

GATE-WAYS AND GET-AWAYS:
URBAN YOUTH, SCHOOL PUSH-OUT, AND THE GED

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

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J. Eve Tuck

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This dissertation documents the role of the General Educational Development (GED) credential in New York City public schools, and the use of the GED option by urban youth as both a gate-way to higher education and full employment, and as a get-away from inadequate high schools. Utilizing participatory action research and Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies, this project explored the lived value of the GED from the perspective of youth who have been pushed-out of their schools by a variety of in-school policies and practices. The study connects school push-out to federal policies such as No Child Left Behind, and state policies such as secondary school exit exams. The dissertation argues that these policies have contributed to the displacement of prior purposes of schooling, rendering *assessment* the contemporary purpose of schooling. The dissertation concludes with implications for theory, policy, and educational practice, and predicts that without the development of multiple, meaningful routes to graduation, youth will continue to pursue the GED as a get-away from narrowly conceived high schools.

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**Introduction to Gateways and Get-aways:
Urban youth, school push-out, and the GED**

*Should I stay or should I go now?
If I go there will be trouble
And if I stay it will be double
-The Clash*

My work on this dissertation began in 2004 at an Urban Education Community Dialogues meeting at the Graduate Center. The dialogues were a series of meetings for educators, organizers, policy makers, and academics on education to come together to discuss New York City public schools. I worked as part of the planning committee for these dialogues, along with Dr. Jean Anyon, Dr. Michelle Fine, and Dr. Stanley Aronowitz and a handful of other Urban Ed students. In this particular meeting, one community organizer stood up and told the room that he had heard a rumor that the GED, a national credential of General Educational Development, would be “cancelled.”

My interest in this rumor deepened the next day when I went to my office at the youth community organizing organization where I was a co-Director of Education for Liberation. My inbox and voicemail box were filled with messages from community organizers, staff at after-school programs and neighborhood organizations, and other concerned educators about the rumored phase-out of the GED. Many folks at the time wondered aloud whether this was a good or bad thing for youth in educationally disenfranchised neighborhoods, and for the neighborhoods themselves.

Several of the youth organizers I worked with had recently been pushed-out of school, and they were not interested in pushing back in. I had been talking with them about getting a little GED preparation study group going, because the GED programs in the South

Bronx neighborhood were filled to over-capacity and were not accepting any “underage” youth. The rumor brought to my attention my own lack of knowledge on the GED, and how the credential would serve these youth in their future aspirations.

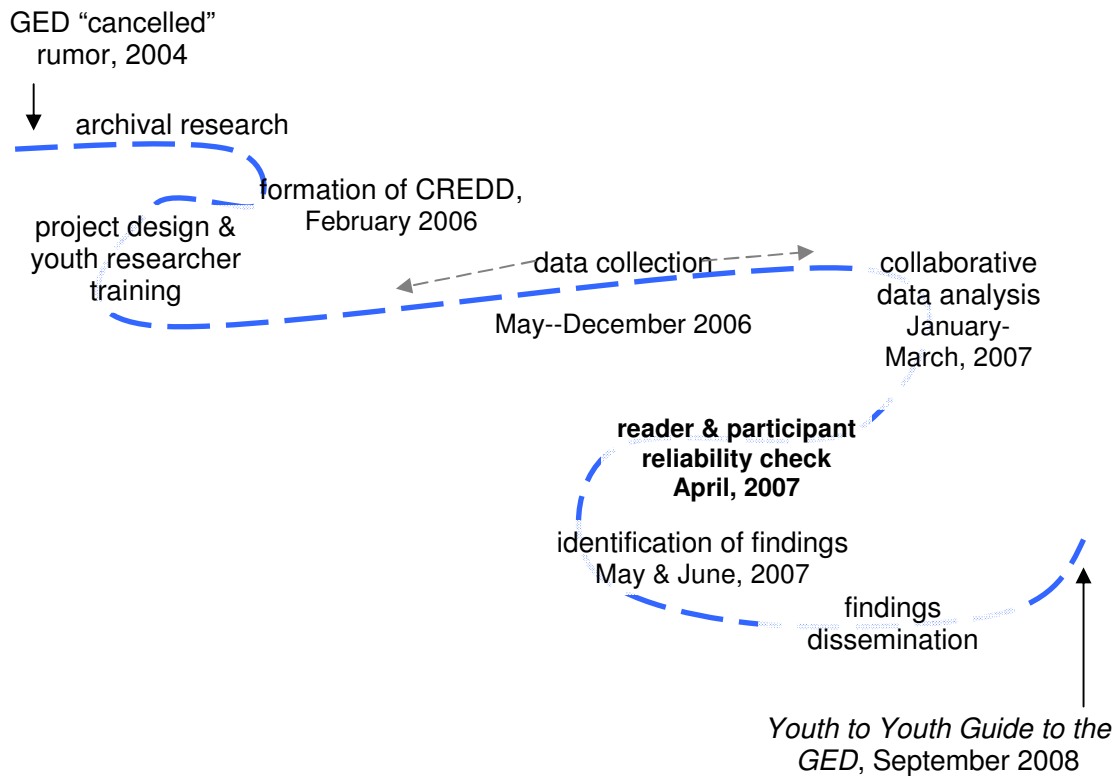
I did a little digging, placed a few phone calls to the American Council on Education, the lobbyist group that sponsors the exam, and learned to my satisfaction that the GED was not being cancelled. My read on the rumor is that it could be linked to the then-recent (2002) revision of the exam, which included a more extensive essay element along with some other changes discussed in chapter three of this manuscript. Assured that the GED option would still be available for a long time to come, I was still unsettled by the questions of the use(s) and value(s) of the GED that the rumor had raised for me. How might I, or anyone working in an advisory relationship with youth, support youth in making sound decisions about the GED? How does the GED play out in young people’s lives as one last opportunity for secondary school completion? Are the punishments for earning a credential widely perceived to be second rate worth the benefits? It was these questions, to which I genuinely had no answers, that sustained me as I designed my dissertation research.

My politics, prior experiences as a community educator, and family’s history with unethical research had primed my interest in Participatory Action Research long before I began designing the project that would become the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project. However, as I began to review the existing literature on the GED, I began to see that existing GED research had been limited by not being participatory inquiries, by not engaging with youth GED earners as co-theorists and co-analysts of the GED’s value and uses. I conducted this study as PAR because of political symmetry, but almost more

importantly because I felt that this would strengthen my data and findings in ways that other researchers on the GED had missed.

By the start of 2006, I had completed my course and exam requirements for the doctorate, and had secured some funding and IRB approval. Because this would be such a large undertaking, I also wrote to some of my tribal leaders to ask them to bless my steps in this work. They wrote back with full support, only wishing that they could see me in person to convey their excitement and pride. In February, my friends and family had a dissertation blessing ceremony for me in a Mexican restaurant on the Upper West Side. There, I shared with them the dreams and worries I had about doing this research. The youth who would become the first members of the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire were there too, and now we think of that as our convocation day.

Figure 1.1 Gateways and Getaways Project Timeline



The Gateways and Getaways Project spanned 18 months in 2006 and 2007. In Figure 1.1, you can view the timeline of the project. Chapter two will detail the formation of CREDD and our methods, but here I would like to present the areas of inquiry of the project.

Due to the participatory and dialogical nature of CREDD's decision making and design processes (described in chapter two), we decided to house our questions within four *areas of inquiry*, and I believe that this is one of the things that has really worked about our study. The areas served as a placeholder, a tie around a finger to be sure to carve out enough space for our project to be complicated and comprehensive. Having areas of inquiry rather than set questions allowed us to reframe our questions depending on our audience or own subjectivities while not losing what is salient about them in relation to the rest of our research.

Area of Inquiry One: The value of the GED

The major work of this area is not conceding to the (perceived to be faltering) value of the GED *a priori*. This area is concerned with taking the existing literature that describes the GED as a depleted credential to task, primarily by seeking to understand the *lived value of the GED*. By engaging in PAR, which positions those upon whose backs research has been historically done, instead, as knowers and experts, this project rejects depictions of youth GED seekers as duped or self destructive. Beyond these depictions, a third possibility emerges: The value of the GED is not only as *gateway* to higher employment to higher education, but also, more importantly, as *get-away* from dehumanizing high schools. Holding this notion as a tenuous premise, this area of inquiry required us to listen to the real experiences of those who have or are seeking a GED, and to honor the value that they attribute to it, along with the critique of schooling that informed this value.

Area of Inquiry Two: Push-out practices in New York City public schools

This area is concerned with the implicit and explicit ways that students are (or are made to feel) unwelcome in schools. This area of inquiry seeks to determine exactly how this message comes across, and to understand what practices and policies specifically thwart student attendance. Dubbed ‘Operation Shove’ by CREDD, these practices are a violation of students’ legal rights to attend school until the age of 21 or obtain a high school diploma and by pushing and prodding very particular students out towards the GED, schools shirk their responsibility to develop real alternatives to Regents based schooling.

Area of Inquiry Three: Alternatives to Regents based schooling

This area of inquiry is informed by our mistrust of most school leadership to adequately inform the public of alternatives to Regents based schooling. I think I may have been too cynical to consider this a crucial area of inquiry, however, my co-researchers have smartly insisted that it be structured into our design. Though in its original version there was a need and hope to document existing models that confound the Regents based model, the depressingly few examples we found have inspired us to revise to instead document what GED seekers and earners imagine as good schools.

Area of Inquiry Four: (false) Meritocracy: How the GED exposes the myth of the American dream

This area of inquiry is concerned with the widely held fantasy of the United States, particularly schooling, in meritocracy. Jennifer Hochschild's work on meritocracy and the American dream offers us a view of these narratives as being incomplete, entirely lacking a provision for failure, as "those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait" (Hochschild, 1995, p. 26)

(N)o one promises that dreams will be fulfilled, but the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is psychologically hard to maintain and politically always blurred... a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss (Hochschild, 1995, p. 27, 29).

Further, as our research participants could attest, the lived experience of failure in schools is exceedingly vulnerable to a meritocratic narrative that individualizes and pathologizes failure. This serves to splinter both the spirit and communities of outrage that might convene.

Thomas Smith's (2003) analysis of the GED echoes my own understanding of the GED's function within meritocratic institutions. He writes,

Educational institutions tend to portray both themselves and society as meritocratic and as inexorably moving toward greater social and economic

justice. In this way, they foster the social belief that the major institutions of our society are equally responsive to all regardless of race, class, or sex. One way in which the educational system can maintain the image of a system that provides high-school level education to nearly all is by providing a second chance at a high school diploma to those who have dropped out. The GED is a highly legitimized means of doing so. (Smith, 2003, p. 397)

Though the GED may be “a highly legitimized means” of maintaining the *image* of universal access to free quality education to all students, this image is distorted by:

- (1) the reported depleted worth of the GED in higher education and the job market,
- (2) the abuse of the GED option by schools as a legitimized receptacle for unwanted students
- (3) the defacto reliance on the GED as the last alternative to contemporary schooling in New York City, effectively getting administrators off the hooks of figuring out ways to develop and implement meaningful curricula, pedagogies, and assessments, thinking through *the purpose of schooling anyway*
- (4) the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous students, students of color, and poor students who are pushed-out under the auspices of the GED.

Looking at NYC public schools through the lens of the GED, or as the CREDD project attempts, through the eyes of a GED seeker or earner, shatters the image that schools strive to maintain.

Beyond our areas of inquiry, another question that I quietly pursued throughout this study was “What can research *do* anyway?” In part, this was a returning question because I am wary of research, and of other researchers. The historical relationship of research on my Unangan community has been damage-centered, intent on portraying our people as defeated and broken.

For example, on the Aleutian Islands, those of my Grandmother’s generation were forced subjects in a range of studies, the purposes of which were concealed. Part of the long arm of the eugenics movement on behalf of colonization, White scientists entered Aleut communities with full support of the U.S. government, and with the arrogance and absence of reflexivity afforded by White supremacy. “For most of the five centuries [of

U.S. colonization], whites have had unrestricted power to describe Indians in any way they chose. Indians were simply not connected to the organs of propaganda so that they could respond to the manner in which whites described them” (Deloria, 1992, p. 66; see also Selden, 1999).

Stories of teeth counting, rib counting, head measuring, blood drawn, bones dug up, medical treatment withheld, erroneous or fabricated ethnography, unsanctioned camera lenses, out-and-out lies, empty promises, cover ups, betrayals, these are the stories of our kitchen tables (Tuck, 2007, p. 159). They are the stories of First Alaska and Native America, and of many communities across the U.S. and the globe. They are the finger-shaped bruises on our pulse points.

The other aspect that made me question what research can really do is, frankly, that it is hard to do and takes a long time. I have a bodily feeling of urgency about this research topic, and it has been difficult for me to see the advantages of time-consuming, methodical research over, say, journalism, which has a much more immediate time frame, and immediate audience. Why did I become trained to be a researcher and not a journalist?

A recent New York Times article drove home this point. Sam Dillon’s March 20, 2008 article argued that No Child Left Behind’s fixations on annual yearly progress (AYP) and test scores puts pressure on schools to get rid of students who won’t do well on tests, frequently under the auspices of the GED. Essentially, the article argued the thesis of this dissertation. Yes, this article affirmed my work on a project that has consumed my life for the past 3-4 years, but feeling a tad beaten to the punch, I wonder, why my way of exploring this thesis over Dillon’s way? Why approach educational injustice as a scholar and not a journalist?

I’ve spent a lot of time mulling over the differences between journalism and scholarly research, and I’ve arrived at two main distinctions. Still, the differences I discuss

here are by no means total; I'm sure there are differences that I am not yet experienced enough to observe, and similarities that blend the two so fully that separating them may render a false dichotomy. Further, great examples of each will defy these differences.

One difference is concerned with issues of truth and knowing. Strong research doesn't take epistemology for granted, grappling with (competing) frameworks of knowing explicitly and with transparency. Thus, research is not only concerned with what is (or can be) known, but how, within what conditions, and to what extent. What counts as truth or Truth is related to the epistemologies and axiologies at work in the worldview of a study. In journalism, the worldview is less up-for-grabs, and is more implicit. Because the industry prioritizes "objectivity" and brevity, most journalists don't have the luxury of situating their work within an epistemology.

This plays out in differences in terms of what constitutes evidence. *Evidence* is a tricky notion these days, especially with the Orwellian double speak of "evidence based reform," "scientifically based research," and "data driven decision making" that is so prevalent in the contemporary conversation on schools; double speak because while signaling tried and tested, successful approaches, policies like No Child Left Behind demarcate programs like phonics-only reading instruments, goals such as 100% proficiency by 2014, and consequences like the five year insufficient AYP sequence that have no empirical backing (Rebell and Wolff, 2008; Noddings, 2007).

Though they have been co-opted by neo-reformists, questions of evidence, what counts as evidence, and who is counting, are crucial to researchers and to journalists. How many people need to have experienced something for it to be true? How many (and who) need(s) to speak for something to be true? What about the counter-stories? Are they true?

Even if from only one person? Researchers and journalists may land on different sides of these questions, but in journalism, the expectation is that these decisions are kept hidden because questions of evidence cut to the heart of the project of journalism. They cut to the heart of the project of research too, but a scholarly response is to uncover these decisions, to tease them out and interrogate them. Most importantly, in research, the answers to questions of evidence are not fixed.

Though questions of evidence are not fixed in research, it does not thinly mean that truth is relative. (It may mean that proof is relative.) What it does mean is that research necessitates methodology to help navigate questions of knowing and evidence. The methodology is a tapestry of epistemology, ontology, axiology, ethic, politic, method(s), theory of change, and stance that internally guides a research project. The pattern of the tapestry helps to determine the way in which a project unfolds, what we see as the start or end of a project, who is our audience, who is our “us,” how we think things are known and how others can or need to be convinced. The methodology operationalizes the ethical stance of the project, what is considered data, what constitutes evidence, how a finding is identified, and what is made public and kept private or sacred.

I have come to call my methodology in this dissertation a *methodology of repatriation*. A methodology of repatriation borrows and builds upon elements from Participatory Action Research (Fine and Torre, 2004; Torre and Fine, 2003 & 2006; Rahman and Fals-Borda, 1991; McTaggart, 1997; Fine, Tuck, Zeller-Berkman, 2007 & 2008) and from Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies (L.T. Smith, 1999 & 2008; Grande, 2004; Alfred, 2005; Tuck, 2007). There are some important differences between PAR and decolonizing methodologies, particularly in views on the route to democracy (or

even the capital goal of democracy), but my bridging of the two approaches is not an easy glossing over of these differences. Rather, in my work (Fine, Tuck, Zeller-Berkman 2007 & 2008; Tuck, 2007; Tuck, in press a) I have used the gaps between them to prod the ethical commitments and conditions of participatory decolonizing approaches. I use these frameworks in celebration of their contradictions, and feel no impulse toward forcing an inflexible or permanent union between the two. I call this a methodology of repatriation because it, in my view, builds upon the most compelling elements of PAR and decolonizing theory, and in the ways I will now describe, imbibes a particular politic of reclaiming, reframing, repurposing, and reparation. Though I have written about each of these elements separately, this is the first time I have written about them together as a methodology of repatriation.

The word repatriate comes from the Latin word *repatriare*, which means restoring homeland, or going home again. It conjures a sense of turning tides, or turned pages. Repatriation summons a sister concept, reparation: to compensate, to restore and repair. However, though this distinction is hard to locate, my sense is that reparation is a series of steps enacted by the repentant colonizer, while repatriation is what we, the colonized do to recover ourselves, our land, and our culture, whether or not the colonizer is ready to apologize. It commands an acknowledgement that would not otherwise come.

I was raised with a thick thirst for repatriation. Broken promises and betrayal have defined the relationship between Unaangan people and the United States Government. In just one example, after Dutch Harbor was bombed in 1942 during World War II, every person of Aleut ancestry was removed from the entire Aleutian chain and the Pribilofs and interned for four years in abandoned warehouses and canneries on the South East coast of

Alaska. My Grandmother remembered that one day the big boat came, and they left only with the clothing they were wearing, not at all knowing what was happening. Though the internment was officially to protect Aleut people, the US government still brought the Aleut men home during each of the fur seal harvests, so that the government would not lose their profit on the pelts. Over four years, many, many Unangax died of starvation, disease, accidents due to the uninhabitable conditions of the government appointed shelters, and freezing to death. The eldest and youngest generations were the most affected.

One day, two years after the war had ended, the big boats returned and delivered some of the people back to their home islands. My Grandmother's family was lucky to get to return to St. Paul, but many other island villages were closed, the people permanently relocated. People returned home to find their entire villages burned to the ground, gutted, destroyed. All of the gold plating in the churches, all of the ancient baskets, hunting hats, cloaks, kayaks, even kitchen sinks and sofas, were looted, not by wartime enemies, but by American servicemen. People were returned in the middle of winter, to cement-wall winds and deep cold. They were given piles of green wood, practically useless against the cold, with promises that boats would return with bricks and other supplies in the spring. The boats never came.

I grew up knowing that I had a dance that had been lost in the four years of internment. I had a language that only few elders could speak. I had a costume that was no longer sewn. And I had this big thing that had happened in my elders' lives that no one would talk about. I would hang on the edge of their conversations, listening for names and tears. I wrote down the names of would-be elder uncles and aunts, then baby sisters and brothers who did not make it through internment. I memorized the lines from me, to my

parents, to my grandparents, to my great grand parents, to my great great grandparents that traced like lines on my palm, one line ending here for no reason. Another line cutting in thick, making that other line almost invisible.

When I was a child, my uncles were involved in a large effort to garner an apology from the US Government to the Aleut people for negligence and disrespect during internment and after. I saw the speech my Uncle delivered to congress written in his own handwriting, before he traveled to Washington DC, and this seemed like a special, intimate piece of him- a demand for an apology in his own handwriting. The letter talked about the silence among our elders about those years. I thought he was brave for speaking into both sides of that silence. It was a silence that made me feel very afraid.

The US Government decided to tack the Aleut internment to an already under-works act, The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, that made restitution to Japanese-Americans that were also interned during WWII. This was our formal apology, but to me, it didn't *feel* like anything. Now I know that I was expecting for the apology to bring back our songs, our dances, to crack open the quiet. I was confusing the apology for the repatriation.

It has been my generation that has spent the time with our elders, talked with other tribes, done the research, and, at times, filled in the gaps with our best guesses to bring back our songs, our dances, our costume, our drums. Now, some elders are again making grass baskets, hunting hats, seal bone dolls. We are repatriating our stories, our traditions, our futures. We tell one another txin yaxtakuq on the phone. I have seen my little cousins do our dances, wearing eyeliner across their cheeks and down their chins like the tattoos of our ancestors. Aleuts dance in bare feet, in curlicues that look just like my Uncle's handwriting.

Unangan axiologies have helped me to understand the first component of a methodology of repatriation, balance. I have been taught “Txin achigalix angaxigumin anugtanatxin agsaasaduukuxtin” / “Always learn and maintain a balance.” This is a lesson that will take my lifetime to fully learn, but I have found it to be a compelling goal. Balance stands in contrast not to imbalance, but to sameness and uniformity. In an educational climate that prioritizes standardization and regimentation, *balance* is practically revolutionary. In many ways, the Indigenous epistemology of balance can serve as a counter to latent dogmatism, such as fetishizing equal distribution, market logic, or even “democratic” practices such as one person, one vote. (Alfred, 2005; Smith, 2000)

Sometimes, folks think that in order to live in balance, they need to be “well-rounded,” which translates into one person doing everything. Well-rounded researchers need to be able to conduct revealing interviews and provocative focus groups, run multiple linear regressions, and make fabulous power-points and reports. Balance is reduced to being a semi-expert in all things. In addition, as my co-researchers and I discuss in chapter two, engaging in “democratic practice” can sometimes feel like everyone should be sharing all responsibilities and all power equally, at all times, like synchronized swimmers. This is because ideals of well-roundedness and equal distribution are confined to an individualist perspective. Within a collective or tribal perspective, balance takes on a wholly different meaning (Grande, 2008). It is the collective, not the individual that achieves balance. Returning to the example of the well-rounded researcher, it is the collective of researchers that will have balance, not an over-extended individual researcher. Each person has a different role, a different power, a different knowing.

At first glance, this notion may resemble the pre-Sputnik school reforms of the Progressive Era, characterized by the 1918 Cardinal Principles Report. This era is also characterized by the invention of school tracking, in which the “brightest” students were put on the track toward college, and other students were put on tracks toward industry. Of course, poor youth, youth of color, and immigrant youth were more likely to be placed in lower tracks, guaranteeing that schooling recreated existing social strata (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). This is not what a balanced school system looks like. The tracking system of prior generations was not a system of multiple routes, but of one route surrounded by dead-ends and trick doors. As I will argue in chapter five, a balanced school system would have multiple, rich, rewarding and meaningful routes to graduation.

The next component of a methodology of repatriation is the episteme of sovereignty. Broadly, sovereignty is a call for recognition and full realization of rights to social, cultural, and spiritual (tribal) identities and to our own envisioned political development. It is a call for respect for our integrity as whole, significant, contemporary civilizations with long histories (some, like mine, spanning 10,000 years) and even longer futures. That respect is shown specifically through US (or other) government non-interference (Laenui, 1994). Sovereignty is difficult to translate into Western culture, or any culture that expects a one to one ratio of meaning. I was recently told by a white colleague that every time I use the word “sovereignty” he mentally crosses it out and inserts the word “autonomy.” (Beyond the immediate insult is the larger insult that your listener only listens to you if what you say is directly applicable to them.) Sovereignty encapsulates what I know about knowing, where knowing comes from and goes to, how knowledge stretches and rises, even and because of the punching down. It is not just

internal however, not a state of mind, but a *real thing*, a lived thing that through the treaties, through the apologies, through our *survivance* (Vizenor, 1994), through the reconfigurations, removals, and reparations is still unrecognized. As I discuss in chapter four, I extend the very real and salient concept of sovereignty to educational sovereignty, a useful paradigm in which to recast the relationships between (urban) youth and schooling.

Along with other Indigenous authors, Sandy Grande has written about sovereignty as a prerequisite democracy insisting, “the discourse of democracy must be fused with considerations of sovereignty, particularly indigenous sovereignty, if it is ever to realize its potential” (Grande, 2008) This is a powerful challenge to participatory action researchers who may take the project of democracy as a given.

At the heart of participatory research lies a desire to resuscitate democracy as a whole, and yet this is an important historic moment to (re)consider democracy. Democracy has been and is being waged on our bodies, in our names, as an occupying force. It has been exposed by Indigenous thinkers as an ideology that thwarts Indigenous interests and maintains the privilege of the power elite (Grande, 2004; G. H. Smith, 2000). The practice of democratizing has been a practice of desecration, of burning down, of forgetting, of washing home-language speakers’ mouths with soap, of forced removal, of denial, of deprivation, of depletion. In the United States, in schools inculcated by hegemonic democracy, we are taught that democracy is our finest gift to ourselves and the world and our most valuable possession. (Fine, Tuck, Zeller-Berkman, 2007 & 2008, p. 270)

Communities and families have been scattered and dispossessed, languages have been washed out of our mouths, children have been forced into boarding schools, nations have been and continue to be occupied, all in the name of democracy. The episteme of sovereignty, especially Indigenous sovereignty, can be an interruption to the discourse on democracy, not to close it down, but reframe it in opposition to colonization.

I see participatory action research spaces as spaces in which to praxis sovereignty and re-imagine democracy. PAR spaces are definitionally and intentionally self-

determined spaces. PAR demands that researchers untangle otherwise jumbled ethics, make transparent otherwise inaccessible practice, and speak what is otherwise silenced. For these reasons, I contend that PAR collectives are prime sites to explore what it might mean to praxis sovereignty. The experience of struggle and possibility that is inherent to working out how to create within a working space that which has been systematically denied to us— the power of arrival of it, and the long lasting body and spirit memory that is taken away from a PAR collective— can be re-visioned and re-articulated as part of an otherwise unacknowledged legacy of Indigenous struggles for sovereignty worldwide (Tuck, 2007).

Intimately bound to sovereignty, the next component of a methodology of repatriation is *desire as a counter to damage-based analyses*. In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss, in an individual, community, or tribe. It is a pathologizing approach. Here's a more applied definition of damage-centered research: it is that research that operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation. Damage-centered analyses are prevalent in educational research: it is not difficult to recall scores of studies that portray schools and communities primarily as broken, emptied, or flattened. As I illustrate in chapter three, existing studies of the GED are damage-centered.

Native communities, poor communities, communities of color, and disenfranchised communities *tolerate* this kind of data gathering because there is an implicit and sometimes explicit assurance that stories of damage pay off in material, sovereign, and political wins. Many Native and urban communities engage/allow/participate in damage centered research and damage narratives as a strategy toward correcting oppression. However, without

contexts of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses (Kelley, 1997); our evidence of ongoing colonization, without a context of that colonization, is relegated to our own bodies, our own families, our own social networks, our leadership. After the research team leaves, after the town meeting, after the news cameras have gone away, all we are left with is the damage. Further, I worry that the theory of change itself may be unreliable in terms of effectiveness for change: It is a powerful idea to think of all of us as litigators, putting the world on trial, but, *does it actually work?* Do the material and political wins come through? And most importantly, are the wins worth the long-term costs of *thinking of ourselves as damaged?*

My alternative to damage-centered research has been to build our research to capture *desire* instead of damage. Several solid examples of such work come to mind (Carney, forthcoming; Fine, 1991; Fine & McClelland, 2007; Graham, 1992; Haney, 1997; Lamb, 1996; Kelley, 1997; Tuck et. al., 2008). In each of these examples, scripts of blame are flipped, and latent assumptions about responsibility are provoked. For example, Sarah Carney argues,

(R)ace, class and gender work in combination within a current (U.S.) social and political moment that favors privatization (Eisenstein, 1997) and the withdrawal of public support to frame and construct various images of 'natural' women, of 'good' and 'bad' mothers, and of female responsibility; and these now-familiar images work to support/bolster state policies regarding shrinking social assistance, and allow the state to place the burden for caring back on the backs of women, particularly women who are poor and of color (Carney, forthcoming).

Michelle Fine and Sara McClelland (2007), writing about sexuality education for young women, argue for a framework of *thick* desire. They write,

Thick desire places sexual activity for all people, regardless of age or gender, within a larger context of social and interpersonal structures that enable a person to engage in the political act of *wanting*. Wanting can be

interpreted in any number of ways, but it necessarily positions a young person as feeling entitled to that which comes in the future. It includes wanting to have unhindered access to structural and institutional supports, such as education, health care, and protection from coercion (Fine and McClelland, 2007. Italics original).

Extending their argument for *thickening* desire, moving beyond (but not cutting off/without) the ties between desire and sexual pleasure, my theorizing of desire draws upon a litany of works diverse in legacy and purpose (Perl, 1980; Cheng, 2001; Kristeva, 1980; Anzaldúa, 1981 & 1987; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Didion, 2005; hooks, 1990; Williams, 1991; Morrison, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari teach us that desire is assembled, crafted over time by our experiences, and in contrast to theorists that posit desire as a gap or that which is missing (such as and somewhat famously, Foucault) Deleuze and Guattari insist that desire is not lacking but “involution” (1987, p. 164). In my own experience of desire, it is located in the body and can be physically *felt* (see also Sondra Perl’s compelling work on felt sense, Perl, 1980), but it is also located in the collective or tribe, which for me is also physically felt, but in a different way that is similar to feeling my relations.

I am not arguing to install desire as an antonym to damage, or to position desire as in binary relationship to damage. It is important to not think of this argument for desire as merely swapping one framework for another, nor is this merely an issue of political correctness or linguistic correction. Rather, it is an argument for desire as an epistemological shift.

It is certainly not a call for another “d” word, denial. It is not a call to paint everything as peachy, as fine, as over. In Joan Didion’s (2005) The Year of Magical Thinking, a memoir on the mournful aspects of desire, Didion writes, “The singer of the song about looking for the silver lining believes that clouds have come her way. The singer

of the song about walking on through the storm assumes that the storm could otherwise take her down.” (Didion, 2005, 171) Desire *includes* melancholia (see Cheng, 2001), grief, shame, felt-fraudulence, and burning hunger for self-representation; it *is* the hurt, *but only in part*. Because desire is smart (Britzman, 2003 on Melanie Klein and Eve Sedgwick), because desire is an assemblage of our experiences (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), because desire involves our imagination and involves our brushing up against big ideas and ideologies (see Anzaldua, 1987 on borderlands), desire is critical, it does not fool itself, even if it is contradictory. Desire is complicated. Further, desire, because it is an assemblage of experiences, ideas, and ideologies, both subversive and dominant, necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency and resistance.

As a theoretical move, desire interrupts the binary of reproduction vs. resistance, because it insists for a more nuanced frame than simply reproduction *or* resistance. Desire is neither and both, it is the thirdspace (Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991) it is rhizomatic, spreading in multiple directions simultaneously (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Desire flushes out that which has been relegated to what is hidden or what happens behind our backs.

In part a framework of desire can do all of this because it accounts for that which Avery Gordon (1997) calls complex personhood. Complex personhood means that people, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves... that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward. (Gordon, 1997, p. 4)

Gordon describes complex personhood as “conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of

enormously subtle meaning (Ibid, p. 5).” In my application of this concept, I utilize complex personhood to reflect Indigenous understandings of collectivity and the interdependence of the collective and the person, rather than western reliances on the individual.

I have learned a great deal about complex personhood from my colleague Monique Guishard who tells a story about working with her youth co-researchers on issues of critical consciousness during the day, tracing the legacy of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ work for social justice (see Guishard, forthcoming). Later the same day, Guishard found herself standing overnight on a long line outside of a shoe store with the same youth co-researchers, waiting for the anticipated release of a new sneaker. Guishard was taken aback by the irony of the situation – the same day youth were openly critical of corporate capitalism and globalization, they waited with hundreds of other youth and adults to purchase an item that represents some of the worst elements of global capitalism and exploitation – but she was even more taken aback by her youth companions’ awareness and ease in/side that irony. In a damage framework, one might surmise that even when faced with options, youth are pliant to the consumerist status quo. However, in a complex personhood framework, we see that “all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others.” (Gordon, 1997, p. 4) We can desire to be critically conscious *and* desire the new Jordans, even if those desires are conflicting.

In my work with CREDD, we refused to accept damage-centered views of the GED, and the youth who pursue the credential. Existing research on the GED positioned it as a depleted credential, ineffective in getting earners through college or fully employed.

Yet, at the same time, studies reported the ever-increasing numbers of youth across the U.S. and especially in New York City flocking to the GED rather than a high school diploma. CREDD’s research took a desire and complex personhood approach by insisting that there must be other values youth place in the GED – that youth aren’t being duped into getting a meaningless credential, but that the meaning they place in it isn’t understood by existing research.

Table 1.1: A Comparative Look at Frameworks: The Gate-ways and Get-away Project

Damage-Based	Desire-Based (with respect to complex personhood)
Value of GED is depleted	Value of GED is related to its role as an emergency exit from negative high school experiences
Youth are making bad choices or are being duped into getting a GED	Youth make the best choices they can based on the information available to them
Youth are lazy, are unable to make wise decisions, or are nihilistic	Youth care deeply about their futures, but also their current situations

I believe it is our work to envision alternative theories of change, especially those that rely upon desire and complex personhood rather than damage. One of those theories of change may be theorizing back, an approach I have adapted from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s concept of researching back (Smith, 1999; Tuck, in press a).

Theorizing back requires us to reprove and reclaim theories that have been used against us, theories that we have mis/believed about ourselves, that have fed our own self abnegation, theories that have made us rely upon, cater to, offer gratitude to, and even congratulate the colonizer, and theories that, as one CREDD researcher has said, “paint us as lazy, crazy, and stupid.” Theorizing back is a refusal to speak against ourselves, shifting the scrutiny off of our own bodies and rightly placing it upon the institutions that naturalize racism, misogyny, gross disparities of wealth, homophobia, and neglect” (Tuck, in press a).

Theorizing back is a repatriation of theories and discourses used against us, and at the same time, is a pedagogy of the ethics of dealing with traditional and emergent sacred material and stories.

Desire, complex personhood, and theorizing back have a rhizomatic relationship to one another. In fact, each component of a methodology of repatriation is part of that rhizome. The rhizome, the underground stalk/stem system of plants such as irises, asparagus, and ginger, but also of pervasive and invasive plants such as forest ferns and ivies, is used by Deleuze and Guattari as an epistemological and ontological model that is decidedly different than *roots and trees*. Of trees, they write, “All of arborescent culture is founded on them, from biology to linguistics” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 15). Deleuze and Guattari critique arborescent culture or root-fetishizing culture as fascist, linear, one-dimensional and uni-causal. Frustrated by arborescent, tree-like theories of social reproduction, youth and community “development,” the value of the GED, and damage-centered analyses of colonized peoples and non-whites, my co-researchers and I have utilized the metaphor/paradigm shift of the rhizome to mark a departure from these root-fetishizing, tree worshiping theories toward interconnected, ever-seeking paradigms of relationships of knowledge, power, and practice. For me, part of the draw of the rhizome is the precise, poetic way in which Deleuze and Guattari describe it:

- a) a rhizome as subterranean stem is very different from the tree or root which plots a point, fixes an order (1987, p. 7);
- b) a rhizome can be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on old lines or on new lines (ibid, 9);
- c) a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles (ibid, 7);
- d) the method of the rhizome involves decentering (a power center) onto other dimensions and registers (ibid, 8).

The metaphor of the rhizome reciprocally complements participation – and participatory action research – in a way that the tree as a metaphor cannot: the importance of ideas is not dependent on their origin, but rather, on their directions and distances. The collective moves in and out of ideas based on its needs, not a pre-determined list of procedures, and when making a misstep, it can retrace its paces and make a new choice, or leap and land, initiating a new path from which many other paths will now grow. Purposefully participatory spaces are spaces of ever-seeking linkages between peoples, places, subjectivities, histories, languages, texts, memories, and knowings. Deleuze and Guattari write,

Make a map, not a tracing. The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of a wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real... A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to the same. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged 'competence' (ibid, 12).

However, theories of rhizome run counter to Indigenous worldviews in some significant ways, primarily in the divergence of embracing a project that abandons roots for map-making of subterranean *stems*. Our senses of ourselves as Indigenous people are often intimately connected to our everyday tracing of passed-down stories and knowledge, to strengthening our links to the past and future, to attending to old ways in our new lives, and new ways in old lives. In this way, a sense of competence *is* involved, not mere performances of our identities or community binds, but rather and for the sake of future generations, a knowing that is bodied, explicit, lived, and passed on. I raise this not because I believe that the rhizome and Indigenous worldviews need to be reconciled (a futile task) but rather to make explicit the ways in which theory use is complicated. This is

not a rare instance; it happens at every nexus of theory, experience, culture, and memory. In pottery, when bringing two pieces of formed clay together, the potter makes scratches, or “roughs the clay” on each piece at the locations they will be joined. In theory use too, we rough the clay in order to hinge unlike, unfired textures and shapes.

The rhizome, like a theory of complex personhood, allows for such contradictions, indeed grows because of them. The metaphor of the rhizome lends itself to balance, and to desire. Further, as a metaphor of (participatory) policy analysis, as demonstrated in chapter five, the rhizomatic approach is not concerned with tracing problem to their roots, but rather mapping the relationships of a problem; thus, recommendations are not geared towards the origin or inversely the symptom, but on improving, re-working, or upending the relationships upon which/within which inequity thrives.

A methodology of repatriation builds upon participatory action research and Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies to operationalize/praxis balance, sovereignty, desire, complex personhood, theorizing back, and the rhizome. It is crafted to be particularly attuned to insynchronicity: to observe contradictions within institutions and the ways those contradictions play out in lived lives. A methodology of repatriation views insynchronicity– the gaps between what institutions, people, and governments say they do and what they actually do– as a revealing unit of analysis.

A methodology of repatriation is the theoretical backbone and ethical compass of this work, consistent throughout the visioning, design, preparation, data collection, data analysis, reliability checks, and dissemination of the findings of this project if only because a methodology of repatriation is really just a map of how I am in the world. It is a

realization of my own worldview as an Indigenous scholar, as a participatory action researcher, as an educator, poet, and learner.

To this end, I have been inspired by many other research projects, only some of which I will describe here. First, the work of my colleagues in the Participatory Action Research Collective at the Graduate Center has challenged me and supported me at every turn. Sarah Zeller-Berkman's work with the children of incarcerated parents (Zeller-Berkman, 2006), Monique Guishard's work with 2nd and 3rd generation community activists (Guishard, forthcoming), and Caitlin Cahill's work with the Fed Up Honeys, a collective of young women of color on the Lower East Side (Cahill, 2006) each were phenomenally instructive on collective relationships and method. My co-researchers and I were lucky to have their work as an example of what our work could be. Further, Zeller-Berkman, Guishard, and Cahill each personally provided guidance to me and my co-researchers, giving insights to our design, and analysis. Brett Stoudt's work with privileged young men attending an elite private school gave CREDD and me another kind of guidance, inspiring us to not shy away from our statistical data by handing the data entry and analysis off to someone else. Instead, Stoudt worked with us for hours upon hours to understand our survey data, an invaluable education. Finally, Maria Torre's extensive experience as a participatory action researcher with a range of diverse groups (including women who were incarcerated and urban and suburban teens) was a treasure trove to our work. Torre generously worked with us to develop an internal assessment process to document and respond to CREDD researcher's experiences within our collective.

Next, Greg Dimitriadis' research that resulted in the book Friendship, Cliques, and Gangs (2003) was influential to my work with CREDD. I first met Dimitriadis when he

came to the Graduate Center to discuss the more behind-the-scenes aspects of the research, an ethnography of two African American young urban men. He told us, among many other helpful observations, that he felt challenged to find ways for his relationship with the young men to be reciprocal. Dimitriadis revealed that he helped with transportation, laundry, and other un-glamorous tasks, but insisted that this was part of the role of a researcher, especially in the lives of youth. I was imprinted by this version of reciprocity, one that echoed the kinds of reciprocity expected in Indigenous communities, and continue to appreciate Dimitriadis' example of humility and meaningful relationship.

Finally, this work has clearly been informed by Michelle Fine's Framing Dropouts (1991). Fine's assertions that youths' dissatisfaction in schooling should be taken seriously as critique, that in-school policies and practices contribute to school non-completion, and that schooling is characterized by silence, the break in communication between curricula and youths' lives, ripple throughout this work. I confess that in everyday life, I actually can't ever remember if the book is titled "Framing Dropouts" or "Reframing Dropouts." This is because the book does both, and has taught me to do both: frame and reframe, frame and reframe- moving between structural realities and inadequacies, to the lived life; out to a lived life in context, to a context made of other lives and bodies, other institutions, other pieces of legislation or paper, other disappointments, other desires, our own collusions, our own collisions, our own bending, our own backs, all in order to frame and reframe.

These inspiring works are largely ethnographic, but this dissertation is decidedly not an ethnography. The experiences of being pushed-out and pursuing a GED cut across many other experiences. Some of the youth who participated in our study are youth raised in foster care, like Jameak. Some, like Ebony, identified as Queer. Others, like Zhi and

Ling lin recently immigrated to the United States. Some, like James, have been incarcerated. Some, like Asia, are young parents. Some, like Benji, were designated special education students. Some, like Jessica, have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. Some are survivors of physical and emotional abuse from guardians or a girlfriend or boyfriend. They are recovering substance abusers. They are artists and teachers and poets. They are students.

Although this dissertation will not present a close telling of each of their stories, I hope that the weft of their stories will lead you to the same conclusion that I have come to: each of these youth deserved schooling that was meaningful to their present and future selves. In the absence of multiple routes to graduation, these youth made the GED meaningful in ways that will go unseen by those un-inclined to take GED youths' perspectives seriously.

