selling drugs. In a city where unemployment for minority youth runs close to 50 percent,¹² a high school diploma was no guarantee of employment. Some students saw little reason to finish their education and become involved in "legitimate" pursuits when they observed friends who had graduated in previous years struggling and often failing to find a job and support themselves.

In addition, peer pressure discouraged students from being academically successful. Some students referred to their successful peers as "school boys" and "school girls." Such terms carried a strong negative connotation. Further, some successful students were derided as "acting white." Thus, success in academic endeavors was strongly associated with behaviors typical of white students, and students who attempted to do well in school were seen as trying to act like white people. The sad counterpoint to this charge was the unspoken logic behind it: the students in Watts who held this view thought that doing well in school was not a

part of the cultural repertoire of African Americans and Latinos, and so to do well was to deny their own ethnicity and heritage. Without a wealth of successful role models, students continued to hold the idea that to be academically successful meant that they must deny their cultural identity and become completely assimilated into white, mainstream culture, which was a painful forced choice.

It was not that role models did not exist in Watts; they did. A first grader at the local elementary school across the street from Medgar High told me that when he grew up he wanted to go to jail. When I asked him about his reasons, he replied that his father and older brothers were there, so he would get arrested and go to jail too. He said, "Then I'll be able to see my daddy and my brothers." To a six-year-old boy who missed the males in his family, the role models of his father and brothers were immediate, powerful, and poignant.

Older siblings served as positive role models for some children in Watts. Those adolescents involved in sibling caretaking sometimes took their responsibilities so seriously that they attended school functions in lieu of their parents and had conferences with their younger brothers' or sisters' teachers, fully adopting even these parenting roles. On open house nights and at other parent-teacher functions, I routinely reported students' progress to their slightly older brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, or cousins, who smiled in shy pride at good reports and made mock threats to the student about continued progress.

Even in the presence of parental and familial involvement in education, inner-city schools like Medgar High contribute to the undereducation of their students by perpetuating the system of inequitable education offered to the poor in this country. This can be accounted for by a number of reasons. First, children between the ages of six and sixteen have more equal access to education than younger or older children.¹³ Access to preschool and university is not equal for all individuals or groups. Although public education is available to all children, the expense of preschools and universities restricts access to them. Certainly, most families living in poverty in Watts were not able to pay for private early educational opportunities for their children. Consequently, the children arrived at the schoolhouse doors with few skills that would help to increase their learning readiness, unlike their more advantaged counterparts.

Further, the United States spends twice as much in education on children of the rich than on those of the poor,¹⁴ so equity in terms of financing simply does not exist. Expenditures per student are not equal from state to state, district to district, or school to school within one district. As much as some politicians attempt to segregate quality education from issues of funding, the fact remains that a school that is able to spend twice as much per year per pupil as a school in a nearby poor district will be able to offer a significantly enriched environment and higher quality education.¹⁵ The education students received at Medgar High was inferior to that received by more advantaged children at other schools around the state and even within the same district. This was a fact of life recognized by both staff and students alike.

De facto segregation results in many inner-city schools having only minority enrollment; thus, they are not reflective of the society at large. Medgar High School was an example of this. With its outdated textbooks and crumbling, dirty facilities, it operated in conditions which would not have been tolerated in other mixed or predominantly white communities. During a visit to a high school outside Watts, a colleague whispered to me that this school felt like a "real school." The differences between Medgar High and the school we were visiting, both within the same district, were strikingly obvious. The sad implications of this remark did not hit me until long after I had left Medgar High: if the school we were visiting was a "real school," then what was Medgar High in our estimation?

