

“In a Position I See Myself In:”
Young Men of Color (Re)Negotiating Educational Identities

by

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Abstract

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Challenging deficit framings of young men of color in educational research, this dissertation seeks to build knowledge on how a group of young men of color in a second-chance secondary level program understand the ways in which they are positioned in and out of spaces of formal education. Specifically, this work seeks to answer the following questions: *How do young men of color understand the ways in which they are represented in educational and life-outcome disparity discourse? How do these young men renegotiate and resist these namings?* In exploring these questions, this dissertation offers analysis of both the young men’s understandings of how they are positioned and documents strategies and cultural tools that the young men draw on when working to reposition themselves. These strategies and cultural tools have implications for a learning process dedicated to educational and life-outcome equity.

The ways in which the ‘crisis’ of young men of color in formal education and life-outcomes is framed is both a consequence of and has consequence for understandings of learning, particularly within the field of literacy. Exploring the ways in which framings of the ‘crisis’ enable and engender both conceptions of literacy and a range of potential solutions, this work argues for a critical socio-cultural approach to literacy education that

begins with a radical listening-with. A literacy education that begins with a radical listening-with has the potential to support sites of solidarity for learners who have historically been minoritized, and to make identity-negotiations central to understandings of what it means to be literate.

The young men in this study are learners in the GED Connect program, a secondary-level educational alternative run by the New York City Department of Education, one of the centers of large-scale neoliberal education reform. These young men participated in an after-school Men's Group of which the primary functions were to create a network of support and engage in a concurrent [alongside the dissertation research project] Youth Participatory Action Research project. Data consist of the young men's narratives that were collected during select Men's Group sessions, and narrative analysis was employed to analyze the structures, themes, and positioning/repositioning practices present in the young men's narratives. Findings suggest that the young men are very much aware of the ways in which they are negatively positioned in discourses in and out of school, and that group identity has been tarnished in ways that diminish space for solidarity and encourage understandings of life-outcomes based on individual merit. In attempting to refuse undesirable positions, the young men draw on a variety of cultural tools and resources to reposition themselves when confronted with prevalent negative discourses on what it means to be a young man of color.

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A note to the reader: at the beginning of each chapter are “narratives from the field.” These first-person narrative nonfiction pieces document moments of confusion, challenge, and growth that motivate this research. In intermingling narrative with academic prose, I am guided by Chandra Mohanty (2006), who writes:

the meanings of the ‘personal’ (as in my story) are not static, but that they change through experience, and with knowledge. I am not talking about the personal as ‘immediate feelings expressed confessionally’ but as something that is deeply historical and collective— as determined by our involvement in collectivities and communities and through political engagement. In fact it is this understanding of experience and of the personal that makes theory possible...the best theory makes personal experience and individual experience communicable. (191)

In these efforts to build knowledge, I include these narratives in the hope that they do two kinds of work: one, to challenge the orthodoxy of academic writing in a way that I hope is enjoyable for the reader; and two, to connect this research with the goals, tensions, and pragmatics of an education that works towards equity.

CHAPTER ONE:
THE FRAMINGS OF THE ‘CRISIS’

PULLING DOWN THE VEIL

The moment that highlights my own emerging understandings of the challenges my students faced outside of the classroom came on a Friday afternoon in February, standing in the heart of the South Bronx. I was in front of the building that houses Schomburg Satellite Academy, the small alternative second-chance high school where I taught English. My student, Rafael, was on his way to repay to me a small sum of money, funds that had been lent to pay for a graduation ceremony fee. I, a White man, was preparing to bicycle-commute, and was bundled up in preparation for the ride home. I was covered head to toe. Rafael, a heavyset Garifuna young man, running too late to find me in my classroom, jogged to the area in front of our school to catch me before I departed, arrived to where I was standing, and placed a handful of small bills in my hand. Out of nowhere, two undercover detectives jumped out of an SUV and pressed us up towards the wall, assuming that they had interrupted a drug deal in progress. In that moment, an innocent repayment was read as a criminal act. The officers were gruff, shouting at us as they removed their badges from under their shirts, demanding to know how much money was in my pocket. I pulled down my facemask to begin to explain that I was a teacher at the school whose wall we were being pressed against, that the money in my pocket was repayment of money lent for the winter graduation dinner, that Rafael had just graduated the week before.