This manuscript is organized into six chapters. This first chapter has introduced the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project, and the methodological frame of the research. The focus of this dissertation may be somewhat different from other dissertations utilizing PAR in that my focus is not on the methodology or process of our collective. This manuscript is not an ethnography of our group or of the GED earners in the group. I view writing on process as important work that bears significant contributions to improving PAR, but I found surprisingly few examples of PAR manuscripts that focus on the presentation of data. My interest in PAR is not only as process, but especially as an approach that yields strong data. Thus my contribution to the field of PAR can be a testament to the heightened potential of participatory methods by focusing on our findings and analysis.

The second chapter presents the major discussion of our collective and our methods in the dissertation. It is a chapter that I have written with my co-researchers, adapted from a piece we co-authored in Revolutionizing Education, a book on youth participatory action research edited by Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine. The chapter is distinctly poly-vocal and reflexive. The chapter serves to describe the inner-workings of our collective, our project design and methods, our participants, and some of the pivotal, educative moments in our work together.¹

Chapter three begins with a political economy of the value of the GED, informed by the ground-breaking work of Jean Anyon (2005, 1997) in the field of political economy. Critiquing existing interpretations of the value of the credential, the chapter moves to youth perspectives on the lived value of the GED. The chapter argues that pushed-out youth pursue the GED as acts of repatriating their learning, and in doing so, repatriate the value of the GED. Further, I argue that the GED has an important role in American schooling, especially in New York City, which has limited routes to school completion. Indeed, the GED is indiscriminately valuable to a school system that is deeply flawed. The chapter demonstrates that the GED is a punished alternative in a system where few other options exist.

Chapter four contends that New York City youth experience schooling as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities, a dialectic of school push-out. In the chapter I provide extensive examples of humiliating ironies and hypocrisies in schooling. I

¹ The collaborative authorship of this chapter is an example of how I have negotiated the politics of writing about CREDD's work: The consistency of participation throughout this project would make my single authorship of a treatment of CREDD's process feel incomplete. This chapter is unique to this dissertation because in it, my voice is part of the collective. In the rest of this manuscript, I write as single author. My authorship in the remainder of this manuscript is informed, of course, by our collaborative analysis, but the connections, observations, and analyses are my own.

illustrate how federal policies like No Child Left Behind, state policies such as exit exams and the phase out of the local diploma, and city policies that prevent multiple routes to graduation directly contribute to school push-out. I emphasize that pushed-out youth can re-orient themselves to positions of dangerous dignity, seeking self-preservation and self-determination, and claiming educational sovereignty.

Chapter five engages in a rhizomatic discussion of the public sector, privatization, school completion, and the purposes of schooling. I demonstrate that as schools become urban youths' last lifelines, the disrespect that youth experience in schools compounds their alienation. I identify assessment as the contemporary purpose of schooling which serves to add to the insult in youth lives. I articulate the ways in which youth reject assessment-based purposes of schooling while embracing the importance of education, and conclude that multiple, meaningful routes to graduation are needed.

The brief concluding chapter of this dissertation provides an overview of the findings of the dissertation, with a discussion of implications for theory, policy, and practice.

In sum, the pages that follow will map constellations of the GED, the purpose(s) of schooling, and school push-out. By a coarse eye, the pushed-out students' accounts of the circumstances of their leaving school might read as a drastic decision over a small thing. Pull it back just a bit though and we see that it was not just one small thing, but a small thing that came shortly after a life-altering change that the school otherwise failed to adequately address. Or, a small thing in a lifetime of small things. Pull it back a bit more to see that around 56% of New York City students are tripped up by those small things and do not graduate each year, and the small things don't seem so small anymore. My framing

of these stories within the lexicon of push-out is an articulation of my belief that youth deserve schooling that is more than a litany of small things.

Chapter 2

PAR Praxes for Now and Future Change: Methods

with CREDD researchers Jovanne Allen, Maria Bacha, Alexis Morales, Sarah Quinter, Jamila Thompson, and Melody Tuck

“CREDD is the place to interrogate the education system that turned its back on me.”

Alexis

“CREDD makes me know that I was sitting down when I should have been standing.”

Jodi-Ann

Our Collective

The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD) came together in February 2006 to be a space for youth participatory action research on education in New York City. We are united by our disappointment in the New York City public school system, and our desire to affect political and educational change in school policies and practices. A group of 12 youth aged 16 to 22, CREDD researchers are lower and working class, ethnically diverse, live all over the city, and represent a wide range of educational experiences, although many identify as being *pushed-out* from our former schools, and all of us have felt unwelcome at school. We have developed a critique of a school system that was never intended for us in the first place. Our group defines itself against racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, the criminalization of poor people, and push-out practices in New York City public high schools. We are in favor of schooling that is rigorous, accessible, and free.



Figure 2.1 The CREDD seal. Created by Sarah Quinter.

“CREDD is exactly what it sounds like. Unique, questioning, and a word that makes you ask *what?*” (Melody). CREDD is different from other research spaces because we are not an academic or government space; usually the academy or government has a monopoly on research. We fill different roles based on our interests and talents, where in other research spaces, power is usually only held by those with the most research experience. Finally, we engage in our own process of decision making, whereas other participatory spaces may rely on a one person one vote decision making model that will always muffle the voices of those in numeric minority (Smith, 2000).

CREDD’s approach to PAR holds that those upon whose backs research has historically been carried *on* are instead researched *alongside*. In our work, PAR has been a way for young men and women who are marginalized by race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality to demand not only access to the conversations, policies, theories, and spaces to which we/they have been systematically denied, but better yet, demand that our research informs and inspires these efforts. CREDD’s approach to PAR is concerned with what knowing is and where knowing comes from, believing that it is often those at the bottom of social hierarchies who know the most about social oppression, but also, the radical

possibilities toward redressing domination (Anyon, 2005; Fine, Tuck, and Zeller-Berkman, 2007).

Further, CREDD understands PAR as *politic*– an embedded and out-loud critique of colonization, racism, misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism, classism, and xenophobia in our society, in our research sites, amongst our research collective, and within the larger and historical research community– rather than a fixed set of methods. At the same time, CREDD takes method seriously, crafting each instrument to be interactive and pedagogical, drawing from qualitative and quantitative traditions, and growing our own legacy of hybridized methods utilizing visual arts, theater, and schoolyard games.

For us, PAR means that:

- There is transparency on all matters of the research
- The research questions are co-constructed
- The project design and design of research methods are collaboratively negotiated and co-constructed
- Analysis is co-constructed.
- The products of the research are dynamic, interactive, and are prepared and disseminated in collaboration.

Our work stands in opposition to the kinds of research that have and continue to be used for domination. Everyone is involved in developing research questions, project design, data collection, data analysis, and product development. Everyone is responsible for making our space a participatory space. We do not erase ourselves from our work, and our whole selves are involved because many kinds of skills and thinking are needed, not just one. By action, CREDD means demanding justice, starting a conversation, taking a stand in order to build power and redefining reality. Action happens all throughout the research, not just at the end. By research, we mean looking again in order to make our own

interpretations, breaking silences, and reclaiming spaces that have been used against us.

Finally, research means refusing to accept analyses that paint us as lazy, crazy, or stupid.

I've learned that it can be more helpful for me to look for people asking similar questions than to count on those offering answers. I came across CREDD and saw a group of people who were also searching for answers about education and youth achieving self-determination. I'd never done research before and had never even heard of PAR. I ended up joining a diverse group of young researchers who are trying something that hadn't been done before. ~ Sarah

The Long-short Herstory of CREDD

We co-founded CREDD in February 2006, though the events in our individual lives were bringing us together long before then. For instance, Alexis, Jovanne, Sarah, and Maria (aka Bacha) were suffocating in their former schools; Eve was working with brilliant youth organizers who were desperately dissatisfied with school; Melody and Jamila were seeing loved ones struggle to keep their heads above school waters.

We came together at first to do a research project that attended to the overuse and abuse of the General Educational Development (GED) credential as a disguise for pushing out unwanted students in New York City high schools; this project became our Gate-ways and Get-aways Project. Some of us had met over the years, others we met when we put out a CREDD call for youth researchers throughout various New York City-based listservs. It was Eve's idea to come together, but as we worked in our twice-a-week meetings to create our research questions, develop our project design, design our research tools, and to learn together how to do research, any feelings of her ownership of our group and our process disappeared, and we all became co-founders. We collected most of our data over summer 2006; our data collection spread over nine months and concluded in December.

We're not sure what the future holds for CREDD. We know that it has become an important space for us, and that a space for participatory action research with youth on

education is a valuable space for our city and our public school system. We are now working together to produce a youth to youth guide to the GED to share our findings and the advice of youth GED earners and seekers with young people who are considering the GED.

The Gate-ways and Get-aways Project

We call our first research project the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project because we are interested in the GED as both a gateway to higher education and employment, and as a get away from dehumanizing high schools. The GED is a credential of General Educational Development that was never intended for widespread use as an alternative to a high school diploma. In the United States and especially in New York City, both numbers of GED earners and the numbers of youth GED earners have increased in the past decade. The pre-existing research on the GED often questioned the value of the GED credential in higher education and employment— but never asked youth why they continue to flock to “a depleted credential.”

We believe that the increase in numbers of youth GED earners in New York City, even in the face of a possibly diminished value of the GED, can be linked to what it feels like to be in high school. To really understand this link, we needed to do participatory action research. Our collective, which includes youth GED earners, designed the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project to privilege the experiences of youth GED earners and seekers in order to challenge mainstream attitudes toward the GED as being an empty credential, and to understand the lived rather than perceived value of the GED. Seeking out the lived value helped us see how federal mandates (such as No Child Left Behind) and state-mandated exit exams (like the NY Regents) put pressure on schools to push-out students

who would not do well on standardized tests. Youth of color and poor youth (many who do not feel like school was made for them anyway) are explicitly and implicitly pushed out and pushed toward the GED. Many youth are misinformed about the GED process and mistakenly think that they will be swapping one set of tests for another without having to attend four years of high school. Our participatory action research has taught us that the value of the GED lies less in it being a gateway to higher education and employment and more in being a get away from inhospitable high schools.

Research Questions, Areas of Inquiry

Rather than specifically worded research questions, we have designed this project around four interconnected areas of inquiry, so that each one of us can use our own words to describe our work, depending on our audience or the situation. The areas of inquiry in the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project are:

- The perceived and lived values of the GED
- Push-out practices in NYC public high schools
- Educational options to state exit exam based curricula
- Meritocracy and the myth of the American Dream

Each one of these four areas of inquiry is full enough to be the source of many years of research. However, our commitment to interconnectivity, our urgency of critique of the pre-existing literature on the GED, and our genuine curiosity compelled us to craft our research to ask questions in the territories of each of these areas, and in the intersections between them.

Research Methods

We have recently begun using the metaphor of a watercolor box to talk about our methods. We try to use the best color to paint the picture we are trying to see, and use the

colors in harmony, rather than muddying the image or weakening the paper by using too many colors at once. In this paint box, our primary colors are individual interviews and group interviews and focus groups. These are the foundations of our research, and our painting would be incomplete without them.



Figure 2.2 CREDD Mixed methods paint box

Our secondary colors have been surveys, opinion polls, cold calls, memoirs, archival research, and mapping. These colors can be blended with one another, but especially the primary colors to create light and shadow, depth and complexity in our work.

We have also mixed colors to create new colors, or new methods such as borrowing activities from Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, popular education's problem tree, and schoolyard games such as the slam book and board games. These hybrid colors come alive in participatory action research, and are indeed some of the most radical and compelling examples of the possibilities of participatory action research.

A final extension to the metaphor, water, participation, is the stuff that moves the pigment from box to brush to page, that makes the stroke translucent or opaque.

Table 2.1 Gate-ways and Get-aways Project Methods

Method	Description	Sample*	N
Interview	Structured, open-ended interviews lasting approximately one hour; tape recorded; transcribed; coded with 87% inter-reader reliability	Youth GED earners and seekers Youth GED earners now in their 30s and 40s GED instructors	35 20 9 6
Focus group	Structured, open ended focus groups lasting 1.5-2 hours; 3 distinct versions; tape recorded or video taped; collectively coded then transcribed -Version One: <i>The GED</i> . Utilized individual mapping, open ended group interview. -Version Two: <i>School push out</i> . Utilized individual mapping, problem tree, and human statues exercise. -Version Three: <i>Meritocracy</i> . Utilized individual mapping, Nothing but Trouble board game, satisfaction group mapping	Youth GED earners and seekers	9 95
Survey	Paper and pencil survey; administered on the street, parks, pools, malls, subways; entered and analyzed in SPSS	GED earners and seekers High school diploma earners and seekers School non completers	476 138 306 32
Cold call	Unannounced phone interviews lasting 5 minutes; recorded using pencil and paper; entered and analyzed in SPSS	Human resources officers College admissions counselors	80 29 51
Slambook	Notebook survey passed from participant to participant; 30 were created and 15 were completed.	New York City youth	15 368
Problem tree	Freirian/Popular education exercise; group maps the symptoms, underlying beliefs, and structural forces and root ideologies of a problem. Problems mapped included the diminished value of the GED and school push out.	Youth GED earners and seekers, CREDD researchers	6
Researcher memoir	Open concept textual, visual, and multimedia educational autobiographies; shared in an end of the year celebration	CREDD researchers	8
Individual mapping	Paper and marker image of educational history		
Human statues exercise	Boal/Theater of the Oppressed exercise in which youth make a human statue of relationships between administrators, teachers and schools. Youth first make statues to represent schools as they are now, then collaborate to form representations of ideal/healthy school relations. Photographed with audio recording or videotaped.		
Nothing but Trouble board game	CREDD-created board game that plays out the schooling, health, housing, policing, and emergency disparities between different groups, created to generate discussion on meritocracy; game play lasts about 45 minutes.		
Satisfaction group mapping	Bulls-eye map upon which youth place multi-colored stickers to represent their (anticipated) life-satisfaction now, 5 years from now, and 25 years from now.		

*To participate in our study, youth needed to be aged 14-22, be residents of New York City, and be current or formers students in New York City public high schools.

In the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project, we carefully designed each of our methods to be deeply participatory, interactive and pedagogical. We approached the project with genuine questions (our areas of inquiry) and with a feeling of genuine urgency. Our counterparts are being pushed out from school, and in many cases, the GED is being abused as a cover for it, right now, this minute. In some of our encounters with research participants, especially youth², such as the interviews, survey, and focus groups, we made sure that they would feel like experts, and collaborators in our analysis and theorizing on the GED and push-out experiences.

As you can see in Table 2.1, we conducted 35 hour-long, structured, open-ended interviews. The bulk of the interviews were with youth GED earners and seekers. We conducted nine interviews with adults who had earned the GED as teens. We also interviewed six GED instructors. We began each discussion by asking the interviewee to tell us what they wanted us to be sure to carry with us. The interviews invited participants to recollect and rethink, to try ideas on and set forth new ideas, to imagine, and to advise. Interview questions can be found in the appendices.

We conducted nine focus groups (three distinct versions, three times each) with youth who were seeking or had earned a GED. We conducted the focus groups in community centers, after school programs, GED preparation centers, and at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

One version was concerned with the lived and perceived value of the GED. This focus group began with individual educational journey mapping exercise as a platform

² For the purposes of this project, youth participants lived in New York City and were current or former NYC public school students aged 16 to 22. The age cap coincided with those youth who were the oldest cohort (2003) affected by the New York state decision (2000) to make the Regent's exam the primary exit task in order to earn a high school diploma.

for participants to their educational journeys. Then we asked the group a series of questions that we designed to invite conversation with multiple perspectives.

In another version, we focused on push-out practices in NYC public high schools. In this group we used a problem tree exercise (Ferreira and Ferreira, 1996) and an exercise from Augusto Boal's (2002) Theater of the Oppressed in order to co-theorize with our participants the circumstances of school push-out. The problem tree, discussed in depth below, helped us to map the everyday experiences of school push-out, the underlying attitudes and beliefs and deeply entrenched ideologies and structures that contribute to push out. In the Boal exercise, youth created human sculptures to represent the dysfunctional relationships between students, teachers, and administrators that make schools unwelcoming. The exercise concluded with re-formed human sculptures depicting improved relationships that support youth school completion.

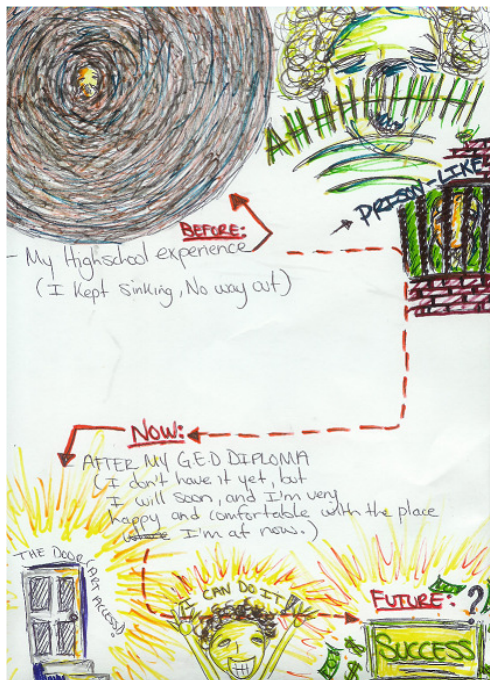


Figure 2.4 Educational map created by focus group participant and GED seeker Domingo Sepulveda

Our third focus group utilized group mapping of now and future life satisfaction (see Figure 2.5), and a conversation starting CREDD-revamped version of pop-o-matic trouble in order to together think through the limits of the meritocracy and American Dream narratives (see Figure 2.6).

In the Satisfied Life map, focus group participants place green stickers to mark their current experiences of satisfaction in their lives. As the participants place the stickers, they explain why they chose the location. In the next round, participants place yellow stickers to mark their anticipated satisfaction in life at the age of 25. Again, participants share their reasoning with the group. In the final round, participants use orange stickers to mark their anticipated satisfaction in life at the age of 45, sharing their logic for why with the group. The mapping exercise is completed after the CREDD researchers facilitate a group discussion to answer the question, “What is a satisfied life?” in order for the group to theorize together what the scale of 1-10 on the map means.

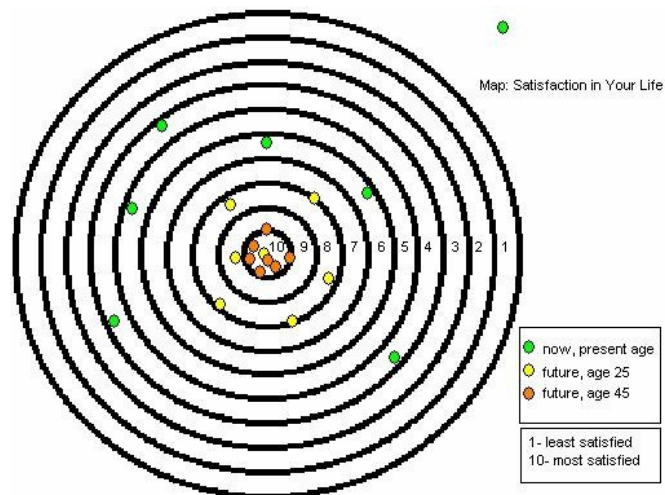


Figure 2.5 Reproduction of one of our “Satisfied Life” group maps.

The idea to craft our own board game, our Nothing but Trouble Game, was inspired by a board game created by Sarah Zeller Berkman and the Participatory Action Team, a group of youth who did participatory action research players on the impacts of

having an incarcerated parent. PAT used their Shoots and Ladders-like board game to present their findings on the everyday struggles and boundaries faced by children of incarcerated parents.

We used our board game as part of our focus groups to initiate conversations about the realities and myths of meritocracy and the American Dream, and to play out socio-economic inequities. In the Nothing but Trouble game, focus group participants are divided into four teams representing differently resourced families (represented by game board colors.) Red players “live” in a large one family home on Long Island, owned for generations; Yellow players “live” in rented apartment in a two family home in Jamaica, Queens; Green players “live” in a new urban-feeling suburb outside of Newark, NJ; Blue players “live” in a project in the South Bronx. In the game, players try to reach all the way around the board to their “American Dreams” without getting tripped up by health, housing, education, policing or social issues or without getting squeezed out or gentrified by opponents. This game was followed by a facilitated discussion on the fantasies of meritocracy and implications on schooling. The game cards and all focus group questions can be found in the appendices.

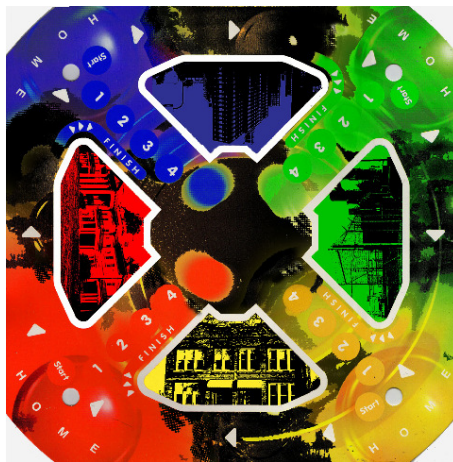


Figure 2.6 CREDD's meritocracy board game. Art work by Sarah Quinter.

Even our survey was designed to be interactive, and made use of a range of survey instruments that were decidedly unlike school tests. We created two versions, a full-length 45-minute version that included many short answer questions, completed by 100 youth, mostly GED earners and seekers, and an abridged 10-minute version that contained fewer short answer questions, completed by 376 youth, in school and out of school youth alike.

Some of our methods such as the cold calls to college admissions officers and employers, our archival research, and our slambooks were created in order to expose biases against the GED. We have completed 80 cold calls to representatives of higher education and employers to interrogate the equivalency of the GED to a high school diploma, but more, to call attention in these offices to their unequal treatment of GED earners, despite professed equal regard.

Over six months, all of us created educational memoirs, and as a closing to our data collection period, we shared them with one another in an evening of food and celebration.

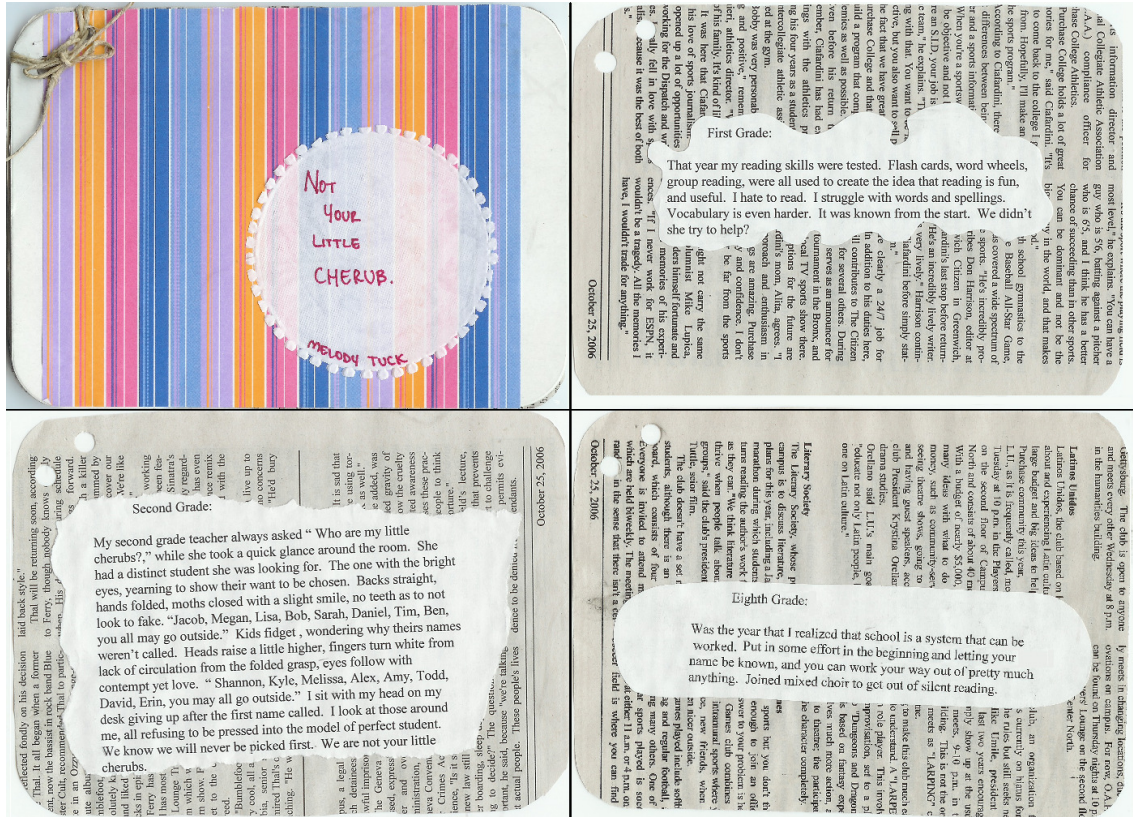


Figure 2.7 Excerpts of an educational memoir by Melody Tuck. Handmade book (4x6) using decorative paper, newspaper, text and twine.



Figure 2.8 Educational memoir by Sarah Quinter. Handmade map (2x1.5)' using a map, paint, chalk, pencil, text, found objects, childhood drawings and school assignments, and other bits of life collected over many years.

Our archival research meant reading everything we could get our hands on, including legal documents, policy documents, academic articles, newspaper clippings, theory, and fiction, in order to make an informed critique of the current framing of the value of the GED and the invisibility of the push-out experience, slipping in and out of power discourses to fulfill our own needs.

Slam books are a school-yard or hallway game that make appearances in elementary, middle and high schools across the United States. In a slambook, a topic is listed at the top of each page of an ordinary notebook; topics might include favorite song, favorite teacher, best TV show, your crush, but also crueler topics such as ugliest couple, worst dressed, and worst breath (hence the *slam*.) Then, the notebook is passed around and each person fills in one line of the entire book. What results is an accumulation of many students' scathing opinions, and the notebooks can become objects of intrigue and scandal, before they are almost inevitably scooped and locked up in the desk of a teacher or dean.

What we like about a slam book, as opposed to a survey or opinion poll, is that youth can see one another's' answers. When designing our project, we saw slambooks as a way to contend with what is and isn't considered a normal experience of schooling. We saw slambooks as a pedagogical and reciprocal method of collecting data, and because of the questions we posed and the answers our slambook participants provided, the slambooks became small acts of creative contention.

For example, we asked participants to list three words that described their school. They told us:

Cesspool! Cesspool! Cesspool!
 Miseducation, conformity, dire
 Drama, comedy, life
 Boys, sexually active, hell
 Immigrant/ minority tower
 Filthy, “hibouncious”, science skills
 Dirty, stinks, nasty
 Confining, uninspiring, something to flee
 Drama filled, diverse, boring
 I just laughed all day
 Bored, hot, unorganized
 The best thing that happened to me
 Small, colorful, jail
 Eew, eew, eew.
 Enjoyable and smooth
 Fun, serious, good
 Learning sweet shit
 Completely lacking in education
 Evil, ridiculous, painful
 Huge, diverse, prison
 Center of drama
 Dumb, rich, white
 Smart, segregated, divided
 Drama, borderline,
 Hilarious, random, diverse, chill
 Diverse, huge, loud

The answers our participants provided help to break up monolithic visions of secondary schooling by applying specific yet generalizable, and contradictory yet coherent descriptors of their schools. Reading this list from one slam book gives a glimpse to the incredibly nuanced and complicated relationships students have with their schools, and for a young person who comes across this list, the resonance of other youths’ experiences with their own might be simultaneously alarming and comforting.

In the end, 15 of the 30 slambooks CREDD created were lost or confiscated. Sometimes someone would email us at the address we stuck on the front cover, telling us they had filled it out and passed it on, and wanted to keep updated with our project. Once some emailed us to apologize for leaving it on the subway. Someone mailed a filled

slambook to us from out of state, someone else mailed us a note saying the notebook they had was filled up, so they made a new one, and added some questions to it. In some ways, it seems that our slambooks have traveled further than we could ever have hoped for our research to go. Or maybe they have gone exactly where we hope our research will go.

Throughout our research design, and as part of our methods, we have used the making of a problem tree to help us organize our thinking, and map out relationships between everyday instances of problems and larger social conditions and systematic injustice. Our use of the problem tree is in the tradition of the work of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. We go about mapping a problem tree in the following way: We begin by identifying the problem or the issue the problem tree will address. We have done problem trees on problems such as “The GED is not seen as an equivalent to a high school diploma,” “Schools have ways of getting rid of unwanted students,” “The American dream does not work for all of us,” and in our focus groups have used the problem, “Schools push students into dropping out.” Recently, in a new research project we are facilitating, we used the problem, “The current school system isn’t working.”

We then pass out small bits of paper, the leaves, and ask people to write the everyday occurrences of the problem. These are the symptoms of the problem. Everyone tapes their leaves to a sheet of big paper, and the group discusses what has been written on the leaves, adding extras as they come up. Examples of the leaves might include *my teacher told me not to come to class if I was going to be late, we have to share textbooks, and I have never met with my guidance counselor.*

Next as a whole group we draw on patterns in the leaves to answer the question, “What feeds the leaves?” in order to start mapping the trunk. The trunk represents the attitudes or beliefs that keep the symptoms in play. Examples of ripples of the trunk might include *there aren't enough seats, resources are unfairly distributed, and the generally held fear of young people in the US.*

We then ask the question, “What roots the trunk?” in order to map the roots of the problem. The roots are the systemic and structural sources of the trunk ripples and the leaves. The roots might include *capitalism and hierarchical power systems of domination.* (See Figure 2.9)

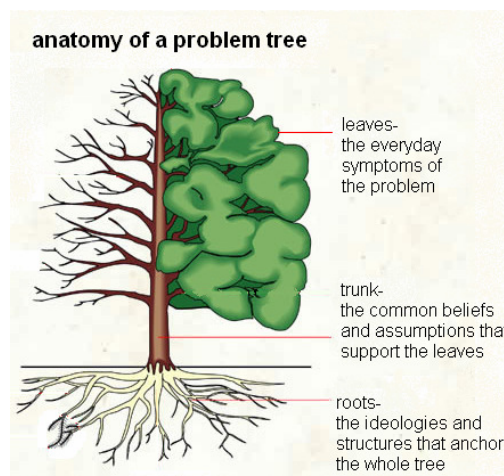


Figure 2.9 Anatomy of a Problem Tree

The problem tree is a useful approach to linking everyday injustices to systemic injustices, and when mapping several different problems on several trees, the linkages between the seemingly separate problems of different communities become evident by their common roots. The responses to our use of the problem tree have been overwhelmingly positive.

However, the activity of tracing an everyday occurrence of an injustice to its roots can undermine an approach to research and action. Does it mean that in order to get toilet

paper in my school bathroom I have to fix all that is wrong with Capitalism? It is defeating to become too attached to the linearity of the problem tree because it is best used to show relationships, not a course of action.

We have been encouraged by the work of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to consider the rhizome as a model instead of a tree. A rhizome is the cluster of underground tubes that plants such as irises are fed by instead of roots. Deleuze and Guattari oppose the tree for some of the same reasons that we are not entirely satisfied with the problem tree; it evokes a linearity that we don't experience, and makes it seem as though you have to attack the roots to get anything done. We all might be long gone before uprooting the roots we are talking about here, and those of us who are getting the brunt of the everyday expressions of those roots are being squashed in the meantime.

Further, Deleuze and Guattari oppose "arborescent" culture because it will always follow the same path, rather than the rhizome which always ceaselessly establishes new connections. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). For us and for our work within educational policy, this notion is resonant. We prefer the idea of the rhizome because it is concerned with the relationships between people, other people, and institutions. In this way, we can think of our research and actions as trying to address relationships rather than roots. We still use the problem tree to map these relationships, but in the Youth Researchers for a New Education System project (described below), we worked to develop better ways to take the ideas in our problem trees and express them metaphorically and visually in non-linear, non-fixed ordered, non-causal ways. We developed a deconstructed problem tree that utilized linked groupings of concentric circles, orbits in constellation.

By taking the notion of the rhizome seriously, we take the implications of our research for public schooling seriously. Our work is principled by our commitment to public schooling and organized by our disappointment in our own schooling experiences and the widespread exclusionary practices that happen at thresholds of the metal detectors of school entrances, at the closed door of the classroom, and at the desk adorned by a standardized test that are evident in our data. We know that these practices are linked to the shrinking of the self determination of schools as public spaces and to the ever increasing pressures on schools to adhere to top down accountability systems and pressures toward privatization.

Most importantly, our work is organized around the desires that abound in our collective and in our data for schools that are sites of ideas and learning and are accessible, fair, and challenging. Schools that push students out, especially that push poor students and students of color out, undermine these desires.

Our work is in rhizome with existing theories of schooling and school policy. By this we mean that we move in and out of these discourses while drawing from our own experiences and data in order to bring discordant narratives into conversation. This, we believe, is our work as researchers.

The Youth Researchers for a New Education System Project

Toward the end of 2006, CREDD began consulting on other youth PAR projects, and began our involvement with a larger citywide initiative to replace mayoral-controlled schooling with human rights-based schooling. In early 2007, we facilitated a participatory action research project with another group of local youth, the newly formed

Youth Researchers for a New Education System (YRNES). Table 2.2 displays the methods used in the YRNES project.

Table 2.2 Youth Researchers for a New Education System Project Methods

Method	Description	Sample	N
Focus groups	Structured, open ended focus groups lasting 1.5-2 hours; tape recorded or video taped; collectively coded then transcribed	Youth education organizers	3 18
Survey	Paper/pencil and online survey; merged and analyzed in SPSS	New York City youth	556

The YRNES project sought to document New York City youths' visions for school governance, schooling based on collaboration rather than competition and control, and the purpose(s) of schooling. The YRNES project included 546 youth surveys and 3 focus groups (N=18) with youth education activists. This dissertation utilizes data from the YRNES project in chapter five.

Participants and Design

In Table 2.3 you can view the participant demographic information for CREDD's interviews and survey, and the YRNES survey.

Table 2.3 Participant Demographic Information

	Interview		CREDD Survey		YRNES survey	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Gender (self designated)						
Men	14	40	213	43.8	197	36.1
Women	20	57.1	203	41.8	287	52.6
Gender Non conforming	1	2.9	70	14.4	12	2.2
Race/ethnicity (self designated, multiple choice)						
White	3	8.6	29	6	75	13.7
Of Color	32	91.4	457	94	388	71.1
African American			160	32.9	144	26.4

African Caribbean	94	19.3	74	13.6
Arab	<i>na</i>	<i>na</i>	9	1.6
Asian/Pacific Islander	30	6.2	48	8.8
Latina/Latino	195	40.1	194	35.5
Native American/Alaskan Native	50	10.3	26	4.8
White	77	15.8	119	21.8
<hr/>				
Class (Metropolitan Life indicator of income)				
Low Income	185	38.1	176	32.2
Middle-High Income	237	48.8	291	53.3
<hr/>				
Age (self designated)				
Range	16-22	14-23	14-21	
Mean	19	18.12	16.67	

Notes:

(1) Demographic data were not collected for focus group participants

(2) Race/ethnicity data add up to more than 100% because participants selected all that applied

Our theory of design in both the Gateways and Get-aways Project and the YRNES Project is represented in Figure 2.10. Our approach was to triangulate our data by employing qualitative, quantitative, and socio-historical methods.

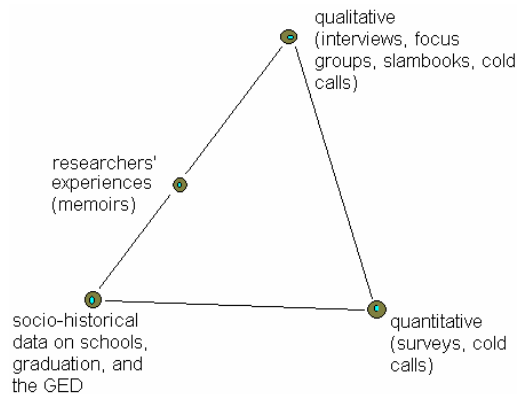


Figure 2.10 Triangulation of Methods and Data

Common Threads

Gate-ways and Get-aways was an ambitious research project, and knowing that our own experiences of disenchantment with schooling are felt exponentially by many other youth in New York City, we sometimes think of it as com/passionate ambition. Our process matters. Sondra Perl writes about the felt sense in writing as being, “the

feelings or non-verbalized perceptions that surround the words, or what the words already present evoke.” (Perl, 1980, p. 367) The notion of the felt sense really resonates with us, not only in writing, but especially in our research design, and now in our data analysis. “The felt sense is always there, within us. It is unifying, and yet, when we bring words to it, it can break apart, shift, unravel, and become something else... What is elicited then is not solely the product of a mind, but of a mind alive in a living, sensing body” (Perl, 1980, p. 367).

Through everything, whether we are getting surveys done, doing a focus group, or interviewing youth, our felt senses come into play. My felt sense is very important in my work, and I am aware of it when doing interviews with other youth have been pushed out. I can relate; When I was in school I don't remember actually meeting with my counselor but I remember the late letters coming home. My counselors and teachers couldn't care less about what was going on for me at home and the reasons why I was late or absent, and that is a memory that is alive in me while I am doing research. The emotion, the frustration, and anger that came out in my interviews out were electric. ~Alexis

We have come to our project by attending to our felt senses, by listening to our hunches, by being unafraid to ask each other to say more at the point where our felt senses may be just about to break apart, to care about words and ideas, to try things on, to say what feels like small things out loud and listen to the echoes. In this way, we engage collectively in reconstructing our own realities. We engage together in/toward self-determination and re-cognition. We are constantly switching between inhabiting this current world and the world we want to inhabit, struggling to clarify our vision, like shaking a TV antenna to get a clear picture.

As CREDD researchers, each of us has an intimate, nuanced understanding of what it means to work for social justice, and what each of us means by social change.

Broadly, CREDD operates on the premise that our educational system is set up to maintain the status quo, including race, class, and gender divisions. We realize that reforming the school system and challenging these various forms of oppression are linked struggles, so our approach to social justice focuses on challenging the status quo through PAR, and at the same time modeling the kinds of interactions we want to have.

Many times throughout this work, each of us has said that *we have been waiting our whole lives be a part of a space like this*. We have wondered aloud what amazing difference it would have made for our schools to be sites of collective inquiry and meaning making, as CREDD has become for us. Our schooling has marked us, but this experience as CREDD has marked us too.

The Roles of Theory

The Gate-ways and Getaways Project and all of our works are influenced by Indigenous theories of sovereignty and interconnectivity, (Deloria Jr., 1988; Grande, 2004) by critical theories, (Anzaldúa, 2002; Crenshaw, 2000; Matsuda, 2002; Moraga, 1993; Morrison, 1970) and by theories of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and third-space (Soja, 1996). We think of CREDD itself as a third-space to graduation and the streets. These theories help us understand how our work negotiates pre-existing systems of domination and exclusion and also experiences of disillusionment and degradation at the behest of hegemonic schooling. These experiences of educational disappointment and desire become our data along with the data our methods have yielded. Most importantly, we use these theories as a jump off point to do our own theorizing, to research and theorize back. (Tuck, in press a).

PAR Praxes for Now and Future Change

Though throughout our work we have been writing our own feature articles and memoirs, this chapter, written over four months, is the first piece we have written collaboratively. We began by deciding that we would use the space of this chapter to collaboratively explore (by writing together, by employing writing as a method) some of the important moments in our work together; this chapter focuses on our collective rather than our work with those who participated in our data gathering. We identified teaching moments that shifted our understanding of our work. Each author wrote about one or two of these moments from her perspective. Next, one or two of us wrote back to the author and our readers in order to contextualize these moments in CREDD's work.

Then, together, we decided to organize the moments and the chapter around three discussions, three praxes: 1) Tailoring research to be ours 2) reclaiming, recovering, carving out personal/political space and 3) cultivating and sustaining our commitments to our research. We understand praxis as the clasped hands of reflection/theory and action/practice "directed at the structures to be transformed" (Freire, 1997, p. 107). The three praxes we describe in this chapter reveal some of the difficult, inspiring, and teaching inner workings of our group, how we thought together and apart about them, how we continue to think about them, and how they have shaped our continued work together.

The three praxes can also be described as praxes towards sovereignty (see also Tuck, 2007). We are challenged and inspired by Sandy Grande's (2004) charge of Indigenous sovereignty as a pre-requisite to democracy. Recognizing that democratic practice is widely understood as a tenant in/of PAR, but also aware of the ways in which "democracy" has been wielded in the United States and across the globe as a weapon of

mass occupation and assimilation, (see also Fine, Tuck, and Zeller-Berkman, 2007) we have strived to use our collective space as a space to engage in what exactly we mean by democratic practice, and what a democratic practice that honors and supports self-determination might look like. This work is in service to larger theoretical conversations concerning sovereignty and US foreign and domestic policy, sovereignty and federal and state educational mandates, and sovereignty and school and social control. (Tuck, 2007).

There are parts of this chapter that are in a “we” voice– parts that one person had to be brave enough to write in a we voice and submit to the group to use as a jump off point, truly a first draft. There are also parts written in an “I” voice– parts in which each of us as authors tell the story of CREDD from our own eyes with the encouragement of our co-researchers behind us. We have listed the names of the authors of the first person pieces to honor their point of view, but also want to recognize that these pieces were written and work shopped in our group, that we have supported each other in arriving at these voices.

We know that when we or any group writes in a we voice it can make the words seem smoother, easier than they really are. Writing as we linguistically stubs the toe on the process it has taken for us to speak of ourselves as a we. Further, if you would map any we in this chapter, where each of us is in relationship to the we voice– curled up in the lap, emptying the dishwasher, unhappy upstairs under the bed– would make the we more feather-shaped than brick-wall-shaped.