Inequities existed at Medgar High in the treatment of students as well. At the school site, some students were favored or promoted over others. According to R. Clark, "The way in which time, curriculum, personnel, and material resources are allocated within neighborhood schools tends to promote the development of a few children at the expense of many other children."¹⁶ Those students who appeared able to succeed received disproportionate amounts of staff time and attention. Since the majority of students experienced serious problems and debilitating difficulties in their lives, both personally and academically, staff found themselves in the position of needing to focus their limited time and energy on those students they perceived they could "save." This amounted to a form of academic triage. As in any triage situation, those who were viewed to be beyond help were ignored in favor of those who were deemed to have a chance. The term *throwaway kid* was used to refer to an adolescent with whom it was perceived nothing could

be done. The debate in working with troubled youth at the school always centered around whether school staff perceived that they could "save" them: "This kid is troubled, but he is basically a good kid, and I think we can save him. He's not a throwaway." Such discussions seemed to take on an evangelical tone, but they revolved around a very real allocation of a limited resource: staff time.

Two segments of the student body claimed attention at the school: those who were in some positive way considered special (athletic, bright, verbal, musical, artistic, charismatic, or active) and those who were consistently in trouble. These students were generally well known by staff and students alike. Those in the middle, the "unspecial," were frequently overlooked.¹⁷ In Watts, the "unspecial" often suffered the multiple handicaps of being inner-city students, possessing weak academic skills, and lacking the personal resources to attract staff attention. Counselors at the high school complained that they spent so much of their time dealing with kids in trouble that they never knew the majority of their counselees. It brings to mind the question as to how a viable academic program can be created for students when their aspirations and abilities are unknown quantities.

Undereducation, which schools in Watts and other inner-city communities all too often offer to their students, can begin in elementary school, where students who do not respond in ways deemed consistent with the dominant culture are often ignored and placed in groups of other like students and are labeled slow learners or low achievers.¹⁸ Ray Rist noted the beginnings of the failure of the educational system in kindergarten, where the teacher separated students into ability groups based on social-class information rather than academic ability.¹⁹ Thus, children who spoke standard English, were middle class, and were clean and neatly dressed were placed in the high-ability group, and those who spoke Ebonics ("Black" English), were living in poverty, were dirty and sometimes smelled of urine, and were poorly dressed were placed in the low-ability group. Such tracking follows children through their academic careers and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One teacher in Rist's study called her student groups the Tigers, the Cardinals, and the Clowns, with the Clowns being considered the lowest-ability group. Rist wrote, "To call a group of students 'clowns' was more than a mere evaluation of their academic performance. It was a statement of their perceived worth as individuals."²⁰ Children within the high group received two to

three times as much academic instruction as the others did, and whereas their assignments were academic, the assignments the "Clowns" received were nonacademic. A teacher expressed her opinion that one of her students would never do anything in life; the boy was in the second grade.

Like Rist, I have had the opportunity to observe elementary classrooms serving minority children and spent considerable time at two local elementary schools where my students worked with, tutored, and taught the children. I spoke with children in Watts in the first and second grade who hated school with good reason. Children who were labeled at five as slow or troublemakers or somehow undesirable because their clothes were dirty or their skin was darker than the other children's or their English was "non-standard" did not fathom the true reasons for their ostracism from the favored group. They did not know that they were giving social, verbal, and nonverbal cues to their teacher that automatically excluded them from the "high achievers," those who were allowed to cluster around the teacher and who received a great deal of the teacher's attention in personal, social, and academic interactions. They only perceived that they were on the fringes, were not loved and accepted. They adopted a quite logical response: they tuned out. I have observed second graders in Watts who literally turned their backs on the teacher, and, after watching the interactions between the teacher and the students, that response seemed to be entirely logical and understandable.

Some of the children I observed in kindergarten or first grade who already were labeled as troublemakers were victims of an abusive and dysfunctional home and an uninformed and at times uncaring school. Children who had been neglected, for example, came to school requiring a great deal of attention from the adults with whom they came in contact. Children who had been so-called drug babies, that is, whose mothers regularly had ingested drugs during their pregnancy, exhibited behaviors in the classroom that were often highly disruptive. Teachers rarely knew about the problems caused by fetal drug exposure or about appropriate methodologies for working with such children. The children's need for consistent individual attention was often overwhelming for teachers trying to deal with a classroom of twenty-five or thirty children. I heard teachers routinely criticize children for needing "too much attention," and it was precisely these children who were labeled, sent to the principal, asked to sit in the

hall, and ultimately ostracized from the group. If teachers are not aware of the dilemmas and daily lives of the population of students they are teaching, then it is quite likely that they will exhibit insensitivity and a lack of understanding in their interactions with those children. In essence, we have to teach the students as they come to us, and in the case of the students in Watts, they often came to us in tremendous need.