The tone immediately shifted when I pulled down my facemask. After asking if I had identification and if the school security agent just inside the school would verify that I was, indeed, a teacher, the officers vanished before checking that I was whom I said I was, not looking at my ID nor talking to the NYPD school safety agent. My Whiteness and standard English seemed enough to make them disappear. I looked to Rafael, a dark-skinned young man from Honduras, and thought of how the officers might have continued this interaction if I looked like him, or if it had been one of his peers rather than me who had lent him the forty dollars for the graduation dinner. I thought back to an undergraduate course in ethical theory, to John Rawl's (1985) notion of the veil of ignorance, that a just society can be measured by whether justice is meted out without recognition of who is behind the veil. The shift in power, in position, the moment I pulled down my facemask brought to (my) life racial profiling and structured inequities in a way that the previous seven years of listening to my students had not. In my fifteen years as an educator, I have struggled with questions of how literacy education can best serve as a site of resistance to these structured inequities and the positioning practices that students like Rafael encounter daily in their neighborhoods and larger society.

How you define a problem is perhaps the most important step in finding a solution. After all, every subsequent act is based on how the problem is shaped.

–Laura Savard and Mark Gallagher, brand marketers

A CALL TO ACTION

The College Board’s recent report entitled *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color¹: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress* (2011) created something of a controversy amongst scholars of education and education activists. At a panel discussion held on Capitol Hill several days after the report’s publication, one panelist, Dr. Roy Jones of Clemson University’s Eugene T. Moore School of Education, asked “How much data do we need?” Speaking of John Michael Lee, Jr., a co-panelist who was then the policy director at the College Board’s Advocacy and Policy Center, and a co-author of the report, Dr. Jones exclaimed “we need to apply some of John’s stuff tomorrow...we know all there is to know. It’s really the will to act.” In addition to the disagreement that encompassed questions of whether or not we need to focus on more research, more political will, or greater action outside of the policy realm, reports on the panel discussion held that “the event was rife with awkward and occasionally tense moments when speakers and audience members evoked a wide range of emotional responses, including glares and groans.” When discussing the findings of the report at the panel, “several speakers sought to impute blame for the problem on racism and what is often described as America’s ‘school to prison pipeline.’” One of the study’s co-authors challenged this, saying that “if men of color didn’t commit crimes, their incarceration rates would not be what they are.” Dr. Victor Saenz, a professor of educational

¹ Though some of the literature cited here focused exclusively on African-American boys/young men, this work focuses on boys and young men of color, including African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and members of other groups.

administration on the panel, resisted this notion by pointing to the prison-industrial complex, noting that “it has become big business to incarcerate Black and Brown men.” Kadeem Palmer, a community college student on the panel, said that the problem as he sees it is “African-American males themselves,” saying that among many men of color seeking higher education was viewed as “betraying ourselves if we try to move on.” The discussion ranged from the effects of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, to the need for more mentoring programs, to the need for more personal and communal responsibility, and to the dearth of teacher-education programs that concentrate on culturally-responsive pedagogy. The panel discussion highlighted the utter lack of agreement as to what the cause(s) of the problem is, though there was, and is, widespread agreement that the quantitative findings of the report represented a major societal failing, one that had not garnered sufficient mainstream attention for far too long. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said that “the devastating numbers and sobering statistics are a call to action...only with genuine and profound educational reform can we create equal opportunities for young men of color.”

