

In Their Own Words: AP Students Characterize their Role Models



Steve Arrieta^{1,2}, Carolyn Callahan² & Haydee Cruz^{2,3}
 Montclair State University¹, University of Virginia², Arizona State University³

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

•A passing score of “3” on Advanced Placement Exams have been correlated with later college performance (Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2006; Geiser and Santelices, 2004).

•The number of AP exams taken by African Americans and Latinos has more than doubled between 2000-2006; these students have not been receiving a 3 or better (College Board, 2007; College Board, 2005).

Rationale

•One of the major problems in both general and gifted education is the scarcity of Black teachers or other academic professionals (Garibaldi, 1991).

•The lack of racial and gender in-group members may give an impression that many academic professions are unavailable to ethnic minorities (Ogbu, 2003).

•Academic support structures for minority students, including summer AP prep courses, counselor-led weekly lunch meetings and organized teacher-led study sessions have shown improved academic outcomes (Beitler, 2004; College Board-Press Release, 2006, Kyburg, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2007; Wakefield High School, 2008).

•Resilience has been defined as adjustment in face of negative circumstances (Ruttner, 1981, 1987). A resilient factor that is often associated with ethnic minority achievement is the presence of a strong support network which includes in-group role models (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Herbert, 1996; Reis, Colbert, & Hebert, 2005).

•Following Zirkel’s (2002) model, identification with a role model should demonstrate that “someone like them” can indeed go to college. Role models can have an inspiring effect when their academic goals seem more attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

•The AP challenge summer program provided 83 ethnic minority high school students from 3 high schools week long activities which included AP course preparation, reading skills, and other teacher or counselor-led activities.

Research Questions

1. What are characteristics most valued by “high potential” ethnic minority adolescents when selecting role models?

2. How does immigrant status/racial identity affect choice of role models?

Methods

Procedure

•Three urban schools in a Mid-Atlantic state were identified as having significant minorities and low-income populations to participate in the AP challenge intervention group.

•While walking to and from AP Challenge activities, students were asked to participate in a brief interview. The questions attempted to ascertain how each participant defined the phrase “role model” and asked participants to name specific role models in different contexts (community, family, media & AP challenge camp).

• Follow up questions: Why? What is it about this person you really admire?

Participants

AP Challenge students were ethnic minority students from the Mid-Atlantic schools district identified as “high potential” based on academic performance and recommendations from school counselors and teachers.

Students (n=11) from the AP Challenge Program (ages 14-17); 8 males, 3 females.

Analysis

Interviews were organized using NVivo8 software.

Analysis upon an a priori list of codes derived from the literature used to create the analytic framework for this study which included:

- *Distance* - the participant knew their role model
- *Domain* - Whether the role model was successful in an area deemed important to the participant.
- *Education Required* - If the role model’s profession required a college education
- Absence of role models
- *Social Learning Theory* – observation of role model resulted in direct shaping of the participant’s behavior
- *Possibilities* – admiration of role model demonstrated that “someone like them” could succeed in a certain domain

Results

Coding

•After a peer-review process, in which the researchers agreed upon the placing of quotes in certain categories, the following were seen to have consistent results. While coding, researchers took note if particular patterns emerged. Pattern coding has been shown as an effective way to organize emerging themes and overarching constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

•Frequent citing of particular role model characteristics across all interviews were seen as significant insight into the participant’s admiration.

Figure #1

Name	References
Adversity	5
Distance - Close	12
Distance - Far	5
Domain	10
Ed. Required	7
Gender match	8
Gratitude	9
Guidance	12
Morality or altruism	12
No Ed Necessary	9
No Role Model	2
Parent or Family Member	10
Possibilities	18
Racial match	3
Social Learning Theory	26

• After initial coding of characteristics found in literature, the researchers found frequent mention of characteristics not mentioned previously mentioned:

- *Adversity* – Participants felt that selected role models had triumphed in the face of adverse circumstances
- *Gratitude* – Participants expressed gratitude for role model guidance or sacrifice
- *Moral attitudes or Altruism* – Role models displayed selfless behavior or altruism
- *Parent of Family Members* – role models were parents or related to role models

Conclusions

•While there was ample evidence of the categories mentioned by previous studies (e.g., Education required, distance to role model, social learning theory, etc) the present study was able to find new trends mentioned by participants. While the literature suggests that many ethnic minority youth may not have role models (Zirkel, 2002; Ogbu, 2002), only two of the eleven participants could not name a role model. Parents or family members were mentioned as role models often. Our first generation participants often explained their adulation for their parents as admiration and gratitude for the hardships they faced as immigrants in an unknown land.

Evidence from student quotes:

When we came to this country, we basically had nothing...so my Mom worked hard, right after she raised us from uh basically babies to six graders. So she stayed home most of the [...] My mom had to work long hours, just to provide our needs

•Participants raised by single parents also shared similar sentiments:

...like my mom, who has like basically sacrificed her life to take care of my brother and I as a single parent”

•In the absence of perceived adversity, participants continually expressed gratitude towards their parents:

...she’s a strong woman [mother], like, she’s also a teacher so she doesn’t only care for me and my brother as her children, she has like a hundred other children too

Participants also expressed admiration for role models that displayed altruistic behaviors:

I would say Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie...because like they’ve made it and now [they’re] helping out the less fortunate

Selected References

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Acknowledgment

The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305B090002 to the University of Virginia. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the U.S. Department of Education.