Within one first-grade bilingual classroom in Watts, I observed three African American boys sitting at a table by themselves while the teacher, the aide, and one of my high school students worked with the three other groups. During the times I observed the class, all instruction took place in Spanish, which these three children did not speak. They were clearly bored, and the only interaction they had with the teacher while I was in the room was one in which she stood over them and yelled (in English) for them to be quiet. It seems clear that, as Rist wrote, "To put it more bluntly, the teachers themselves contributed significantly to the creation of the 'slow learners' within their classrooms."²¹ However, simply pointing to the teachers' role does not get to the root of the problem.

Why were some teachers in Watts using such obviously counterproductive and harmful methodologies? Many of them were never taught about the special needs of the particular population of children they ended up teaching. Responsibility for this inadequate preparation rests with the teacher preparation programs for their initial lack of training and with the districts for their lack of viable, practical in-service training. The districts may perhaps be the best place for offering teachers specific teaching methodologies to use with a particular population, leaving the teacher preparation programs to utilize a broad approach.

When I arrived at Medgar High, I was interested to learn that all "new teachers" were to be involved in a program designed to offer them support as they began their teaching careers at the school. I assumed that such intervention would take the form of educating those of us who were new to inner-city education about the special needs of our student population and about the Watts community. This was not the case. Teachers who were new to the profession, those who were teaching on an emergency credential and who had no formal teacher training, and experienced teachers who were new to the school were lumped under the heading *new teacher*. The training took the format of a series of lectures on how

to take role, how to discipline, how to write a lesson plan, and how to deal with issues such as students chewing gum in class. A colleague and I, both experienced teachers who had held teaching credentials for a number of years, found this approach insulting and unhelpful. After confronting the coordinator with our situation and finding she had no intention of dealing with the issues of teaching at an inner-city high school, we simply stopped attending these “required” sessions. This is a classic example of how the implementation of what amounted to a good idea, that of orienting teachers to working in the inner city, in essence widely missed its mark and indeed alienated those who participated in it.

Students who were taught by teachers who were insensitive to the realities of their daily lives changed over time. The evolution of these young people from turned-off second grader to high school “dropout” was not difficult to fathom. Many students who were excluded from the educational process as children never attained the skills necessary to be able to succeed in school. A kindergartner I repeatedly observed sitting in the principal’s office at the elementary school ended up spending many hours in the office through first, second, and third grade. It was painful to watch the hope drain out of him over the years. He entered the school troubled; however, the school created and labeled the “troublemaker.” The only way he received attention was by acting out, and he became quite skillful at it. He lived up to the level of his teachers’ expectations as students tend to do, and since they had only expectations for poor performance, he performed poorly. By the time he was in the third grade, he wore his label as troublemaker with pride. It was far too easy to see him as a future hall walker at the high school in another six or seven years, wandering through the corridors and disrupting classes, if he did not drop out of school before then.

Constant exposure to failure eventually fostered either anger or apathy. Students ultimately opted out of the system because they could not win within it, and to lose constantly was far too self-damaging. The tenth grader who decided to leave the school had already invested nine-plus years of his life in what he perceived to be a losing proposition. Some educators argue that these highly at-risk students do not have the choice of “opting out” or dropping out and prefer the term *push out* to transfer responsibility for failure to the educational system rather than the students. In light of the systemic failure we experienced at Medgar High, this transfer of responsibility seems appropriate.