Dr. Gates’ call to action lends itself to easy agreement: the need for profound reform is more than apparent when faced with the findings of the College Board’s report. Perhaps the most sobering statistic is the fact that “nearly half [of this demographic]—ages 15 to 24— who *graduate* from high school will end up unemployed, incarcerated, or dead.” This, of course, does not include the boys and young men of color who comprise the 27.8% of learners who leave formal education before earning a diploma or GED— a percentage that is a disproportionate to the population at large (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). But what is this reform; what actions can work to ameliorate

these outcomes? And: is further research necessary, or do we, as policy-makers, practitioners, teacher-educators, and researchers, already know all that is needed to bring about the needed reforms? If continued research is called for, what role can and should it play?

THE ROLE OF CONTINUING RESEARCH

In this conversation, one thing seems certain: a hyper-vigilant recitation of these continuing educational and life outcome gaps does little to address the needs of this demographic; it may, in fact, further produce the deficit constructions that young men of color are forced to contend with in and out of school. Teacher educator and researcher Dr. Marcelle Haddix (2010) maintains that

...simply highlighting U.S. national statistics and failing to deal with the complexity and confluence of identity categories is counterproductive...it is well-documented that African-American males are disproportionately placed in special education, school suspensions, and expulsions, and are leading in school dropout rates, unemployment, and juvenile incarceration. (Haddix, 2010)

Further: “An achievement gap exists...consensus on how to most effectively address the needs of African-American male students may not be immediately or easily determined, an overemphasis and perpetual spotlighting of the ‘African-American male crisis’ does not effectively identify effective practices either”(Haddix, 342).

Though Haddix uses the language of the ‘achievement gap’ here—a framing of these issues that I, in agreement with many others, challenge— an interesting point is raised. What is the role of research when seeking to improve the educational experience and life-trajectory outcomes for young men of color? Endless recitations of statistics and framings that engender ‘gaps’ serve as little more than reminders that educational and life-outcome equity are far from our current realities. Though I am generally not in

agreement with the solutions proposed in the (2010) text *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*, I find a point made by authors Christensen, Johnson, and Horn valuable: educational research overwhelmingly focuses on describing ‘problems,’ shying away from proposed remedies. This is particularly true in terms of research on young men of color, formal education, and life trajectories: as Haddix implies, research has tended to highlight the statistics and life-outcome gaps for young people of color, and has focused on describing what many have termed a ‘crisis’ of and for young men of color.

I argue that further research is both desirable and needed as we— policy-makers, practitioners, teacher educators, and researchers—work to support better outcomes for young men of color in formal education and larger society. In this, I do not want to subscribe wholly to a research/action dichotomy or divide; research in and of itself *is* an action, albeit one that perhaps obeys a different temporality than other forms of action (Morrell, 2008, 207). I do, though, want to argue for a particular role for research concerned with educational experiences and outcomes for boys and young men of color. First, it should be acknowledged that not only do the continued recitations of statistical disparities do nothing to better the possibilities for instructional practice for young men of color, they also have the potential to further damaging deficit constructions of these young people. What, then, is the role of research here, if not to continue highlighting disparate outcomes? I argue that, regarding these sets of issues, research can and should do two things: one, challenge the framings of these issues, as the way a ‘problem’ is framed engenders the range of possible solutions, and, two, seek to shine a spotlight on how to best support young men of color. It is imperative that research build knowledge

on what sorts of actions best work to ameliorate the sets of conditions that lead to these negative outcomes.

THE FRAMINGS OF THE ‘CRISIS’

How, then, have the educational experience, outcomes, and life trajectories of young men of color been framed? Overwhelmingly, there is a sense of a ‘crisis’ that pervades research findings and calls to action. The College Board’s website dedicated to the (2011) meta-analysis “The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color” welcomes visitors with enlarged numbers that relate statistics stating how much higher the status dropout rate for a shifting group of minority men aged 16-24 is than the rate for these young men’s “female counterparts.” Below this, the text reads:

The fastest growing populations in the country are those minority groups with the lowest levels of male educational attainment. If present levels of education and current population trends hold, the United States will see a decline in the educational attainment of the country as a whole. The goal of ensuring the global competitiveness of the U.S. cannot be met without the full participation of our nation’s young men of color. It is our hope that this work provides insights that help make this possible.