But finally, we also know that our work is vulnerable. So as a group of youth (except for Eve), as mostly young women of color, as PAR researchers, as big-mouths, as

“trouble makers,” we are not always entirely sure how much of ourselves we want to reveal in our writing, how much of ourselves we are willing to serve up.

This can compound the we voice’s likelihood to come across as peachy-keen and even sappy; all of those things that are lobbed at women and youth to undermine their ideas and realities. We are a hopeful bunch, a committed-to-each-other bunch, a strong and sometimes sappy bunch. We are a proud bunch, an intentional bunch, a watchful bunch.

Some of us identify as writers and have for many years, while others of us are just beginning to come into our identities as writers. Others of us hate writing; have been taught to hate our own writing and to be quiet. All of us have taken on this chapter anyway, knowing that it would be a loss to leave out the voices of those who are ambivalent about what a book chapter can do.

We have a similar relationship to research, and at some or many points throughout our work have turned to each other and asked, “What can this do anyway?” For many of us, what we have known about research through the experiences of our families and communities has taught us that research can too easily be employed as a tool of colonization and domination, used, as in the eugenics movement, to forward racist agendas and to reaffirm the status quo. We would not be researchers without an inherent commitment to action towards the relief of social injustice, especially in education. We would not be researchers without an inherent commitment to participation, dissolving the traditional researcher-subject hierarchy toward the refusal to use the power of the language of research to speak against our people and ourselves.

Our relationship to writing and research is important to us as expatriate and exiled students. Many of us exiled students, others of us marooned, we in creating CREDD but also in creating our Gate-ways and Get-aways Project, make ourselves *present exiles*. As present exiles, our still-here bodies prove the disarray of the dumping grounds, our still-here voices prove the illogic of the erasure, and our still-here drives for justice prove the betrayal of a school system that aims to stamp and sort us according to our race and ethnicity, our gender, our class, our ability, and our language in order to contribute to a wider disparity of wealth, the further disenfranchisement and political isolation of poor communities and communities of color, and the consolidation of white supremacy. Further, our approach to participatory action research, which aims to document the presence and experiences of the NYC public school system's present exiles, amplifies the disarray, illogic, and betrayal in order to demand change in policy and practice.

I locate research in the realm of education and learner. At this moment, I feel like the skins of researcher and learner are synonymous for me. There is some dominant thought in the US that in order to create change, one must launch a campaign around a specific issue, target, demand, or winnable victory. Furthermore, it is assumed that we should demand our victory from the state, corporation, or someone with power (cause we don't have any, except that power that we gain through following this method). Who came up with this and how does it get continually get imposed?

Knowledge is power. Our identities, the options available to us and our education are extremely powerful. Education can determine our lives. Education can create change. We need a diversity of research, strategies, tactics, options and types of power. ~Maria.

In this vein, and before we turn to the three discussions below, we want to say something about the how-to-ness of this chapter. At our presentations, many people come up to us and ask us about the steps involved to making a research collective, or somewhat creepily, how to get "buy-in" from young people. What we know is this: a big part of "how to" do this work depends on how the group has constructed themselves and

the work—thus, we will offer how *we* have constructed ourselves and the work. For us, how we do this work has in its sights big, full, round goals of social justice, not only as a lofty end-of-the-road goal, but also in everyday practice. It is really hard, and we have messed up lots of times. We trust each other and the validity and importance of our work enough to not be deterred by messing up and continue working for now and future change.

Praxis One: How we have tailored research to be ours

This section involves the telling of CREDD's first retreat/training weekend and the process that yielded CREDD's research design and a telling of how we approach sharing the work of our research in order to describe how we have made research, an activity we would have never anticipated for ourselves, our own. How did we get the guts to call ourselves researchers and call the work we do research?

One part of the answer lies in our critique of how research has historically, in the United States and abroad, been waged on oppressed people. Informed by indigenous critiques of this (ongoing) history and buttressed by our own experiences in communities where outsider, often white, research types come in for a hot minute and then, having extracted whatever they need, take off for the next community "in need," we are wary of the practices of research and of researchers.

It appalls us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (Smith, 1999, p. 1).

The other part of the answer has to do with our own desires for "no action without research; no research without action." (K. Lewin, as quoted by Adelman, 1997). From

our own experiences under the treads of the uninformed policies that have rolled through our schools, it only makes sense for us to take the matters of informing ourselves and others into our own hands. There is a lot of valuable knowledge in those treads.

From time to time over the course of this project we have looked at one another with a twinkle in our eyes and asked, “Does it feel like *science* yet?” Elbow deep in slightly damp surveys (see below); hung up on for the fortieth time; dragging a big pad of paper on the subway to a focus group; balancing a stack of slambooks; searching on our hands and knees for the missing yellow piece of our nothing but trouble game; we have to look at each other with a laugh and say “yes.”

Deciding upon and developing our methods- Eve Tuck

I remember that I was really nervous the day that we were going to begin selecting our research methods. I had a full itinerary of research methods to present to our group, and being practically famous for my absentmindedness on time when in the heat of discussion, I was worried that I had planned to talk about way too much in way too little time. Also, even though I had known many in the group for years, I felt shy about talking with them about research methods—while used to talking with them about writing or organizing or scary movies (hate them) or reality TV shows (love them), talking about research methods felt like pulling on my Dad’s shoes over my own when I was a girl: clunky, awkward, pretend-like.

Also, I had a lot of nagging worries about how all of this was supposed to happen... How was I supposed to smoosh all of the methods that it had taken me four years to learn into a two day retreat? How was I supposed to really support the group in choosing which methods to use when all I could offer was what I knew? There were a lot of methods that I didn’t plan to share with the group—was I being too limiting? There

were also a lot of methods that I was really curious about but had no experience in; was it okay that I planned to offer up research methods that I couldn't personally vouch for? There were also a few ideas I had about some "new" research methods, five-finger discounted from popular education and organizing, and others modified from school games. How was I to present these methods alongside the tried and true pillars of qualitative research such as the interview and the focus group?

I was encouraged by friends' reminders that it hadn't taken me all that long to get the gist of these methods; that we can only offer what we know; that I could be open about what I did and didn't know, but also what I was tempted to try out; that I could share my own hunches around "new" research methods, as long as we made room for ourselves to be critical and curious about all of the research methods. I entered CREDD's methods retreat armed with an agenda detailed to the minute and a gift from my partner: the biggest, loudest kitchen timer he could buy.

I developed a series of activities or encounters for the whole group, with strict time limits on my own talking. Each method got 10 minutes, of which I was only allowed to present for two minutes. The gigantic kitchen timer was very helpful in keeping me from going over two minutes of presentation on each method, and I had photos, copies, film footage and mock up examples for the group to see and explore. The remaining eight minutes consisted of almost rapid fire questions and clarifications, and importantly, the group shared what they already knew of each method. After the 10 minutes, we took five minutes to write in our researcher journals, listing notes and first impressions of the method, further questions, and ideas for implementation in our design.

We spent much of this day in this way— intense bouillon cube discussions around possible methods broken up by quiet moments of reflection through writing— fueled by pizza and salad, curious about what was going on in one another's' notebooks.

Taking a deep collective breath and diving in to choosing our methods proved to be a great way to try out our newly established decision making process (see Praxis Two, this chapter). There was no magical moment where our methods became evident; we just felt our way through, sharing with each other which methods seemed compelling, which seemed to speak to one of our four areas of inquiry, which methods would generate some intrigue from the youth we wanted to talk to. At one point in the conversation, we wanted to do all of the methods! At another point, we wanted to do all of the methods and also seek out more! We used this conversation to decide for ourselves what methods actually are, that is, what role they would have in our research.

Rather than choosing methods that would corroborate our data, we were interested in selecting a range of methods that would yield data from multiple perspectives and positions. Being familiar with the ways in which research on the GED had been conducted in the past, we also wanted to select methods that attend to the gaps in existing research, especially research that has excluded youth voices.

In the end, we chose to use over 18 different tools (see our list at the beginning of this chapter) and did so knowing that it would be ambitious and nearly impossible to accomplish on our timeframe and our budget. Our big dreams were in part due to being big dreamers, but also in part as a response to the complexity of our research interests, a killer combination.

Sharing the work- Alexis Morales

When I took a step back and saw all of the work that CREDD decided to take on, I admit I felt confused. I thought the work load ahead was going to be overwhelming because we had so much to do and so little time in which to do it. I thought the goal was unrealistic, but as time went on and I saw the methods and division of work within the group, I began to feel relieved.

Over time, when something has felt heavy and overwhelming, I have had the support of my group members, and the feeling of being flustered seemed to fade away. CREDD began to feel like a safety net.

The roles of CREDD are not exactly assigned to each individual because we have our own way of getting things done. When we have certain tasks to do or deadlines to meet, we use our meeting times to generate and go through a to-do list and everyone speaks up on what task they would like to take on.

Dividing the roles is usually pretty easy. When someone feels strongly about an assignment they volunteer to take that particular task on. Then we go from there. With all the different interests and talents in the group things can at times get lopsided for a week or two, but we all have the CREDDgenda in mind so we try to divide things as evenly as possible.

We try our best to balance things so that no ones' worth, dedication or desire goes unnoticed, there is always a way for someone to bring their talent to the table. For example, for one of our focus groups, we created a board game that portrays the unfairness of meritocracy, and it was a perfect opportunity for Sarah to express her artistic talents.

It's important in my collective that everyone is satisfied with the work. We don't like to assign tasks that seem like a chore. We all make decisions together as a team, no researcher knows more than another, and no one is any more or less valuable than another. We are a unit that works together. As the saying goes "there is no I in team" and there certainly isn't an "I" in CREDD.

One of the fantasies that people might have about PAR, especially among youth, is that we all have to be the same and do everything the same way. PAR isn't synchronized swimming! CREDD has become a space for us to put into practice our theories and politics that are committed to addressing one another as a whole person. We appreciate and *go there* with each other as thinkers, as people with souls and histories, as people who are conflicted and complicated, and brimming with desire to be seen in this way. We often take the time to write together and read our words to each other as a way to ensure that the time for really hearing and seeing one another is built into our everyday work.

Hearing and seeing one another as whole people also often happens in unplanned ways when we are trying to do something else. A decision to use a "female, male, or other" multiple choice question, or blank answer question to capture gender on our survey gave way to a revealing, unforgettable discussion on the politics of gender and race and sexuality, a discussion that we return to frequently. In another example, when during a major summer heat wave we anticipated that like us, many other youth in the city would need to have some fun in the Astoria pool to beat the heat, we went on a CREDD family outing and brought a stack of our surveys to conduct with the hundreds

of youth waiting in line to get in. Working alongside one another, seeing each other in action, and then a celebratory dip in the pool helped us meet many of our needs at once.

Praxis Two: Reclaiming, recovering, carving out personal/political space

This section is crafted around two moments, the first depicting the session in which CREDD solidified our decision-making process, the second depicting what will go down in the CREDD history books as “our first fight,” told from the perspectives of the women at the center of the argument. We have identified both of these moments as pivotal crossroads in our attempts to carve out a political and personal space for our collective. Much of the carving work has actually been work of reclaiming and recovering. Our understanding of this has been informed by the work of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Her concept of “researching back,” in the legacies of “writing back” and “talking back,” involves, “a ‘knowingness of the colonizer’ and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (Smith, 1999, p. 7).

Part of the reclaiming has to do with taking back words and languages that have been used against us, for example, (un)intelligence, (limited) capacity, and discourses of (trickle down) power and democracy. Part of the recovery has to do with tapping into parts of us that have been discouraged in our schooling such as asking questions, being curious about the underbelly or behind-the-scenes dynamics of everyday life, writing in order to discover what we really believe about something, relying on someone else when overwhelmed or unsure, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and being motivated by a shared goal rather than competition. These thoughtful, reflective parts of ourselves, often

otherwise silenced or swept away by the hustle and bustle of city life, are nurtured in our collective work.

In addition, indeed because we have created CREDD as a space and practice of reclamation and recovery, CREDD operates as a thirdspace (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) to many of the binaries in our own lives such as work/home, teaching/learning, talking/listening, but also as a thirdspace to ideas such as reproduction/resistance, success/failure, and reality/hope. The verb or activity of thirthing, “is the first and most important step in transforming the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open of both/ and also...” (Soja, 1996, p. 60). Linked to our always circling back wistfulness for our schooling to have looked, or more importantly felt like CREDD, it our very work together that underlines our critique of schooling, while simultaneously making evident that such an educational space is possible. “*Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” (Soja, 1996, p. 56).

The work of reclaiming and recovering and thirthing is difficult, messy. It is especially so when it becomes the work itself, detached from the project of researching back. There have been moments when our confidence has been shaken by someone outside our collective who devalues our work or underestimates the validity of research by urban youth. By our very naming of ourselves as researchers, we sometimes cause a stir. “Trialectical thinking is difficult, for it challenges all conventional modes of thought and taken for granted epistemologies. It is disorderly, unruly, constantly evolving,

unfixed, never presentable in permanent constructions.” (Soja, 1996, p. 70) It is because we are engaging in research that has grown from our own experiences that we can speak to the everyday meaning of these ideas and have been able to resist spiraling off too far into the abstract; we always remind ourselves that there is work to do.

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we forever recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonizer/ colonized. Marginality is the space of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.

(hooks,1990, p. 152 as quoted in Soja, 1996, p. 98).

Deciding how we would decide- Melody Tuck

One of the things we noticed early on in CREDD was that everyone in the group had a different take on democracy and how it is put into practice. Some of us who are indigenous or immigrant to the United States see democracy as a code word for something that has been used against us and our families to limit access to power, land, resources, and sustainability. Others of us who are readers of critical theory or critical pedagogy employ those discourses’ use of “democracy” to signal a “for the people, by the people” approach to knowledge building and learning. Still others had little time to think about democracy (these groups are not mutually exclusive). The most prevalent experience with democratic process for all of us has followed a scenario where at a given time in a group everyone stops and votes, with or without a prior discussion and with or without a discussion after, the votes are counted and the results lived with.

When during one of our first CREDD meetings Eve urged us to spend some time together “deciding how we want to make decisions,” it’s probable that all of us felt under-prepared for such a discussion. All of us had been burned by the one-person, one-vote model from family decisions to classroom voting to the presidential election. Some of us had been in situations where voting had been redone and redone until finally the

facilitator's wishes had been granted. This is an abuse of power that CREDD would not tolerate in our group.

Eve's friend Kym took notes as we listed ideal elements of decision making: Having a time limit; dealing with a real issue not an abstracted issue; working as a group from proposals or first drafts rather than starting from scratch; being able to decide something without coercing everyone to agree; getting to a place in decisions where everyone feels okay, even if it's not their first choice.

We then used these elements to both be the basis of our decision-making process and as a guide to our process in deciding our decision making process. We set a 45-minute time limit and used the list we had brainstormed as our first draft. We paid attention to people's disagreements and prodded silences and used these views to modify the first draft. Knowing that we had a limited amount of time to complete the discussion meant people didn't talk too much or too little.

This is the document that all of CREDD has signed...

Our decision-making process works because we believe in sharing responsibility for this space and work.

- We begin by opening the floor and setting a time limit for discussion.
- We bring forth issues, collectively brainstorming– each of us taking notes and reflecting on how strongly we agree or object to ideas.
- Then, people take on the responsibility of making suggestions/proposals/first drafts which synthesize multiple ideas from the brainstorm.
- After questions and modifications, the facilitator can check in with the group using red, yellow, green or throwing Cs.³
- We strive to get a place where all of CREDD is okay with moving forward with all of our decisions, even if the final choice is not their first choice.

³ Red, yellow, green is a go-around tool that can be used in the middle or at the end of a discussion to check in with one another. Like a traffic light, each person says if they are green, or good to go, yellow, meaning they still have some questions or thinking to do, or red, meaning the conversation needs to stop and address a specific concern. By throwing Cs, we mean that to get a sense of the support of an idea, a researcher makes a "C" (for CREDD) symbol with her hands. Seeing this symbol, other researchers around the table show/throw their own Cs, or don't, signaling disagreement or confusion.

It certainly was not an easy process. If we did not all trust that it was worth it then it could have fallen apart into a frustrating mess. To decide how to decide every one in the room must believe that it is worth figuring out how to listen to each other, how to treat each other and our ideas fairly, and put a critique of society into practice.

It's hard to step away from a method that has "seemed" to work in the past. The one person, one vote model, or single voiced model of democracy is the way our government works, how workplaces are run. One voice is elected/ heard and that is the only voice that is followed. We didn't want that. We wanted a method that let everyone be heard, and that allow an open space for people to express their thoughts and concerns without someone being stepped on. We wanted even the smallest voice heard, both because we have a critique of how voices are steamrolled over in society, but also because it is these small voices, outliers, counter-stories, that help ensure the most full design and analysis.

Creating a decision-making process is hard to do when you are just meeting people for the first time because you don't know how others think, work, how they will respond to your ideas, how you will respond to their ideas. The brain storming process allowed us to opportunity to open ourselves up, granted everyone a chance to see who we are as people, working together to build the foundation of CREDD.

CREDD's first argument- Jovanne Allen

CREDD has had its first argument; it sure won't be the last. With a mix of ethnic identities, including African-American, Latina, Jewish, Native American, White and bi-racial, a range of gender identities and a variety of identities of sexuality, bringing together such a diverse group of opinionated youth almost guarantees disputes.

However, just because we have had a fight doesn't mean that we all don't all have an overall respect for one another.

I worked with Sarah and Jamila on the design of a focus group that would try to understand what the lived value of the GED from the point of view of GED earners and GED seekers aged 16-22. At the previous meeting, Jamila had to promised revise the questions we had drafted in time for us to pilot the focus group with the rest of CREDD.

When the day of our pilot came, I came to the meeting to find that neither of my group members had arrived early as we planned in order to index cards for our questions. Soon after, Sarah arrived and apologized, but Jamila didn't arrive until moments before we were set to begin. I was hurt. Jamila hadn't called to say she would be late and I took it personally, because I have a GED, and I felt that I took it more seriously than she, a person with a high school diploma and not a GED, was taking our project.

Though I was aggravated, we tried to go forward with the focus group anyway, when I soon became even more frustrated with Jamila for asking what felt like too many follow-up questions and not paying attention to our time limit. I felt disrespected by her disregard for the plan we had made, and decided to speak up.

We ended up totally abandoning the pilot and had it out in front of the whole group. It was a very heated argument, and at one point I told her and the group that I felt that I would never be able to work with her.

For a few minutes the entire group tried to see if there were a way that Jamila or I could work on another focus group planning team, but the other teams had already done a lot of work too, and were happy with the way things were. Seeing that, I

announced that I did not have to like her as a person to work with her as a partner in our project, but that still wasn't a satisfying situation for anyone.

The group was quiet for a long time. Actually, Eve made us take a 10-minute quiet together break, and afterwards asked everyone if they had "arrived at anything." Everyone else shared that they cared and respected both of us, and that it was hurtful to see us disrespect one another. In the moment, I took it in, but still shared that I was angry.

Eve next said that we should maybe use one of Augusto Boal's games in which we had to attack one another with imaginary swords. Everyone played, but it ended up being that when it was my turn, I had to attack Jamila with my sword, making her jump up and crouch down and leap from side to side. (At the time I was still so mad it would have been heaven if I really could have attacked her with a sword– smile.) She got to make me jump around too, and we both were cracking up. The whole group was laughing.

It has been several months since the "fight," and though I couldn't guess that I would then, I have fully gotten over it. I know now that it was really unrealistic to think that we all work so close together and not fight. However, it also was unrealistic for me to think that I would not work with her ever again. It's not about the fight, it's about what happens after.

Communities of resistance- Jamila Thompson

Communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness

Thich Nhat Hanh

My best friend's mother is a woman of color and has a prestigious position at a Fortune 500 company and she revealed to me her regret of once complaining to her boss about the "work ethic" of her former colleague who is also a woman of color, especially

since she understood the difficulties that her former friend was having outside of the office. My best friend's mother understood the implications of such a complaint in the corporate world, but she explained to me that she also learned from that incident her obligation to a fellow Black woman in a work environment that was potentially treacherous to them both.

My first conflict in CREDD was with Jovanne, the only other biracial/part Black woman in our group, though I was only able to appreciate the significance of this later. For the past two years I have been attempting to help build community with sisters because there are many obstacles in the way of us loving, caring for and respecting one another. This is especially the case in work spaces. But CREDD is not corporate America; it is not of the mainstream. We are a collective whose purpose it to transform and remold our society but after my conflict with Jovanne I feared that we were adopting the individualistic values of the very institutions we are struggling against.

My lateness and incompleteness of my part of the pilot preparations sparked Jovanne's annoyance with me, but when Jovanne asked me, "Do you need to ask so many follow-up questions?" I was insulted. I retorted that the key to rich data was follow-up questions and that I did not appreciate her attitude. We went off. When Jovanne questioned my dedication to CREDD I was infuriated. In any other situation I would probably have explained my situation, apologized and kept it moving but the stress of my outside life in conjunction with my self-righteousness—I just knew that I was giving everything I possibly could and this was challenged and not acknowledged—amplified things.

At that moment, I had been taking three summer courses and CREDD was one of my two jobs. My rent had been increased and struggling financially, I had walked to CREDD from my job that day to save enough train fare to get back to Brooklyn after the meeting, and so arrived late for the pilot. Still, I was hurt and disappointed with myself for allowing the situation to escalate. What I needed at that moment was understanding and what Jovanne needed, I think, was context.

We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. (hooks, 1984, p. ix, as quoted in Soja, 1996, p. 100).
 Jovanne: We overcame our argument because we realized that CREDD's work is made better by our continued collaboration, and because we know that disagreements do important work in collectives to share, negotiate, and solidify ideas. All of us have come to see that people do have other things going on in their lives, and there needs to be a balance between our lives and CREDD.

Alexis: One thing that is important to say is that this argument is different than what would be expected from young women of color. Many people would expect us to always be involved in "cat fights," all crying and emotions. I can assure you we are all very professional women, and for us that means that we take the work personally. We love, care and have a deep respect for this project and so we do show emotion. We are not robots who come to work everyday with the same expressions on our faces; sometimes we are happy and excited and sometimes we can be a little frustrated.

Jovanne: When you work in a collective where there is no one in the "boss" role, and no one in the "employee" role, the only thing that keeps the work going is that each of us follows through on our promises. Trying to do PAR without everyone following

through is like trying to build a room with four walls but no floor. Ideally, all the researchers in the collective would need to bring 100 percent to the table, but in our society we can't. The New York life is fast and expensive. Sometimes you have to let go of your promises, even if they are your dreams and life-love, just to make sure ends met.

Jamila: Viewing ourselves and each other as inhuman objects whose purpose and meaning is to achieve an end result or a product (research data and findings), is not acceptable in PAR/social activist groups. First, this disables us from creating the group dynamics that are vital to PAR research. Second, if our goal is to radically restructure our society then we can not reproduce the detrimental attitudes of mainstream institutions. If we are to stand in opposition to disregard for human worth we must be conscious of our attitudes and perceptions of one another.

Jovanne: It feels like a long time since CREDD's first fight, and other arguments have happened along the way. We know that these haven't been damaging, but part of our process and growth.

Jamila: I am a complex individual who strives to contribute to the communities that I inhabit as best as I can. I have learned to remember that about all of CREDD's researchers. We try to be conscious of each other and what is going on in our lives. We have had conversations where we've expressed and explored the experiences and ideas that make us who we are individually and collectively. We appreciate differences and we consciously nurture one another. Recently, Jovanne and I led a CREDD meeting together. We had two hours between the two of us as facilitators to complete a number of tasks, and ended up finishing early. After we finished Jovanne

said “Now do you see how fast Jamila and I can get our work done and get you all out of here at a decent time.” I blushed. To me, that statement was a demonstration of how far we have come.

Praxis Three: Cultivating and sustaining our commitments to our research

In this section, we describe two events: one an impromptu ceremony created by CREDD that solidified our commitment to our project and social justice, the other, an exercise that helped establish CREDD’s commitments to one another as researchers, and to our larger community. In our experience, commitment is the element of PAR that most determines a collective’s possibilities and challenges. We are asked about it all the time and talk about it among ourselves all the time: what we can say is that it is really difficult to keep in balance.

To be painfully obvious, commitment cannot be forced or faked, it has to be grown. Further, it can feel illusive and it always feels like you need it before it’s really able to be there. In many ways, our commitment to this project springs from our own experiences, and linking our work on this issue to our own personal well-being. However, this has also been true for others of our researchers who have fallen out– so we know that this in the face of financial, emotional, and family hardships is not enough to sustain a researcher’s participation.

Further, linking the success of a research project to our own personal projects of justice and well-being can generate a lot of pressure on us. Internally, we also know that commitment is something that youth “drop-outs” are thought to be void of, so proving this attitude wrong with our own staying power ups the stakes for us. It’s difficult to be thoughtful and creative and curious when under so much self-pressure.

All we can do is remind ourselves that in PAR, doing the work *is* doing the work.

The two moments in this section both happened during a sleep-away retreat in June 2006. In the last hour of our retreat, Sarah facilitated a closing that has taught us a lot about CREDD as a (third) space of disappointment and desire.

It had been a full two days, crammed with workshops and writing and decision making, but also with swimming and volleyball and air hockey and quesadillas. We entered that closing with the electricity of our time together, with the new knowledge of who was afraid of ladybugs, who swims with his glasses over his goggles, who is suspicious of deer, who only eats with a spoon because “forks make food taste bad,” and who knows all of the words to “Peanut Butter Jelly Time.”

Eve had brought along a coconut wrapped in plastic wrap with the fantasy that someone would make good use of it, and it was present in all of our talks, in the corners of photos, passed around and shaken for the melody of its juice, made unofficial mascot of CREDD by the simple fact that it was there. Sarah made the connection more clear in her closing, leading us in an exercise that could be likened to Patricia Carini’s (2001) method of close description: we passed around the coconut, freeing it from the plastic wrap, and described it, naming everything we ever knew about coconuts, claimed it. Coconuts can float, unlike other seeds. Coconuts can live for a long time after leaving the tree. Coconuts are thrives, are savory, are sustaining. The coconut has a rough, covered shell, protecting its water and air and flesh.

In our final go around, Sarah asked us to each hold the coconut again, and speak aloud our commitments to CREDD/ the coconut: I will plant it to grow new knowledge, new understanding, new awareness; doing my share, doing my part in it; preserving this

knowledge for years until I can find a nice place to plant it; love it support it, baby it; break bread/ break coconut with others over it because it is so good; live with it even when it is tough; know it for the long haul; not knowing what's inside, not knowing the immediate outcome, I'll trust it anyway; give it everything I know, all of my trust; protect it from what wants to eat it; being always down for its cause, never leaving it; making sure that I am its safety net. (CREDD log 06.24.06)

CREDD and the coconut- Sarah Quinter

At the beginning of our data collection, we went on a retreat to plan our work and get to know each other. Eve had brought along a coconut that rolled around with us throughout the trip. A sort of spontaneous homemade ritual occurred during the closing I facilitated – we passed around the coconut, a symbol of CREDD's collective hopes, and each shared how we would be committed to it. We talked about how we would each do our part, preserving CREDD's knowledge like a rough shell protecting tender fruit. It seemed like a small historical moment.

At the same time that CREDD is coming up with our own symbols such as the coconut, and our own research methods such as the slam books and the board game, I am trying to figure out my own ways of doing things in my life. I'm asking myself, What happens to people when they are forced to adapt to pre-made structures and conventions and expectations? Can someone become who he or she really is through this path? Are the structures of school and work scaffolding for our dreams or cages to contain us? Does that depend on your position in society? What if I can't grow up to be myself within these preexisting structures? What would it take to make my own? How can I build something strong and flexible enough to support and accommodate my needs? How do I avoid alienating others? When I tried to answer these questions honestly, I came to the

conclusion that I couldn't be the person I wanted to be without rebuilding a lot of these structures from scratch with tools like art making, lists, charts, books, writing, the internet, intuition, advice from mentors, and solidarity with my peers.

There have been several times when CREDD has made its own ceremonies. This is a part of what makes our work special, beautiful and unique. Making our own ceremonies is possible because we feel free to be creative and to not just have to do the usual. This is not because we do PAR, but through our PAR.

Someone took the coconut home, and a few days later, when we met again, we teased ourselves for having a magical moment with a coconut and letting it get away. Eve looked at several different stores for a replacement, and not finding one and in a pinch to make it in time for our next meeting, she bought some coconut milk in a can. The can took a place of honor at our meetings for a while, then, as the weeks passed, we began leaving it in the locker.

Still, when having a hard conversation in our meetings, someone usually goes to the locker and brings out the coconut in a can. It is a silent reminder of our overall goals, an inside joke on how we can be flexible and work under any conditions (in plastic wrap, in our shell, in a can) and a way to show our solidarity, even in the heat of frustration and disagreement.

Since the coconut ritual, we've made a lot of progress, but we've also had to deal with lateness, absence, missing deadlines, interpersonal conflicts, and everything else you'd expect when a group of people is struggling to attain ambitious goals together. But like a coconut that floats in the sea for years until it finds the perfect place to plant its roots, we are resilient and hold the potential to grow.

Commitment is a big deal in CREDD. Finding the reasons to get and be and stay committed can be difficult. Ultimately, committing to CREDD is committing to us. Investing in CREDD is an investment in us, not only because our research is dealing with our own experiences, but also because of the kind of space this is. It's rare to have the type of workspace where you're not piecing yourself off, but instead, you're nurturing your own self. CREDD fosters our individual growth, and our individual growth helps CREDD to grow.

Crafting the power flower- Maria Bacha

It is through the creation of people centered spaces that we challenge existing power structures. CREDD not only challenges oppressive power's business as usual, but at the same time we build our own power, based on working with each other with love toward collective liberation.

On the first day of our retreat, Jamila, Q, and I facilitated the group in a power flower exercise (Arnold et al. 1991). We realized that we needed to break from the original power flower, which focuses on the individual and on power being outside of ourselves, to create something that represents both how we understand collectivity and how we understand power. The power flower exercise made explicit our collective power analysis and understanding of a system of oppression that later, was critical to our data analysis process.

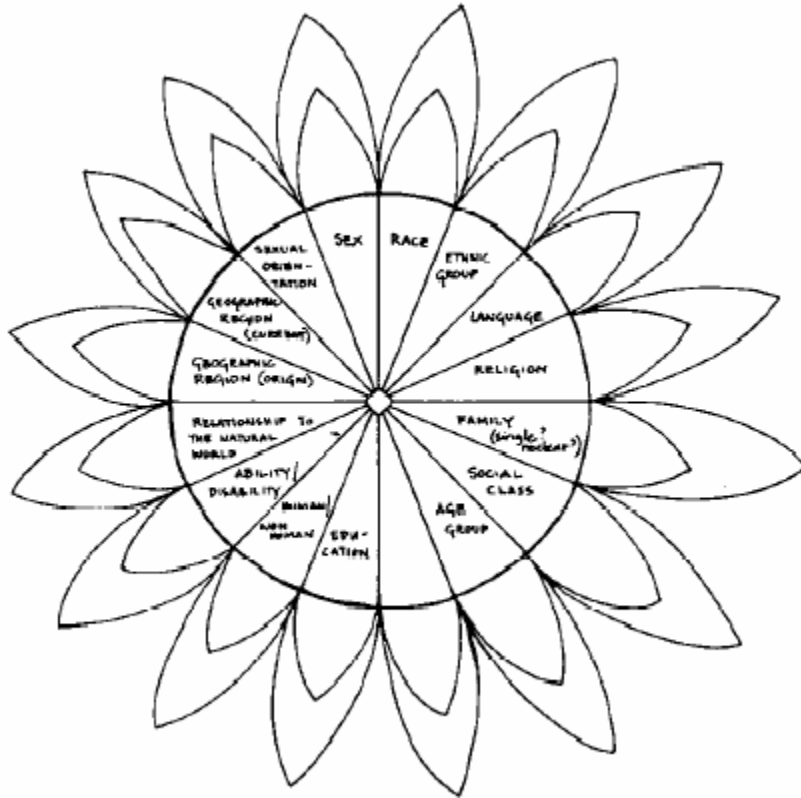


Figure 1 Source: Arnold, et al. 1991, p. 88. This tool is used “for looking at who we are in relation to those who wield power in society.” (Arnold et. al. 1991, p. 13) In the authors’ use, the inside petals represent categories of identity, the inner petals represent individual identifications within those identities, and the outer petals represent the dominant social identity.

them to pick them up. We are not serving or empowering youth because as youth we can do this work ourselves. We can work with allies but only on common ground.

Being a self-determined “people-centered space” means that we can only grow and be complex people if we allow our perceptions of others to grow and be complex as well. This is a lifelong process of challenging assumptions and of having your own assumptions challenged, of breaking stereotypes by outgrowing them, and of being humble enough to see that everyone has something to teach you.

That’s why we spend so much time in CREDD having intellectual and political conversations around these issues. It’s part of our work. Because CREDD is a “people-centered space,” we need to stay conscious of how society’s power structures play out in our interactions, so that we can challenge them and thus allow each other more room to grow. Now matter how advanced CREDD gets in its work, we will always place a high priority on genuine, honest interpersonal relationships. Without these bonds and this striving to understand and respect one another, no strong foundation for change can exist.

“We have a lot of work to do. We need to keep a list inside our brains of all things we have left to finish, right beside where it says commitment.” Jovanne

Concluding statement

This chapter has described some of the powerful moments so far in our collective. It is our hope that by sharing these moments, the dynamics and praxes of PAR might be better understood, and that some of our readers might be encouraged to engage in participatory research.

We have been marked by our schooling— we have been told explicitly and implicitly that we are stupid, that we are wasted space, that we can't handle complex ideas. We have been oversimplified by small aspects of ourselves, caricatured as a bully, a troublemaker, as indecisive, scatterbrained. The moments we have described here all have been opportunities to remake our own names, to be seen in the ways we desire to be seen. The stumbles and scuffles that have happened along the way have stung like those old categories. In a heated debate, one of us might call another a bully, or intimate that another is scatterbrained. In the moment that old hurt comes back, and it makes it hard to see one another. It is sometimes what the rest of us do, or maybe a night to reflect, and the apology that comes that has taught us that the old hurts have less power here. We wouldn't take advantage of our intimate knowledge of one another. This too is a part of our work as researchers.

We think of PAR as being like Double Dutch, to do it you just have to jump right in, but we hope that by sharing some of the arcs of our ropes, those doing PAR might be comforted instead of bewildered when the rope makes a surprising turn.

We want to close this piece an everyday moment because CREDD's work is both in the "ah hah!" moments and in the mundane; our nomadic workspace, our can of coconut milk, our jokes, our distractions, our photocopying, all to the hum of fluorescent lighting.

Deadline day- Melody Tuck

Today is a CREDD deadline for our survey and interview tapes and consent forms. It's not a meeting day, just a drop off day and I am sitting here waiting for my sister to get out of her meeting, while one by one CREDD researchers are stopping off to turn in their surveys and interviews. Each one hands me a stack of papers, each filled

with the stories of people on the streets who have gone through, broken away, or are trying to survive the public school system. The researchers who hand me these fragments of life on ink filled pages, smile and wish me a good weekend.

I'm lucky to get to do this work because I get to research how education has failed its children, to reflect with my co-researchers, and to just think for once. Each chance I get to come be a part of CREDD makes my soul strong.

Chapter dedication

This chapter is dedicated to students who have been pushed out and exiled, who are disappointed by schooling. We dedicate this chapter to all of those who have worked beside us to document the lived value of a “depleted credential,” and the fantasies of the American dream. Finally, we dedicate this chapter to our desires for public schools that are accessible, rigorous, honorable, and free.

Chapter 3 Repatriating the GED

CREDD: What is the most important thing that you have learned in the past few years?

Alex: The most important thing I learned is not give up on myself, keep my head up high, have some self respect for myself. And once I did that, I got my GED and everything. And everyday I wake up and I pick up my head high and have respect for myself.

CREDD: So when and how did you learn it?

Alex: Actually, I learned it on my own.

CREDD: Do you think it is rare that you didn't learn this in school?

Alex: No. Actually, in school, they would want to make you put your head down. It's like, when you pass by a teacher, they give you that certain look like you just want to put your head down and hope she didn't see you.

Interview excerpt

“The GED being valuable would deflate the only thing that high schools have going for them: being compulsory and coercive”

CREDD problem tree on the analysis of the value of the GED

The General Educational Development (GED) credential is widely perceived as an alternative to a high school diploma, though it is not evenly recognized as *equivalent* to a high school diploma. This chapter will explore different perspectives on the value and use of the GED, especially the perspectives of youth who have earned or are in the process of earning the credential. In this chapter, I will critique the existing literature on the diminished value of the GED and analyze cold call data that punctuate the credential's dubious worth. Then, utilizing interview, survey, and focus group data, I argue that the GED is valuable in youth lives for a range of reasons, most notably as an

exit from truculent high schools. In this way, the value of the GED is repatriated to the youth who seek it.

The GED is offered throughout the United States and its territories, and Canada, and is sponsored by the GED Testing Service of the higher education lobbyist group, the American Council on Education (ACE). Many are surprised to learn that the GED is not a public run institution, but rather, like the SAT, is a privately run exam corroborated by private and public institutions. Thus, colleges, employers, and the military have no civic requirement to accept or support GED earners, nor are they compelled by anything beyond public perception to view the GED as an equivalent to the high school diploma.

A series of five parts testing proficiency in mathematics, reading, science, social science, and writing, the GED is administered by official GED testing sites that are overseen by provincial, state, or territorial governments. Each year, the exam is administered by the ACE to a set of graduating high school seniors in order to establish the passing score. In order to pass the GED exam, the GED candidate must meet or achieve a higher score than the top 60% of high school diploma earners on each of the five parts.

In the fifty United States, in 2006, 676,020 people took at least one GED test; 86% completed the battery of tests and 69% passed, earning a GED credential. New York State had a lower pass rate in 2006: 51,766 people took at least one GED test, 98% completed the tests, but only 56% passed the tests, earning a GED. New York State tied with Mississippi for the third lowest pass rate, surpassing only Alabama (50%) and the District of Columbia (52%) (ACE, 2007).

In the early 1990s, 1 in 7 secondary school completion credentials was a GED, both nationwide and in New York City. In the 2000s, the use of the GED increased to be 1 in 5 nationwide, and 1 in 4 in New York City. In part, this can be attributed to the increase in numbers of youth who have earned the GED, but it also can be related to the numbers of immigrant youth and adults who earn the credential.

The GED is earned by men and women of many ages, though between the years of 1975 and 2000, the numbers of youth GED earners aged nineteen and younger grew by 11%, while the numbers of GED earners aged twenty-five and older declined by 8% (acenet). “For the vast majority of non-credentialed adults, and increasing numbers of teenagers, the GED has become America’s largest high school, and its cheapest.” (Quinn, 2002, p. 1). GED programs in New York City documented enrolling more than 25,500 school aged students in 2001. The number rose to more than 37, 000 school aged students by 2003 (Arenson, 2004). In New York State, in 2006, 48% of GED earners were aged 16-19; 26% were aged 20-24, and 26% were aged 25 or over. This echoes the age distribution of GED earners across the US. (See Table 3.1) The American Council on Education reports that 30% of GED candidates have been out of school for one year or less, and fewer candidates, 25%, have been out of school for ten or more years.

Table 3.1 Age of GED Candidates and Earners in US and New York State (2006)

<i>Age</i>	US Candidates (%)	NYS Candidates (%)	US Earners (%)	NYS Earners (%)
16-19	41	38	46	48
20-24	25	28	25	26
25-29	13	12	12	11
30-34	7	7	6	6
35-39	5	6	4	4
40-49	6	7	5	4
50-59	2	2	1	1
60+	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.3

N 674,906 51,766 398,045 28,341
 Source: ACE, 07

The GED credential is earned by individuals from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds (determined by zip code) and who identify across diverse racial and ethnic categories.

Table 3.2 Race/Ethnicity of GED Candidates and Earners in US and New York State (2006)

	US Candidates (%)	US Earners (%)	NYS Candidates (%)	NYS Earners (%)
African American	23	17	34	27
American Indian/ Alaskan Native	3	2	1	1
Asian	2	2	3	3
Hispanic	19	16	26	22
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	1	1	0.3	0.3
White	54	63	36	47
N	605,398	359,758	45,372	24,836

Source: ACE, 07

In Table 3.2, you can see that racial/ethnic demographics of GED candidates and earners in New York State differ from national demographics, as expected. You can also see that GED earners are disproportionately more likely to be white, and disproportionately less likely to be African American and ‘Hispanic’ in both the US and in New York State. This may indicate a bias in the tests, or represent unequal access to quality test preparation, or reflect the uneven quality of GED takers’ former schools; probably it is a combination of the three.

In the US and in New York State, men are more likely to be GED earners and GED candidates than women. (See Table 3.3)

Table 3.3 Gender of GED Candidates and Earners in US (2006)

	Candidates (%)	Earners (%)
Men	56	59

Women	44	41
N	661,892	391,784
		Source: ACE, 07

The ACE estimates that 16% of men and 15% of women in the nation do not have a secondary school credential. While some scholars support that young men, particularly Black young men and Native young men, are more vulnerable than young women in terms of school push out and school non-completion (Ferguson, 2001; Brayboy, forthcoming) other scholars argue that girls are also vulnerable to negative consequences in schooling, exceedingly so when their behavior betrays societal assumptions of girlhood, resulting in “status offenses” (Schaffner, 2006, p. 19). In CREDD’s Gateways and Get-away’s study, 43% of those who were explicitly asked to leave school identified as women, 50% identified as men, and 7% identified in ways that were heteronormative gender non-conforming. Still, GED *earners* are disproportionately men.