In such a context, the students and sometimes young community members in Watts who roamed the halls of the high school and created havoc with students and teachers alike became comprehensible. They felt rage at having been cheated, at finding themselves excluded because of their lack of skills from what occurred inside the classroom. Their exclusion became literal when they stopped going to classes and began to “hang” in the halls and the stairwells, on the field, or on the quad. They vented their rage against teachers, the buildings, and successful students. As is so often the case in education, our response to these students was reactive rather than proactive: we simply locked our classroom doors.

Students who are involved in active rebellion may participate in an “illicit curriculum” which includes a variety of ways of avoiding the “legitimate” curriculum of the school without actually dropping out.²² Such on-campus acts as using alcohol or other drugs; being involved in illegal activities such as graffiti, theft, and assault; and urinating and defecating in the stairwell made up the “illicit” curriculum at Medgar High. These students were highly skillful in avoiding security guards, “ditching” (skipping or cutting class), climbing the fences to leave school, and bluffing their way past the security guard at the front door in order to leave campus.

Teachers who had graduated from the school some years before spoke of the changes in the student population since they had attended: observable declines in respect for authority, academic excellence, and interest in education. The older adult members of the Site Improvement Council at the school spoke of the years when they were students at Medgar High and described a place utterly removed from the school it had become. Perhaps the future had seemed to hold out more to these earlier graduates. In the 1980s and the early 1990s, the few of my students in Watts who were able to find work did so at fast-food restaurants working for minimum wage, and their prospects upon completion of high school were no brighter. When students announced that they had landed a job, a common question was “Are you working for the colonel or the clown?” This was in reference to working at Kentucky Fried Chicken or McDonald’s fast-food outlets, the extent of opportunity for many of the young people I knew in Watts. Thus, students often expressed a hopelessness about their future prospects that was not conducive to motivating them to complete their education. They asked, “What’s the point?”

Although minority graduation rates are increasing, they are still below those of whites.²³ Some Medgar High students did graduate, of course, in a tremendously emotional celebration of having beaten the odds. It was impossible to sit through a graduation celebration at the high school without being moved. Parents seated around me at the last graduation ceremony I attended leaned forward to pat my shoulders when they saw the tears in my eyes as I watched my students walk up to receive their diplomas. "You have a right to be proud," they whispered to me.

These young graduates, so proud and exultant, were being sent out into the world, and yet many were not equipped to compete. Their attendance at an all-minority inner-city high school, their cultural encapsulation, their lack of financial resources, and their flawed and inadequate education were the handicaps they carried with them as they accepted their diplomas. It was the knowledge of these handicaps and of the students' struggle to overcome them that gave the graduation ceremonies their profound poignancy. It was also the knowledge of all they had to overcome in order to march in graduation: the gangs avoided, the drugs not ingested, the pregnancies thwarted, the poverty endured, the abuses survived.

For some of these students, this was a high point in their lives, and they felt that it was unlikely that it would ever be matched again. Their senior year represented the peak in their social interactions and academic achievement. Their prom pictures possessed added meaning because of this. They graduated, and the fortunate ones went on to vocational school, to college, or to work. Some married and became pregnant. Some were pregnant as they walked up to accept their diplomas.

There was another reason for tears at graduation ceremonies at Medgar High: grief at the knowledge of how many we lost. Look at the graduating class of a typical inner-city high school and realize that up to three-quarters of the original class members are not present. This is beyond failure; it is a travesty.

EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

For some students in Watts, graduation from high school marked the end of their academic careers; they donned cap and gown but once. It was for this reason that, on the days before graduation

when caps and gowns already had been distributed, students strode purposefully down the street in full regalia. These were moments to be savored. Community members honked and called out their congratulations as these students walked briskly by the government housing projects flanking the high school.

For most high school students, entrance into college is not an easy feat, and this was particularly true of Medgar High School students. The application process was often intimidating. Further, research shows that social class is a dominant factor in determining the accessibility of higher education and the subsequent perseverance and success of students,²⁴ and students from Medgar High, who left high school at a distinct disadvantage, found it difficult to enter into colleges and universities and even more difficult to remain there once they arrived. Fewer than one in five college-age minorities are enrolled in college.²⁵ Part of my job as a teacher at Medgar High was to introduce college as a possible life option; for so many of my students, it had never even been considered.