There is a sense of both warning and blame here: because of these young men, global dominance by the United States is at risk. Education is understood in terms of ‘global competitiveness;’ its utility is understood solely as the production of human capital. It is implied that this research, which consists of many dire statistics with “six clear recommendations” for action, contains ‘insights’ that can remedy this dire state of affairs.

Educational researchers Lalitha Vasudevan and Gerald Campano (2009) argue that such framings hinder productive action due to the way they focus on those effected rather than the causes of the effects. They write:

youth are often scapegoats of accusatory discourses that invert causality. Rather than understanding how students are placed at risk through forms

of structural violence (e.g., poverty, school tracking, and severely underresourced and overcrowded schools) as well as direct violence (e.g, racial profiling and hate crimes), they are blamed for the very conditions that oppress them and are often accorded an inflated and superstitious form of destructive power. (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, 314)

Not only does this blame shift attention from structural and direct violence, it further produces the conditions of risk for young people. Vasudevan and Campano argue that “institutionalized labels and policies seemingly designed to attend to risk unwittingly reinforce such labels, paradoxically placing students at risk”(313). Further, the ‘crisis’ often refers to specific young people: referencing young people of color, they argue that “moral panic about youth is often based on essentialized notions of who ‘at-risk’ adolescents are and how they learn”(320). The general trend in the responses of educational policy-makers and advocates has been continued recitation of disparities between groups and the highlighting of statistics. In reviewing the literature on the effects of this continuing recitation, Vasudevan and Campano state:

researchers argue that data, such as arrest statistics and high school graduation rates, are interpreted through essentialist lenses, wherein structural inequalities are obscured behind a language of blame and vilification. Black boys, in particular, are placed at greater risk of being ‘labeled as less intelligent, to be punished severely for minor offenses, to be excluded from educational opportunities such as advanced classes, and to be relegated to special education.’(321)

Further, “these patterns of punishment and remediation of certain children serve to reinforce stereotypes about intellectual capacity and ability, through which ‘implicit and explicit messages about racial and gender identities are conveyed”(Noguera, 2008, Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, 321). Not only do these patterns encourage negative conceptions of young people of color, they also eclipse the production of inequity when enshrined in policies that purport to resolve the ‘crisis.’

Any given framing of the ‘crisis’ co-opts these conversations in service of a particular cause and a particular solution. The doxa, or popular wisdom, around issues of young men of color and education achievement or life-outcomes is that educators and policy-makers have all of the information needed to act and resolve the ‘problems.’ Each solution—whether it be understood as better funding, more positive role models, fewer single-parent homes, or “back-to-the-basics” literacy practices— come from particular discursive framings. Questioning these framings leads us to ask who the ‘protagonists’ and ‘villains’ are within each narrative of the problem, a practice that has the potential to reveal new ways of understanding the issues at hand. Does a policy, practice, or research finding imply that a young man of color is culturally deprived? That a young man of color needs to be controlled if he is to succeed? That boys and young men of certain ethnicities, races, or social/geographical locations enter school with skill deficits? That the teachers of these boys and young men are incompetent and must be monitored? That learners from certain communities do not take advantage of the opportunities offered through an education that holds social mobility as its promise?

Some framings locate the problem in institutions like schools (Ferguson, 2001, Dance, 2002, Payne and Brown, 2011). Ethnographer L. Janelle Dance (2002) writes that scholars have uncovered “a variety of mechanisms associated with schooling that reproduce, instead of alleviate, social inequality”(3). One well-regarded ethnography on school as the producer of social inequalities is Ann Ferguson’s (2001) *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. She writes that her ethnographic study builds knowledge that “just as children were tracked into futures as doctors, scientists, engineers, word processors, and fast-food workers, there were also tracks for some

children, predominately African-American and male, that led to prison”(2). Other framings, to varying degrees, locate the problem in the political economy, arguing that institutions like schools are simply the result of larger circulations of power in society (Noguera, 2003, 2008, Wacquant, 2001, Anyon and Nolan, 2004).