A brief history of the GED

The first GED exam was crafted in 1943 as a credential for veterans. The GED, based on the Iowa Test of Educational Development, was crafted by the ACE for university use as a major tool for evaluating the 2.2 million veterans who entered higher education under the GI bill. However, the groundwork for the GED began much earlier than that.

The American Council on Education was formed during WWI, its primary goal to prevent college educated men from being on battle frontlines, in order to avoid the “reckless waste of irreplaceable talent” (Quinn, 2002, p. 7). Emerging from the WWI years with a national membership of universities and colleges, city school systems, national education organizations, ACE now operates by retaining fees from its 1,597

academic institutions, 134 national and regional associations, and 79 associates comprised of international subscribers, executive searches, and corporations (www.acenet.edu). Citing the belief that “American higher education is at its best—and is most effective—when it is unified and operating with a mutual sense of purpose,” the ACE describes itself as “the major coordinating body for all the nation's higher education institutions,” and its mission as “provid(ing) leadership and a unifying voice on key higher education issues... to influence public policy,” in order to build a “stronger nation and a better world.” (www.acenet.edu)

The ACE's vision is to, “Be the most visible and influential higher education organization in public policy deliberations... (and) (s)trenghen higher education's voice in public policy by developing a unified position on legislative and regulatory issues... (and) (i)ntervene in important judicial proceedings.” (www.acenet.edu) For instance, when proposition 209 was approved in California in late1996, the ACE issued a statement of commitment to working with California's universities towards the goal of affirmative action. (Pear, 1996, p. 7)

In many ways, the ACE has always had a critical observer relationship to the US military. For example, in 1990, the ACE along with three other lobbyist groups wrote a letter to then defense secretary Dick Cheney urging him to drop the ban on homosexuality in military service. (NYT, 1990, p. 17) In 1985, the ACE helped to convince the US Education Department to drop its policy of requiring colleges to check the draft compliance status of men applicants. (NYT, 1985, p. 12)

What is unusual and seemingly counterintuitive about the ACE (because of its membership) is its commitment to the “service” of “Facilitat[ing] the transfer and award

of academic credit for nontraditional learning... enabl[ing] adults without traditional high school credentials to enter postsecondary education.” (www.acenet.edu) This service is provided through the GED exam.

Back in the 1940s, the ACE, along with a small group of progressive educators, was intent upon, “introducing a ‘general education’ curriculum into the high schools and assessing school outcomes by ‘scientific’ testing techniques.” (Quinn, 2002, p. 3). In 1940 the ACE issued a report called *What the Schools Ought to Teach*, a report that argued for a curriculum that focused on practical life skills, and rejected the then-standard curriculum that emphasized algebra, science, foreign language and English as out-of-focus for the ideal purposes of schooling. Of the ninth grade curriculum, the report disputed, “It would be difficult to imagine a more uninviting year’s study for adolescents.” (Quinn, 2002, p. 8.) A few years later, one of the authors of this report, E.F. Lindquist, authored the first GED test.

Prior to authoring the first GED, Lindquist was an author of the Iowa Test of Educational Development. The ITED was used to rank each student in the state of Iowa and compare school districts on test items determined by the test authors to represent a general education. He believed his tests to be “superior to teacher assessments in the classroom.” (Quinn, 2002, p. 14).

WWII provided Lindquist and his colleagues an opportunity to expand the scope of their initiatives, causing a shift in the uses of generalist curricula and specialized curricula not only in high schools, but also in higher education.

“Lindquist and other reformist educators seized upon America's entry into World War II as an opportune time to promote their ‘general education’ curriculum, new-style multiple choice tests, and ‘testing for credit’ alternative to the Carnegie unit system. Within two weeks after the

bombing of Pearl Harbor, the College Entrance Examination Board announced suspension of its College Board essay examinations in favor of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which it had been trying to promote since 1926. Seven months into World War II, University of Chicago President Hutchins announced that his university would begin awarding a bachelor of arts college degree in general education to students completing their first two years of college. Believing that the real work of the University consisted of specialized training at the graduate school level, for several years faculty administrators at Chicago had sought to move students through their general education program as quickly as possible using standardized tests to determine when the students had learned enough” (Quinn, 2002, p. 15).

In 1943, Lindquist and his colleagues had the opportunity to further expand their project by developing a military general educational development test for returning veterans. This first test, a slightly revised version of that year’s ITED, was the first GED. Their argument for using the ITED was not that it had any special relevance to the military, but that it had been normed by tens of thousands of Iowa students.

Throughout the years immediately following, and through the promotion of the GED by the ACE to non-veteran civilians and later, young people who would not complete a high school diploma, the GED quickly became an exam for civilians rather than returning soldiers. In its over 60 year history, over 15.2 million people have earned the credential. While established as an exam for adults, the rise in social capital and market value of a high school degree coupled with increasingly higher regimentation in secondary schooling has contributed to the growing population of teenagers who opt out and are forced out of a traditional high school diploma track for a GED (Rachal and Bingham, 2004).

The contemporary GED

Over the years, the exam has seen many revisions, the most historic and impacting occurring in 2002. The ACE revised the exam to reflect contemporary issues

of citizenship and include a more extensive written essay component. Two concerns that educators raised around the revisions centered around the potential leaning toward patriotism of the exam material and how an extensive written essay might exclude speakers of first languages other than English and international candidates from earning a GED.

Perhaps more controversial were the two new but largely under-wraps developments put forth by the ACE that accompanied the revision: corporate involvement in the development of the exam, and changes in the emphases in the reporting of GED data by the ACE. The 2002 revision was largely informed by corporate representatives in order to reconnect the qualifications of GED earners with the needs of corporate employers (see also the discussion the job market value of the GED credential, below). The new GED exam was developed with the help of a committee featuring representatives from businesses and organizations such as Taco Bell, Safeway, Motorola, and the National Alliance of Businesses, at least in part because of a history of employer complaints about the quality of GED holders. “ ‘It's a win-win situation all around,’ says workplace committee member Tami Kaiser, senior director of people development for Red Lobster. ‘Employees get a study process and a test that's very relevant to the workplace they're in, and employers get employees who are educated in a way that's more useful to us.’” (Kleiner, 2001, p. 3).

However, I interpret the 2002 revision of the GED as attempting to better align GED earners to low-wage jobs rather than higher education. In 2006, 48% of GED candidates cited wanting higher wages or a better job as the compelling reason for wanting the credential, but the employers that participated in the revision were largely

low wage employers.⁴ Further, GED earners' wage earnings are "statistically indistinguishable" to those of "drop-outs" and earn significantly less than regular high school diploma earners (Heckman and Cameron, 1993, 2005; Greene, 2002).

In addition, the 2002 revision included a change in the ACE's reporting practices around the GED. The General Educational Development Testing Service of the American Council on Education shifted the focus of their annual statistical reports from a focus on "Who Took the GED Tests?" to "Who Passed the GED Tests?"⁵ Also, the ACE no longer provides extensive annual disaggregated data on who took the tests or passed the tests.

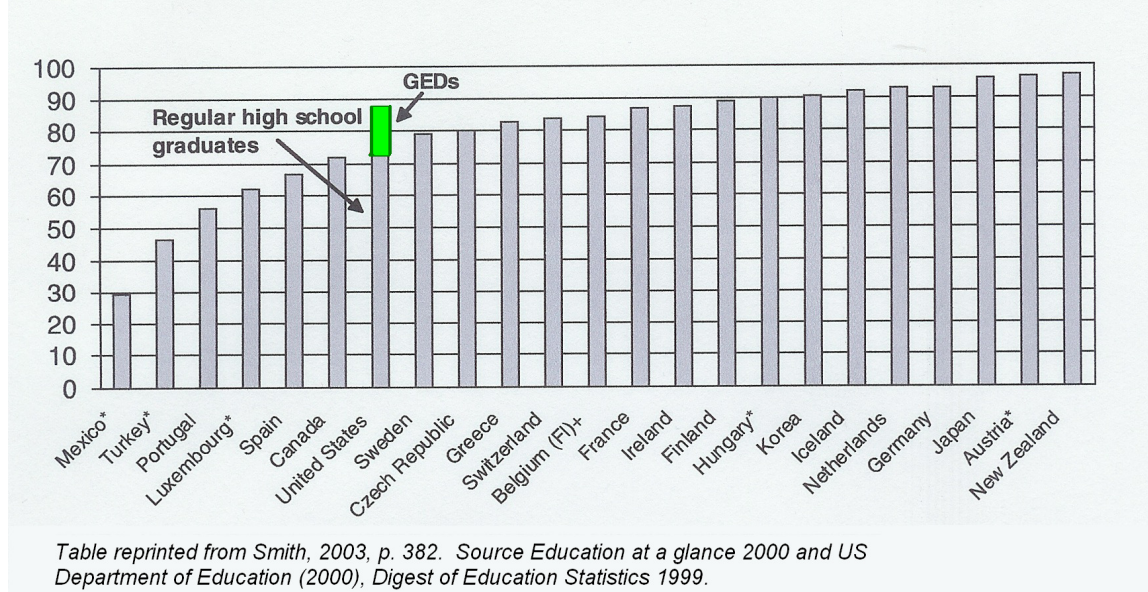
Historically, from a government standpoint, the GED has been seen as synonymous with a high school diploma. It has been so strongly viewed and valued as an equal alternative that it was not until over 50 years after the GED's inception that GED earners were differentiated from high school diploma earners in US census questionnaires. Though this change took place in 1998, GED earners are most often still calculated as high school graduates in statistics of local, state, and federal education systems and agencies. For instance, the 1998 *Education at a Glance* report put forth by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) put the US in the bottom third of twenty-four industrialized countries in secondary school completion, whereas if the GED were included, the US would be among the top half, where most Americans would expect to place. The subsequent shock that rippled through US popular media in response to the report demonstrates the GED as "an integral component of

⁴ In 2006 nearly 60% of GED candidates took the exams for educational reasons. 52% took the exams for personal reasons (being a good role model, feeling accomplished). 48% took the exams for employment reasons, and 7% took the exams to gain entry into the military. (ACE, 2007)

⁵ These are the names of the yearly reports issued by the ACE.

popular myths of declining US dropout rates and American superiority in providing basic education to all of its citizens.” (Smith, 2003, p. 382).

Figure 3.1 OECD Grad Rate Comparison



As you can see in Figure 3.1, the GED is what makes the United States “competitive” in terms of graduation rates on an international scale, when compared to the twenty-three other countries participating in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. When the GED is included in the national graduation rate, the US places in the top third. When the GED is not included in the national graduation rate, the US places in the bottom third.

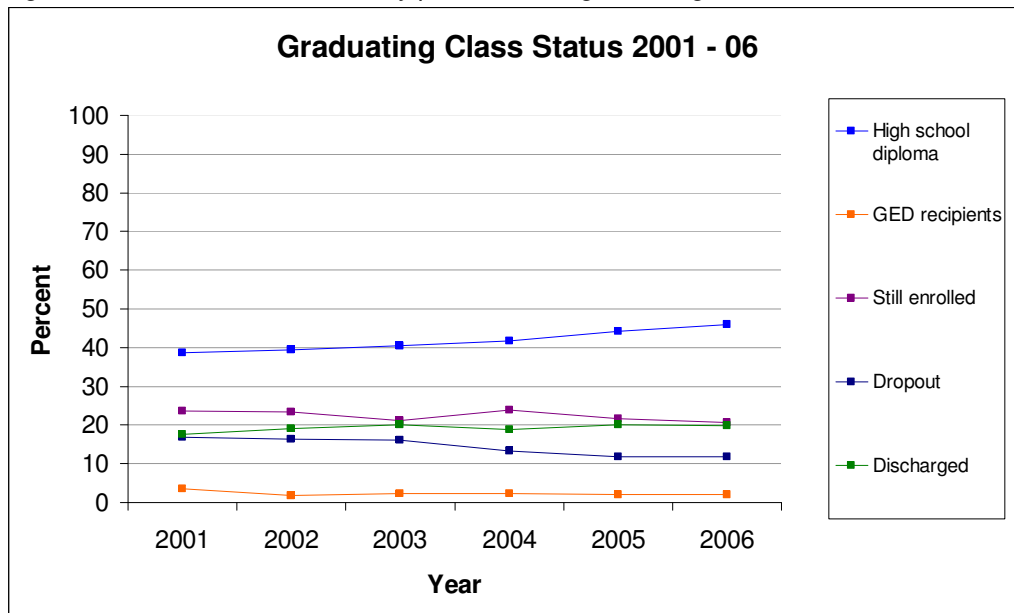
Rates of graduation

We know that graduation rates are slippery, dependent on the measurement formula. Several years ago, Joel Klein “boasted” that the New York City graduation rate, including GEDs for 2005 was 53%. New York State, which does not include the GED, calculated the NYC graduation rate at 44%. It’s difficult to trace where Klein got that particular figure, because the NYCDoe Longitudinal Report on the Class of 2005 reports

a graduation rate of 44.3% without the GED, and 46.4% with the GED (NYCDoE, 2006).

Remembering that rates can shift dramatically based on the rate formula (Warren, 2005), it does appear that there have been some gains in graduation rate in New York City since 2001. Between 2001 and 2006, the rate of on-time diplomas rose 7.3%, from 38.6% to 45.9%. However, there is need to look beneath the surface of this “improvement.” Martha Foote, Director of Research for the New York Performance Standards Consortium, recently completed a data compilation that provides a more nuanced view of the what happens to students in a graduating class. I have depicted her compilation in Figure 3.2. Notice that although the graduation rate rises 7.3%, and the reported drop-out rate decreases by 5.1%, the murky category of “discharged” students has stayed constant.⁶

Figure 3.2 Status of New York City public school graduating class members, 2001-2006



⁶ The percentage of GED earners also appears to be constant, but it is very important to recall that eligibility requirements for the GED exam often prevent youth from earning the GED within the timeframe that they would have earned a high school diploma. Thus, these figures do not provide a realistic view of the percentage of youth within a graduating class who earn a GED; it can be expected that many youth in the “drop-out,” “discharged,” and “still enrolled” categories will eventually earn a GED.

54-56% of youth do not graduate on time each year, and NYCDoE data (Table 3.4) show that after three years, only five percent more will complete the high school diploma.

Some will complete a GED in that time, but most will become “drop-outs.”

Table 3.4 What happens in New York City public high schools after four and seven years?

	Class of 2006: after 4 years (%)	Class of 2003: after 7 years (%)
High school diploma	45	50
GED	2	4
Still Enrolled	21	0
Discharged	20	22
Drop-out	12	24

Source: City Limits, 2008 and NYCDoE

It is also important to remember that federal and state assessment policies are impacting middle school completion. Recent analyses by Walt Haney and Martha Foote that look at student completion rates from 7th -12th grades rather than 9th -12th grades reveal an expanding fault line between 7th and 8th grades, a trend that has emerged over the past eight years (Haney and Foote, personal communication). Historically, exiting youth most frequently exited school between 10th and 11th grades, and this continues to be when the largest numbers of students exit, around 25-26%⁷ for Asian and White youth, 39% for Native American youth, and 43% for Black and Hispanic youth. However, the numbers of youth exiting school between 7th and 8th grades are on the rise, and they are disproportionately of color: White youth at 3.84%, Hispanic youth at 6.9%, and Black youth at 7.73% (Haney and Foote, personal communication).

The incrementally rising graduation rate would lead most to believe that things are looking up for New York City schools, that policies such as NCLB, mandatory Regents exams, and mayoral control are improving school completion rates. But a closer

⁷ Figures in this paragraph are for 2003-2004 school year.

look at the bulging discharge category— a category officially intended to report students who have moved out of New York City to other schools, students who are over the age of 17 and have parental permission to leave school to work or join the military, or who turn 21 and don't finish the school year (NYCDoE, 2001)— and the growing loss of students between 7th and 8th grades suggest that the improvements are little more than a numbers trick. Patting oneself on the back for rising graduation rates while mechanisms such as the discharge designation camouflage push-out, and while another leak of students between 7th and 8th are not counted in the dropout rate results in a hollow victory.

Beyond controversies in rate calculation, graduation rates are disproportionately lower for Black, Latino and Native American youth at 40-50% than White youth who have rates of 60-70%. Graduation rates are also disproportionate by income: youth from low-income families are twice as likely to be non-completers as youth from middle-income families, and six times more likely to be non-completers than youth from high-income families. (Fine and Ruglis, 2008)

Federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state accountability drives such as the state mandated exit exams required in over 20 states, with New York at the forefront, put a new kind of pressure on schools to achieve high test scores at any cost. Under NCLB and state-run high stakes standardized testing schools benefit by siphoning out academically weak and/or disruptive students. Because NCLB prioritizes assessment, schools are held more highly accountable to success in standardized tests than success in student retention and reducing drop out rates. (This discussion is taken up in chapter four.)

CREDD's research in New York City reveals the ways in which this pressure is expressed by both school personnel and by students. A surprising number of current and pushed out students that participated in our interviews and focus groups reported being advised of the GED option by school personnel as early as 7th and 8th grades, up to two years before ever setting foot in high school. This, combined with students' sensing that "school is not for me" as early as 5th grade, has exacerbated the general school cultural belief that students who will not perform well on standardized tests should not be in school.

As other alternatives such as night high schools, vocational schools, and now most recently, the local diploma have been stripped away, the use of the GED has become more pronounced. However, existing research on the GED deems it a consolation prize, or worse, as "not worth the paper it was printed on" (Greene, 2002). More, as discussed throughout this dissertation, recent immigrant students who are speakers of first languages other than English are often dissuaded from enrolling in high school and pushed toward GED programs (Advocates for Children, 2007)

These common, yet covert practices concretize the defacto reliance on the GED as a last alternative to contemporary schooling, effectively getting school leaders off the hooks of figuring out ways to honor all students' rights to attend school until the age of 21; to develop and implement meaningful curricula, pedagogies, and assessments; and to reassess the purpose of schooling. The GED,

serves as a systemic safety valve for a system with comparatively high dropout rates. The GED program is a low-cost way to integrate hundreds of thousands of off-track individuals back into the mainstream of society, while at the same time providing as efficient means for the educational system to appear to meet its goals of equality of educational opportunity. (Smith, 2003, p. 375).

In the rest of this chapter I will lay out the seen and unseen values of the GED, but it is important to note that it is this role of the GED— safety valve under the high pressure of assessment geared education, duct tape on a broken system, wood putty on the gashed purposes of schooling— that is most valuable to the New York City public school system and to the national school climate as they exist now. The GED is a levee, and now we know that levees break.

Re-valuing the GED

Existing research and journalism on the GED are focused on what I think of as the easily seen, or obvious values of the GED; and debating whether the GED is a “meaningless piece of paper” (Mariott, 1993) or if it is like the Wizard of Oz who gives a trivial gift with the expectation that Dorothy or the Tin Man ascribe its meaning, (Quinn in Greene, 2002) most studies land on the side of practically meaningless. These studies declare that GED earners are more likely to be placed in remedial courses in two-year colleges than high school diploma earners (Hamilton, 1998), they lack perseverance and a strong work ethic (Tyler, 1998), and will earn significantly less over a lifetime than high school diploma earners. Studies report that wages of those with GEDs are practically identical to non-completers without GEDs, controlling for years in high school (Cao, Stromsdorfer, and Weeks, 1996) and insist that very few will go on to complete a two-year or four-year college degree (Boesel, 1998; Tyler, Murnane, and Willett, 2003).

Prior to my research with CREDD, existing studies on the GED had two important commonalities (1) They attempted to establish and evaluate the value of the GED from a market or higher education standpoint (2) While market-value and academic-value clearly have a powerful impact on GED earners’ lives, absent from prior

studies is an understanding of the ways in which GED earners experience the value of the GED in their own lives.

These analyses of the GED, because they are myopic, are borne of and contribute to societal conditions that stigmatize the GED and GED earners. In addition to these analyses, due to the prevalence of GED programs in prisons, (Garner, 2005; Tyler and Kling, 2004) some might think of the GED as a credential for/of prisoners, flaring the stigma. In an interview GED earner Guillermo theorized, “I think society at large views it basically like a toy, like a Cracker Jack box kind of thing, you know? But at the same time, the state of education is so flux that it’s a real opportunity.”

Asia confessed that she had a disparaging view on GED earners prior to being pushed out of school. “I laughed [at GED earners and seekers], ‘You dummy. You can’t go through high school,’ and once I was sitting in a classroom getting my GED I was like, ‘How could you say that to somebody? How could you make them feel bad like that?’

Sophia told us that the GED is seen as, “less than a diploma. You’re a little– not dumb– but you’re not as smart as the average. Even though they say that the GED test is harder.” To this point Jovanne observed, “I think they’re sending the wrong message because they say is the GED is fast, easy, get out of school, go to college. But that’s not what it’s about. They should let you know that... the GED is not for everybody just like high school is not for everybody.”

At the same time, even in the stigmatized context of the GED, youth reported that they were explicitly advised by school personnel to get the GED because it would serve, as in Tyrone’s telling, as an, “an alternative; No, they said an equivalency to high school.

I [would have] an equivalency so I could be just as good as a high school diploma [earner]. But it is not true.” Of the 31 interview participants who had earned or were seeking the GED as youth, 90% or 28, first learned about the GED from a dean, principal, teacher, or guidance counselor.⁸ Of that 90%, all but two were told that the GED is an alternative to a high school diploma that would afford them the same options as a diploma. Note that the title of the GED certificate awarded in New York State is the “New York State High School Equivalency Diploma.”

We asked GED instructors if they think the GED is an equivalent alternative to the high school diploma. All six of the GED instructors told us no, including Kersha who told us,

“But do I think all high school diplomas are equal to one another? No. I think it depends on the quality of the education received at any place. Obviously, the GED is going to suffer a little bit, because like I said before there isn’t a deep exploration. That could be challenging depending on how long the student goes to the preparation classes and how much the instructor is invested in moving beyond the actual test. Maybe, that class and the preparation they get there could mirror the information that they would receive in a low performing school where the principal and teachers don’t care but the students do. The kids are just in class doing worksheets all day. Which happens. No, I don’t equate them, but I do not equate all high school diplomas either.”

Zhi, a recent Immigrant from China, was told about the GED when he tried to enroll in high school. He followed that advice, and now regrets the decision, “If you get GED you cannot go to many senior colleges. You can only go to community college. GED is seen as easier... than normal high school. For many new English [speakers]... it’s a bad, bad choice.” Zhi’s information is correct, but only in part, and it’s a good example of the shaky availability of needed information on the GED. Many immigrant youth who don’t speak English are placed in pre-GED classes, even though they may

⁸ Other participants first learned about it from a relative, neighbor, or television or subway ad.

have the skill base to pass the exam on a faster track. This can unnecessarily extend their route to the GED, and GED programs are not generally designed to teach English.

However, youth can attend senior colleges, especially after they have gone to community college, and, as the spring 2006 debate between then-Governor George Pataki and several local campuses demonstrated (Arenson, 2006), there are four year colleges that quietly accept GED youth as first year students rather than as transfer students. Still, by turning him away at the door, school personnel denied Zhi his right afforded by New York State law to attend public school until the age of 21.

School advisors also underplayed the difficulty of the exam procedures and the exam itself. For example, many youth are unaware that youth fifteen and younger are not eligible to take the exams in New York State. Sixteen year old youth can only take the exams if they are joining the military, or if they have completed a GED preparation program *and* have reached the compulsory school attendance age (17 in New York City.) Seventeen and eighteen year old youth also need to show documentation demonstrating that they are in State institutions like hospitals or prisons, are a member of a graduating class that has already graduated, or it has been more than one year since officially leaving school, among other scenarios (nysed.gov).

Jordan told us,

“Not for nothing, taking your GED is not that easy. Like taking your license; all you got to do is go to the DMV, stand on line for a million hours, take a primary, six months later come back, take the road test, and you got your license. But to get your GED, it’s a whole big spectacle, and ... it’s not like they give it every week. It’s only specific days of the year that they give it in specific locations throughout the five boroughs.”

Pilar confirmed other youths’ experiences of the battery of tests as difficult,

“A lot of it is very technical. Things that you learn in high school, I guess, that I clearly didn’t remember... I remember the math being totally hard. Other things, I hustled a lot of it. It was a lot of logic and ... trick questions. A lot of things about people, necessarily, quote unquote leaders of America... Social studies, things like that. Science, biology of the body.”

As in the existing research, youth derive much of the value of the GED from how it has worked for them as a passport to good jobs and higher education. And, as in the existing research, they have found that the GED yields disappointing, or mixed results. Potential employers told Asia, “‘Get your high school diploma.’ People said, ‘don’t get your,’ what do they call it? *‘The Good Enough Diploma?’* She continued,

“I don’t think society takes it seriously. I’ve been in job interviews and I’ve shown them my GED and people have looked at me like, ‘What??’ And haven’t called back. But, you know, I’ve moved on with my life. I found a job that I like and I enjoy and I’m going to school, so just because I have my GED doesn’t mean it’s going to stop my program.”

GED earners do not experience the same rates of success as high school diploma earners in the US labor market. Much of the literature does not support the GED as a distinguishing factor in getting a job. (Boesel, 1998; Boesel, Smith, and Alsalam, 1998; Greene, 2002; Heckman and Cameron, 1993, 2005) These studies illustrate that employment rates are much higher for high school diploma holders than GED recipients. Men with GEDs have higher job turnover rates than men who have “dropped out,” and actually do not work as often. (This is not documented for women who have GEDs.) Overall, high school diploma earners work more and have lower job turnovers than GED earners. While GED earners’ yearly wages are 8% higher than those of “dropouts,” they are 9-12% lower than high school diploma earners’ wages.

As I have mentioned above, the ACE’s decision to include employer perspectives on the 2002 revision of the GED exam was due in part to employers’ complaints about

the work habits, or the socialization of GED earners. Informing both the material covered and preparation practices for the GED exam has been a way for corporations to access and mold a future generation of workers, socializing them to meet corporate needs.

Like in national averages, there is a wide disparity of income between men and women who have earned a GED. The national average annual income for men in the US is \$50,000⁹, and the national average yearly income for women in the US is \$33,000. (census.gov) Men who have earned a GED as a terminal degree make just under half of the national average, about \$24,000, which is \$10,000 more than women with GEDs as final degrees, who also make below half of their national average at about \$14,000 per year. (See Table 3.4)

Table 3.5 Income by gender and terminal degree (2000)

	High School Diploma earner monthly income in US dollars	High School Diploma earner annual income in US dollars	GED earner monthly income in US dollars	GED earner annual income in US dollars
HSD or GED as final degree	\$1,751	\$21,012	\$1,596	\$19,152
Men	\$2,264	\$27,168	\$2,006	\$24,072
Women	\$1,300	\$15,600	\$1,171	\$14,052
High school or GED with some college or more	\$2,986	\$35,832	\$2,380	\$28,560
Men	\$3,829	\$45,948	\$2,953	\$35,436
Women	\$2,206	\$26,472	\$1,838	\$22,056

Source: US 2000
Census, Table 2F

Obtaining at least some college improves the earnings for men to \$35,400 and women to \$22,000— still a disparity of over \$13,000 yearly. Men who have graduated with a high school diploma and have attended some college make closer to the national average at

⁹ This census data averages the salaries of all workers.

about \$46,000, and women who have graduated from high school and have attended some college make on average \$26, 400, a disparity of close to \$20,000 per year.

A 1995 report by Francisco Rivera-Batiz provided a gender and racial analysis on the employment rates, earnings, and literacy of GED earners aged twenty-five and older in comparison to ‘dropouts’ and high school diploma earners. Rivera-Batiz found that white men GED earners enjoy annual incomes similar to their high school diploma counterparts. Black and Latino men with GEDs earn between \$2000 and \$7800 per year less than their high school diploma earning counterparts. White women with GEDs earn about \$2000 less per year than white women with high school diplomas, while Black and Latina women earn between \$2300 and \$4600 less than their high school diploma counterparts. Latino men and Latina women experienced the biggest gaps in income with their high school diploma counterparts. Citing data from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey study which established the strikingly similar literacies of GED earners and high school graduates *across the board*, Rivera-Batiz concludes that “stereotyping by employers leads GED holders to be subject to great racial or ethnic discrimination,” and further that white men have greater access to both higher paying jobs and higher quality GED preparation programs than white women, Black men and women, and Latina/o men and women. (Rivera-Batiz, 1995, p. 319) Thus, the GED probably will work as an equivalent to the high school diploma for white men youth, but probably will not work as an equivalent to the high school diploma for white young women and women and men youth of color. My comparisons using US census data (Table 3.6) point to the same trends of racial bias, evidenced by income disparities.

Table 3.6 Income by race and terminal degree (2000)

	HSD earner monthly income in US dollars	HSD earner annual income in US dollars	GED earner monthly income is US dollars	GED earner annual income is US dollars
High school or GED as final degree	\$1,751	\$21,012	\$1,596	\$19,152
White	\$1,850	\$22,200	\$1,688	\$20,256
Black	\$1,439	\$17,268	\$1,409	\$16,908
Hispanic	\$1412	\$16,944	\$1,333	\$15,996
High school or GED with some college or more	\$2,986	\$35,832	\$2,380	\$28,560
White	\$3,110	\$37,320	\$2,458	\$29,496
Black	\$2,340	\$28,080	\$2,082	\$24,984
Hispanic	\$2,412	\$28,944	\$1,979	\$23,748

Source: US 2000
Census, Table 2F

For many young people in New York City, joining the military seems like the only way that they can afford to go to college, or secure regular work with benefits. In 2006, 7% of GED candidates nationwide sought to earn their GEDs in order to join the military. Now, in an unpopular war, US military branches such as the army have “education plus” programs that can pay for GED preparation and exam fees (goarmy.com) However, because of a historical dissatisfaction with the performance of GED earners-turned-recruits, each US military branch limits the number of GED-earner recruits at 0 to 5%, depending on how successfully or unsuccessfully they are able to recruit high school diploma earners to service.

Many youth reported counter-stories to the gloomy job prospects for GED earners. For example, Jason told us,

“I’ve been on a lot of interviews where they said, ‘Hmm, I see you got a GED. You didn’t do your 4 years of college.’ But, it’s all about the individual, how he sells himself and how he presents himself. A person can actually tell if you’re intelligent or if you just took a short cut; and you

got the GED but you didn't really *get it*, you know, you're dumb as a doorknob. Sure, some people look down on it. But once they see you personally, how you present yourself and that you are a bright person, and educated, it all works out for you."

Alex put it in these terms, "I've been discriminated on some job interviews for having a GED. 'Don't call us, we'll call you.' But some places you go to, they do give you that benefit of the doubt. Like I said, a lot of people in this world, their kid has to get the GED as well." Other youth, like Raymond, were very pleased with the GED for being the thing that allowed employers to do just that, give them the benefit of the doubt. "I have a good job, a good paying job. At that, I work in a hotel association, I make good money. All I needed was a GED. Thank God, I didn't have to go to college or anything like that."

Cold calling desirable employers and higher education institutions

Still, that the job market value of the GED is so susceptible to employers' subjectivities is highly problematic. As part of the Gateways and Get-aways project, CREDD phone surveyed 100 employers, many appearing on the 2006 Fortune 500 Best Companies to Work For list, others, common companies cited as ideal employers by young people. Employers were extremely reluctant to participate in our cold calls, many citing a company policy "not to participate in research." Twenty-nine percent (n=29) agreed to participate, and, after multiple attempts, 71% (n=71) declined. In our cold calls to employers, 50% indicated that an applicants' ability to fit into the company cultures was the most important factor in hiring decisions, and 35% indicated that the most important factor depended on the position sought.¹⁰

¹⁰ Other answers included "education" and prior work and life "experience."

When we asked what degree they most preferred for a successful applicant to have, 64% indicated that it depended on the position sought, and 14% indicated a high school diploma, and 14% indicated a high school diploma or GED. When we asked if employers prefer for successful applicants to have a high school diploma or GED, 42% declined to answer, 33% indicated that they do not differentiate, and 25% indicated that they prefer a high school diploma. No one answered that they prefer a GED. Our finding that 33% of participating employers declared that they do not differentiate between the GED and a high school diploma complicates the predictions of other studies and affirms the experiences of youth who attest that the GED provides them the “benefit of the doubt” while job seeking.

However, while nearly all employers did report hiring GED earners, it was difficult for human resources representatives of these companies to provide instances of GED earners in leadership positions.

CREDD also cold called 100 admissions officers, many listed in the US News and World Report’s Top 100 National Colleges, and Top New York State Colleges, and many of the City University of New York campuses. Again, admissions officers were reticent to participate in our study. Fifty-one percent of the colleges and universities on our list agreed to participate. Forty-nine percent did not participate, often hanging up on us. Of those who did participate, several stated that they view the GED as an equivalent to a high school diploma. But, we needed to inform several others of what a GED is.

Eighty-seven percent of those who agreed to participate indicated they accept GED earners, 11% accept GED earners as transfer students (often from community

colleges), and 3% did not accept GED earners. However, when we asked about the most important factor in a prospective student's application, 38% answered the applicant's transcript, 27% answered the applicant's "whole file"¹¹ and 15% answered the applicant's high school GPA (totaling 80%). Admissions offices' reliance on these factors put GED earners at a disadvantage. A GED earner can be admitted on paper, but our findings reveal that it is rare for a GED earner to be admitted to these desired schools in practice. Ninety-one percent of those who participated in our cold calls indicated that one per cent or less of their incoming students were GED earners. (See Table 3.7)

Table 3.7 Percentage of incoming students with a GED per college or university as estimated by admissions counselors (2006-2007) N=51

Admissions counselors' estimations

No GEDs	18%
1%	73%
Greater than 1%	9%

Source: CREDD cold calls

One private Northeastern college did state that GED earners' applications were reviewed in consideration of factors that were different than high school diploma earners, such as "work history." However, this school had not admitted a GED earner in the past ten years.

In 2006, nearly 60% of GED candidates listed education as a reason for taking GED exams. Of this 60%, 26% percent indicated they planned to enroll in two-year college, 22% planned to enroll in a trade school or receive technical training, and 18% planned to enroll in four-year college (acenet). Youth told us that they have had some disappointments in pursuit of a college degree. Tyrone told us, "I wanted to go to a certain college, but I couldn't go because I didn't have a 300 on my GED. That's the one

¹¹ An applicant's "whole file" includes her transcripts and GPA, SAT or ACT scores, essays and/or interviews, and extra curricular activities. These answers in singular made up the remaining 20%.

bad thing that happened.” Jovanne experienced a setback when she learned that she would have to attend community college before transferring to a senior college, but she isn’t defeated. “I can’t go straight to a four year university. I mean, that’s closed but I never was sure I wanted to knock on that door anyway. I wanted to go to CUNY and I don’t want to bury myself in student loan debts and things like that.”

Findings of recent investigations on the GED maintain that the 44% of GED earners who enter associates degree programs are half as likely as high school diploma earners to complete their degrees, and only 2-8% of GED earners who seek bachelors degrees attain them, as compared to 20% of high school diploma earners (Boesel, Smith, and Alsalam, 1998; Kleiner, 2001; ACE, 2006; Jobs for the Future, 2006). The often cited 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) demonstrated that GED earners are equal or more achieved than high school diploma earners in terms of literacy and cognition. Thus, in many ways, the difference between high school diploma earners and GED earners is a difference in socialization, and the ways in which those who complete high school are more cogently socialized for a college classroom that mirrors secondary schooling. Obvious perhaps, this aspect of socialization is important to make transparent in any analysis that seeks to determine the purposes of secondary and higher education.

It’s hard to find credibility in the findings that GED earners are unlikely to complete college when listening to Asia, a young mother of two, who earned her GED and now is completing a four year college program. “Soon as I get my bachelor’s, I’m going to go on and get whatever else I need to get. I’m trying to get my MBA.”

Though he hasn’t yet taken steps towards college admission, Jameak says, “That’s always the plan. College is always open. They accept you at any age. Like a month ago,

I met a guy who was somewhere down south, he was maybe 70 and he wanted to go to college. There's always a chance."

And here's where we come face to face with the real impetus for this research, the heart of the matter. When confronted with the same data, other researchers see a devalued credential, a pathetic shell, a piece of paper; I can't help but see an opportunity for repatriation, in fact, repatriation that is already well underway. Thomas Smith also named this problem in his article "Who Values the GED?" but leaves the issue unexplored. He writes, "The human capital perspective helps us to understand why the GED is not functioning in the same way as credential more strongly linked to skills acquisition, although it provides little insight into why the demand for the credential remains so strong" (Smith, 2003, p. 403). Without seeking to understand the *lived* value of the GED from the perspective of the youth who continue to flock to a supposedly depleted credential, we are left to assume that the youth are being duped into making a fatalistic decision. This assumption is deeply unsatisfying to me.¹²

More importantly, those other researchers have completely missed the picture on the most prominent element of the GED: *hope. Desire. Pained, yes. Self-protective, yes. But also reflective and growing, rhizomatic. Regrouping. And ultimately, pretty well informed.*

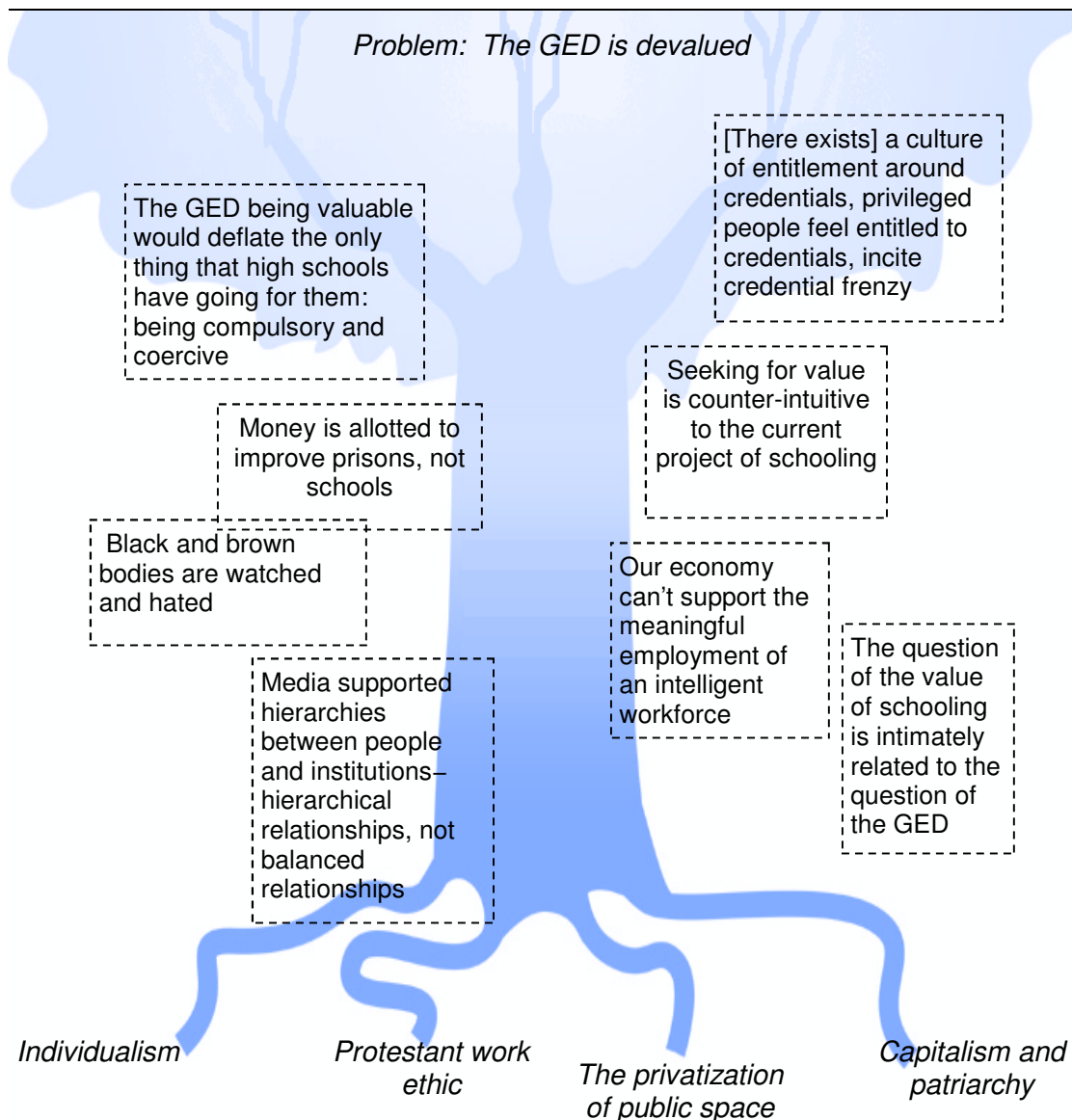
With all of this as context, we can appreciate, in Gayatri Spivak's words, a "new chain of value" (1987, p. 205) of the GED in youth lives: it is a moment of completion in a system determined to ensure your failure, a crossing of the finish line after a life-time of being tripped up, it is an act of hope, of desire, of repatriation. In an essay called

¹² This is also why it was important for me to conduct this work as participatory action research, alongside those who have been pushed out of their under-resourced public NYC schools.

“Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value,” Spivak calls for a conceptualization of value outside of ideology and materialist production. These are too easily reduced to a “calculus of economic indicators [that] ignore the dark presence of the Third World” (ibid, p. 230).

Not having read Spivak, my co-researchers in CREDD arrived at similar conclusions by mapping a problem tree on the diminished value of the GED. In Figure 3.3 I have re-created the trunk and roots of CREDD’s problem tree. Not included in the recreation are the leaves, the everyday symptoms of the problem of the diminished value of the GED. The leaves represented much of the data already discussed here that pertain to limited returns of the GED in terms of higher education and employment, and also youths’ tellings of instances of stigmatizing the GED.