College entrance requirements include providing the college or university with scores on standardized entrance examinations and transcripts which also show results of previous standardized tests administered at school. Medgar High ranked at the bottom of schools in Los Angeles County in California Assessment Program (CAP) test scores in math and reading. The school scored 1 in both reading and math on a scale of a low of 1 to a high of 99 with a medial rank of 50.²⁶ Even though many tests are thought to be culturally biased, covering, as they do, material which was often not a part of the life experience of students from the inner city, they exerted a strong influence on the life chances of students from Medgar High. Many children in Watts experienced cultural encapsulation and socioeconomic disadvantages which in some cases had spanned generations. They were tested with instruments based on conformity with a dominant-culture model of appraisal. Thus, these were really tests of assimilation into the culture, not, as they were touted to be, tests of intelligence or achievement. It did not surprise me that my students did not do well on them.

Many of these students were not enrolled in a college preparatory sequence of courses in high school (or, as was sometimes said, "tracked into college prep"), and this may have caused them to score lower on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). The SAT is used as a predictor of college performance and is based on academic preparedness,²⁷ and students who have not received ade-

quate preparation are likely to produce lower scores; Medgar High students went into the tests at a distinct disadvantage. They often did not have access to intensive SAT preparatory courses, as did many of their more fortunate peers. Although such courses are not known to have a significant effect on test scores,²⁸ they can help to reduce or alleviate test anxiety caused by lack of familiarity with the testing process. In all the time I was teaching in Watts, not one of my seniors reported to me a combined SAT test score above 900, and most were in the 600 to 800 range. Although some educators may see this as a failure of minorities, it is rather a failure of the educational system²⁹ to provide adequate, equitable education.

If they attend college, minority students are more likely to go to a community college than to a four-year institution. Students in Watts followed this trend, and the logic behind their decision was sound. They realized that they had not been well prepared and that competition with students who were better prepared would be stiff. They talked about going to a community college as a way of "getting used to college" prior to going on to a four-year institution. It constituted, then, a transition step from high school to a university, often a needed one. Fewer minority students, however, are transferring to four-year institutions,³⁰ which means that for some of my students the transition from community college to a four-year university never occurred. The quality of their transfer degree was a strong factor in enrollment at a four-year institution, and they needed wise counseling early in their academic careers so that they took courses which would be counted in the transfer. Without such counseling, they lost credits, which functioned as a disincentive to matriculate. Medgar High graduates who did not know how to function within the system found themselves in the predicament of attempting to transfer and discovering that they had not taken the required courses or had taken courses that would not be accepted at the university to which they applied.

Students from Medgar High who did progress to college were often unable to graduate. Research shows that minorities consistently fall through the cracks of the educational system and are unable to finish high school, college, and graduate school much more often than their nonminority counterparts.³¹ Medgar High graduates left college for both academic and nonacademic reasons. They often arrived at college in need of remediation; that is, their skills were not as high as those of their more advantaged

peers, so they needed extra assistance in the form of remedial coursework and tutoring. Such courses are lacking at many colleges and universities, and faculty resistance to teaching remedial courses appears to be a contributing factor.³² University professors, who are considered to be experts in their disciplines but are not necessarily experts in teaching methodology, often know little or nothing about how to teach students with special needs; some feel that such students do not belong at the university. It is essential that “we work with what we’ve got”³³ at universities rather than bicker over which grade level failed students with poor skills who are entering universities. Thus, the issue is not that students should have acquired these skills prior to entering the university or that the university is not the place to deal with students in need of “remediation.” The issue quite plainly revolves around a simple credo in education that we teach the students as they come to us, not as we envision they should be.