These framings are not the ones guiding the current educational reform movement. Sadly, the dominant narrative framing of the ‘crisis’ locates the problem within the boys and young men themselves. One exemplar of this is the (2004) “Issues in Urban Literacy” article “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Slow Learners in the Reading Classroom. It is worth noting that this article was published in the International Reading Association Journal *The Reading Teacher*, the largest literacy education journal in the world, and that one of the article’s authors, Dr. Robert Cooter, was selected to be the journal’s editor-in-chief in 2006.

In this article, the ‘crisis’ of young men of color in formal education is framed as the School-to-Prison Pipeline, but the locus of the problem is not disciplinary practices or institutional failings but the learners themselves. These learners are “slow;” they do not possess the requisite tools to succeed in school. The article suggests that standardized curricula do not allow educators to reach these learners with low capacity or capability, and, having no options for success within school, these young people leave the classroom and often turn to lives of crime. Authors Robert B. Cooter, Jr. and Kathleen S. Cooter (2004) argue that the School-to-Prison Pipeline is fed by an inability to teach reading and writing skills to young people with cognitive or skill deficits, young people who do not have the support they need to be successful in school. The problem, according to their

work, has been exacerbated by the push for ‘one-size-fits-all’ literacy curricula and programs born of No Child Left Behind accountability legislation.

The framing of Cooter and Cooter’s version of the School-to-Prison Pipeline is problematic. They write:

One serious consequence of inflexible reading curricula is that students become discouraged and drop out of school. In Dallas, Texas, for instance, we noted in 2001 that some 43% of ninth-grade students were reading below the 25th percentile on standardized measures. That statistic was appallingly similar to the district’s dropout rate. So what happens when urban students drop out of school? Some turn to gangs, crime, and other negative outlets. (681)

Cooter and Cooter note the correlation between the percentage of learners who do not achieve sufficient literacy levels, as determined by the standardized assessment, and the percentage of learners who ultimately drop out of school. Again, the narrative offered here is that these learners cannot be successful (or do not feel that they can be successful) in school, so they make the choice to drop out of school, where they devote time and energy to ‘negative outlets’ such as gangs and crime, leading some of them to prison. Though this is only a correlation between percentages of learners who scored poorly on the standardized literacy assessment and the percentage of learners who leave or are pushed out of school— we know nothing of why these learners leave school, nor even if these are the same learners who scored poorly— the authors state in this peer-reviewed journal that “the connection between reading failure for slow learners and potential consequences is both clear and frightening”(681). “Slow learners” seems to be code for poor and working-class youth of color.

The solutions offered here involve tracking by ability, and a “back to the basics” approach. Cooter and Cooter offer a few bullet-pointed words of advice: practitioners

should “make lessons short” and “limit the work time to several work periods rather than one long one”(683). Other advice is to “encourage parents to talk to their child to build language and vocabulary” and to “coach parents to ask about their child’s day at school, the best part of his or her day, or even about TV shows that the child watches.” This should be done because “language development is critical”(683). Educators should “give short, specific directions and have students repeat them.” Class and race are conflated as the authors surmise that poverty, along with other factors, increases the risk factors that lead to ‘slowness.’ Cooter and Cooter write:

In a typical classroom of twenty-five students, one would expect to find three to four slow learners. In areas of poverty and many low-income urban areas, the children per classroom who could be characterized as slow learners might be twice that number. Causes of lower intelligence are many, and it is often difficult to pinpoint a single origin. Premature births, familial or genetic factors, literacy-deprived home and caregiver environments, fetal alcohol or drug exposure, and poor or nonexistent prenatal care are common risk factors. (681)

While not a direct argument that certain populations have an intrinsic lower intelligence, this article evidences a belief that living conditions, as well as some genetic factors, create a set of factors that hinder intelligence for some learners. This leads to “the ‘literacy failure track’ trodden by the many children whose intellect limits them”(682). In short, it is the learners’ intellectual and cognitive deficiencies—albeit deficiencies that may have been caused by some social, as opposed to genetic, factors, in the eyes of the authors, but deficiencies nonetheless—that leads them to drop out of school and become fodder for incarceration.