Figure 3.3 *Analysis of the Value of the GED Problem Tree* by the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire



Recall that the trunk of a problem tree represents the widespread beliefs and assumptions that serve to sustain the problem, and that lay just beneath the surfaces of youths' everyday encounters with the devaluing of the GED. In this case, facilitators and CREDD researchers Bacha and Crystal helped the rest of us identify these beliefs and

assumptions by asking ourselves, ‘What assumptions and beliefs prevent the GED from being widely recognized as valuable?’ The conversation that ensued pointed to the nexus of a wayward economy and “credential frenzy;” what the GED exposes about schools; and the relationships between the surveillance of youth of color, prisons, and the a priori power of institutions. We then turned to the ideological and structural roots of these beliefs and assumptions– locating individualism, the Protestant work ethic, the privatization of public space, and capitalism and patriarchy as the anchors in the devaluing of the GED.

Through this process of tracing the diminished value of the GED to its roots, we were able to see with our own eyes how the value of the GED is currently framed by a worldview that did not resonate with us. We were fueled by this exercise to continue in our work to listen closely to GED earners and seekers, not only to develop a sense of the lived value of the GED, but also to expand and reclaim a worldview that is meaningful to us. We were affirmed in our senses, that, in Taiaiake Alfred’s words, “To honor the spirit and yet have an approach that respects our values and is effective against our adversaries and enemies, we need to define “struggle” in a way that makes sense for us in our circumstances” (Alfred, 2005, p. 51). Later I would recognize that the struggle that emerged as most salient in my eyes, is a struggle for repatriation of youth learning.

In Indigenous contexts, repatriation refers to the reclaiming of sovereignty, land, subsistence rights, cultural knowledge and artifacts, theories, epistemologies and axiologies, and even sometimes our dead. A strong image that comes to me when I think of repatriation is of the times I have caught a fish, and suddenly, the fish jumped out of the boat, back into the ocean, and swam away. Repatriation is jumping back into the sea

and swimming away. Sometimes it may be with a hook, or line, or entire fishing pole still attached to the fish's mouth, just as in repatriation, in which we are marked, even tied to our experiences of colonization. But repatriation is escaping the suffocating boat and returning to water and who we were meant to be.

In the rest of this chapter, I call attention to the values that youth attribute to the GED that are obfuscated in existing GED inquiries. I see these attributions as youth repatriations of the value of the GED that enact a larger repatriation of youth education.

Repatriating the GED

Table 3.8 displays CREDD's survey results on perceptions of the usefulness (captured through helpfulness) of the GED from GED earners and seekers (GED), high school diploma earners and seekers (HSD) and school non-completers (NC).

Table 3.8 Use of the GED by GED seekers and earners, high school diploma seekers and earners, and school non-completers

	GED	HSD	NC
N (476)	138	306	32
	helps or really helps (%)	helps or really helps (%)	helps or really helps (%)
Getting into college	90	84	78
Getting a good job*	87	76	72
Feeling closure, gaining a sense of completion	82	75	71
Feeling like you completed your educational work	82	66	73
Being able to get on with your life	81	83	76
Having a good career	80	71	69
Feeling good about yourself	79	69	73
Finishing a college degree*	78	78	52
Feeling fulfilled by your learning experience	76	68	65
Being a role model for family and community	75	61	64
Making enough money to have a life that you want	74	63	77
Finishing school with your peers	71	62	58
Having an easy life*	67	50	52

* indicates items with 15% or more difference between GED earners and non-completers

With some exceptions, fewer youth in the NC category reported that the GED helps or really helps in tasks listed on the survey. This makes sense because youth in the NC category are not pursuing a GED; lower “helps or really helps” response rates for these tasks give insight to why school non completers might not pursue a GED. The greatest difference of opinion between youth in the GED category (and the HSD category) and in the NC category (represented by percentage difference between GED and NC) rested on the GED’s helpfulness/use in finishing a college degree. There were also sizeable gaps on the items “getting a good job” and “having an easy life.” I interpret these differences as meaning that the perceived negligible uses of the GED in college, job, and easy life prospects are determining factors in youths’ pursuit of the GED.

However, we also see that youth who are in the GED category associate a higher degree of use of the credential, especially with tasks associated with higher education, employment, and “feeling closure and gaining a sense of completion.” In general, greater numbers of youth in the GED category reported that the GED helps or really helps in all tasks. GED youth prioritized higher education and employment, but also feeling like they completed their educational work, and being able to get on their lives.

GED youth in our interviews punctuated these findings. Ling lin, a recent immigrant from China, told us, “When I get my GED I’m going to feel more confident about my English and believe in myself.” James explained how earning his GED would change him, “I feel like without having my GED, I’m nothing. I’m just a regular dude, walking around with a nice head of hair, a nice smile. Just walking around not doing anything productive. When I do that, I’ll be able to be a force.”

Mr. Aaron, now a GED instructor, said, “My self esteem was actually lifted knowing I had acquired my GED.” Pilar told us, “I got a really high score. Very impressive. I impressed myself.”

Youth told us that they saw themselves “going far” with the GED. “You can get very, very far with it. And you’re not going to get very far without it,” Ebony said. Youth talked to us about the GED as a key to doors that would otherwise be closed to them. “You can go to college with that,” Jameak commented. “You can go to college. And once you’re on a job interview and they see college on the paper, *that’s* a big deal.” Rafael talked with us explicitly about keys and doors,

I think it opens certain doors. It can open certain doors. It’s like if I give you a key ring full of keys and just give it to you and you don’t know that one of the keys on there opens the door to the bank around the block, it does you no good. You[’re] just sitting there with some keys there. But if you know it and you get that key ring, you’ll try every door, and you’re going to find some good things.

Rafael’s nuanced metaphor of the key ring helps to interpret the differences in use that youth attributed to the GED in *getting* into college or job, and having a *career* or *finishing* college in Table 3.8. His insistence that if one knows that the GED will open doors, she will try to open every door (and see some results) is a powerful analysis of what the GED can mean in youths’ lives.

Ebony told us that now when she meets another young person with a GED, “I feel like they earned it, they deserved it. Cause it’s something very hard, it’s not something easy.” For some, like Mr. Aaron, recognizing the accomplishments takes a little while longer.

In the beginning, I felt a little less than. I felt that because I didn’t stick to my commitment of high school. So you feel, if I didn’t stick to my commitment, then you know, I felt like I was a failure even though I had

the GED. But then I have to look at the positive side of having a GED, that what people learn in four years, I didn't in do the four years, but I did acquire the knowledge.

Our ten adult interview participants, teen GED earners now in their 30s and 40s, all described a deepening of their feelings of accomplishment as time went on. Patricia, now in her late 40s, told us,

Just talking about it makes my whole person smile. Yeah, even though I didn't accomplish what I wanted to accomplish at the end, the journey is still happening. One never learns, we're always learning. Nobody knows everything about anything. We constantly learn. That's one of the things the GED has really given me. Given me the eyes to search. Has opened my eyes, if you will, to how wonderful education can be. Because it also has to do with the person, doesn't it? What kind of person. We all do things for different reasons. I'm giving you my reasons and my experience. But for somebody, coming in I'd let them walk in my shoes for a little bit. You know what I'm saying? And let them feel that. Let them feel what I'm feeling. At least try to make them feel a little bit of what I'm feeling. Of the joy. Of the experience. It was just wonderful for me.

The life lessons and conclusions that this group of now-adult GED earners contributed to this study suggest that the lived value of a credential develops over a long span of time, and is easier to observe in hindsight.

Still, one more immediate value that every young person emphasized was the GED as emergency escape exit from their former schools. Riccel reported, "I wanted to get [my GED] because I felt that high school was not really providing for me what I needed." For some youth, like Riccel and Jaqui, schools didn't deliver the academic rigor that they desired. Jaqui described this scenario,

I think it's better to get a GED. To me, high school was a waste of time. When I was in high school, they used to give us a workbook and a reading book. Let me tell you something, I used to do my workbook within a week. The rest of the school year I was a truant. I got promoted twice and left back once. So it defeated the purpose... With all the time that I had left over, I spent it across the street from [my school.] There's a morgue

across the street... I spent a lot of time there. I spent a lot of time all over the place, anywhere other than the classroom because I [already had] finished my workbook. All I had to do was tear out the pages and hand them in.

Other youth observed that their schools did not meet their personal needs when having problems at home, asserting their high schools were “not flexible enough to deal with me while I was dealing with much bigger shit,” as in Francine’s words. (This discussion is further developed in the next chapter.)

Alex told us that he valued the GED option because it got him out of a school situation that he felt would lead to “heartbreak,” telling us, “Sometimes you have to take other steps and precautions to stay out of trouble so I decided to go and join the GED program.” Miguel confirmed this point, though insisted it wasn’t an option, “I had to get away from the bad elements: the drugs, the guns, the gangs.”

Young women also told us that the GED was a way for them to sidestep “trouble.” “At first I was fighting the fighters.” Benita began, “Then I realized it was happening [so much] I was one of the fighters. I went to my first GED class with cut up knuckles and a cut above my eye. I ain’t fought no one since.” Ebony cited the overcrowded classrooms of her former school as the conditions for “messing up in school.” “I [was] around the wrong crowds, it was too crowded. I think it’s better for me to have less students in the classroom like the GED program. It’s not overcrowded like a normal high school is...and the class is more flexible.”

Beyond staying out of trouble, for many youth, the value of the GED is associated with their experiences in GED programs. In these cases the GED class sizes were smaller, as Ebony reported above, and youth received more focused attention. Jameak said, “I really like the reading we do [in my GED program] because it is on my level but

is interesting to me and my life.” Alexis appreciated having “people who are dedicated to their work, [who] really work hard to help you out” as staff members of the GED program she attended. She continued, “They stay late hours, help tutor you. They also actually influence other kids to help you, and they ask you to tutor other kids on your strong subjects.”

In part, GED programs can provide this kind of personalized attention and support because they are crafted to be flexible. When we started our interview with Asia, the young woman who wants an MBA, we asked her, “Is there any question I should ask you?” She answered,

Definitely ask me what impact this has had on my life. Like it was so much better for me to be able to go to school at night and get my GED. I couldn't get my high school diploma. I figured my GED would be better because it was a six month class. I was only 17 when I got my GED and I'm 22 now. I am a mother of two beautiful children. My son is 6 months and my daughter is 2.

GED instructors shared with us how the flexibility of a GED program has allowed them to employ engaging pedagogies, even though like high schools they were “teaching to a test.” Mr. Smith told us, “

I do some special workshops and music or music society. History, some special lectures from my travels. Slides and storytelling and other things that may stimulate the other parts of their beings because if you just teach GED with GED books it can get to be pretty boring and pretty taxing. You have to teach to the whole person.

Kersha also spoke of the freedom she has had to expand class discussions beyond direct GED preparation, while also getting students ready to succeed on the exams.

I've always been lucky enough to have a group of students where we build classes where they want more than the test. And so, although the actual test was a big aspect of how we structured the class— where I brought other material in and we'd watch movies, read the newspaper— all of those

things that help them have bigger conceptualizations of knowledge, and not just that knowledge that is presented the test... You've got to build a class where people feel like they are generating things.

Alongside revitalized classroom content, several GED instructors positioned their work as educators as oriented around respect for students, as in Mr. Rami's words, "I try to respect them and meet them where they are. I try to push them where they don't want to go. Create a comfortable atmosphere for learning." For Mr. Smith, this approach to his students comes from realizing, "A lot of students I've had have had many problems in their lives. And it really taught me that sometimes failure or sense of failure doesn't depend on a piece of paper. It depends on the student himself or herself. It depends on life circumstances."

GED seeker Brittany has seen first hand the ways that these perspectives on students play out with positive results. "Besides the education stuff about the program I told you about, they talk about 'Keep your head up. Try your hardest. And, don't think about dropping out [of the GED program] because that is not the best for you.'"

Youth were clear with us to not romanticize the GED, emphasizing that it is a credential of basic education, that the test itself is very technical, and uncritically patriotic. They also underlined the difficulty of the GED exams. When we asked what Yvette would like for the rest of the world to know about the GED, she told us, "That test is damn hard!" Kersha confirmed this point by saying, "I think that in all actuality, work-wise it might be easier to go to high school, get straight Ds in all your classes and get your high school diploma."

Tyrone had this advice for youth who are still in school who are considering the GED.

If you have to get your GED, get it. If you are 25, and you didn't graduate high school, get it, get it now. If you are 16 and you are a junior, stay in school. Don't be stupid. Just stay in school. It's not worth it just leaving school to possibly jeopardize your chances of getting employed or going to college... But if you have to get it, that's more power to you, I hope you do well. But if not, if you don't have to get it, if you have the [option] to stay in school or get your GED, stay in school. I don't regret getting my GED, I really don't. I wasn't going to graduate on time anyway. I got my GED and I'm glad I got it. But if you have the option of staying in school and getting your diploma, do that.

In each of our interviews with GED earners and seekers we asked, "Would you recommend getting a GED to others?" The most frequent and resounding answer was, "No. Unless you are in the position I was in." It is important to read youths' reluctance to recommend the GED to other youth not as condemnation, but as evidence of the way in which the GED is a powerful yet punished alternative to the high school diploma. It is a scarlet letter, perhaps rarely admitted once people have 'passed' as graduates into work or higher education spaces. It is also important to read a student's jettisoning from school toward the GED exam as a critique of schooling. GED youth valued the GED because it served as desperately needed escape hatch and last option standing. At the same time, pursuing a GED marked a refusal to let go of their right to learn and live satisfying lives. Pursuing a GED is a reclaiming of their education by exiting their schooling. It is an act of repatriation.

I want to close by insisting that we need to look beyond market and higher education factors to determine the value of the GED, or of any credential. In our study, peeking beneath the surfaces of these factors revealed the dense intricacies of youth lives, and the meanings they attribute to earning a GED. What results is a textured, nuanced valuation of the GED that reflects the contradictions, compromises, and complexities of reclaiming an education within/out a school system bent on assessment.

In this way, it is plain to see that the GED (or at least the space that it keeps from imploding and caving in) is dynamically valuable to the New York City public school system. The GED option suppresses the symptoms of a faltering school system, papering over the absent bodies, the cast-away disputes, and the silenced counter-stories. However, this does not mean that the GED option should be shut down. Rather, it should be understood as evidence for the need for expanded, multiplied, meaningful routes to graduation, as I discuss in a later chapter.

The GED can be read as cultural artifact, as political, as acquiescent, as subversive, as cover up and at the same time a magnifying lens for what is and isn't working in secondary schooling. In these ways, it is a powerful public space, and as other public spaces are, is vulnerable to the privatized, corporatized, militarized political economies that seek to streamline, anaesthetize, and close down genuine, satisfying, sustainable options for youth. The use(s) and value(s) of the GED are supremely tenuous, yet hold profound implications for the purposes of schooling and learning when in nexus with the lived value of the GED. It is important to read the over-use and abuse of the GED option in secondary schooling as the canary in the mine, indicating the need for multiple paths to secondary school completion, not just one exit to the mine.

Chapter 4
Humiliating Ironies and Dangerous Dignities:
A dialectic of school push out

One time I went to school and...

I was caught bringing in a case of Samuel Adams beer

I got caught stealing

I was searched against my will

I got good grades

I fell asleep, woke up, and passed all of my classes

I dropped out after 9.11 and contemplated the many means of escape

I got kicked out at the end of my junior year

I wrote a 40 page paper on censorship and pornography

I wore the worst clothes possible

I "fell down the stairs" multiple times

I got kicked out of graduation practice for wearing a tube top and couldn't walk with my class

I left school to get my GED because school felt like the land of doom

For four years I was mis-educated

(slam book excerpt, Summer 2006)

You want me to paint the picture? This is where it gets a little crazy. I don't know if you are ready for this. My first day of high school was waking up in the morning, and already thinking about this new experience. I'm kind of excited because I'm going to meet new people... I'm just like motivating myself to go out there, be myself. Make a couple of friends, whatever. Get a little clique started, whatever.

I wake up in the morning, get ready. Start walking, whatever. I get off the train and a billion people are walking with me and we're all going the same way. Each and every person does not acknowledge one another. It's almost as if everyone in that morning was robots. Just walking there. Not wanting to go. All of them had like some kind of fear hidden underneath them like oh, I don't want to do this. Like they just wanted to quit and give up. Already it was discouraging and I hadn't even gotten there, I'm just walking there.

Finally, I get to the building and the building is so- it's seven stories high- it's like huge. It's a big giant building. It's a whole block. It's big. It's really big and then you see the school yard which is closed off inside. Automatically, you just get this feeling- am I going to school or minimum security? Like, am I going to school or am I going to visit my locked up uncle? So you walk in and the most unexpected thing happens. I see metal detectors. I've never seen metal detectors in a high school before. A lot of people are used to it but it was something that was new to me. I'm like why the hell do we have metal detectors? What's going on?

Is Osama Bin Laden coming to school with us? Why do we have metal detectors? All the security guards they all look like cops. They are ready to arrest any body right there?

... My first week that I was there were 7 fights. That's crazy... a whole week went by and I hadn't made not one friend yet.

-Jordan, interview excerpt

Animal. Terrorist. Criminal. Loser, baby, prisoner, outsider. Stupid. Students who have been pressed to leave school by school personnel use these words to describe how their teachers treated them. This chapter sets up camp inside that pressure by *articulating* student experiences within unwelcoming and hostile school spaces. I use the word articulating here to signal both the acts of expressing or verbalizing and also of joining together two or more things in such a way that motion is possible.

This chapter argues that New York City public high schools both inadvertently and by design push out students via explicit and implicit policies and practices. It is about the institutional production of drop-out/push-out, emphasizing the potential of individuals and communities to interrupt. In this chapter I conceptualize school push out as being defined by a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities. Citing examples and analyses provided by our youth interview, survey, and focus group participants, I explore the blurred boundaries between personal and institutional responsibility, and by expanding both sides of the dialectic, I argue that school practices that capitalize upon humiliating ironies can be expected to have no other than the present outcome: a school system that invites more students to go than stay.¹³ As a final thread

¹³ The NYCDoe reported the 2005 graduation rate for NYC as 58.2%, 55.6% without GEDs. However, NYSED reported the graduation rate for NYC as 43.5%. Graduation rate reporting is the source of much controversy in New York City, and CREDD recently contributed to a bill sponsored by Assembly person Felix Ortiz' office arguing for standardized, disaggregated, uniformly reported and accessible graduation rate reporting across New York state. For instance, the NYCDoe base cohort number does not include

of analysis, I argue that one person who can help create a space of refuge and critique can be effective in mitigating humiliating ironies, and in part insulate the danger of dangerous dignities.

I utilize the term *push out* throughout this chapter and dissertation to describe the experiences of those youth who have been pressured to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other school personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the insurmountable presence of high stakes testing. My use of the term is somewhat conflicted for several reasons. First, opponents of the make and stance of our research might view it as a loaded term that absolves the individual student of her personal responsibility in her schooling, yielding to a conspiracy theorist's phantasies. Likewise, some might find it too generous a term that protects the closeted inner-workings of a system determined to fail city students. Now having listened to hundreds of stories of push out, this second view resonates with me; for many former students, schools were sites of anxiety, depression, and humiliation—their stories are not stories of mere push out, but squeezed, kicked, punched, sliced out. Cast out. Stamped out. My coinciding readings of Indigenous and decolonizing literatures affirm another word that comes to my mouth: erasure.

However, it is this third item that most complicates my use of the words push out; few youth in our research embraced the term. In an interview Asia told us, “I never was pushed out, I stepped out.”

Jovanne: So there was never one time you felt the teachers and everyone were-

Asia: (jumping in) discriminating. They weren't discriminating so much against my class work as in my behavior. They didn't like the way I was acting, the way I spoke, the way I dressed.

We asked Jameak, “Was there ever a time that you felt pushed out?” Jameak told us, “Pushed *on*, that’s about it.” Later, when looking across transcripts of all of our interviews and focus groups we (CREDD) were perplexed. Our research participants rarely identified as pushed out, but then they would go on to describe circumstances that we would without a doubt categorize as push out. We began by agreeing that it was politically and methodologically problematic to hide or override participants’ reluctance to embrace the term. We then theorized the reluctance.

“Maybe it’s like the term ‘Hispanic,’” Alexis pointed out. “I hate that term, ‘hispanic,’ it’s a term placed on me that’s not useful to me... only to the people that use the term to describe me.” We used this parallel to anchor our theorizing of the limits of the term push out.

In our interviews, we resisted defining push out so that our interview participants would have the space to define it themselves, but doing so might have discouraged participants from identifying in that way. Dropped out and kicked out are persistent terms used to describe school non-completers, and when met by the unfamiliar term push out, youth may have rejected it due to its unfamiliarity. To extend this point, push out is not a term that can substitute for drop out or kick(ed) out, because it shifts its focus away from the individual student and on to the school and school personnel, and youth may have been unfamiliar with a term that signals this shift.

Finally, in part because some of our research collective have been pushed out and have embraced that term as a political identity and very minimally as a personal identity,

we recognize that it doesn't feel good to identify as being "screwed over." Identifying as having been pushed out, calling oneself a push out signals admitting one has been betrayed.

It is with respect and a deep sense of injustice of this betrayal that CREDD and I have continued our use of this term, and we do so with the emphasis that people have the right to name their own identities and we should use the words that people choose for themselves to describe them.

Pilar, a youth GED earner now in her thirties asserts this definition of push out,

If you want to break it down, ultimately, once again I always take responsibility for my shit. Sometimes we don't make the best choices in life. It's not just school that pushed me out. The structure of my school was chaotic. It was like no. I couldn't get help and I sought help. You just get no support. Yes, ultimately, you are pushed out. If by pushed out you mean pushed out by more than just the school.

As I have indicated, my use of the term push out describes those components inside schools that detain and derail students' secondary school completion. However, as Pilar argues, outside forces compound students' needs, and in those times of crisis the lack of support afforded by school policies and practices is glaring.

In a focus group, Gabriel told us, "High school is fine for kids who are fine in their lives, but if there is anything hard going on in someone's life, school becomes very difficult. When things are hard in your life and you're not excelling academically, it's easy to be like, 'This is stupid, I don't need to be here.' And for adults in the school to feel the same way."

Capturing push out

In our survey of over 476 youth from across the city, we asked youth to tell us if they have ever been explicitly asked to leave school. 120, or 23% told us yes. This particular sample (as seen in Table 4.1) yields a close-to-even distribution of explicit push-out across gender, race/ethnicity (with the exception of Native American and Alaskan Native youth, and Asian youth) and class. A recent, smaller scale survey conducted by Advocates for Children (2007), documented a similar even distribution across gender, race/ethnicity, and class. However, we know that Black, Latino, and Native American youth have a 40-50% graduation rate, while White youth have a 50-60% graduation rate. We also know that low income youth are half as likely as middle income youth to graduate in four years.

To me this means that the survey question, “Have you ever been asked to leave school by school personnel?” was not a sufficiently sensitive indicator of school push out. It only captures part of the most explicit nature of school push out, not the implicit yet persistent ways that youth are excluded from schooling.

Table 4.1 Have you ever been asked to leave school by school personnel? by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, Class

		No (N)	No (%)	Yes (N)	Yes (%)
Gender					
	Men	150	75.0	50	25.0
	Women	153	78.1	43	21.9
	Gender non conforming	27	79.4	7	20.6
Race/Ethnicity					
	African American/Black	116	76.3	36	23.7
	African Caribbean	67	77.0	20	23.0
	Asian/Pacific Islander	28	96.6	1	3.4
	Latina/Latino	147	77.8	42	22.2
	Native American Alaskan Native	30	63.8	17	36.2
	White	57	75.0	19	25.0

Class					
	Low-income	137	76.5	42	23.5
	Middle-High Income	172	76.4	53	23.6

Youth in our interviews helped us understand who is pushed out from schooling. Alexis told us that pushed out youth are, “Mostly kids like me. The kids that come from poor families. Came in wanted to learn, asked questions. So many questions that sometimes the teacher was boggled that I even asked questions.” Asia told us,

I’m a very hands on, very loud person. I have to be vocal. They didn’t support that because they felt you’re supposed to be this quiet, demur person. That’s just not my style. I’m sorry, I can’t be quiet. I can’t not speak.

Asia’s insights provide not only a critique of how students are “supposed” to behave, but also how young women are supposed to act in the classroom. In our interview with Brittany, other stereotypes of how girls should act were challenged.

Interviewer: What kind of kids weren’t welcome in your school?

Brittany: People, kids that are out of control. Disrespectful.

Interviewer: Which one of those were you?

Brittany: Actually, I was a fighter.

Interviewer: Would you consider yourself unruly?

Brittany: Yeah.

Ebony tells us that students who were, “Trouble makers, fighters, people that [were always] running in the hallways,” were unwelcome. Riccel wondered in our interview which comes first,

I think, it’s not like people aren’t unwelcome at my high school, it’s just that if they feel like you’re not doing what you need to do to be in school they let you go. So, if you come there and you fight constantly, you have conflicts constantly, you just don’t do what you need to do, you just going to school just because you haven’t anything else to do, then they just let you go.

Asia numerated who is unwelcome,” They didn't want any kids that had a probation officer, they didn't want kids that came from other districts, they didn't want anyone making below an 80 average.”

In Table 4.2, you can see that we did uncover some differences in distribution of school track and school status.

Table 4.2 Have you ever been asked to leave school by school personnel? by school track and school status

	No (N)	No (%)	Yes (N)	Yes (%)
Most of the students in my classes are/were				
AP/honors	70	82.4	15	17.6
Regular/Academic	159	76.1	50	23.9
Remedial/Basic	27	67.5	13	32.5
In Special Education	15	65.2	8	34.8
School status				
GED	77	72.6	29	27.4
HSD	230	79.6	59	20.4
NC	19	63.3	11	36.7

Youth who were explicitly asked to leave school were less likely to be AP or honors students, and more likely to be in special education than students who have never been explicitly asked to leave school. Youth explicitly asked to leave were also less likely to be seeking or have earned a high school diploma, and were more likely to be seeking or have earned a GED or be high school and GED non-completers than youth not explicitly asked to leave.

Table 4.3 displays some of the differences in responses from each group around some central questions.

Table 4.3 Have you ever been asked to leave school by school personnel? Selected questions

	No (N)	No (%)	Yes (N)	Yes (%)
Have you ever considered getting a GED?				

	Yes	120	38.1	46	50.5
	No	195	61.9	45	49.5
Do you know other students who have been pushed out?					
	Yes	158	52.7	66	75.0
	No	142	47.3	22	25.0
Some students are better off getting a GED than staying in high school until graduation.					
	Agree	120	41	43	48.3
	Disagree	173	59	46	51.7
High schools benefit by getting rid of students who don't get good grades; don't pass Regents exams; don't attend classes regularly.					
	Agree	107	41.5	48	55.8
	Disagree	151	58.5	38	44.2

Table 4.3 shows that youth explicitly asked to leave are more likely than their counterparts to consider pursuing a GED. This finding serves to cement the relationship between push out and the GED. Youth who have been asked to leave also were more likely to know other youth who have been pushed out. This suggests that particular groups of youth are targeted to be pushed out.

We asked survey respondents to agree or disagree with the statement, “Some students are better off getting a GED than staying in high school until graduation.” Youth who were asked to leave were more likely than their counterparts to agree with this statement. Further, they were more likely than their counterparts to agree with the statement, “High schools benefit by getting rid of students who don't get good grades, don't pass Regents exams, and don't attend classes regularly.” Their agreement with these statements may point to a belief that exiting school is better for all parties. Interview participant Sophia told us, “I had this teacher who always told me ‘Quit wasting my time, quit wasting my time.’ One day, it came to me, this was a waste of all of our time.”

The school environment as context of push out

In our interviews, in our focus groups, on our survey, young people again and again taught us the following three things: 1) Some schools implicitly teach students they are not cut out for school. 2) Students struggle to sustain their schooling in spaces that no one seems to want to be 3) Poor students, students of color, and undocumented students are especially unwelcome in some schools. Miguel told us, “They didn't want *anybody* there. My high school was the *worst*.”

Hsaio, a GED instructor, told us about the experiences of undocumented youth who come to her GED program.

Some of the students [when they come to the US] they are turning into 19 or 20. Sometimes 18. The schools, they refuse to take them. It's not just one case, it's like 10 different cases every month. They've been deferred. They've been pushed out of school and told go to [a] GED [program]. They don't even provide them a place they could contact. So, sometimes they use their English skills as an excuse. They say go and take GED because they require less of this language than demanded in a school.

Zhi, a recent immigrant from China, told us about being turned away when he tried to enroll in several high schools. “They did not want me because my age and my English level. They tell me if I go to a high school I cannot understand what they are talking about. They said, how can I learn the something?”

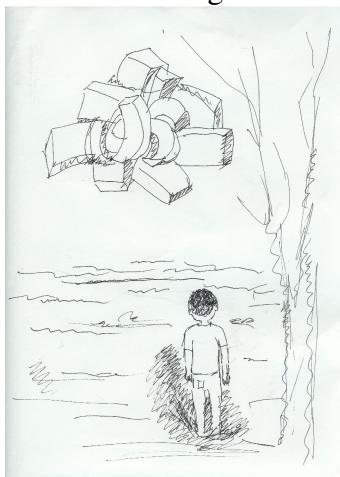


Figure 4.1 Zhi's education map depicting the puzzling question before him of how to move forward in the United States and in his education.

Many youth told us that their schools made them question if they were really cut out for learning, some telling us that they felt pushed out of school as early as 5th and 7th grade. Benji told us, “I walked [in the building] and I thought, ‘no way, not me.’ I mean, I knew right away that that place was not for me in the first place.” Amaris observed “I felt like there was no need for me to be there. They already had their minds set up that I was just going to continue doing what I had been doing. They weren't going to waste their time with me.” Tyrone, however, insisted, “It’s not that we aren’t cut out for school, we don’t want to be in school because we don’t like it. If they were in a different school, they would stay. If they were in a different environment, they would stay. That’s not the case, so they leave.”

We asked youth to tell us about the environments of their current and former schools. In Table 4.4, you can see that youth who were explicitly asked to leave were more likely than their counterparts to describe their schools as overcrowded, violent, unstable, dirty, depressing, and prison-like. They are less likely than their counterparts to describe their schools as relevant, welcoming, encouraging, respectful, well-kept, and safe.

Table 4.4 School Environment: Selected Responses and Comparisons (N= 455)

My school is...	Not asked to leave	Asked to leave
Overcrowded	42.9	50.5
Violent	30.1	44.4
Unstable	29.1	43.4
Dirty	24.5	40.8
Depressing	24.8	35.4
Prison-like	29.8	34.3
Relevant	9.3	9.1
Rigorous	11.1	15.2
Welcoming	35.6	20.2
Encouraging	27.1	23.5
Respectful	36.6	24.2

Well-kept	32.2	24.2
Safe	40.8	33.3

When we shared these findings with interview participant James, he explained the situation in these terms, “I went to a very bad school. Constant fights, gang members, nobody doing the right thing... Overworked, underappreciated teachers. The whole system set us up to fail.” Amanda explained, “Some people just can’t take the stress of the classroom and the kids and the violence and the hypocrites.”

In Table 4.4, you can also see that all groups of youth overwhelmingly described their schools as *not* relevant, *not* rigorous. In an interview, Jovanne contended, “I don’t think my school supported anyone’s way of learning. The only learning [my school] cared about was money, money, money. Basically, you could say their favorite subject was math; adding and subtracting a group students.”

The dialectic of school push out

My goal here is to map school push out as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities. I call the disrespectful interactions between school personnel and youth, and the unintended consequences of school policies humiliating ironies because they do not just serve to exclude youth from schooling, but assault their dignities in the process. Dangerous dignity is the powerful position that youth take up in response to and in anticipation of this ongoing humiliation and hypocrisy.

Calling upon dialectics as a way to conceptualize contradictory bothness, I will move through our data to show that the complexities of school push out move beyond institutional vs. personal responsibilities toward something much more like the image of the snake eating her own tail: Ironies and hypocrisies that humiliate are more difficult to expose. Dignities that are dangerous exponentially raise the stakes. It is hard to tell

where one ends and the other begins, and impossible to trace to their origins. They simultaneously cause and provoke the other. They are an arms race.

Within this dialectic the lines between institutional and personal responsibilities are blurred, confused. For example, Jovanne spoke in an interview about an incident with a teacher when she refused to remove her head scarf. Jovanne identified this “altercation” as an exemplary moment in which she felt unwelcome in school. “My hair was not done that day and he tried to make me take my scarf off. I refused. So he went out of his way to get me suspended for telling him that if he had a bad hair day he'd want to wear a scarf too.”

Unsure if the no scarves policy was school wide or particular to this teacher's classroom, Jovanne nevertheless experienced this rule as directly aimed at embarrassing her. Her teacher's institutional power wore personal and punitive gloves; Jovanne's somewhat innocuous reasons for wearing her head scarf (a bad hair day) rapidly became politicized, a line drawn in the sand that was too easily crossed by each of them. Jovanne and her teacher's personal and institutional responsibilities were tangled, knotted and oppositional. Each oppositional tug on the knot made the tangles tighter and less likely to come undone without scissors, further entrenching both of them in increasingly extreme options. Her teacher exercised the seemingly extreme option of getting Jovanne suspended, while Jovanne soon exercised the seemingly extreme option of exiting school completely.

By examining the extreme options to push and be pushed as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities, we can begin to understand Jovanne's and

many other pushed out youths' exits from schooling as not at all extreme, but rather as acts of self-preservation and political critique and defiance, even as repatriation.

Humiliating Ironies

There are some people who are smarter than others, that learn faster than others but it doesn't mean you should have them feel like, 'You know what, I'm dumb so I have to stay over here with the dumb people.' You should treat them the same regardless of their grades and things like that. Everybody should feel wanted and feel like I could be that if I wanted to. There are people here who are going to help me. –Sophia

This discussion contends that youth are acutely aware of the ironies of schooling, and this awareness, compounded by their widely held connections between success in schooling and intelligence and worthiness, makes each ongoing irony more and more humiliating. In other words, unresolved ironies of schooling stab at students' experiences of themselves as intelligent enough or worthy enough to do well in school. The ironies that I will discuss here include state mandated exit exams and shrinking class size. An additional irony, school as lifeline, will be the focus of the entirety of the next chapter.

An overwhelming finding of our study is that many of these humiliating ironies play out between student and teacher, and though they likely have meta-institutional origins, they take on a pervasive inter-personal quality. Like in the example Jovanne shared above, institutional rules and policies are enforced by teachers in ways that target specific students with specificity to their bodies, behavior, and thinking. *Rule enforcement is personalized, even when school rules are generalized.* This humiliating irony confounds students, and they describe their school experiences as feeling attacked and paranoid.

One of the most commonly broken rules is regular attendance. Amaris told us, "(O)ne teacher, he freaking asked me if I had like 12 kids, if that is why I missed so much

school.” Her teacher’s enforcement of the rule of regular attendance publicly objectified Amaris’ body and sexuality, and implicitly her ethnicity and social class. In a less overt example, Arimme told us about a time her class was assigned a book report on a difficult text. She asked her teacher, “What if you can’t read it?” and her teacher retorted,

“It’s not my fault you all didn’t come to school.” This approach to rule enforcement confirms students’ suspicions that they are unwelcome in school, yielding a Catch 22 of school attendance often cited by our participants: The less regularly a student attends, the more difficult school personnel make it to attend. Further, attendance rule enforcement at a time when a student is indicating a need for help salts the wound, expanding their dangerous dignity.

For youth, evidence of their being unwelcome goes beyond school rule enforcement, to their teachers’ pedagogies. For example, Sophia described to us an interaction in Math class that happened after she (unexpectedly) correctly answered a tough question. Seeing how pleased she was with herself, her teacher said (in Sophia’s telling), “Yeah, you think you’re so smart. But children in Africa are smarter than you because dadadadada. They carry their desks to school and you kids in America, you dadadada.” Sophia continued, “He was just really insulting me and I just felt like what kind of teacher is this? How am I supposed to feel comfortable in class when he’s insulting me and telling me I am not that smart and things like that?”

Tyrone describes how he experienced his teacher’s practice of reading out loud to the class, a practice widely held to be effective in improving students’ comprehension and reading fluency, as well as teaching a love of reading. “She would read to us every day. At first, I was like, why is she reading this to us? I can read it myself. Why [is] she

reading it to us? After a while, after class was over, I'm figuring, 'Dag, I need somebody to read it to me.'" In this way, even well intentioned teacher practices undermine students' feelings of intelligence and worthiness. It is important to remember that Tyrone's and other's experiences are often repeated across their interactions with many school personnel. Unfortunately this means that one teacher's good intentions may be misread as being in concert with a litany of hostile interactions. (A discussion of what one person can do, indeed counter stories to this idea, appears at the end of this chapter)

These experiences accumulate into a complete and pervasive, highly personalized feelings of being unwelcome. We asked interview participant Arimme, "Was there a specific time that you felt unwelcome?" She told us,

It was so many times. It is hard to just pinpoint one of them. Most of the times what I would do is just get a pass to the bathroom and leave. The first exit I see, I'm out the door. They don't want me to be here. Here I am and you're acting like I'm invisible, and you're only paying attention to certain individuals in the class. Well, I'm going to get out of here, I'm getting the hell out of here. I'm not going to waste my time.

The feeling of unwelcoming in schools has been described to us by our participants as imprecise yet omnipresent. Youth describe it as all encompassing but, as in Arimme's words above, hard to pinpoint. *Unwelcome, unwanted, inhospitable*- youth experience schooling in ways that are largely marked by that which is missing- yet these words barely hint at the aggression that youth report. We are not talking about inadvertent slights here, but what amounts to systematic unwelcoming and resentment, way-paved by acute inflexibility and indifference.

For example, Amanda tells us, "A teacher one time was really horrible and she called me a spic. I [have] never been so degraded in my life." Amanda's experience of

her teacher's blatant racism is echoed in James' assessment of differential treatment of white students and students of color.

You could be the smartest dude in the world. Have a PhD. But you have a red flag on and you walk in the school, they're going to say this guy's trouble... To them you're just some thug. A white person comes walking and they've got a red flag on, they're going to think they've got a red flag on just because it's hot. They're just covering their hair. A Black guy [is automatically] a triple three star general [in a gang]. You see Black guys doing it, or Hispanic, you're like, hey he's a troublemaker. Watch him.

While our participants were adept at identifying racist comments and assumptions made by their teachers, speaking much more to the (lacking) quality of their teachers' thoughts than their own, because these kinds of incidents often occurred publicly and were personalized, they were difficult to put behind.

Table 4.5 Teacher Treatment by Not Asked to Leave and Asked to Leave

My teachers treated me like...	Not Asked to Leave		Asked to leave		Difference (%)
	Agree(%)	Disagree(%)	Agree(%)	Disagree(%)	
A thinker	49.5	50.5	42.3	57.7	-7.2
A creative person	57.4	42.6	41.2	58.8	-16.2
A college bound student	41.5	58.5	30.2	69.8	-11.3
A friend	53.6	46.4	26.8	73.2	-26.8
A leader	37.0	63.0	26.8	73.2	-10.2
A source of knowledge	31.8	68.2	20.6	79.4	-11.2
I'm valuable to them	19.4	80.6	17.5	82.5	-1.9
A criminal	15.1	84.9	36.1	63.9	21.0
A prisoner	11.1	88.9	33.0	67.0	21.9
A loser	14.6	85.4	32.3	67.7	17.7
A stupid person	17.4	82.6	32.3	67.7	14.9
A baby	11.5	88.5	29.9	70.1	18.4
An animal	10.8	89.2	28.9	71.1	18.1
An outsider	13.9	86.1	24.7	75.3	10.8
I'm nothing without them	13.5	86.5	21.5	78.5	8.0
A 2nd Class citizen	10.9	89.1	19.6	80.4	8.7
A terrorist	7.4	92.6	16.5	83.5	9.1
A future day laborer	11.5	88.5	11.5	88.5	0.0

Our survey results confirm our interview data that describe teacher-student dealings as destabilizing students' feelings of intelligence and worthiness. In our sample

of 476 youth, 80.6% of all youth said their teachers do not treat them like “I’m valuable to them,” 68.2% said that their teachers do not treat them like a source of knowledge, and 58.5% said that their teachers do not treat them like a college bound student.

Further, those who were explicitly asked to leave (23% of the larger sample) were 3 times more likely to say that their teachers treated them like a prisoner and an animal, were more than 2 times more likely to say that their teachers treated them like a criminal, loser, and terrorist, and were 2 times more likely to say that their teachers treated them like a baby and a stupid person.

The ways in which humiliating ironies play out as interpersonal are not limited to teacher-student relationships. Although 33% of those explicitly asked to leave were asked by teachers, 29% were asked by a dean, 23% were asked by a principal, and 15% were asked to leave by other school personnel. Brittany, a self described “fighter” told us about a time that she went to a principal rather than engage in a physical retaliation after a male student pushed her in the hallway. Her principal told her that it showed that, “(Y)ou’re not welcome here,” and suggested that she pursue a GED.

The intimate, interpersonal nature of these ironies heat them, causing a chemical reaction that turns these ironies into an even more poignant offense: hypocrisy. Youth we interviewed saw the personnel of their former schools as painfully hypocritical. For example, Jameak told us that school staff would rarely curb the behavior of “negative people,” students who were blatantly disrespectful and even violent. Jameak continued,

(T)hey don't bother them like that ‘cause they are afraid they will get disrespected, or probably get into a fight with one of the kids. But a person who barely does nothing like me, [because] I have a loud laugh, or talk to myself so much, [that] makes [school personnel] upset. So if I was talking to myself in the hallway, or I start laughing, [it] would lead me into a detention. [They were always] trying to burn me for little stuff like that.