Although clearly effective remediation and ongoing counseling for students like those from Medgar High are needed to maximize retention, the funding for such programs is difficult to obtain,³⁴ especially in a time of extreme budget cuts at all state universities in California. Some faculty see little need to expend any of the scarce resources on maximizing retention when classes are already filled to overflowing. Students from Watts and other inner-city high schools are the first to leave school in these times of dwindling human services and financial aid. Because their education has been inferior and their familiarity with university protocol is scant, they are often unable to get the extra assistance they need to be successful at the university, and they leave.

Medgar High School students said that they felt they were in an alien world when they went to college, and in many senses they were. Their previous academic experiences took place in a segregated environment where whites were rarely present in the student population. They lived in a socioeconomically impoverished community. At college, especially for those who lived on campus, they suddenly found themselves in the minority. They were confronted with students who came from more affluent families. Research shows that minority students often do not become assimilated into the dominant culture at the college or university, maintaining an allegiance to peer groups of like minorities,³⁵ and this was true of the students I knew from Watts. This kind of allegiance inhibited interaction among the various ethnic and racial groups on campus

and prevented students from being able to establish a real connection or bond with the institution, which functioned as a deterrent to achieving a degree. The rising racism on college campuses only served to further weaken the already tenuous connection between the institution and these Medgar High graduates.

One student from Watts, Mari, who attended a University of California campus and lived in a dormitory, related to me that she had no white female friends, a few white male friends, and many African American and Latino friends. She said the white female students were cordial but not friendly. "They say hi in the bathroom in the morning, but we never do anything together socially. They stick to themselves," she said. Apparently, the pressure on campus was also strong among minority students to maintain friendships only with other minority students, and Mari found herself defending her attempts to befriend people of other races and ethnicities, something she was anxious to do because of her years of education in Watts in de facto segregated schools. When I first met Mari, she later revealed to me, she did not like whites. During her ninth- and tenth-grade years, we spent much time talking as she struggled and came to terms with her own prejudices, and this became an area of abiding interest for her. For Mari, going to the university was a chance to interact with a diverse population of people with whom she had previously had little contact and to explore her own issues of racism, prejudice, stereotypes, and oppression.

Mari's African American and Latino friends at the university asked her why she was "talking to that white boy" or "listening to that white music." Such comments invariably sparked heated arguments that clearly defined the ethnic and racial barriers that these students felt they should honor. Mari explicitly wanted to make friends with students from the dominant culture. After two years of attending the university, she reported that she had finally met one white student, a woman, with whom she felt she was cultivating a friendship. All of her other friends and her roommates were Latino and African American, and this was a source of frustration to her.

Most Medgar High graduates found that the quality of their precollege education was inadequate, and their lack of preparation caused some of them such difficulty that they decided to leave their college or university. As one graduate complained to me when she returned to the high school for a visit, "I didn't even know what

an atom was! My roommate had to tell me. I'd never used a computer! It was humiliating. I felt so stupid. We never learned these things here so the other students are miles ahead of us. I am always trying to catch up on what I didn't learn in high school just so that I can understand what is being taught in college."

Many Medgar High graduates had difficulty securing sufficient financial aid to attend college. Such problems are common, especially at those institutions which have a large default rate on student loans and whose federal funds are being cut.³⁶ The process of filling out the financial aid application forms required a certain amount of savvy and experience. My students were first-generation college students; consequently, they did not have parents who had gone to college on whom they could rely for help in the lengthy application process or in the cultivation of expectations of university life. Some concerned teachers and staff at the high school assisted them. Medgar High students who crossed the threshold onto a university campus represented the tremendous combined effort of the students themselves, family, faculty, and staff.

Beyond the academic sphere, life itself caused interruptions in their academic careers. Students found, for example, that they were expecting a child or experienced urgent family problems. Some young women from tradition-bound microcultures had to fight a constant battle with their families and their boyfriends over their quest for higher education, which was viewed as unnecessary for a woman. Such battles often sapped their energy, their confidence, and their time.