In many of our interviews, youth describe instances where school personnel “went out of their way” to ensure that students were punished for what in many cases were attempts to deflect verbal attacks on their person. In another situation he described, Jameak was so frustrated with an administrator who was constantly disrespecting students that one day after being insulted, Jameak retorted that he wished President Bush could visit the school, just to see the way that students are really treated. The administrator railed Jameak, even provoking him with “Why don’t you just leave?” but at the time, Jameak held his ground.

“I was sure that if President Bush was in the school everybody would be so nice to me. It would be so nice in the school. The school would be clean. The teachers would be nicer. I was just speaking my mind and it got me in trouble.” Clearly, the hyperbolic irony, the hypocrisy of being asked to leave because he suggested that a visit from the President might improve the conditions for students did not escape Jameak. Jameak stopped attending the school shortly after this incident.

Another frequently cited hypocrisy concerned what our participants observed as school personnel’s’ reluctance to educate all students. Miguel told us, “When I asked for help, they sucked their teeth. That’s their job. Even if you are to ask a bunch of times, that’s their job. [If a] student keeps asking, you’ve got to help. And they get upset.” Almost half of our interview participants indicated that they believe that some school personnel are “only there to get paid.” Some insisted that they saw a difference in the attitudes of school personnel on pay days, and Sophia told us that

“Not all of them, but some of them” had a favorite phrase: “I already got mine so I don’t really care if you get yours; I’m going to get paid anyway.” When we challenged

this idea by reminding our participants that school staff are notoriously underpaid, they told us that this made school personnel even more resentful. Every single one of the participants that made this assessment was careful to emphasize that this attitude was not held by all but only some school personnel. However, the impact of these sentiments was widespread, serving to undermine compelling reasons for students to continue to attend school.

In Alexis' experience, "Some teachers just didn't give a damn about you. They just wanted to mark that attendance card that you're sitting in that seat and then you could have just walked out of that class." The hypocrisy of being required to attend (and punished for not attending) a school day when school personnel also don't want to be there insulted youth and made their attempts toward school completion seem futile. In a focus group, Raymond wondered,

"How are we supposed to want to be there when they don't?" Flora added,

"Instead of making it a place we all want to go to, they take out punishment on us because they have to be there." In an interview, Asia told us,

"It's like a lynch mob when you walk in that building." While youth in our focus groups and interviews theorized that the experience was just as unsatisfying and disheartening to the personnel of their schools, they saw school personnel as having the responsibility of making the first step towards change, a responsibility they rarely saw be embraced.

One last interpersonal hypocrisy identified by our youth participants was the fantasy of meritocracy. Almost all of our participants expressed frustration in the largely unspoken, grotesquely imbalanced playing field between well funded and under funded

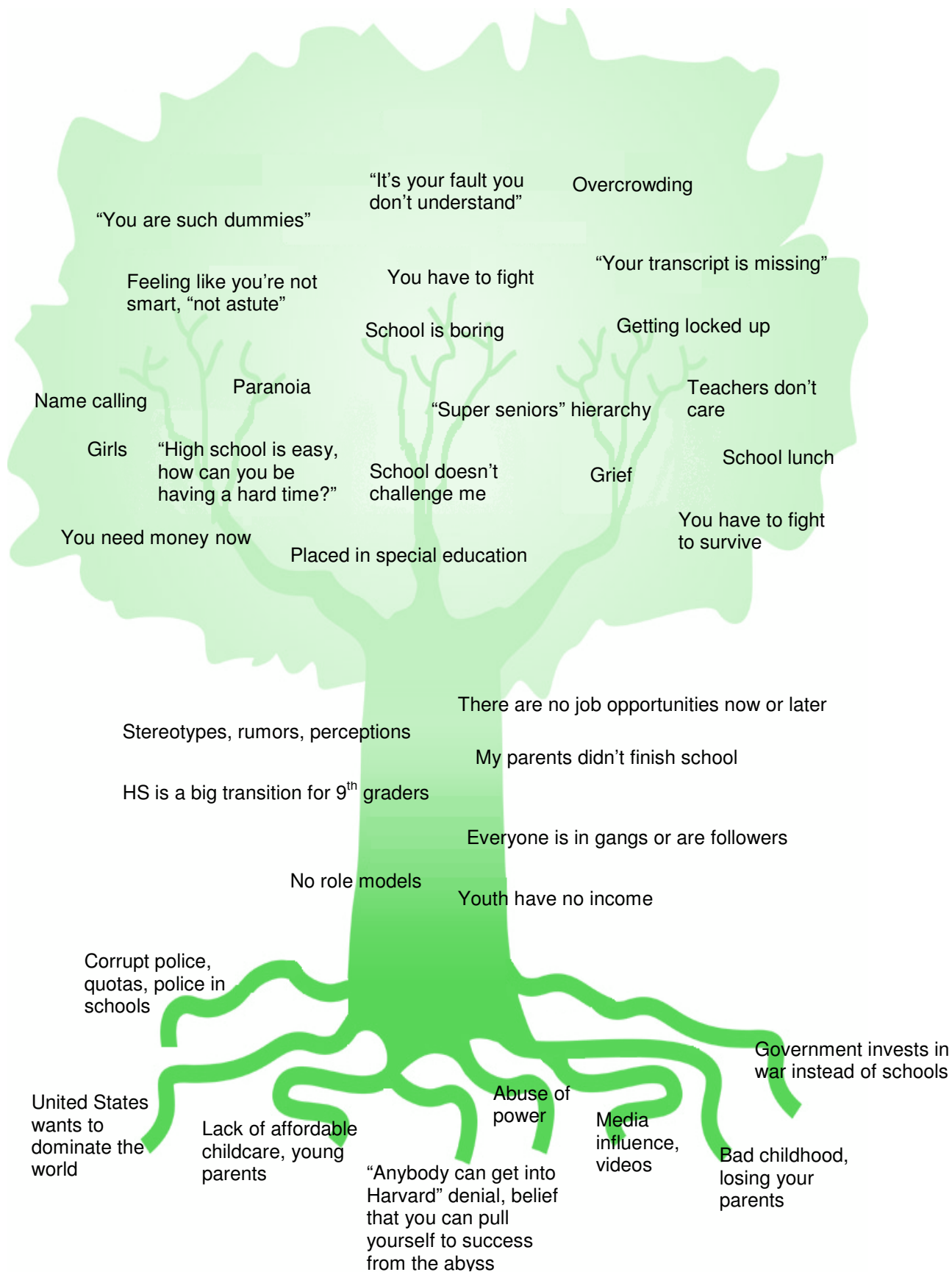
schools. In one focus group, a young woman angrily explained, “It’s not fair that poor students go to poor schools.” In an interview, a young man told us,

“If you know the deck is stacked against you a lot of times you just stop playing the game.” Several youth in our interviews describe this stacked deck by citing funding per student in wealthy school districts such as nearby Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester counties, compared to funding per student in New York City. In the last moments of her interview, Jovanne had this message,

I want to let you know that putting us in housing projects is setting us up for failure. It's not equal. And sending us to school with no books, teachers who have no education themselves, attitudes and stuff like that is not what we need. Meanwhile, when you go to a suburb and the teachers are nice and friendly and accommodate these children’s ways of learning. They've got books. They've got extra books. They're just throwing them around. They have bowling classes, and they have art. They are learning how to crochet while we sitting there just trying to learn our math with the person interrupting in the back, the gunshots on the outside, fire trucks, and police running our school.

Somewhat polemic in her analysis, Jovanne’s statement nevertheless points to the absurdity of education as the great equalizer in such unequal circumstances. Youth participants in focus group, while completing their problem tree on school push out, called this the “Anybody can get into Harvard denial,” and cited it as one of the persistent roots of school push out. In Figure 4.1, you can see the problem tree on school push-out created by youth GED seekers and earners in our school push-out focus group. The construction of the tree was facilitated by my youth co-researchers, who began by asking youth to make the leaves, the everyday ways that they felt pushed-out of school. Then, the group theorized the trunk, the attitudes and beliefs that contributed to the leaves. Finally, the group theorized the roots, the often unseen ideologies and structures that anchor the trunk and the leaves.

Figure 4.1 Push out Focus Group Problem Tree



In this problem tree, youth mapped and connected issues of youth derogation to the pre-existing derogation of their parents and families. Further, they situated this generational disrespect within a context of US domination and concurrent domestic disinvestment. Finally, they mapped the ways in which the meritocratic narrative or “Anybody can get into Harvard denial”—by insisting that anyone can “pull yourself to success,”—masks this disinvestment.

This deep set denial fog-rolls through every corner of youths’ schools, and youth are betrayed by their teachers’ and administrators’ grip-lock on it. (It is difficult to capture fog in one’s grasp.) Put another way, youth see school personnel as believing more in (false) meritocracy than in the complexity of youths’ lives, and they experience this as a betrayal. Tyrone provides this picture of the difference between the fantasy and real life, utilizing the concept of the American Dream to articulate this denial.

You say the American Dream is that you can go to public school, high school, graduate, and go to college and go to grad school and become a doctor. That’s not going to happen. That’s not reality. Sometimes that happens, but that’s not reality. When you go to pre-school, you go to kindergarten, first grade, you get in trouble cause you flushed a mouse down the toilet. Something simple like that. For the rest of your life you’re known as the kid who flushed the mouse down the toilet. People make fun of you because of that. And you go to junior high school and you get into fights. You go to high school and there’s girls there. It’s crazy. People have such a set goal for what education is supposed to be like, and it’s the complete..., well, not the complete opposite, but different than people intended it to be.

A mix of experience, humor, and longing, Tyrone’s description reveals how arbitrary acts have school-career long consequences on student reputations, and then, how quickly other factors (fights, girls) can stack up while tearing apart any possibilities for the easy and idyllic educational path that is widely upheld as the norm. Throughout our entire interview with Tyrone, he sustained and built upon this critique, citing how the

difference between what schools were supposed to be and what they really are, compounded by the denial of this difference, amounts to a hypocrisy that students struggle to stomach. Meritocracy and schooling's public face as a "fair," meritocratic system are another humiliating irony, especially because youth are critical of how the meritocratic myth hides unfair sorting practices, and at the same time they *want* schools to be places that balance social inequity. This discussion is taken up in chapter five.

Having dedicated several pages to explicating the interpersonal nature of humiliating ironies and the ways in which these ironies are experienced by youth as offensive hypocrisies, I now turn to two additional humiliating ironies: state mandated exit exams and shrinking class size.

Humiliating Irony: State mandated exit exams

New York State is one of twenty-two (and counting) states that require students to pass an exit exam or exams in order to graduate from high school. In 1996, the New York State Board of Regents passed an order making the passing of five Regents exams mandatory for all students to qualify for graduation. Prior to 1996, the Regents exams were optional, and students who planned to attend competitive colleges and universities might take the exams in order to earn an enhanced high school diploma. The 1996 decision began a long, uneven phase-out of what was known as the local diploma, the credit-based graduation option; long and uneven because while urban areas such as New York City and Rochester have fully excised the option, some smaller (and wealthier) districts continue to award the local diploma.¹⁴

Officially, between the years of 1996 and 2001, one additional exam was added each year until 2001, when all five exams were required and the title "local diploma" was

¹⁴ This was revealed to me after some persistent questioning in a meeting with a NYSED representative.

changed to “Regents Diploma.” To graduate, students must pass Regents exams in mathematics, English, global history and geography, US history and government, and science.¹⁵ Students who pass additional exams in mathematics, science, and a language other than English qualify for an “Advanced Regents Diploma.”

Policy allows students to retake exams if they do not pass the first time, though in practice, as youth told us, being allowed to retake exams is not guaranteed. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are allowed to take a Regents Competency Test (RCT) instead of the Regents exams. Students with IEPs who do not or cannot pass the RCT can receive an IEP diploma by meeting the terms of their IEP. Students without IEPs who do not pass the Regents exams, cannot receive a diploma, and have no options for being credentialed except for somehow being classified as needing an IEP and getting an IEP diploma, or the GED.¹⁶

CREDD’s data confirm the link between mandatory exit exams/phase out of the local diploma to school push out in ways that I will describe below. Before I turn to this evidence, however, it is important to note the New York City has been held up as a national exemplar of school policy reform via Mayoral Control; even though the city is third from the bottom in graduation rates (Detroit graduated 21.7%, Baltimore graduated 38.5%) mayors from all over the country have come to New York City to learn from

¹⁵ One rare exception is the network of 28 small, innovative high schools that are the New York Performance Standards Consortium, formed in 1997. Member schools do not use exit exams to determine graduation. In 2001, the NYSED attempted to strip the schools of their rights to not comply to Regents exam mandates afforded by a prior variance agreement. The consortium sued, and has maintained these rights. (performanceassessment.org)

¹⁶ In my work with Advocates for Children I have come across several cases in which students who *wanted* to stay in school but would not ever be able to pass the Regents exams tried to get classified as needing an IEP. I came across many more in which they were classified as IEP without their consent precisely because their counselors had determined that they could not pass the Regents. The IEP “diploma” is at the heart of much controversy in NYS because many advocates for special education students argue that “diploma” is a misnomer. The IEP diploma literally has no use-value for gaining access to further education or employment. In terms of credential power it is a certificate of attendance. There are deep-grooved parallels between the IEP and GED.

Mayor Bloomberg's model. (Toppo, 2006; Moore, 2007) New York State ranks 47th out of 49 on a list of states ranked by graduation rate¹⁷. Though not cited by our youth participants, this is certainly a frustrating if not humiliating irony.

Further, recent (2002 and 2007) merit pay agreements can exacerbate the pressure on teachers and schools to produce improved exam results at any costs. In 2002, the contract for New York City superintendents included a bonus of up to \$40,000 for increasing the number of students who scored 65 or higher on the English and mathematics Regents exams (Goodnough, 2002). Though the teachers' union was critical of this move as potentially "divisive" in 2002, in 2007 the union accepted a merit based reward effort from the Mayor's office in exchange for earlier retirement for long term teachers. Randi Weingarten, union president, emphasized the differences between the individual merit pay for superintendents and the "checks and balances," "collaborative on a school level" plan accepted for teachers. In the teacher plan, schools will be awarded for increased test scores, and committees in each school will decide how and to whom to distribute the money. Also, test scores will not be attached to teacher tenure decisions (Gootman, 2007).

Most of the youth participants in our study theorized the role of testing and their former schools' over-reliance on testing as influential in their push out experiences. They framed the problem of testing in two ways: 1) *Testing impacts student completion*. The first had to do with the pressure to pass the Regents exit exams, and the fallout when students don't pass the exams. For example, many youth reported that teachers, guidance counselors, deans, and other administrators explicitly told them, "You're not going to pass this test, why bother [taking it again/staying in school]?" 2) *Testing impacts school*

¹⁷ Missing from the ranked list were Washington DC and Hawaii.

curricula. The second way youth framed the problem of testing dealt with the ways in which testing has narrowed and over-determined curricula. These two elements work in combination with the steep consequences (and rewards, as discussed above) of testing for schools creating a perfect storm-like set up for school push out.

The New York City Department of Education itself has acknowledged this problematic scenario. In 2001, the NYCDoE completed a report titled *An Examination of the Relationship between Higher Standards and Students Dropping Out* that warned that at-risk students, particularly English Language Learners were made vulnerable by current testing policies.

Research has consistently shown that increasing standards has an impact on the high school completion rates of the most at-risk student...if interventions are not consistently carried out for at-risk students, then students who are not able to keep up tend to give up and become drop-outs (2001, p. 5)

The report also acknowledges,

While it is too soon to conclusively attribute the observed increase in drop out rate over the past three years to the higher grade promotion standards being imposed in New York City and the higher graduation standards being phased in by New York State, this trend is consistent with previous research showing a relationship between higher standards and lower school completion rates. (2001, p. 1)

Yet seven years later, the policies haven't changed.

GED instructor Rashaad, who earned his GED as a young person, had this analysis of the effects of testing on youth school completion:

New York has a more than 50% drop out rate. How do they remedy this? They made it harder. They abolished the regular track and made the Regents mandatory. That made no sense to me. They said, 'You got a problem already.' And you don't solve it, you know, you aggravate it,

you widen the gap. And it's really not worth it. That's one of the things, it's really not worth it.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, it appears that on-time graduation rates have incrementally increased, but there are important unanswered questions about the largely undefined and unaccounted for “discharge category” to which one in five youth are assigned, and the substantial loss of youth before they enter 9th grade (Haney and Foote, personal communication. See also chapter three). Without such nuances, it would be difficult to argue that the mandatory Regents policy has caused graduation rates to drop, but with these nuances, we can see that the pressure such policies exert on schools may be affecting earlier push-out, and shadowy “discharge.”

In one focus group, three youth who had attended the same school talked about a time they showed up for a Regents exam and there were not enough chairs set up for all of the students in the class. “They were like, ‘Oh— you’re here.’ They were like disappointed.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t believe it [was] so blatant.”

“I knew they didn’t think that I was going to pass it, but I can’t believe they [were] like betting that I wasn’t going to face it.”

“[I saw that happening to you and] I just felt like getting up and walking out. I was probably more pissed about it than you were.”

“I was so pissed I could barely concentrate.”

In an interview Amanda told us, “A lot of people were told if they are not going to make it, just leave. They just basically didn't care; if you weren't there, they were happy.” Amanda saw many classmates be pushed out before she herself was pushed out.

At the same time, youth told us that the “test obsession” made their actual classes dreadfully unappealing. Benji told us, “If I saw one more bubble sheet I was going to go crazy.” He continued, “A lot of what we were learning actually wasn’t that bad, because I learned it later in my GED classes. But the GED classes applied [the course content] to my life, not to what was going to be on the test.” Benji, a GED earner now in community college marveled in his interview at his current interest in course subjects that he could have never anticipated he would enjoy. Still, he expresses a sense of loss and frustration for what his high school classes could have been;

Now looking back at what my classes were like I feel angry that I didn’t have the time to learn things that are important to me. It was always ‘Pack it in, pack it in, pack it in, move on to the next things because it’s gonna be on the test.’ There would be things that caught my eye, that sparked my mind, but it would be like, ‘No, keep it moving to the next lesson.’

Renata, a GED instructor, left her teaching position in the NYCDoE in 2003, in large part because of the weight of testing on her curriculum and pedagogy.

Every day for about a month my ‘do now’ said ‘Get ready to get ready for the test!!!’ And I would, like, add exclamation points to it like it wasn’t a travesty. It got to the point where I was feeling embarrassed... When a student asks you ‘Why do we need to know this?’ I feel like a good teacher should have a good answer. To say ‘Because it’s on the test’ is disrespectful to them in all sorts of ways... I was very depressed, I barely made it through that semester... Then all summer I felt so— *heavy* about going back... In the end, I just couldn’t go back.

Renata’s observations of the pedagogical and ethical conflicts that arise in test-based curricula were echoed from the students’ points of view in our interviews and focus groups. Young people often expressed feelings of resentment for teachers in standardized test-based courses for being “hypocritical.” In one focus group, youth scoffed at teachers who said that the tests don’t matter. “They said they don’t matter but they did. [Otherwise] why is she putting so much pressure on it?” Later in the discussion,

Yeo said, “I had a teacher who was always talking about loving learning. Asking us if we loved our learning today. I’m thinking, ‘Are you so crazy you’re loving *this*?’”

Beyond these ironies, the biggest irony of all- that tests don’t even accurately or comprehensively measure student learning- is best captured by Willis: “Tests are unnecessary for being able to show that you put in effort, show that you care, that you pay attention; what’s the point of having a test if it can’t tell you these things?”

In 2001, the Rockefeller foundation hosted a group of educational experts to form a panel that would review the Regents exams. The panel found that the exams do not meet stated NYSED standards, that passing English Language Arts (ELA) and Global Studies exams does not indicate readiness for college, and that the ELA consistently “sanitizes” literature excerpts on the exam (Regents exam review panel report, 2001). In total, five such panels have convened at their assessment of these assessments are consistent: these tests do not purport to do what they say they do, and they are often poorly and inaccurately constructed (performanceassessment.org/consequences/index).

In their critical analysis (2008) of the No Child Left Behind Act, Michael Rebell and Jessica Wolff describe the ways in which NCLB has contributed to a shift in the purpose of schooling, away from teaching and learning toward assessment. In part, this is because although the drafters of the act recognized two significant needs in the nation’s education landscape, opportunity and proficiency, they drafted the act to respond only to proficiency.

...(P)oor and minority students, whose readiness for learning is severely affected by conditions of poverty, are nevertheless more likely than their more affluent White peers to attend lower-quality schools— however school quality is measured— and to lack adequate educational resources to meet their learning needs. NCLB does not speak directly to this central issue. (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 39).

The act mandates 100% proficiency for all schools by 2014. This mandate has exponentially raised the stakes for schools, as private firms and companies willing to step in and take over failing schools wait in the wings, licking their chops.

If the proficiency for all target were merely a motivational goal, this might be an innocuous stand. But since thousands of schools around the country are being labeled “in need of improvement”- which the public reads as “failing”- because they have proved incapable of making sufficient progress toward an unempirical goal, this aspect of the law is causing considerable harm...This situation will become increasingly unworkable as we approach 2014. By that year, almost all schools in the nation will fall short of the AYP targets and are likely to be on the “needs improvement” list. (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 5; Linn, 2004).

Further, in a recent audit conducted by the Fordham Foundation, only five states have tests that are in “solid” alignment with their state standards. New York State was determined to have a “fair” and “fair, borderline poor” alignment between tests and standards in Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Math, and Secondary Reading, and determined the state to have a “poor” alignment between tests and standards in Elementary and Middle Reading. (Cross, Rebarber, & Torres, 2004) “Given the lack of alignment of many state tests with state content standards, a serious question arises as to whether many of the tests are, in fact, valid for the extensive purposes for which they are being used.” (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 120).

Standardized test based curricula, and the pressure on all parties for high scores combine to dissuade students from schooling. More compelling reasons for curricular lessons and high achievement need to be identified in order to counteract this trend.

Humiliating Irony: Shrinking graduating class size while my remedial class size continues to grow

The final humiliating irony that I will explore in this chapter has to do with youths' awareness of the number of their classmates exiting school before graduation while at the same time being squeezed into over-crowded classrooms. Youth told us that even though they may see fewer familiar faces in the crowd as they moved through the halls of their high schools, there were just as many bodies in the basic and remedial classes that they needed in order to continue their schooling. "I know it wasn't all honors kids dropping out, so why do they got no one in their classes and I got everyone in mine?" Jessica asked in a focus group.

In our interviews, we asked each young person to tell us if their graduating class got smaller, or "dwindled down," when they noticed it, and what they thought about it. Their estimations of how many and who match graduation rate statistics from the Manhattan Institute. Asia told us, "We went from being 200 entry class to being, when I was last told, when all my other friends graduated, it was about 100 people that graduated."

But Alexis told us, "Dwindled down? Nooo, they never dwindled down, they always dwindled up. Sometimes they had standing room only in my classes." She continued,

I'd walk by some classes and [see through the door window] that there were empty seats in them. I think they were separating us, dumb kids from smart kids and making dumb special classes. And crowding us all up in other classes, you know like 'Crowd them up in there and let them go crazy for the 45 minutes.'

Tyrone offered this narration,

There was like a hundred of us, then the next year, like eighty-something. Then junior year came and there was like half of us.¹⁸ Then senior year came and there was only ten to fifteen of them... The numbers started to decrease, not even every year, but, like, every semester. The fall semester would come and there would be kids there. The spring semester would come and they'd be gone. Every semester there would be less and less of us. I don't know if they went to different high schools or if they were dropping out, but they did leave.

Youth told us that they thought differently about youth who were pushed out before they themselves were pushed out.¹⁹ Before it happened to them, they thought that school non-completers were losers, pathetic. When it happened to acquaintances or bullies, they had mixed feelings of too bad/thank God not me/good riddance. When friends were pushed out, our participants told us that they worried it meant that they would not graduate too, but some confessed it was a relief to not be the only one on their way out the door.

Young people talked about these experiences as being emotionally difficult to sort through, and as summoning up feelings of intense aloneness and loneliness. "I felt like I was walking around with this big secret," Reina said. "I was going crazy. I was going to have to get out or I thought I would fall apart." B.B. reflected, "So many people go through it, but it felt like I was the only one."

There are several betrayals at work here. First, youth see mass numbers of students exiting their schools, and their schools continue as if nothing has occurred, as if those students had just fallen through the cracks. Then, the courses in which they are supposed to get the help they need to move through their schooling are over crowded and chaotic. Finally, though those who do not complete school are in the numeric majority

¹⁸ Tyrone left in the middle of his 11th grade year.

¹⁹ This was the most requested moment in our interviews in which participants asked to turn off the tape.

of New York City youth, young people who have this experience are left feeling isolated, and like *they* are aberrant.

Late in the spring of 2007, I met with CREDD to plan some actions and outreach about our data, particularly around these findings. Our conversation inspired me to imagine a city-wide action in which rather than walk out, or wear black, or teach in, all of the students on all of the city rosters, *show up*. The too long lines for security, too few chairs and textbooks, too many voices and bodies would expose the ways in which schools are designed to ensure that only half or so make it through. It would expose a school system in deep, deep denial.

As I've listened to the interview tapes, to their pauses, the places where the tape stops and starts again, I've been thinking about this show up day. Avery Gordon (1997) has written about haunting and the sociological imagination— she writes quite literally of ghosts, the stubborn souls bearing marks of colonization and white supremacy that hang around in the silences and in the noise of everyday life. I think too of Michelle Fine and Pearl Rosenberg's insistence on the ways in which,

Critical perspectives on social institutions are often best obtained from exiles, that is, persons who leave those institutions. This is perhaps why exiles' views are frequently disparaged as deviant and in some cases are conspicuously silenced (Fine and Rosenberg, 1983, p. 257.)

Now when I go to schools I can't help but feel that the halls of New York City public schools are haunted by their exiles. I think again about my show up day idea. I listen to the tapes. I stare at the computer screen. I admit to myself that many of the youth on the tapes have promised themselves that they could never be made to go back. With that, I land on the other side of the dialectic. I land in recognition of the need for self-preservation, self-determination. I land on the side of dangerous dignity.

Dangerous Dignity

My concept of dangerous dignity is derived from Six Nations scholar Taiaiake Alfred's (2005) assertion of Indigenous dignity as part of our returning to *wasase*, or the warrior's way. "The way to defeat the colonial state is to struggle in creative contention to delegitimize it and to weaken belief and commitment in the colonizers' minds, not by confronting the state on its own terms and playing to its strength, violence. (Alfred, 2005, p. 228) Alfred cites Gandhi's satyagraha, or truth force, movement as a "challenge to both colonialism and traditionalism," (p. 269) that inspires his call for *regeneration*. "Regeneration means we will reference ourselves differently, both from the ways we did traditionally and under colonial dominion" (ibid, p. 34).

Dangerous dignity is a stance of wise defiance. Informed come-uppittance. Dangerous dignity is a dialectic in itself, because the danger is extended to both the person and the institutions and larger society (as well as tribes and communities.) There are personal, professional, economic, safety, and health risks for the person with dangerous dignity. At the same time, when one stands in her own dangerous dignity it is risky to institutions and societies because hypocrisy, corruption, exploitation, and greed are exposed.²⁰ As a strategy of decolonization, it is part of a "process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies." (ibid, p. 280)

Yielded by my desire-based framework of inquiry, my concept of dangerous dignity applies Alfred's notions of creative contention and regeneration to the strategies taken on by pushed out youth. Like regeneration, in which Indigenous and colonized people re-vision themselves beyond the context of colonization and (fantasies of) who

²⁰ Humiliation in the humiliating ironies described above is also a dialectic, though less recognized. This truism is found in Memmi's assertion of colonization disfiguring the colonizer and Freire's assertion of oppression dehumanizing the oppressor. Maria Torre writes about this in terms of mutual implication.

they were before first contacts, dangerous dignity encompasses strategies employed by youth to re-vision who they are because of and in spite of their schooling. Youth most frequently talked about this in terms of “doing what I had to do,” but they also talked about their school leaving as taking care of themselves, as finally doing the right thing for themselves, and in some cases, saving their own lives. In our interview with Amaris, a young woman pushed out in tenth grade, she put it this way: “I think high school makes you who you are, basically.”

“Can you say more about how it made you who you are?”

“Yeah. It opens you up to new things and stuff. It's a learning experience.”

“Regardless [of] if you feel unwanted? You think it makes you stronger in that sense?”

“Yeah. It's an emotional journey. If it doesn't kill you it's just going to make you stronger. Or at least that's what I thought before I realized it was actually going to kill me.”

Youth made observations in line with Kathleen Nolan's work on the confluence of policing and schooling, and Jessica Ruglis' work on the health consequences of school non-completion *and* the health consequences of *staying in* school: for these youth, schools were the sites and sources of unsafe interactions with police and gangs, and declining physical and mental health (Nolan, 2008; Ruglis, 2008).

In this short section I'll share pushed out youths' views on their own acts of self-preservation, self-determination, and educational sovereignty. I will continue to develop the concepts of dangerous dignity and educational sovereignty over the rest of this dissertation. The orientation of this discussion comes from Indigenous and decolonizing frameworks; this means that I am signaling Indigenous conceptions of the

interdependence between the individual and the collective. Thus, concepts of self are at the supra-individual level, a sense of self that is bigger than the body, and in relationship to one's community, history, ancestors, and land. (Deloria, 1988; Tuck, in press b)

Self preservation

There were as many contexts of self-preservation as young people who participated in our interviews and focus groups, including bullying, gang violence, homophobia and hate based violence, misogyny, racism, physical health, mental health, family health, foster care, pregnancy, substance abuse, abuse at home or from a boyfriend or girlfriend, and in several cases, parenting younger siblings. One young woman parented her four younger siblings for six months when her parent disappeared. She was pushed out within weeks of entering foster care.

For James, each new school day brought a sense of impending violence, and before he permanently exited school, the potential violence escalated,

Say somebody else has a gun, everybody has a gun. Everybody. Everybody don't want to get killed. As soon as you fight someone, you just fight them without a gun, and you beat him up, you going to be assed out, in front of the other students. He about to come get you, he has something in his hand... I saved my own life [by getting away from that school.]

In James' case, the self-preservation was immediate, for other youth, the need for self preservation is more accumulative. For example Lionel told us that year after year of gross inequity of resources in schools was unbearable,

They spend less money per school on our schools than on their schools. It's just a fact...it's almost like a chain that everyone is stuck in. Like, poverty is something that you are born into, you die into it, and then your kids are born into it and they die into it. Because there's no escaping it unless you're lucky.

Wilson also told us that the idea of how poorly his school was resourced made him furious. He described the differences between poor and well resourced schools and communities as an uneven playing field from the very beginning,

Do you know that the waiting list for preschool at the YMCA on the East Side in the 90s? There's a huge waiting list for a YMCA preschool. Think about that. These people understand the game. And they're playing it from day one. So right away, that's the privilege. [Their parents] might say [to their children] the whole time "You're going to college, so do good, do good, do good. You need the grades." You go on opening day of [a privileged] school, first day of classes, the first grade class, the kindergarten class, and ask the parents, "How many of you can afford to send your kids to college? Where do you expect your kids to go to college?" And they are going to have an answer for you.

Youths' jettisoning from schools should be read as a critique of school inequity. Jameak talked to us about the importance of having educational opportunities. We asked him, "Do you think that opportunity is offered to everybody?"

"Yeah," he told us, "Everybody has a chance to make it in life."

"Do you think everybody has an equal chance?" we asked.

"No," he said, "Not even close."

Self determination

When Tyrone tells his push out story, he often begins by telling listeners that he wasn't supposed to go to the school that ultimately pushed him out. "I know I was in that school because there was a typo on my junior high transcript saying I [would] go to automotive. But I wanted to go to some other high school. It was a typo."

For Tyrone it was a literal clerical error that evidenced the inanity of the decision making around his schooling. For others, the pointlessness of school showed up in other ways. Jacqui told us, "I got more out of School House Rock (a series of animated

educational music videos that aired on Saturday morning cartoons) than I got out of school.”

“I was in high school for three years and the only thing I got out of high school was foreshadowing.” Jovanne declared. “Yep, that’s about it. In your real life, when am I going to be in a work place and they say, ‘Hey, Jovanne, do you know what foreshadowing is?’ I don’t think ever will happen.” Youth who see their schooling experiences as putting up with a lot while gaining very little exit schools as acts of self-determination. Rather than tolerating bureaucratic slights and irrelevant curricula, youth exercise self determination as an extension of their dangerous dignity.

Pilar talked with CREDD researcher Bacha about the power of her own self determination in getting a GED,

And I made it. I passed it. That was very great... [I was proud that] I can achieve something, I could actually complete something. Kind of like a “Fuck you. I can do this.” I know there were a lot of things that were holding, that were against me during high school. A lot of things. So it was kind of like a “fuck you.” To the system, not to you Bacha.

Educational Sovereignty

Another way of thinking about dangerous dignity, self-preservation, and self-determination, is in terms of educational sovereignty. At bare bones, sovereignty is a struggle against empire (Grande, 2008) it is the fight for who we will become, and who we have been. Scott Richard Lyons writes,

Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self respect. For indigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal. Attacks on sovereignty are attacks on what it enables us to pursue; the pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities. (Lyons, 2000, p. 449)

Educational sovereignty is the political right of all peoples, and it should be especially cultivated among youth. It involves being recognized as having a wealth of experiences and ancestors, a richness of interests and talents, a limitless number of paths a life might take, and those around you will confer the respect on you to choose and make each step on the path. Educational sovereignty means that all peoples are extended the right to complex personhood (Gordon, 1997; Tuck, in press c) the right to be complicated, even contradictory. Educational sovereignty means that all peoples are seen as holding an abundance of desires, for now and for their futures.

Lyons writes about the need to understand “the twin pillars of sovereignty: the power to self-govern and the affirmation of peoplehood” (Lyons, 2000, p. 456). This is what makes sovereignty distinct from autonomy- sovereignty is realized by a people, not one person. In this way, educational sovereignty does not get reduced to youth merely being free to fail, but instead, youth, in relationship to their communities, map a dynamic trajectory of learning to, in CREDD researcher Sarah’s words, “grow up to be myself.”

Sarah writes,

At the same time [that I am working with CREDD] I am trying to figure out my own ways of doing things in my life. I’m asking myself: What happens to people when they are forced to adapt to pre-made structures and conventions and expectations? Can someone become who he or she really is through this path? Are the structures of school and work scaffolding for our dreams or cages to contain us? Does that depend on your position in society? What if I can’t grow up to be myself within these preexisting structures? What would it take to make my own? How can I build something strong and flexible enough to support and accommodate my needs?

These are questions that are central to educational sovereignty.

I’d like to close this chapter with one final point. Educational sovereignty is predicated on intergenerational relationships. As many lessons as we learned about the policies and practices inside schools that push youth out, my co-researchers and I also

learned about the power of relationships. Relationships matter, they really do. They *matter*. In similar fashion to the gravitational pull on objects in orbit, one strong relationship with a teacher, guidance counselor, elder, or other adult can help keep youth experiencing the dialectic of humiliating irony and dangerous dignity from being torn apart. These relationship can interrupt the chemical reaction that heats up within this dialectic, cooling down the stakes so that youth make decisions from places of dignity, not humiliation.

Again and again, youth told us that whether they are between youth and teachers, youth and other adults in schools, youth and adults in out-of- school sites, or even between youth, these relationships matter. They may not result in school completion, but they will have a long term educational impact. Our interview participant Sophia put it this way, “If things were better I probably would have finished. I know it’s people around you that make things worse. If you want to do it you’re going to do it. Some people can just make it a little easier.” Certainly, crowded classrooms and coverage-mandated curricula make it difficult to nurture relationships, in part this is why out-of-school spaces are so important, but I have never been so convinced of anything except this: against the odds, in the inhumane spaces, in the bleakest moments, relationships matter.

In this chapter I have discussed my complicated and strategic use of the term push-out in order to frame New York City youths’ experiences of public schooling as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities. I emphasized the interpersonal nature of humiliating ironies, and discussed the humiliating ironies of meritocracy, assessment, and school crowding. I outlined dangerous dignity as a position of self-

preservation, self-determination, and educational sovereignty, and will continue to develop this concept in the next chapters. Finally I asserted that positive intergenerational relationships can interrupt the spinning-out of the dialectic of push-out. In the following chapter, I will discuss schooling as a fraying life-line, and this, an additional humiliating irony. I will illustrate youths' differentiation between schooling and education as a strategy of dangerous dignity and educational sovereignty.

Chapter 5

Repurposing Schooling

“In my dream school we’d have a lot of things going on. We would not push kids out of school. It’s not a good idea. Everybody deserves to get their high school diploma. Everybody deserves to get a good education.”

-Brittany, interview excerpt

“In the future, I will be...”

Running a non profit
 Nominated for an Oscar
 Married with children
 A pediatrician
 A sport agent
 A successful Black woman
 A tender teacher, successful, and a role model
 Not a gold-digger
 A husband and entrepreneur
 A police officer
 Famous!!!
 An independent person who does my own thing
 Just me!
 Moshing with fantastic fans
 Waiting with arms wide open
 A cultured and worldly man
 The best fashion designer
 Dead or on my bike
 Teaching and playing musics (sic)
 Going to Costa Rica
 Speaking fluent French
 Out of America
 Working (I hope)
 Playing videogames

(slambook excerpt, Summer 2006)

This chapter looks deeply at the rhizome of push out/ privatization/ schooling purposes/ assessment. This chapter contends with a final, yet primary humiliating irony: school as disrespectful lifeline. I’ll engage in interview and slambook data and focus

group and survey data from both the Gate-ways and Get-aways Project and the Youth Researchers for a New Education System Project to understand how youth theorize schools as toxic, while at the same time, hold education as vital to their now and future selves. I will explore youths' differentiations of schooling and education as another element of youths' dangerous dignities. As in the slambook excerpt above, our youth participants disagreed that passing the Regents should be the only goal for student learning in New York City public school curricula. Further, they contested views of youth as apathetic and hopeless. Rather, we found that youth envision a diversity of futures, and do so critically, in critical relation to their current situations.

On May 4, 2008 the New York Times published an article that detailed the dire situation for many US Americans needing healthcare in a climate of exponentially rising costs. Though 158 million do have some kind of health insurance, the portion of families' household incomes going to healthcare has risen by 12% since 2001, making healthcare the largest annual expense for the average US family (Abelson and Freudenheim, 2008).

Elsewhere, unanticipated crises such as the Minneapolis bridge collapse in August 2007, heavy rains in New York City that flooded and shut down the subway system, and the months long 2007 drought in Georgia spurred cries for the private take-over of roads, public transportation, and water management, not just in the crisis zones, but all over the country (Shannon, 2008). Shortly after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) scrambled to respond to the expanding needs of survivors, for-profit crisis management companies such as Halliburton, Bechtel, and Blackwater, already fattened by profits on the ongoing wars in

Afghanistan and Iraq, moved quietly into place to seize the opportunity yielded by FEMA's severe inadequacy (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 2006; Shannon, 2008).

In early 2008, New York State garnered proposals from Wall Street firms who want to take over the state lottery system. States like New Jersey, Illinois, and California are already seriously considering privatizing state lotteries (Hakim, 2008). Between 2001 and 2008, the New York City Housing Authority lost \$611 million in Federal funding, as public housing units all over the country have been destroyed, or as developments have been privatized (Fernandez, 2008). Presidential nominee John McCain favors privatizing parts of social security, (Collins, 2008) and veterans' health benefits (Krugman, 2008).

In 2004, Donald Rumsfeld began privatizing warfare by hiring Blackwater USA to do combat in Iraq, a move that unilaterally interrupted pre-existing international checks and balances (via international tribunals and less directly through things like trade embargos). Hiring a for-profit company to engage in combat undercuts any ethical or economic factors that might encourage reason and restraint. A company that makes its money on war without the consequences of paying for it will be sure to keep the war going.

At the same time, the prison industry continues to exponentially grow. This is a different way of thinking about the shrinking of public/free space. Bruce Western writes,

Between 1970 and 2003, state and federal prisons grew sevenfold to house 1.4 million convicted felons serving at least one year behind bars, and typically much longer. Offenders held in county jails, awaiting trial or serving short sentences, added another 700,000 by 2003. In addition to the incarcerated populations, another 4.7 million people were under probation and parole supervision. The entire correctional population of the United States totaled nearly 7 million in 2003, around 6 percent of the adult male population. (Western, 2006, p. 3).

In the US, more than 1 in 100 adults are in jail or prison. More than 1 in 9 Black men aged 20-34 are in jail or prison (Pew Center on the States, 2008), a “profound social exclusion” (Western, 2006, p. 7). “No other group,” Western writes, “routinely contends with long terms of forced confinement and bears the stigma of official criminality in all subsequent spheres of social life...” (ibid, p. 7). In the past twenty years, state spending on prisons has grown by more than 127%, while state spending on higher education has only grown by 21% (Pew Center on the States, 2008). The expansion of prison spending and increase of percentage of the population impact what is public and who are the public in ways that we haven’t even begun to understand.

Like other parts of the public sphere, education is vulnerable to privatizing reform when perceived to be in crisis. In a recent book, *When School Reform Goes Wrong* (2007), Nel Noddings positions the No Child Left Behind Act within a reform effort ignited in 1983 by *A Nation at Risk*, an open letter to the American people written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk*, Noddings writes,

(I)s alarmist; it uses words such as *war*, *foreign power*, and *unilateral disarmament*. Readers who might otherwise look for carefully presented evidence may be swept into premature agreement by language that induces fear. When policymakers warn that the United States will lose its competitive edge, that other nations are producing more engineers than the United States, and that our students lag dangerously behind those of other nations, audiences rarely ask for evidence to support the warnings. They are moved by emotion (Noddings, 1997, p. 21. Italics original).

Noddings casts NCLB as a prime example of Orwellian double-think (leave no child behind while all children are left behind) and writes that some critics claim that “the designers and advocates of NCLB intend to weaken the public schools and thus pave the way for privatization” (ibid, p. 23). It’s not difficult to be suspicious; NCLB has

mandated that all students and all schools demonstrate “100% proficiency” by the year 2014. “Virtually no informed parent, teacher, administrator, researcher –or legislator- thinks this mandate can be met.” (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 5). As the deadline approaches, schools already struggling to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) have back loaded the widest increments toward proficiency. For example, “Under Ohio’s AYP arrangement, the rate of progress required for the years from 2002-2009 is only one third of the annual rate that will be required from 2010 to 2014” (ibid, 2008, p. 6; Linn, 2003). Last year, New York City schools Chancellor Joel Klein hired a subdivision of Edison, Inc., the same company rebuffed by the Philadelphia school system in 2002 and New York City school system in 2007, to provide federally mandated tutoring to schools not making AYP under NCLB. Edison, Inc. made \$9.6 million from this arrangement in the 2005-06 school year (Gootman, 2006).

Authors Michael Rebell and Jessica Wolff refer to the ripple effects of NCLB’s 100% proficiency mandate as a “cascade of consequences” that grow more severe over five years of a school’s documented insufficient progress. Ultimately, in the fifth year of insufficient progress, schools are “identified for restructuring” and are “required to develop new governance structures, such as reopening as a charter school, replacing a majority of the staff, hiring a private management company to run the school, or being taken over by the state” (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 60). There are no data that support that the kinds of improvements built into the NCLB progress schedule can be made within set time frames, and no evidence that the sequence of steps required of unsatisfactory schools will put them back on track (Sunderman and Orfield, 2006; Rebell and Wolff, 2008). Further, though federal funding for schools has increased, the increase

does not cover the increased testing and administrative costs of complying with NCLB. The backloading of progress requirements, the “rapid-fire cascade of consequences” (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 135), the inadequate funding, and the almost absurd goal of 100% proficiency all add up to a scenario destined for steep fall-out for public schools, as private firms and faith-based organizations are poised on the sidelines, waiting for their chance to make a play. By 2014, “almost all schools are likely to be on the “needs improvement’ list.” (Rebell and Wolff, 2008, p. 5; Linn, 2003)

Similarly, the staggeringly low graduation rates of many US school systems caught national media attention in the Spring of 2008. A Lexis-Nexus search for US print news articles on school drop out between February 8, 2008 and May 8, 2008 yielded over 350 articles, with headlines utilizing words such as “dismal,” “atrocious,” and “epidemic.” In that three month period, the New York Times ran four major articles on the topic, with a March 20, 2008 article that tied high drop out rates specifically to No Child Left Behind, and testing policies that drive youth to the GED. (Dillon, 2008) In the same time span, USA today also ran four articles on the subject, with a piece de resistance on drop out as an “intractable problem” running in the April 2, 2002 edition. The Washington Times ran five articles on the subject, one an op ed piece by former Secretary of State Colin Powell and Alma Powell that called for ending the dropout “catastrophe” as necessary in “keeping America’s promise” (C. Powell and A. Powell, 2008) Echoing the tone and rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk*, they write,

When our children are not prepared for success, we are failing them and our nation. A strong military depends on an educated workforce. A strong national-security infrastructure depends on an educated workforce. A strong intelligence system depends on an educated workforce, now more than ever.

The United States was once the recognized world leader in the educational arena, but many countries with far fewer resources than ours have now surpassed our graduation and literacy rates. Still others are gaining ground while we have stood still...

Our nation has never backed down from a challenge, and while this is undeniably a daunting one, it is surmountable if we work together. There have been numerous past efforts to improve graduation rates, but most have been implemented in independent silos. The only way to succeed where we have previously failed is to unite together to turn the tide. *We need nothing less than a national call to arms.* (ibid, 2008. Emphasis mine.)

In April 2008, the Powells held a summit on drop out prevention in Washington DC, and audience members were told that in the US, one young person drops out from high school every twenty-six seconds, resulting in more than 1.1 million drop out youth a year (Morial, 2008).

History teaches us to be wary of crisis-mode reform. Just as war profiteers were ready to step in to manage crises in Iraq and New Orleans, profiteers stand at the ready to take over public schools. Urban schools, the centerpieces of the crisis, will be the first to be privatized. Amidst the Spring 2008 media attention on low graduation rates, US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced a new mandate on state graduation rate formulas, promising to go so far as mandating uniform graduation rate reporting at the school level. While uniform graduation rate and non completion rate reporting are valuable tools in improving schools, the general sense seems to be that urban schools have deteriorated beyond a point of return. The rumblings of a widespread call to privatize urban schools are already quaking. For example, the day after the Powells' op ed piece ran, the Washington Times ran an op ed piece titled "The ignorant fool's errand; How we're encouraging the high-school dropouts" which declared in its conclusion,

The catechism of liberalism inevitably prescribes more money as the key to changing all this, but the real key is how the money is spent. The public

schools in the nation's capital spend about \$25,000 per student per year, considerably more than a good private-school education. The Washington schools are nevertheless among the worst in the country. That's why few congressmen send their kids to the public schools (Fields, 2008).

Public funding for basic human and civic needs is being repealed at every turn in a young person's life (Anyon, 2005). As firms position themselves to take over public transportation, public housing, and public schools, and as the healthcare system becomes available only to those who can pay for it in more pronounced ways, young people find themselves becoming more and more isolated from the lifelines that have defined the American way. Though we know that resources are unevenly distributed, and that much improvement is needed, school is the only place that some students will be able to get a healthful meal, see a counselor or nurse, be tested for a range of cognitive, learning, and physiological disabilities or impairments, have access to books, computers and the internet, and be free from the expectation to earn money. For fewer students, school will be the place where they learn English, get needed sexual health information and safe sex devices, and receive relevant career training and guidance.²¹

Lawrence Cremin argued in 1989 that as non-school institutions have changed since World War II, schools have been expected to pick up the pieces. Further, as Cremin and Jean Anyon (2005) assert, the US has a "longstanding tendency of...try[ing] to solve certain social problems indirectly through education rather than directly through politics," (Cremin, 1990, p. ix) or in Anyon's work, through the direct change of social policy (Anyon, 2005).

²¹ Bruce Western (2005) argues that another institution has picked up the slack as other institutions have contracted: prisons. "(T)he penal system (has) assumed new responsibilities for public health, delivering treatment on a large scale for mental illness, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C" (Western, 2005, p. 3).

This is the humiliating irony. Schools are expected to do so much because other public spaces have contracted. It is a humiliating irony that federal and state mandates focused upon accountability have *feigned* accountability while passing the buck: schools absorb the responsibility for meeting most social needs. They are the last lifeline for many youth, youth who keep hanging on even in situations of gross misconduct and disrespect. And, by nature of being that last lifeline, by nature of being a contested, even confused space, school policies and practices sever that lifeline by pushing students out.

Interview participant Rashaad told us, “I knew that by not finishing school I was going to have to pay. Either by having to work harder for not as much money, or literally paying somewhere to teach me what I didn’t learn in school...” Rosarie, a focus group participant and recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic said that she was excited to move to a US school because, “You can go to a good school for free here.” She didn’t ever find her good, free school. “That was the issue that made my mother so upset when I left [my former school],” Rosarie continued, “it was a big part of [why] we moved here.”

The Youth Researchers for a New Education System Project asked a series of questions pertaining to the purposes of schooling to youth who are largely still enrolled in school. Of our 546 survey participants, fewer than 10% of our participants were school non-completers (1%) or GED earners (3%) or seekers (5%). In the YRNES survey, we asked youth to tell us what they think their parents/guardians want them to do after they complete a secondary school degree, 80% answered that their parents and guardians want them to go to college (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Parent and Guardian Aspirations for Schooling: What do you think your parents or guardians want you to do after completing a secondary school degree?

	(%)
Go to college	80
Work full time	6
Join the military	2
Not sure	4

Table 5.2 presents results pertaining to youth aspirations for schooling. You can see that overall, youth demonstrated a confidence about their own futures and purposes in schooling, but that there are some important differences by class and school type. Further, as questions shift from confidence in self to confidence in classes and school, the percentage of youth who agree drops.

Table 2: Youth Aspirations for Schooling- General responses and selected comparisons

	(n)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
I have a sense of my purpose in school	493	63	37
Low income		50	50
Middle-High income		71	29
I feel that what I learn in high school is relevant to my life outside of high school	492	54	46
My school provides me with good reasons to keep attending school	490	55	45
Large/converted school		48	52
Specialized school		59	41
Grades in high school matter for success in the future	495	73	27
Young men		68	32
Young women		79	21
My classes give me useful preparation for what I plan to do in life	492	46	54
In the past two years, my school has been making positive changes that have benefited the students	498	44	56

Table 5.3 displays selected disaggregated survey responses to the statement, “I am getting a good education at my school.” Although the overall responses seem to be positive, it is important to consider whether 61% agreement with the statement is adequate, and to attend to the lower “agree” response rate of low income youth, youth of color, and youth attending large/converted schools.

Table 5.3: I'm getting a good education at my school

	(n)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
I'm getting a good education at my school	486	61	39
Low income		48	52
Middle-High income		70	30
Youth of Color		59	41
White Youth		74	26
Large/converted school		54	46
Specialized school		66	34

Even though youth are dissatisfied in their schooling, they see it as crucial to their current and future lives. Although our research participants in both projects expressed their frustration and disappointment in their schooling, the findings in Tables 5.1-5.3 demonstrate that school and earning a high school diploma are still seen as important to youth. Their beliefs in the necessity of their education, even and especially when being denied resources and respect, compounds the insult of this denial.

Most of our survey respondents agreed with the statement, “I have a sense of my purpose in school,” even though, as our focus group participants told us, the current, foggy purposes of schooling are less than inspiring. Youths’ abilities to maintain a sense of purpose within schools that feel purposeless is an indication of how youth view schooling as something to “get through” or “put up with” in order to enjoy better situated

futures. The pushed-out youth who participated in CREDD's Gate-ways and Getaways Project also described a sense of purpose in their education that survived, even when their senses of purpose in their schooling did not. This is the final element of dangerous dignity in this dissertation: youths' differentiating between their schooling and their education. GED youth taught us again and again about the differences between the two, indeed because their experiences have helped them get so clear about where that line falls. Jordan told us,

The TV makes high school look kind of cool though. I don't know if you've ever seen like on the Disney channel and stuff like that. Everybody has nice lockers. My school didn't have lockers [except in the gym.] The gym, you could only use that locker when you are in there and if you bring a lock in you're pretty good, but if you don't bring a lock, you still got to use it. I'm saying, the difference between schools and education, education is something you want and school is just something that, like, they just made it up. Let's use this as a way to provide people with an education. But it hasn't really been. It's not the best thing that they could have done.

Jordan's insistence that education is "something you want" when schooling is something that "they just made up," reverberated through other interviews with pushed out youth. Asia made this comparison, "Schooling is you just go in there and get work and go on home. Education is you go in there and get learning, you're taking it in; you go on home and you're doing it."

Tyrone talked specifically about how his everyday life completed the incomplete lessons of the classroom,

When I was in 8th grade they said "don't do drugs, it's bad for you." No specifics. I would go outside and see So and So as a crackhead. I'd say "I'm not going to do drugs, I'm not going to do anything with drugs in my life. It would mess people up." They say "don't eat food that's greasy," and stuff, "it'll hurt your body." And I'll say, "ok, whatever." And I wouldn't do it. And I'd see people outside, huge people, two-chairs-size people eating at McDonald's. I don't ever want to get to that point. It's crazy. It's like [school is] forced to mention [these lessons], but not give

you enough information to really know something, understand it. So you go outside and you see their example at work. Like, “don’t have sex when you are a teenager.” I say, “I don’t care.” Then I go see fifteen, sixteen year old girls that are pregnant. School didn’t scare me. Outside, reality, scared me. That’s how I learned, from looking at the outside.

Jordan, Asia and Tyrone are speaking to a kind of relevance or applicability that is missing in schooling. They talk about the differences between their schools and the schools on television (Jordan), but also the differences between the lessons in their classrooms and their real lives (Asia and Tyrone). Thus, schooling becomes defined by its unwillingness to provide the full picture of a lesson, by being out of step with young people’s lives. Education is defined by these youth as the world that they want to know and understand because they are already a part of it, and a visioning futures for themselves in it.

GED instructor Kersha spoke about the differences between education and schooling in a politicized way.

I think schooling is only about acquiring information. Particularly for marginalized folks, we need to be *educated*. We need to understand the way our society looks at us, and the way the society works so we can find ways to disrupt some of the status quo and try to change it.

A few youth, like Amanda, spoke with a vein of tough nostalgia about the importance of education. “Education is where it’s at. It’s the only you going to succeed in life. You’re not going to succeed by sitting on your ass, wishing it would come to you under your pillow.” Like Paul Willis’ lads for whom “the shop floor has become a prison,” for many GED youth, “education is seen retrospectively, and hopelessly, as the only escape” (Willis, 1977, p. 107). For GED youth, however, the door on hope and education is not totally closed; this is why they seek and earn a GED.

The purposes of schooling

So far, GED youths' differentiations between education and schooling have helped to ascribe the qualities and purposes of education, but what are the purposes of schooling? Schooling has been compulsory to the age of sixteen in all states since 1918 (Rippa, 1992). What exactly are the ongoing purposes of compulsory schooling?

In 1842, Horace Mann insisted that education is “the surest means of amassing property” (Mann as quoted in Bowles and Gintis, 1976, p. 164). Mann’s assertions of schooling as the “balance wheel” of society, and society’s “great equalizer” have had miraculous staying power. Youth, especially poor youth, in our study showed dedication to the idea that education would be the transformative element in their lives even though, as Jean Anyon has shown, social policies such as taxation, housing policies, and health policies might have a much more direct and dramatic transformative power (Anyon, 2005).

In the footsteps of Clarence Kingsley’s (1918) seven Cardinal Principals of Secondary Education (which include health, command of fundamental processes, worthy home membership, vocation, civic education, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character) Doug Feldman conducted a study (2005) that documented the importance of a variety of potential purposes of schooling from the perspectives of novice teachers. (See Table 5.4)

Table 5.4 Schooling Purposes Rated Important and Most Important by Novice Teachers

	(%)
To provide a dynamic vehicle for social and economic mobility, a way for the poor to reach their potential	100
To nurture creative students in developing art, music, and writing; to encourage creative cultural achievement	99
To help eliminate racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and all forms of discrimination from society	96
To develop academic skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science	96
To prepare workers to compete in a technological world economy	95

Source: Feldman, 2005

As you can see, 100% of novice teachers agreed with a Mannian purpose of schooling. Other priorities included the teaching of creative arts, academic skills, anti-discrimination, and technology.

Low on the list of priorities, designated unimportant or very unimportant, were “To develop strong self-concept and self-esteem in students” (50% unimportant or very unimportant) and “To provide support to families through after-school child care, nutritional supplements, medical treatment, and so on” (48% unimportant or very unimportant). Novice teachers were split on the importance of the purpose of “To provide child care for the nation’s children and to free parents to work and/or pursue their interests and activities” (41% unimportant or very unimportant; 29% important or very important; 30% neutral.)

At the same time, youth in our study maintained a critique of schooling that echoed Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis’ (1976) analysis of schooling as structural reproduction. Bowles and Gintis argue that reproducing economic and social strata is the purpose of compulsory schooling.

In the YRNES project, we asked youth focus group participants, “Why do you go to school (other than because your parent/legal guardian tells you to)?” Their answers play out the double-bind of schooling as equalizer and reproduction. Ravi told us, School has taught me that you can get along with a lot of different kinds of people. That, and I have a lot in common with a lot of other people. Sometimes what we have in common is we agree on why we hate school.

Dennis told us, “I go to school because unfortunately it’s the only way of fitting in to this society.” This idea is echoed in an exchange from another YRNES focus group,

William: If you don't go to school, it's difficult to have a future... No matter how much you hate it, if you want to have a future you have to go to school.

Rachel: But what if you're not even learning anything? If your teachers are not teaching you the right stuff?

Several youth told us that the only reason they attend school is because they have no choice. We pursued this line of thinking with the question, "In your opinion, why *does* our government mandate that we go to school?" Sharim told us,

If you go to school you are taught to obey. You know, like 'over throwing the government?' The school is designed to train you not to think that way. They train you to think in whatever manner they want you to think.

"They want our country to be educated so that we can work," Felix answered. But Maricruz countered, "Yeah, but do you really need to be educated to do the kinds of jobs they want *us* to do?"

Other scholars have observed other purposes of schooling. Joel Spring (1976) and Sandy Grande (2004) argue that the purposes of schooling are nationalist and assimilationist, that schooling is an integral tool in the maintenance of a nation state. David Labaree has described the purpose of schooling as the expansion of the power of the open market, not predestined or predetermined, but nevertheless predicated on the market process (Labaree, 1997). What results, says Labaree, is a "system in which credentials count more than knowledge in the struggle to get ahead and stay ahead." (p.4) Similarly, Doug Foley (1994) has depicted US schools as the sites in which US born and foreign born youth learn capitalist culture.

Rendering the purposes of schooling as an amalgamation of all of these, Laurie Olsen has situated the primary goals of schools as Americanizing youth, a project bolstered in part by xenophobic responses to recent waves of immigration (1997). Certainly the history of US policies stretching over nearly 100 years that forced US Indigenous youth into off-reservation boarding schools is evidence of this view.

Considering the claims made in this dissertation, what in terms of social explanation of the purposes of schooling can be derived from the Gateways and Getaways Project and the YRNES Project? Youth in the YRNES research told us that the purpose of schooling is foggy. Youth in the Gateways and Getaways told us that there is a divide between education and schooling. Recall in chapter three, I argued that the value of the GED in youths' lives is in relationship to their negative experiences in schooling. I also argued that the current school structures are regimented but brittle, and only a shell of the former, multiple routes to graduation remains. This makes the GED a powerful yet punished alternative to the high school diploma. Also recall in chapter four I discussed school practices and policies as a dialectic of school push out. Federal policies such as No Child Left Behind and state policies such as state mandated exit exams put pressure on schools that results in school push out.

In a recent presentation at the Graduate Center, Ofelia Garcia observed that the current climate created by NCLB has shifted the purpose of schooling away from education, to assessment (Garcia, 2008). Kenneth Sirotnik and colleagues made a similar claim in a volume on Holding Accountability Accountable (2004). My analysis of our data supports this observation. *Assessment has displaced all prior purposes of schooling.*

The purposes of school have been gentrified by assessment, so that schooling *is* assessment. Focus group participant Lionel confirmed,

It's obvious that schools are just about passing the tests, because all we do is prepare for the test, and all that is said is "We don't have time for that because we have to get ready to do the test." But then after we take the test, you barely even have to come to school because there is totally nothing going on. The school day is just about passing time until we're out.

The displacement of prior purposes of schooling by assessment yields significant consequences for student learning, as Samuel noted,

If you think of all the times that you crammed for the test and how much of that you've retained. Think of test that you crammed for three years ago, how much of the stuff you crammed that night. Do you remember [that material now]? You didn't retain any of that. But it's all about tests. It's all about the test, they got you in such a competition, and that's what I was talking about before with the Regents.... It's nothing to cram, especially if you have the resources. You can hire a tutor to pass the test. You can get your grades up there. But you're not retaining anything. And what are you left with?

Further, I submit that we can attribute much of what we are seeing in terms of school push out to the dissonance of contemporary assessment based purposes of schooling. Assessment as schooling is not full or compelling enough to make schooling meaningful or resonant in youth lives. This is why taking the distinctions GED youth make between education and schooling seriously is so important. Through these distinctions we can see that youth desire an education while rejecting the hollowed out purposes of schooling.

It's not too late to reclaim the purposes of schooling. In fact, as I have argued in chapter three, repatriating the GED, as youth are doing now, is a step in that direction. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write of the ebb and flow of territorialization and deterritorialization,

A flow is always of belief and desire...A social field is always animated by all kinds of movements of decoding and deterritorialization affecting “masses” and operating at different paces and speeds. These are not contradictions but escapes... But at the same time, and inseparably, there occur overcodings and reterritorializations... (it is always on the most deterritorialized element that reterritorialization takes place) (1987, p. 219-221, parentheses original).

This is a helpful way of thinking about what has happened, and what will happen in determining the wider purposes of schooling. But what makes me pause (what always makes me pause in Deleuze and Guattari’s work) is that it seems that they are saying that it *is* like an ocean, and there is little or no role or effect for human agency. Rather, they are saying that the ebb and flow of this ocean is moved by human agency, the specificity of which doesn’t matter very much, because there will be many actions in many directions. It serves to bring my attention to the (frustrating) reality that the purpose of schooling should and will shift; even if we are successful in displacing assessment, what takes its place will at some time feel just as clunky and irrelevant.

Thus the project of repurposing schools does not have to be a project of finding some holy grail. It is not a project of finding the perfected purpose, only the next, better, and more meaningful purpose(s.) In the remainder of this chapter, I will utilize CREDD’s data to re-envision more meaningful purposes of schooling.

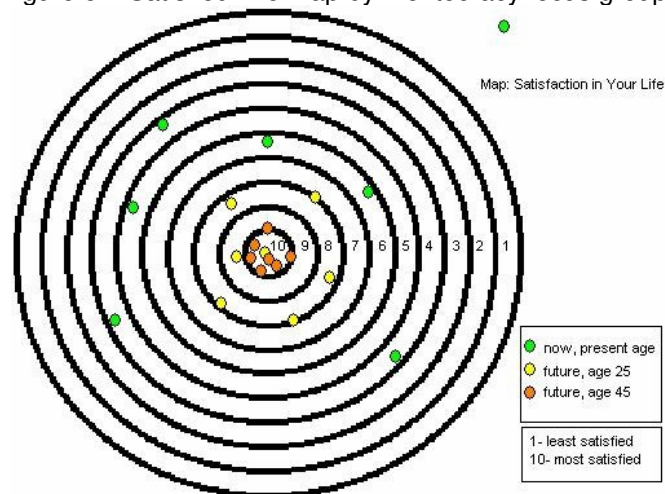
Repurposing schooling

Reviewing the audio and videotapes of CREDD’s interviews and focus groups, some of the most captivating conversations happened around a group mapping activity in our meritocracy focus groups. In this focus group with GED earners and seekers, participants began by drawing individual educational maps and shared them in order to introduce themselves to the researcher facilitators and the rest of the group. Then, the

researchers and the participants played our Nothing but Trouble Game (described in chapter two.) The game was followed by a lengthy discussion on social and economic inequity, the myth of the American dream, and the roles of schools in purporting the American dream.

Then, the facilitators asked the participants to shift gears and think about their lives in terms of satisfaction. Facilitators brought out a pre-made 3' by 2' line drawing of a bulls eye, with the number 1 on the outer ring, and numbers up to 10 in each inner ring with 10 at the center. Facilitators gave each youth a green sticker and asked them to initial it. Then they asked the participants to place the sticker on the page to represent their satisfaction in life now, 1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied. After youth placed the green stickers, the facilitators asked youth to share why they placed their sticker where they placed them.

Figure 5.1 Satisfied Life Map by meritocracy focus group 2



Most youth talked about feeling moderately satisfied in their lives now, about having big dreams but few opportunities, and about “holding onto my ambitions.” One youth placed his sticker in the far right corner of the paper, “I’m presently homeless,” he

told us, “I don’t want this for myself.” After several youth shared, the facilitators asked if anyone wanted to move their stickers, and those who wished to did.

Next, the facilitators handed out yellow stickers, asking youth to again initial them and place them on the map to represent their anticipated satisfaction in life at age twenty-five. In this round, youth shared that they placed their stickers much closer to ten because they will have completed college by then, will have “solid work,” or own a business, and will be “married, or living with my best friend.” Youth were also given the option to reposition their stickers at the end of this round.

In the final stage of the mapping, youth initialed orange stickers and placed them to represent their anticipated life satisfaction at age 45. Almost all youth placed their stickers within the 9-10 range. Youth explained that by this time they would have children “old enough to be my best friend,” will have traveled around the world, and will have “a lot of freedom.” Several youth talked about having made important contributions to their communities by this time. Youth who wanted to move their stickers did so after the sharing time.

Next, facilitators initiated a more general conversation on what constitutes a satisfied life, with the goal of developing a collective definition of a satisfied life. The definition of a satisfied life that accompanied the satisfaction map in Figure 5.1 is as follows,

A Satisfied Life is...

Having enough

Money

Power

Respect

Employment, a job that pays well

Supportive family

Good literature
 Determination
 Endurance
 Education, college, a diploma
 Good cars
 Talents and gifts
 Motivation
 Affordable housing
 Inspiring music
 Positive influences and friends
 Good credit

(Meritocracy Focus Group 2, September 2006)

Meritocracy Focus Group 3 generated definitions for each of the points of satisfaction from 1-10. Their definitions were,

- 1 Low self esteem, depression
- 2 Life feels like it will end early
- 3 Not everyone had opportunity, it depends on who you are
- 4 I need more chances, barely making it
- 5 Having ambition but deprived
- 6 Happy but trying to get better
- 7 Trying to move forward, growing
- 8 In college doing what I need to do
- 9 Satisfied with yourself, but not the world.
- 10 In college, all the money and kids that I want. I still need help from other people.

(Meritocracy Focus Group 3, October 2006)

Several things about these exercises are striking to me. First, I feel inspired by young people's visions of their futures, by their senses that they are (in their terms) doing what they need to do to enjoy satisfied lives, and that they are all on a long track toward ten.

Second, I'm impressed by the complexity and comprehensiveness of Meritocracy Focus Group 2's collaborative definition of satisfaction. Their inclusion of respect, supportive families, literature and music, affordable housing and good credit struck me as wise.

Finally, I appreciated Meritocracy Focus Group 3's depiction of the spectrum of satisfaction, and how each increment is a different variation of relationships between the

self, community, and the world. The pole of 1) Low self esteem depression and 2) Life feels like it will end early have a insightful symmetry to the pole at the other end, 9) Satisfied with yourself but not the world and 10) ...All the money and kids I want. I still need help from other people. This spectrum reads less like a line and more like a circle.

At the same time, it's useful to temper the good future feelings that were evoked in the focus groups with our survey findings; 54% of the youth we surveyed agree that no matter how hard someone works, because we live in an unfair society, some people will never have a 10 in satisfaction. While most (59%) youth anticipated that their life satisfaction would grow between now and age 45, 29% anticipated no change in life satisfaction, and 12% anticipated they would be less satisfied.

I hold that these kinds of conversations are critical conversations in the project of repurposing schools. Youth plainly recognize that the current economy cannot sustain their meaningful employment (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Harrison and Bluestone, 1982, 1988; Dolby and Dimitriadis, 2004) and more importantly, they recognize that future employment should not be the entire focus of schooling. They recognize assessment-purposed schooling as practically pointless in their lives. They see through the mythologies of equal opportunities and access.

For these youth, a satisfied life is a whole life, a life with friends, family, children, health, wealth, community, literature, music, and travel. A backwards planning approach would begin there; repurposed schools would hold satisfied living as their goals, with the definition of satisfaction always under revision. In the end, to fully achieve this, we'll have to reconcile the need to earn money with global capitalism and our "jobless future" (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994); we'll need to reconcile democracy with both Indigenous

(and Iraqi and Afghani) sovereignty and with the electoral college (and non-popular vote presidents.) But that is work that we can do along the way, in process, en route and in-purposed of repurposed schools.

A first step, is to expand the number of meaningful routes to high school graduation. A recent report by Linda Darling Hammond et. al. (2006) on multiple measures of high school graduation demonstrated the confluence of multiple measures and high graduation rates. States such as New Jersey, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut enjoy graduation rates 9-32% higher than “test only” states such as Florida New York North Carolina Indiana and South Carolina. (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2006, p. 19) In Michelle Fine et. al.’s analysis of New Jersey’s Special Review Assessment (SRA) graduation option, the authors confirmed that New Jersey graduates via this alternative route to a diploma are disproportionately low income, of color, are English language learners, and are in special education (Fine et. al., 2007). Multiple routes to graduation will ensure higher numbers of graduates, and higher numbers of graduates who are of color, low income, immigrant, English language learners, and in special education.

New York City Schools Chancellor and Mayor Bloomberg often cite the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation (OMPG) as providing multiple routes to graduation to New York City youth. This is not accurate. The OMPG program has created approximately 23 Young Adult Borough Centers (YABCs) and approximately 30 Transfer High Schools (THS) for New York City students; though these sites are alternatives to New York City public high schools, the graduation requirements still

include twenty-two credits and five Regents exams. A 2008 brief by Advocates for Children reported that:

- 59% of YABCs and 50% of THS do not provide services for ELL youth.
- 53% of YABS do not provide services for youth in special education.
- 59% of YABCs and 35% of THS do not provide childcare services.

Further, no YABCs accept youth with fewer than 17 credits, 58% of THS do not accept students with no credits. Thus, though OMPG programs were created to address the needs of English Language Learners, youth in special education, pregnant and parenting youth, and over-age/under-credited youth, fewer than half of the programs provide necessary services for the youth populations.

The Chancellor and Mayor also widely tout District 79 as an exemplary alternative route to graduation. District 79 primarily serves pregnant and parenting youth and youth who are severely under-credited. While an extremely important resource to New York City youth, many of the programs in District 79 result in a GED, not a high school diploma.

The fact is, as I have detailed in chapter four, the only route to completion of a high school diploma in New York City is through the five Regents exams.²² Multiple, meaningful, non-exam based routes are desperately needed. Opponents this notion oppose it as destandardized, relative, and personalized education. Frankly, I don't see these as faults. However, to those opponents I contend, "there is nothing so *unequal* in education as sameness." (Noddings, 2007, p. 29)

Noddings poses the question, "Which things should all students learn, and at what point should we provide different educational experiences for children with different

²² As I discussed in chapter four, youth can also receive an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) diploma, which is regarded as a misnomer. The IEP diploma is more accurately described as a certificate of attendance.

aptitudes and interests?” (ibid, p. 29) When this question was asked in prior generations, what resulted was school tracking, a hierarchical system of many dead ends and booby traps, with prized opportunities only for the best and the brightest (which translated into the wealthiest and the whitest.) What I am arguing for is a range of routes to graduation, each one of them meaningful and challenging. There should be multiple, interesting paths to multiple, interesting destinations. Further, there should be ways of changing from one route to another without penalty. Finally, the route a student chooses should be determined by the student, her guardians, her guidance counselor, and her teachers.

One can endorse, as I do, an open recognition of difference and an honest disclosure of the content of all programs and still insist on an assessment of equal worth. Those who oppose the equalization of degrees offer equality through sameness: Study what I study, learn what I learn, and you will be equal to me (ibid, p. 33).

Multiple, meaningful routes to graduation forward youth and communities’ educational sovereignty. As I discussed in chapter four, educational sovereignty recognizes desire and complexity, and the need for self/community preservation and self/community determination. Schools as public spaces can be sites of educational sovereignty without reducing education to autonomous individualism.²³ Schools, by recognizing youths’ educational sovereignty, can be places in which youth learn educational sovereignty, and learn to practice it. Schools can support youth in making wise academic decisions, not just prescribed “good” decisions. Each route may not end in college, but each route will be deep and rich. Every young person can have access to a compelling, meaningful education *in* school.

²³ Sovereignty holds the community, tribe, as the irreducible unit, not the individual. Sovereignty acknowledges the interdependence of self, community, and land.

I close this chapter with some of the voices of our GED interview participants. In our interviews, we asked youth to talk to us about their dream schools. Tyrone had this dream,

Just a place that I would feel like maybe it was my second home. I could, I feel like. There's always going to be some type of pressure on you, but I [would] feel like there are people there who are going to help me. No matter what, I could always go and have tutoring, and not feel like I'm stupid or never going to make it or succeed. Just having people around me that want to help, enjoy their job.

Ebony's dream school complimented Tyrone's criteria. For Ebony, a dream school is "A school where I am accepted as far as sexuality. Someplace I can come and it's not too crowded. Individual help from the teacher. A lot of support. They tell you, 'You can do this, you can believe in yourself.' Give a lot of motivation, verbally."

When we thought to ask for youths' dreams, we thought we might get the big kind of dreams- flying cars, self-recording note taking devices, Willy Wonka style lunch rooms- along with no more homework, no more tests, no more teachers. Instead, we got the kind of dreams that are so close to the touch, so real to the senses, so damn possible that when one awakes, she's not sure it didn't really happen. Dreams of this sort are so powerful but tenuous, so thick with possibility, but elusive. They are the kinds of dreams that *happen*.

This chapter has illustrated the vulnerability of public education to privatization, and linked this to the ongoing severing of lifelines available to urban youth. Youth experience schools that are both the last lifeline and disrespectfully inadequate as a humiliating irony. They condemn the lack of purpose in their schooling. Observing that assessment has displaced all prior purposes of schooling, I argued that satisfied living

would be a worthy purpose for schooling. To begin steps toward repurposed schools, we must work to develop multiple, meaningful routes to graduation. I close with the emphasis that our dream schools are not out of reach. Arimme's definition of a dream school is short, yet poignant. "It would be a challenge, they want me there, they help." Her dream is worth working for.

Chapter 6 On Renewal

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin, which, except for renewal, except for the coming of new and the young, would be inevitable... and where we decide we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.

-Hannah Arendt, as quoted by William Ayres, 2000, p. 64

In my office, I use a large tapestry that I brought home from India as a bulletin board. Scotch-taped on the black, copper, and green-printed medallion featuring elephants, donkeys, and peacocks, are the bits of paper that I have accumulated over the years, the shards of thoughts and inspirations that would become my dissertation. First, at 12 o'clock there are the lists of codes, the fragments of thoughts that have helped me to organize the focus group and interview transcriptions in Atlas.ti. Moving clockwise there is a index card with the word "kudzu" on it, because I wanted to remember to somewhere make a metaphor about rhizomes and kudzu, a metaphor that never came together, but that I haven't yet let go of. There are index cards with my own poems,^{24 25} a list of

²⁴ One poem reads...
There it goes that there
is a place in my body
that knows.
Not ungoing but going. Not
broken but healing. The city
spirals around that place in my body. It swings to it- tornado eye
calming and nourishing- suspending.
This is where my work
comes from. There is the better question of where it
goes to

²⁵ Another poem reads...
I keep going on
feet folded under weight
feet thick with holding hands

connecting words, “acknowledges, adds, admits, agrees, argues, asserts, believes, boasts, claims,” a poem torn out of the New Yorker, called Rapture, by Katha Pollitt. There is the galaxy of tiny flashes of light, cramped points made on scraps of paper, just-awakened scribbles looted from the notebook beside my bed. Of all of these bits, these chiclets of provocation, it has been Hannah Arendt’s passage on education that has continued to propel my thinking. I like the thirding that she does in this passage, the neither and bothness. I like that it is generational, that her vision for education has room for every generation. I like that she says that education is about love and concern for the world, that this requires responsibility and flexibility. I like that she calls for renewal. Each word reverberates with the stories of the youth I have met on this journey.

I will conclude this dissertation in two parts. First I will review the findings. In the second part of the conclusion, I will discuss the implications of these findings for theory, for policy, and for practice. It is my hope that the findings of this dissertation will be of service to the improvement of schooling, to expanded educational options for urban youth, and to the re(en)visioning and renewal of the purposes of public schooling.

Review of Findings

What follows is a review of the findings of this dissertation. I have presented them in the order they appear in the dissertation, first as a list, then, I provide a brief summary of the main points of each finding.

- Youth value the GED in ways formerly unobserved by analyses that focus on higher-education-use and use for employment.

to hold out for water longer
 there is too much earth
 between me and where I have to go
 there are too many mountains
 too many sticks in the field

- An additional, pivotal value of the GED is in its role as substitute for adequate educational options in the New York City Public school system.
- The GED provides youth with an alternative, but not equal route to a secondary school credential, especially as schooling becomes more and more regimented.
- Youth experience schooling as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities; this can be understood as a dialectic of school push out.
- Federal policies like No Child Left Behind, state policies such as exit exams and the phase out of the local diploma, and city policies that prevent multiple routes to graduation directly contribute to school push out.
- As other public institutions become more vulnerable to privatization, schools also become more vulnerable, potentially closing urban youths' last access to the public sphere.
- At the same time, assessment has displaced prior purposes of schooling, rendering schooling deeply dissatisfying.
- Pushed out youth reject assessment-based purposes of schooling while embracing the importance of education;
- Multiple, meaningful routes to graduation are needed.

Discussion

Youth value the GED in ways formerly unobserved by analyses that focus on higher-education-use and use for employment. Prior to the Gate-ways and Get-aways study by the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire, analyses of the use and value of the GED were myopic, able only to see the GED in terms of employment and higher education. Our research did support that the GED does not provide the same kind of access to employment and higher education that the high school diploma affords, however, our cold calls and interviews with GED youth reveal that returns on the GED are not nearly as over-determined as prior studies would have us believe. Further, GED youth, who resist that schooling should only be geared for job and higher education preparation anyway, told us that they valued the GED for a range of reasons, most notably because it has provided them a sense of accomplishment and completion, and was an emergency exit from inadequate schools. Youth also praised

their GED programs for being flexible, dynamic, and supportive in ways that their schools were not.

An additional, pivotal value of the GED is in its role as substitute for adequate educational options in the New York City Public school system. With one exception (Smith, 2003) existing analyses that focused on the individual returns of the GED missed the big picture of the value of the GED option: its role in keeping up the appearance of functionality for a very dysfunctional system: A system that only makes one route of graduation available to most students, while only half of those who enter will graduate is dysfunctional. Students who are pushed out of school and enter GED programs are categorized in the benign, murky status of “discharged;” and up until 2006, New York City Department of Education made no distinction between GED earners and high school diploma earners. A 2008 Advocates for Children report revealed that fewer than half of Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation programs provide necessary services to English Language Learners, pregnant and parenting teens, over-age/under credited youth, and youth in special education, the very populations these programs are intended to serve. The GED is less expensive to administer than other educational options such as night schools, rich and meaningful vocational and alternative schools, apprentice programs, and portfolio-based routes to graduation. In New York State, in 2006, 48% of GED earners were aged 16-19; 26% were aged 20-24, and 26% were aged 25 or over.

The GED provides youth with an alternative, but not equal route to a secondary school credential, especially as schooling becomes more and more regimented. GED youth experience the GED as a stigmatized credential, and less effective passport to sustainable employment and higher education than the high school diploma. However,

for many youth, the GED provides access to job interviews and college admissions processes to which they would not have gained access without the credential. Under the current climate of NCLB assessment and Regents exit exams, pushed out youth who pursue and earn a GED would not have otherwise earned a high school diploma. Though they do not experience the GED as an equal credential to the high school diploma, they value the GED for being a legitimized alternative credential.

Youth experience schooling as a dialectic of humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities; this can be understood as a dialectic of school push out. Though humiliation and dignity may seem to be in contradiction, the boundaries between them in this dialectic are blurred. Youth identify a series of ironies in schooling, especially related to assessment, exit exams, and meritocracy, that, due to the personalized nature of school rule enforcement, humiliate students. At the same time, youth position themselves within a particular kind of dignity that is dangerous both to the stasis of the classroom and hallway, and also their own school careers. Both sides of the dialectic are in action at the same time, they inform and propel one another. This dialectic is characteristic of school push out.

Federal policies like No Child Left Behind, state policies such as exit exams and the phase out of the local diploma, and city policies that prevent multiple routes to graduation directly contribute to school push out. There are always negative consequences to policy, but the outcomes of these particular policies are counter-intuitive: they prevent access and completion of secondary schooling for more than half of New York City youth, disproportionately youth of color and poor youth. Findings from other states and cities echo this claim.

As other public institutions become more vulnerable to privatization, schools also become more vulnerable, potentially closing urban youths' last access to the public sphere. Crises (and perceived crises) in public transportation, public housing, social security, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the health care and prescription drug industries prompt calls for privatization, as for-profit crisis management corporations, some with high ranking government officials at the helm, lurk at the ready to step in. Within this climate, schools, especially urban schools, are also increasingly perceived to be sites of crises for which no solution exists except for privatization. At the same time, two things are happening: First, the outside demand placed on schools to meet assessment mandates (such as those required by NCLB) and social needs (such as providing healthcare, multiple nourishing meals, and after school programs) continues to grow. Second, as public funding for basic human and civic needs is being repealed at every turn in a young person's life, her need for her school to provide these lifelines becomes more acute; her school's inability to sufficiently meet her needs while also disrespecting her is a slap in the face, a broken promise. We should be wary of mandates that demand 100% proficiency by 2014, as NCLB does, or that close down a main artery to high school completion, such as the NYSED has done with the local diploma, because these policies guarantee school failure, and pave the way for privatization.

At the same time, assessment has displaced prior purposes of schooling, rendering schooling deeply dissatisfying. The purposes of public schooling in the United States, though somewhat contested, have largely been organized around serving the public good. For example, Horace Mann's vision of schools as the great wheel of balance, equalizing poverty, and public schooling as the civic education that would be

fundamental to democracy. Other, more cynical reads on the purposes of schooling include Bowles and Gintis' view of schooling as social reproduction, and views of schooling as assimilationist, nationalist, and the site in which global capitalism is grown. CREDD's research supports a 2008 observation made by Ofelia Garcia that assessment has become the contemporary purpose of schooling. Schooling as assessment has deep pedagogical and curricular ramifications on school completion: assessment is not a sustainable or compelling purpose for schooling, not for a generation, or an individual. The purposes of schooling need to be reassessed, recalibrated, renewed so that schooling activities and tasks are meaningful.