My students provided a compelling picture of their lives in college. One student's mother left the state shortly before the end of her freshman year. The student lived with a friend of her mother's until it became clear that she was no longer welcome. At that point, she would have become homeless but for a community activist who had set up a house as a sort of dormitory for young women going to school and working who either had dysfunctional home situations or who had nowhere to go. Through all of this turmoil and at last report, she was still in college.

Another student was accepted into a prestigious California university. Once there, he was confronted with academic challenges beyond any he had imagined, although a few teachers had worked hard to try to prepare him for the challenges he would surely meet. His letters from the university were filled with won-

der at all the accomplishments of his classmates, accomplishments he had not confronted in his peers before. One student could sit down and play classical music on the piano from memory. Another had been in journalism in high school and had been hired by a local paper to write for them part-time. Another was an accomplished photographer, and another had more CDs (compact discs) than he had ever seen anywhere. All of his classmates had personal computers. He wrote that he knew it would be difficult but that he was sure he could get by with his old manual typewriter. He had no experience with computers and lacked the funds to buy one.

During the first semester, this student left the university. His stated reason was that his mother was ill and needed him at home because all the other children were gone. (His father had left the family before he was born.) A classmate of his who was attending the same university said the reason he left was that he was failing all of his classes. He returned to Los Angeles and went to work in an office, commuting two hours each way by bus every day. He continued to dream of all that he could do in his life and continued to be haunted by the label given to him in his senior year of high school: most likely to succeed. Upon hearing of his return to Watts, I wondered how he could have competed with an inferior education, inadequate materials, constant worry about his mother's health, limited financial resources, little assistance, and no idea of what he needed to do to be able to succeed in such a foreign environment. He spoke of feeling like he was in another country while at the university, and in effect he was, for he had come from the inner city, the "other America" of extreme poverty,³⁷ a world away from the life of relative privilege and ease from which so many of his classmates derived.

Some of the students I knew were able to succeed in college. Some were gifted or courageous or tenacious or had whatever combination of the three equals success. It was never easy, however. These were students who had little experience with the bureaucracy that universities can be. Even after they left for college, I continued to hear from them as they asked me for advice: "I'm behind in my Bio. class. What do I do?" "My financial aid didn't come through. What should I do?"

Changes in university priorities could help to ease the transition for inner-city students. Recruitment is only one way to increase minority enrollment, and students continue to need sup-

port and assistance after they declare their intention to attend a particular institution. Medgar High students were often baffled by the academic maze a university can be. They needed ongoing assistance to help guide them through the process and to ease them into university life. Follow-up mentoring and programs addressing retention were as important as recruitment.

Much of my time in the first semester of each school year in Watts was spent helping my seniors fill out applications for college admission, calling schools to ask for information or status reports on their applications, filling out financial aid applications, helping them to write and type essays, and even doing their families' taxes so they could complete the financial aid forms. They did not know how to deal with the mountains of paperwork and deadlines involved in getting into college. Once at the college or university, they continued to need an enlightened guide as they confronted the new bureaucracy of their school, and their peers often helped to facilitate this transition in the absence of staff assistance or a faculty mentor.

Medgar High students who finished twelve years of school, passed their competency tests, received their diplomas, and entered college showed that it could happen, even though the process was arduous and often painful, filled with the pitfalls of a foreign culture, a sense of personal inadequacy, new and bewildering rules, and the responsibility for their own success and failure. The transition to the university could have been so much easier on them if they had had a mentor at that level as some of them had at the high school, someone who understood firsthand the environment from which they came, the education they received and its failings, their naivete of bureaucracies, their confusion at suddenly being thrown into a culturally diverse environment, and their self-doubt as they compared themselves to their classmates. Such one-on-one interaction of minority students with a skilled and caring mentor could do much to reduce the attrition rate of minorities at the college level. In particular, students from Medgar High and other inner-city high schools have come so far and overcome so much once they arrive at the gates of the university that it is tragic to allow them to turn back without Herculean efforts on the part of the institution to retain them.