Pushed out youth reject assessment-based purposes of schooling while embracing the importance of education. Our youth participants maintained a key differentiation between schooling (as assessment) and education, that which happens over a lifetime, in accordance to individual interests and talents, and family and community needs. Youth had a longitudinal perspective on education, of which schooling, especially inadequate schooling, was just one element. This is not to say that their schooling was not important to them, but rather, youth exited their schools in order to preserve their rights to an education. This differentiation is evidence that supports the following finding.

Multiple, meaningful routes to graduation are needed. The most significant value youth place on the GED is as an alternative to the narrowly conceived Regents exam graduation requirement that serves as major, singular determinant of a high school diploma. This, along with our finding that youth treasure the potential for education, even in sacrifice of their schooling, yields the conclusion that making an array of rich, rewarding, respected, respectful avenues to graduation would make schools and

schooling more resonant in youth lives. This is not a call for hierarchical tracking of yesteryear, but a thorough imagining of multiple, challenging, fascinating paths to multiple, challenging, fascinating destinations. In this way, schooling and education don't need to be a dichotomy, and youth can have access to compelling education inside their schools.

Implications

In the following section, I will indicate the implications of this dissertation for theory, for policy, and for practice.

Theoretical implications of this work are largely related to desire and complex personhood as a counter framework to damage-based analyses. This is evidenced in several theoretical advancements throughout the manuscript. First, I discussed youth pursuit of the GED as acts of repatriating their learning, and in doing so, repatriation of the value of the GED. Repatriation refers to the returning of sacred objects, ancestral lands, cultural rights (such as subsistence rights), and human remains that have been looted, stolen, or false-treated. It is a powerful process within a network of decolonizing processes. Repatriation is a useful way of understanding how youth view their own seeking of the GED, as reclaiming, recovering, and redirecting their own paths of learning. Repatriation is a key element of (educational) sovereignty. By sheer force and commitment of youth to the necessity and significance of the GED in their lives, the value of the GED is repatriated, returned to those who seek it.

I also theorized that pushed out youth can re-orient themselves to positions of dangerous dignity, seeking self-preservation and self-determination, and claiming educational sovereignty. With the notable exception of Fine (1991), many prior

interpretations of school non-completer youth fell into the flat binaries of loser/hero and rebel/dupe. School leavers were cast off as those intent to cut off their noses to spite their faces. In contrast, dangerous dignity recognizes complex personhood, contradiction, and desire. It affords youth the right to make difficult decisions on competing needs, especially the needs to be economically secure and to be respected. Dangerous dignity exposes structural ironies at the same time that it confronts hypocrisy. It is another key element of educational sovereignty.

In chapter five, I theorized the distinctions between schooling and education made by pushed out youth as an opportunity to repurpose schools toward satisfied living. I discussed the ways in which pushed-out youth expressed belief in the transformative power of education, and in schools' roles in reproducing existing social and economic strata. A framework of complex personhood (Gordon, 1997; Tuck, in press c) helps to decode how youth might simultaneously believe two seemingly contradictory purposes of schooling: The contradiction is not in the youth, but in the schools. Schools purport to do one thing (equalize) but then by design do another (reproduce inequity.) To engage in tracing their purpose is to engage in that schizophrenia.

Taking a different approach to the purposes of schooling, from the perspective of our youth participants, satisfied living included not only economic and health sustainability, but also feeling respected and powerful, supportive family and community relationships, great literature and music, good credit, and affordable housing. The question is, how might schools help youth accomplish their vision of a satisfied life? This question provides powerful guidance in the re-purposing of schooling.

This work also has significant implications for policy, some of which I have already discussed here. I believe that securing multiple, viable, purposeful, rich routes to graduation saturated in meaning and justice should be one of our main priorities. In part, this means we need to look at who the New York State local diploma phase-out policy excludes from graduation. We already know that fewer educational options contributes to school non-completion (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Fine et. al. 2007) and to increased abuse of the IEP diploma (Advocates for Children, forthcoming). To continue to persist in limited routes to graduation without accounting for the educational casualties is unethical. I'm not the only one that has come to this conclusion. The Performance Assessment Consortium Schools in New York State (Foote, 2007) and the Center for Education Policy (www.cep-dc.org) are both developing visions for multiple pathways to graduation.

In CREDD's forthcoming *Youth to Youth Guide to the GED*, my co-researchers have laid out several additional implications for policy.²⁶ They are:

- Expand hours and opportunities to attend classes
- Evaluate and expedite the process of transferring credits
- Hold schools accountable for the students they push-out
- Stop obsessing over test scores and give us smaller classes

Each of these recommendations requires school leaders to re-cognize the ways that schools exclude a variety of youth populations, especially youth who are poor, who are court-involved, who are over-age and under credited, and who are experiencing crises due to health, housing, safety, and family. In these recommendations, my co-researchers

²⁶ Thank you to my co-researcher Maria Bacha for writing the policy recommendations section of the *Youth to Youth Guide to the GED* discussed here.

are calling for a particular kind of flexibility, that will allow youth within highly regimented, potentially overwhelming conditions to still participate in schooling.

Finally, a contribution of this work for policy is an example of the rhizome as potent organizing metaphor for understanding connections between policy and educational injustice. The rhizome “connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 21). Concerned not only with rhizoming as an activity or as a way to describe behavior or performance, CREDD and I have thought together about the use of the rhizome as a unit of analysis, especially as a unit of policy analysis. Rather than looking in arborescent, tree-like style – for ‘causes’ – we studied *relationships*. The rhizome as a unit of analysis has had a major impact on CREDD’s design of the Gate-ways and Getaways Project, and is at the heart of our decisions to carve out and work within our four areas of inquiry and to craft methods that would help us better understand the relationships involved between students, institutions, and communities, *rather than the origins or causes of the trend* of pushing students towards the GED rather than a high school diploma.

Finally, are two major implications for educational practice, both derived from chapter three. First, I asserted that *rule enforcement is personalized, even when school rules are generalized*. Youth reported that school personnel regularly referenced their lives and bodies when enforcing school rules and policies, resonating as attacks. Such instances were especially assaulting when a young person was facing an outside crisis because they saw school personnel as intimately punitive, on one hand, and painfully indifferent to their personal troubles on the other. Concerned educators might consider

this dynamic when disciplining students, and choose to find ways that are not personalized to enforce school rules and policies.

Second and related, educators might be more aware that relationships between youth and school personnel *matter*. Just one caring relationship can be a brace against the alienation and disrespect youth experience in schools. It is important for youth to have school personnel who are friendly and reliable, who are encouraging and have high expectations, who challenge and offer solace. Such relationships may not always result in school completion, but they likely will have an educational impact in the long term. Taiaiake Alfred claims that decolonization is “a process of discovering the truth in a world created out of lies” (Alfred, 2005, p. 280). Youth GED earner Jordan told us that it was his adult neighbors that helped him sort the truth from the lies,

There was a whole number of people in Brooklyn, they all saw me and they said, “You’re bright. You’re going to make it. But not if you do this [do not complete a high school diploma or a GED]. Don’t give up. Just come on, get back on track, yadda, yadda, yadda.” I mean, I was hearing constantly from like a billion different people, I think that’s one of the biggest things that stuck with me. I think that’s why I want to go to college. That’s why I’m not letting the man shove me down.

Jordan’s story is about the power of balancing voices- from within a school or from community- to motivate youth to search for evidence of counter truths. In this way, relationships can be a stasis from which youth can make wise(r) educational decisions.

This dissertation has argued that it is important to look beneath the surface of the now-normalized use of the GED as a receptacle for youth who are unwanted in school. This exploration raises several over-arching questions. Why is the GED practically the only alternative to Regents exit exam graduation requirements in New York State? What will it take to re-vision schools, so that satisfied living (and not assessment) is the

purpose of schooling? Obviously these are questions that require further study, with different questions and methods. However, I believe that a methodology of repatriation can be of service to this kind of inquiry.

I'm not sure what the coming years of educational and social policy will bring. Certainly as we approach 2014, and the number of schools failing to meet AYP increases, schools and students will be more vulnerable to privatizing forces. Will school systems be able to withstand the pressure to privatize? If so, who among the students will be left? Now, as we learn more and more about school push-out in middle school, what will be the role of the GED in the lives of those young school exiles?

I think that we can be sure that without the development of multiple, meaningful routes to graduation, youth will continue to pursue the GED as a get-away from narrowly conceived high schools. Further, as more and more youth use the GED as an exit strategy, I believe that we will see a shift in the material returns of the credential. We will see more youth GED earners entering and succeeding in college, and more GED earners gaining full employment because these youth will be under-schooled, but not necessarily under-prepared. Like my youth co-researchers who have been pushed-out, yet dazzled and inspired me on a daily basis with their tenacious, brilliant lives steeped in self-education, GED earners will defy those who dismiss the credential as a meaningless piece of paper. Still, there will be GED earners who *are* under-schooled and under-prepared, and it is for these youth that the need to develop multiple, rich, challenging, compelling routes is most acute.

I am convinced, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) argue, that it is upon the most territorialized structures that deterritorialization takes place- youth use of the GED is only

the first deterritorializations that will unfold in response to the territorialization of schools by NCLB, State exit exams, and the phase out of the local diploma. By rejecting such policies, youth (and concerned educators) are already re-imagining, re-visioning what schools can be, even as the rest of society appears to be more and more hell-bent on shrinking what schooling should be. What we can do is support, sustain, and be a soft place for youth to land in their dangerous dignities, because it is their dangerous dignities that contain our hope for educational renewal. This is a call to every generation.

Appendices

Appendix A: Youth GED earners and seekers and youth GED earners now in adulthood interview questions

How familiar are you with the GED? I'm going to ask you lots of questions about the GED, but I'd like for you to begin by telling me everything you would like for me to know about it.

When did you first hear about the GED? Who told you about it?

What did you hear about it?

So far, has your experience as a GED earner/seeker met your expectations? How or how not?

What was your high school experience like before leaving?

What are your thoughts about how the GED is valued as a credential by society?

Some people think that a valuable part of the GED is that someone avoids sitting in high school. What do you think about that? Do you think that's true?

Were there people at your school who the school didn't really want to be there? Who were the people that were not welcomed?

Can you tell me about a time that you felt unwelcome at school? What did you do?

What did your school do with people they weren't happy with?

When you were in school, did you notice if your graduation class dwindled down? (if it did) what are your thoughts on this?

Do you think some students are not cut out for school? Why or why not? Where do they get that message?

A lot of people who leave school before graduation are called dropouts. Often the reality is that they were pushed-out by the school, teachers, leaders, or school rules or school tests. Is there a time that you have felt pushed out from school? What happened? What did you do?

I'm going to change topics here. What is the most important thing you have ever learned? Where did you learn it? How did you learn it?

Do you think it's weird that you did/didn't learn it in school? Why?

Do you think that there is a difference between schooling and education?
Why or why not? What is or isn't the difference?

How do you personally learn (best)? Did your school support your way of learning?
How or how not?

Lots of people say that schools are supposed to be places that make more society equal.
Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

What advice would you give to someone who was in your shoes?

What would be your dream school?

Is there anything else you want to tell me or other youth considering the GED?

Appendix B: GED Instructor Interview Questions

How did you become a GED teacher?

Before becoming a GED teacher what were your views on someone who gets a GED? How have your views changed?

Have you ever taught outside of the GED? If so, how is it different or similar?

In your opinion, what is the "ideal" GED student?

How do you think society views your students (who have or are seeking a GED)? Do you agree or disagree with this view? Why?

Besides GED exam preparation lessons, what other kinds of lessons or skills do you or your program offer?

What kind of relationships do you try to create with your GED students? How do you go about that?

Some of your students may not have been in a classroom for several years before entering your GED class. How do you help them readjust to this school-like environment?

Why do you think your students have left high school?

Some people think that rather than dropping out, students are actually pushed out from their high schools by teachers, administrators, and unfair school rules. Do you think that some of your students have been pushed out towards the GED? If so, can you tell me the story of one particular student that is a good example of students being pushed out?

One idea that has come up in our research is that students are leaving high school to pursue the GED because they do not think they will pass the Regents exams. What is your view on this? Have the Regents exams played a role in your students' decisions to pursue a GED? How or how not?

What challenges or struggles do you see students coming into your program with in comparison to the challenges and struggles they may have when they leave?

Do you feel that a GED is equal to a high school diploma? Why or why not?

Would you recommend getting the GED? Why or why not? Who would you recommend getting a GED to?

Do you feel that there are any other alternatives to traditional high school besides the GED? If so, what are they?

Why do you feel people drop out or leave their GED programs before getting their GED?

Do you feel supported by the Department of Education? How or how not?

Can you tell me the story of a past student who really sticks out in your mind?

What advice would you give to a young person who is thinking of leaving high school to earn a GED?

Do you think there is a difference between education and schooling? Can you describe it?

Please describe for me your "Dream School" or education?

Appendix C: Value of the GED focus group discussion questions

Some people say that getting a GED is not as hard as getting a high school diploma and that getting a GED is a cop out. Why do you think people might think this? Do you agree? Why or why not?

What doors are opened to people with GEDs and why? How have these doors opened in your life?

What doors are closed to people with GEDs and why? How have these doors been closed in your life?

Lots of people think that the GED is a degree for “ex-convicts.” What do you think of this reputation? Does this view impact your life? How?

Would you recommend getting the GED to a friend? Why or why not? In what situations?

How would you describe a person with a GED?

Why do you think people leave school to get a GED?

What advice would you give to youth in your shoes?

Appendix D: School push out focus group discussion questions

Were there people at your school who the school didn't really want to be there? Who were the people that were not welcomed?

What did your school do with people they weren't happy with?

When you were in school, did you notice if your graduation class dwindled down? (if it did) what are your thoughts on this?

Do you think some students are not cut out for school? Why or why not? Where do they get that message?

A lot of people who leave school before graduation are called dropouts. Often the reality is that they were pushed-out by the school, teachers, leaders, or school rules or school tests. Is there a time that you have felt pushed out from school? What happened? What did you do?

What can a powerful person in leadership do about school push-out?

What can a group of powerful people like you do about school push-out?

What advice would you give to someone who has had your experience?

Appendix E: Youth Researchers for a New Education System focus group discussion questions

What would meaningful participation in school look like for you? (on various levels, from showing-up to making administrative decisions)

If you did participate meaningfully in how your school was run, how would your overall school experience be different?

In some classrooms, hip hop culture is recognized as a valid teaching tool that speaks to students' experiences. What are other ways that teachers and students can learn from each other?

Why do you go to school (other than because your parent/legal guardian tells you to)?

Why does our government mandate that we go to school?

Do you feel that your school is meeting your needs? Please explain your answer.

Imagine what your educational experience would be like if it truly fulfilled your purpose... (pass out markers/pens, more paper)

Appendix F: Meritocracy focus group discussion questions

After the Nothing but Trouble Game...

How do you think this game is or isn't like real life?

What are the things that keep players/people from reaching their dreams (in the game and in real life)?

Who would you expect to win this game? What do you think about that?

After the satisfied life map, and after defining a satisfied life...

Is there anything else that we should add to our definition of a satisfied life? Does anyone want to move their dots? Why? (only if they do)

Do you think everyone has an equal opportunity to have a satisfied life? Why or why not? Who doesn't?

What happens to those who don't?

What needs to happen to change how many dots are toward the middle?

What can a powerful person in leadership do?

What can a group of powerful people like you do?

What advice would you give to someone who has had your experience?

Appendix G: Meritocracy focus group “Nothing but Trouble” game cards

1 Housing (red)

Your home in Suffolk county on Long Island, which your family has owned for generations, has been appraised for triple its purchase price. Move one step forward.

1 Housing (yellow)

Your rent on your 2 family home in Jamaica, Queens has increased so you need to move; move your playing piece to the first space in blue’s home territory. If blue has a piece there, eject her to the back of the blue home territory.

1 Housing (green)

You moved to this Jersey neighborhood to escape the crime and cramped quarters of the city, but you’ve found yourself in a poor suburb- with depleted schools, unhelpful public transportation, and hostile wealthy communities pushing your neighborhood in on itself. Move back one space.

1 Housing (blue)

Your apartment in a South Bronx Project building has been bought by a developer who wants to knock it down to build condos for people who can no longer afford to live in Manhattan. You are forced to move into the North Bronx, away from your school and the friends and family that have surrounded you for your whole life. Move your playing piece back to your home territory.

2 Education (red)

Your family has attended private colleges for generations, you have the option to attend either your mother or father’s alma matters, both top universities. Or, you might put off college for a few years to travel or work in your family business. Move three steps forward.

2 Education (yellow)

You are competing with thousands of other students just like you to win a scholarship to attend a college in another state- you are proud of the essay that you wrote for it, but could have used some help from your college counselor, who you haven’t seen more than twice in your four years of high school. If you don’t get in, you will attend a CUNY school and get to keep your part time job. Move two steps forward.

2 Education (green)

You hope to move back home to attend a 4 year or community CUNY college- it's tough to imagine what the steps are to get into college. Move one step forward.

2 Education (blue)

You hope to be the first person in your family to go to college but have had trouble getting current, up-to date information on how to get there. There are also a lot of forms to fill out, and not many who can help. Move one step forward.

3 Health (red)

Your family can afford any of the regular or emergency medical attention you might need, you attend a dentist regularly. Move one step forward.

3 Health (yellow)

One of your folks has medical insurance, so theoretically you can get a medical appointment, it just doesn't seem like doctors want patients on your family's insurance plan though, so often it's a long wait to see someone. Wait one turn before popping again.

3 Health (green)

Lack of quality public transportation makes it nearly impossible to see a doctor or get to a clinic when needed so you have to be really really sick to see a doctor. Move back one space.

3 Health (blue)

When you need to see a doctor, the emergency room is your only option. Though there are payment plans available, it is still very costly. Move back one space.

4 Income (red)

Your family makes enough money to purchase all that it needs and acquire savings.

4 Income (yellow)

Your family makes enough money to pay bills and otherwise make ends meet.

4 Income (green)

Your family's income is dependent on wealthy suburbanites- you may not move your playing piece until passed by a red playing piece.

4 Income (blue)

Your family's income is not always reliable, although lots of times everyone has multiple jobs.

5 Emergency! (red)

Your home is in danger of flooding, you have flood insurance so all you can do is pack up your valuables and stay with family until the drama is over. Move ahead one space.

5 Emergency! (yellow)

Your home is in danger of flooding, you move all you can to higher ground, but chose to risk it and stay in place to wait out the storm. Wait one turn before moving ahead.

5 Emergency! (green)

Your home is in danger of flooding. You are forced to wait out the storm because the buses you rely upon to get out of your urbanized suburb never arrive. Your lives are in danger. Wait one turn before moving ahead.

5 Emergency! (blue)

Your home is in danger of flooding. You will likely be forcibly removed from your home. Your safety and wellbeing has not been made a priority by your local or federal government. Your lives are in danger. Wait one turn before moving ahead.

6 What the world reflects back to you about yourself (red)

All around you are people who look just like you who are successful and respected as hard working and honorable. Your sense of entitlement allows you to move one space forward.

6 What the world reflects back to you about yourself (yellow)

All around you are people who are hard working like you, but it doesn't seem like as many people are struggling like you are. Your doubt keeps you from moving until the next turn.

6 What the world reflects back to you about yourself (green)

In your neighborhood, you see people who look just like you who are struggling to get better lives every day- right outside your neighborhood you see people who have it easy and always get the best of things: schools, houses, jobs, cars. Your frustration keeps you from moving until the next turn.

6 What the world reflects back to you about yourself (blue)

Because New York is such a segregated city, usually the people you see every day look just like you- except for the police officers and new people moving into the neighborhood, who look at you with suspicion. You're not really surprised: what is shown about people like you in the media isn't ever good news. Your feelings of invisibility keep you from moving until the next turn.

Appendix H: Cold calls to college admissions counselors

Hi, may I please speak to an admissions counselor?

(if asked why) I'm doing research on the college admission process.

(when talking to the admissions counselor) Hi, I'm doing research on the college admission process and have some (five) questions for you. What is the most important factor in getting accepted to your school?

Do you accept applicants with GEDs? (if they don't know: a degree of General Educational Development)

About what percentage of your incoming freshmen have GEDs?

Are these students often offered financial aid?

Data show that only about 2% of GED earners who enter 4 year college ever complete their bachelor's degrees, (Thomas Smith, "Who Values the GED" 2003 in the Teacher's College Record) do you have any academic supports in place for students who enter with a GED?

Thanks so much for your time.

(If asked for your name) My name is _____ and I'm a researcher for CREDD, a youth research group in New York City.

(if pressed for more details) You can email us at credd06@gmail.com and we will be happy to send you more information and send you the link to our website.

Appendix I: Cold calls to human resources departments, desirable employers

Hi, I'd like to speak to human resources.

(When patched through to human resources) Hi, I'd like to speak to someone who knows a lot about your company's employees. (If asked why) I'm doing some research on applying for jobs.

(When talking to that person) Hi, I'm doing some research on the job application process and have some questions for you. What is the single most important factor that you look for in an employee?

What is the degree that you most prefer for applicants to hold?

About what percentage of your employees hold a GED? (if they don't know: a degree of General Educational Development)

About what percentage of these employees hold management positions?

Thanks so much for your time.

(If asked for your name) My name is _____ and I'm a researcher for CREDD, a youth research group in New York City.

(If pressed for more details) You can email us at credd06@gmail.com and we will be happy to send you more information and send you the link to our website.

Appendix J: Slam book prompts

Continued story... Once upon a time, I went to school and... (each person adds to the sentence)

What is your least favorite subject?

Best hang out spot?

Average number of times you skip class on a given day

Three words to describe your school?

Three words to describe your guidance counselor?

How many times did you meet/talk with your guidance counselor

My Principal is _____ (Three words)

At school (two columns) think/felt I belonged in this group

Teachers assignments are _____(Three words)

Three words to describe me?

Three words to describe my learning?

(Blank) is one person who understands me most

In the future I will be _____

Three words to say what high school is all about

Two words to describe your (in two columns) Education and School

What do you want to learn? (Three topics)

Describe your ideal education (Three words)

Two important things you learned (two columns) in School. In Life

What is discipline to you? (Three words)?

What is trust to you? (Three words)

How is it gained?

Three words to describe your society (4 words)

The army is... (Three words)

My peers treat me with (Three words)

Have you ever thought of leaving school to get your GED? If yes, when (age, grade, time of year)

Have you ever been approached by a teacher or school administrator about getting a GED?

How many guidance counselors are in your school?

A day at my school is (Three words)

My plans after I turn 18 are...

My teachers treat me with/like (Three words)

I _____ school (One word)

Add on to this drawing of how school is

Add on to this drawing of how school *should* be

Appendix K: CREDD survey- short version

Have a GED? [circle one]				
yes				no
In high school? [circle one]				
yes				no
Circle last grade completed				
9	10	11	12	12+

YOUR VIEWS ON SCHOOLING AND THE GED

We want to know about what **you** think about schooling in New York City public

schools and the GED (a degree of *General Educational Development*.)

CREDD (the *Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire*) is conducting this opinion poll to NYC residents aged 16-22 because we want to know what you **really** think about schools and the GED.

This is an opinion poll, not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. You can skip questions that you don't want to answer, or choose not to answer any at all. Of course, we hope you do because we want to know as much about what you really think as possible.

Your name is not on the opinion poll, nothing will connect your answers to you.

Thanks! To learn more about our work, email us at thecreddproject@yahoo.com.

1. Every year 50% to 70% of NYC students do not graduate with the rest of their class. Who is responsible for this? Mark each with a number 1 to 11 to indicate responsibility for the 50% to 70% who do not graduate with their class.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
least responsible								most responsible		

Use each number only once

individual student who does not graduate_____	community_____
other students_____	media_____
teachers_____	mayor Bloomberg_____
guidance counselors_____	governor Pataki_____
principals and other administrators_____	president Bush_____
parents or guardians_____	

Use this space to list others that are responsible: _____

2. Please circle all of the words that describe the school you attend or attended:

respectful	safe	violent	far from home	close to home
dirty	well kept	modern	relevant	big
small	crowded	hopeful	depressing	test-crazed
alternative	liberatory	prison-like	unstable	dull
welcoming	disenfranchised		encouraging	rigorous

What are three additional words that describe the environment of the school that you attend/attended?

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how important is/was the environment of the school that you attend or attended in your decision to stay in school or not stay in school? _____

3. [Please circle all that apply] My teachers treat or treated me like:

a college bound student	an outsider	a friend	a terrorist
a prisoner	a baby	a leader	a future day laborer
an animal	a 'foreigner'	a criminal	a stupid person
a 2 nd class citizen	a thinker	a loser	a creative person
I'm valuable to them	a source of knowledge	I'm nothing without them	
_____ other	_____ other	_____ other	

4. What is valuable to you about school? Check all that apply.

<input type="checkbox"/> getting a high school diploma	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling like you completed your educational work
<input type="checkbox"/> seeing friends	<input type="checkbox"/> making enough money to have a life you want
<input type="checkbox"/> learning relevant things	<input type="checkbox"/> getting prepared to complete a college degree
<input type="checkbox"/> getting into college	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling closure, gaining a sense of completion
<input type="checkbox"/> getting a good job	<input type="checkbox"/> not feeling left behind in life
<input type="checkbox"/> having a happy life	<input type="checkbox"/> finishing school with your peers
<input type="checkbox"/> having an easy life	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling fulfilled by your learning experience
<input type="checkbox"/> getting good grades	<input type="checkbox"/> being a role model for family and community
<input type="checkbox"/> taking tests	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning discipline	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning to question	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning to obey people in power	
<input type="checkbox"/> getting a good career	
<input type="checkbox"/> getting out of your home	
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling good about yourself	

5. Some people think that in order to be successful in life, you have to earn a high school diploma. How much do you agree or disagree? Why?

Some people think that the GED is not equal to a high school diploma. How much do you agree or disagree?

Why? _____

6. How helpful is having a GED in the following? Please check one [doesn't help, helps, or really helps] for each item.

	doesn't help	helps	really helps
getting into college	_____	_____	_____
finishing a college degree	_____	_____	_____
getting a good job	_____	_____	_____
having a good career	_____	_____	_____
making enough money			
to have a life that you want	_____	_____	_____
having an easy life	_____	_____	_____
feeling good about yourself	_____	_____	_____
being a role model			
for family and community	_____	_____	_____
feeling like you completed			
your educational work	_____	_____	_____
feeling closure, gaining a			
sense of completion	_____	_____	_____
being able to get on with your life	_____	_____	_____
finishing school with your peers	_____	_____	_____
feeling fulfilled by your learning			
experience	_____	_____	_____

7. Some people say that *some students are better off getting a GED than staying in high school until graduation.* How much do you agree or disagree? Why?

Some people think that *high schools benefit by getting rid of students who don't get good grades; don't pass regents exams; don't attend classes regularly.* How much do you agree or disagree?

Why? _____

8. Have you ever considered getting a GED? [circle one] no yes

Would you recommend getting a GED to a friend? [circle one] no yes

9. Have you ever been asked to leave high school

[circle one] no yes

If yes, who asked you? Please circle: Teacher Dean Principal

10. Do you know of students who have been asked to leave high school?

[circle one] no yes

11. Final questions about you.

What is your age? _____

Are you [circle one:]

a GED earner

seeking a GED

not in school/not seeking a GED

in high school

in college

other _____

In what borough do you live? _____

In what borough did/do you attend school? _____

Most of the students in my classes are/were [circle one]:

AP/Honors Regular/Academic

Remedial/Basic In special education

What is your gender? _____

Were you born in the United States? _____ If not, where? _____

What language is spoken in your home? _____

Many people have conditions that are considered disabilities, like learning disabilities, being blind, deaf, mobility impairments, cerebral palsy, etc. Do you have any conditions that would be considered a disability? _____

If yes, please explain _____

People come from families with different resources. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
I or my family can afford whatever I need				
I or my family have a hard time paying for what I need				

People in the United States come from different cultures. Some of these are listed below.

Check all that describe your family's ancestry.

- African Caribbean

 Asian or Pacific Islander
 Black or African American

 Latino, Latina
 Native American or American Indian, Alaska Native
 White
 Other (please school us) _____

**Thanks
for
sharing
your
opinions with us.**

[This space is for CREDD use] Researcher Date Location

Appendix L: CREDD survey- extended version

Have a GED? [circle one]				
yes				no
In high school? [circle one]				
yes				no
Circle last grade completed				
9	10	11	12	12+

YOUR VIEWS ON SCHOOLING AND THE GED

We want to know about what **you** think about schooling in New York City public

schools and the GED (a degree of General Educational Development.)

CREDD (the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire) is conducting this opinion poll to NYC residents aged 16-22 because we want to know what you **really** think about schools and the GED.

This is an opinion poll, not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. You can skip questions that you don't want to answer, or choose not to answer any at all. Of course, we hope you do because we want to know as much about what you really think as possible.

Your name is not on the opinion poll, nothing will connect your answers to you.

Thanks! To learn more about our work, email us at thecreddproject@yahoo.com.

1. Every year 50% to 70% of NYC students do not graduate with the rest of their class. Who is responsible for this? Mark each with a number 1 to 11 to indicate responsibility for the 50% to 70% who do not graduate with their class.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
least responsible								most responsible		

Use each number only once

individual student who does not graduate_____	community_____
other students_____	media_____
teachers_____	mayor Bloomberg_____
guidance counselors_____	governor Pataki_____
principals and other administrators_____	president Bush_____
parents or guardians_____	

Use this space to list others that are responsible: _____

2. Please circle all of the words that describe the school you attend or attended:

respectful	safe	violent	far from home	close to home
dirty	well kept	modern	relevant	big
small	crowded	hopeful	depressing	test-crazed
alternative	liberatory	prison-like	unstable	dull
welcoming	disenfranchised		encouraging	rigorous

What are three additional words that describe the environment of the school that you attend/attended?

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how important is/was the environment of the school that you attend or attended in your decision to stay in school or not stay in school? _____

3. [Please circle all that apply] My teachers treat or treated me like:

a college bound student	an outsider	a friend	a terrorist
a prisoner	a baby	a leader	a future day laborer
an animal	a 'foreigner'	a criminal	a stupid person
a 2 nd class citizen	a thinker	a loser	a creative person
I'm valuable to them	a source of knowledge	I'm nothing without them	
_____ other	_____ other	_____ other	

4. What is valuable to you about school? Check all that apply.

<input type="checkbox"/> getting a high school diploma	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling like you completed your educational work
<input type="checkbox"/> seeing friends	<input type="checkbox"/> making enough money to have a life you want
<input type="checkbox"/> learning relevant things	<input type="checkbox"/> getting prepared to complete a college degree
<input type="checkbox"/> getting into college	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling closure, gaining a sense of completion
<input type="checkbox"/> getting a good job	<input type="checkbox"/> not feeling left behind in life
<input type="checkbox"/> having a happy life	<input type="checkbox"/> finishing school with your peers
<input type="checkbox"/> having an easy life	<input type="checkbox"/> feeling fulfilled by your learning experience
<input type="checkbox"/> getting good grades	<input type="checkbox"/> being a role model for family and community
<input type="checkbox"/> taking tests	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning discipline	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning to question	_____ other
<input type="checkbox"/> learning to obey people in power	
<input type="checkbox"/> getting a good career	
<input type="checkbox"/> getting out of your home	
<input type="checkbox"/> feeling good about yourself	

What do you think is the purpose of going to school? _____

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least and 10 being the most, how important is the payoff of a high school diploma in your decision to stay in school or not stay in school? _____

5. Some people think that in order to be successful in life, you have to earn a high school diploma. How much do you agree or disagree? Why?

Some people think that the GED is not equal to a high school diploma. How much do you agree or disagree?
Why? _____

6. What do you hope to do for work or a career?

What degree, credential, or experience do you need to do this?

7. How helpful is having a GED in the following? Please check one [doesn't help, helps, or really helps] for each item.

	doesn't help	helps	really helps
getting into college	_____	_____	_____
finishing a college degree	_____	_____	_____
getting a good job	_____	_____	_____
having a good career	_____	_____	_____
making enough money			
to have a life that you want	_____	_____	_____
having an easy life	_____	_____	_____
feeling good about yourself	_____	_____	_____
being a role model			
for family and community	_____	_____	_____
feeling like you completed			
your educational work	_____	_____	_____
feeling closure, gaining a			
sense of completion	_____	_____	_____
being able to get on with your life	_____	_____	_____
finishing school with your peers	_____	_____	_____
feeling fulfilled by your learning			
experience	_____	_____	_____

8. Some people say that *some students are better off getting a GED than staying in high school until graduation*. How much do you agree or disagree? Why?

Some people think that *high schools benefit by getting rid of students who don't get good grades; don't pass regents exams; don't attend classes regularly*. How much do you agree or disagree? Why?

9. Have you ever considered getting a GED? Why or why not?

Describe who gets a GED.

Would you recommend getting a GED to a friend? Why or why not?

10. Please check all of the compelling reasons to leave school to get a GED

	FOR YOU	FOR OTHER STUDENTS
school is not interesting	_____	_____
repeated suspensions	_____	_____
teachers don't like you	_____	_____
hate taking tests	_____	_____
drug or alcohol addiction	_____	_____
joining the military	_____	_____
needing to make money now	_____	_____
school feels unsafe	_____	_____
school feels unwelcome	_____	_____
pregnancy	_____	_____
family needs you at home	_____	_____

- been held back _____
- too old for high school _____
- not going to pass the regents _____
- bad grades _____
- school just isn't for you _____
- being harassed by school police or security agents _____
- homelessness _____
- school is homophobic _____
- not going to college _____
- school is racist _____
- violence _____
- too smart to deal with the b.s of school _____

11. Have you ever been asked to leave high school

[circle one] no yes

If yes, who asked you? Please circle: Teacher Dean Principal

Other _____

If yes, what reason was provided?

If yes, what did you do?

12. Do you know of students who have been asked to leave high school?

[circle one] no yes

What is your take on this?

13. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Check one for each item.

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
Sometimes no matter how hard I work/ed I get/got low grades				
My grades reflect/ed how much I have learned in school				
It is/was easy for me to get high grades in my classes				
It is/was easy for me to get high scores on tests and exams				

Tests are the best way to see if I have learned something				
Hard work is/was rewarded in my school				
Grades are an accurate way of rewarding hard work				
Everyone in my school can get high grades				
I'd prefer to have ways other than grades to get feedback on my work				

14. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied, how satisfied are you with your life right now?_____

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied, how satisfied will you be with your life **at the age of 25?**_____

On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being the least satisfied and 10 being the most satisfied, how satisfied will you be with your life **at the age of 45?**_____

Some people think that *no matter how hard someone works, because we live in an unfair society, some people will never have a 10 in satisfaction.* Do you agree or disagree? Why?

15. Final questions about you.

What is your age?_____

Are you [circle one:]

a GED earner

seeking a GED

not in school/not seeking a GED

in high school

in college

other_____

In what borough do you live?_____

In what borough did/do you attend school?_____

Most of the students in my classes are/were [circle one]:

AP/Honors Regular/Academic
Remedial/Basic In special education

What is your gender? _____

Were you born in the United States? _____ If not, where? _____

What language is spoken in your home? _____

Many people have conditions that are considered disabilities, like learning disabilities, being blind, deaf, mobility impairments, cerebral palsy, etc. Do you have any conditions that would be considered a disability? _____

If yes, please explain _____

People come from families with different resources. How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statements below?

	strongly agree	agree	disagree	strongly disagree
I or my family can afford whatever I need				
I or my family have a hard time paying for what I need				

People in the United States come from different cultures. Some of these are listed below.

Check all that describe your family's ancestry.

- African Caribbean Asian or Pacific Islander
 Black or African American Latino, Latina
 Native American or American Indian, Alaska Native
 White
 Other (please school us) _____

**Thanks
for
sharing
your
opinions with us.**

[This space is for CREDD use]
Researcher
Date
Location

Appendix M: YRNES survey- paper version

Your Views on Schooling Opinion Poll

Youth Researchers for a New Education System

We want to know what you think about schooling in New York City public schools. This is an opinion poll, not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers.

1. Are you between the ages of 14 and 21?
 Yes No
2. Do you or have you attended public high school in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, or Staten Island?
 Yes No
3. How often are you put into classes in which you don't belong (i.e. classes not on your educational level)?
 Always Sometimes Rarely Never
4. How many times did you meet with your high school COUNSELOR THIS YEAR?
 None 1-2 times 3-4 times 5+ times
5. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
I often feel lost navigating through the public school system	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have access to all the help I need to make my education work for me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel prepared to take my next steps after high school from information I have received at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

6. Throughout high school, my counselors (**check all that apply**):
 - Helped me select courses that meet my high school's graduation requirements.
 - Helped me select courses that I need for work or admission to college.
 - Helped me decide what I want to do after I graduate.
 - Encouraged me to take AP/honors courses.
 - Encouraged me to continue my education after high school.
 - Talked to me about how to get a job.
 - Talked to me about how to get a job that I would want.
 - Talked to me about colleges/schools that are suited to my interests and abilities.
7. Who would be the best at running your school? (**check one**)
 - me and my classmates

- my parents
- my community
- the NYPD
- the mayor and the mayor's appointees

8. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
I feel that the mayor knows how to best run my school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Police Department has a negative effect on my schooling.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Mayor has a negative effect on my schooling.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have good ideas for programs or projects that would help solve the problems in my community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Members of my community have good ideas for programs of projects that would help solve the problems in my school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. How often are facilities in your school (i.e. the cafeteria, closets) used as a classroom?

- Always Usually Sometimes Never

10. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
My school administrators value my input when deciding what I should be learning.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My principal knows what is best for us students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In the past two years, my school has been making positive changes that have benefited the students.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. Who is most responsible for setting the rules and policies of the school? (**check one**)

- Students Teachers Parents and guardians
 Principals, deans, and other administrators Guidance counselors
 The mayor and the mayor's appointees Community
 The governor The president

12. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
On the whole, I feel respected by administration and faculty at my school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would want to participate in setting the rules and policies of my school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I think that my school rules make sense	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think that my school's rules are fair	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am aware of how I could change the rules and policies at school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. What do you think your PARENTS/GUARDIANS want you to do after high school?

- Go to college Work full time Join the military
 Not sure Other (blank) _____

14. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
My school is overcrowded	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My school provides me with the resources I need in order to learn	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My school provides equal opportunities for learning to every student	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that students in my school have to compete for things that we actually have rights to	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my school there is the general feeling that there are not enough desks, and/or enough chairs for all students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. How helpful is YOUR HIGH SCHOOL in finding a job?

- very helpful helpful somewhat helpful not at all helpful

16. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
I have a sense of my purpose in school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel that what I learn in high school is relevant to my life outside of high school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My school provides me with good reasons to keep attending school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grades in high school matter for success in my future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My classes give me useful preparation for what I plan to do in life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
High school teaches me valuable skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Working hard in high school matters for success in the work force	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
What we learn in class is necessary for success in the future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm getting a good education at my school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. What is the highest level of schooling your mother/female guardian has completed?
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Don't know | <input type="radio"/> Did not graduate from high school |
| <input type="radio"/> Attained a GED | <input type="radio"/> Graduated from high school |
| <input type="radio"/> Went to college, but did not graduate | <input type="radio"/> Graduated from a 4 year college |
| <input type="radio"/> Graduated from a 2 year college or technical/vocational school | <input type="radio"/> Graduate degree- MD/MA/PhD/MBA |
18. Were you born in the US?
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes, I was born in the US | <input type="radio"/> No, I arrived between age 11-15 |
| <input type="radio"/> No, I arrived between age 0-5 | <input type="radio"/> No, I arrived at age 15+ |
| <input type="radio"/> No, I arrived between age 6-10 | |
19. How often do you speak a language other than English when talking with your parents/guardians?
- All the time Most of the time Once in a while Never
20. How often do you speak a language other than English when talking with your friends?
- All the time Most of the time Once in a while Never
21. If you speak a language other than English, what language do you speak?
- _____
22. Which of the following best describes you?
- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="radio"/> in grade 6 | <input type="radio"/> in grade 9 | <input type="radio"/> in grade 12 |
| <input type="radio"/> in grade 7 | <input type="radio"/> in grade 10 | <input type="radio"/> high school graduate |
| <input type="radio"/> in grade 8 | <input type="radio"/> in grade 11 | |
| <input type="radio"/> GED earner | | |
| <input type="radio"/> seeking a GED | | |
| <input type="radio"/> did not graduate and did not earn a GED | | |
23. In what borough do you live?
- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Brooklyn | <input type="radio"/> Bronx | <input type="radio"/> Manhattan | <input type="radio"/> Queens |
| <input type="radio"/> Staten Island | | | |

24. In what borough do/did you attend school?

- Brooklyn Bronx Manhattan Queens
 Staten Island

25. Do you go to school in your neighborhood?

- Yes No

26. What kind of school do you go to?

- alternative school
 enrollment based on application/audition
 one large school
 SOS (Second Opportunity School)
 school within a detention facility
 specialized/ vocational school (performing arts, business, culinary)
 converted school (a large school that was converted into different schools)

27. What is your age? _____

28. What is your gender? _____

29. What is your race and/or ethnicity? (Check all that apply)

- African Caribbean Black or African American Latina, Latino

- Arab Asian or Pacific Islander White

- Native American or American Indian, Alaskan Native Other (please specify)

30. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Agree	Disagree
I or my family can afford whatever I need	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I or my family have a hard time paying for what I need	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

31. What is your sexual orientation? _____

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