This framing is central within contemporary educational reform conversations. Journalist Paul Tough’s first book, *Whatever it Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America*, documents the work of Geoffrey Canada and the Harlem

Children's Zone, a series of programs designed to "break the cycle of poverty" for thousands of children and families in Harlem. A review of this book states that author Paul Tough:

concludes that the problems of poverty don't flow from an innate lack of intelligence. (He points out that students born into poor families and adopted by wealthier ones outscore their impoverished peers.) But neither do these disparities reflect merely an absence of economic opportunities. Rather, the poor are poor in no small part because they lack the cognitive skills that can be taught. (Toch, 2009, 97)

Within this framing, poverty robs people of cognitive development, so the answer becomes an intense focus on the cognitive development of poor people, who in the case of Tough's book chronicling the Harlem Children's Zone, are mostly people of color. Within this framing, poor young people have been cognitively malnourished by their environments, a cognitive version of the culture of poverty arguments popular a half-century ago. The effects of this framing can be seen in the seemingly-endless skill-boosters, worksheets, online skill practice programs, test-prep and testing that have intensified within the educational reform movement over the course of the past decade. While endemic to contemporary educational reform, these effects are intensified in working-class and poor communities of color.

Though this framing is pervasive, the current educational reform ethos is in the process of moving from its hyper-focus on cognitive prowess as an explanatory factor for how and why poverty operates and influences achievement and life outcomes. As research has documented the limited predictive power of cognitive assessments and life outcomes (Heckman, 2001, 2006, 2008), this explanatory model is morphing to incorporate *noncognitive* traits, loosely understood as character. Paul Tough's most recent book, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*

(2012), is, in this moment, a widely popular book passing from hand to hand between legions of educational reformers, and serves as a good barometer for this shift. The central theme of this work is that noncognitive skills, such as persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, self-confidence, and grit matter more than raw cognitive ability. The book chronicles an array of recent developments and research findings on what is being called character, and provides vignettes from the lives of learners growing up in poverty. These vignettes caricature the struggles of young people of color living in poverty, and the book offers arguments for why or why not these young people develop the necessary resilience to overcome their environmental limitations. The implication is that recent scientific research can tell us how to foster resilience in young people.

Positioning his argument as building on what he sees as flaws in both the politically-left's historical focus on anti-poverty programs and the politically-right view that people must first help themselves, journalist Paul Tough uses recent research on cognitive and noncognitive traits to argue that these issues are not social, political, or economic: they are *scientific*. He heralds the research that shows that we now have the science to create the conditions that foster success for all. Tough concludes:

...this science suggests a very different reality. It says that character strengths that matter so much to young people's success are not innate; they don't appear in us magically, as a result of good luck or good genes. And they are not simply a choice. They are rooted in brain chemistry, and they are molded, in measurable and predictable ways, by the environment in which children grow up. (196)

Tough argues that there is no "anti-poverty tool" that matters as much as noncognitive traits like grit and optimism, which can now be scientifically understood. In this, discourses of meritocracy, deservingness, and blame come into play in ways that seek to negate the effects of structured inequities. He compares the educational communities of

the charter school KIPP South Bronx, which largely serves poor and working-class youth, and the private school Riverdale, which largely serves wealthy youth. He argues that there is a universal human need for experiences that foster perseverance, grit, and so on, and that we know the science that can make this an integral part of schooling at either socioeconomic extreme. In doing this, he glosses over the many differences between the challenges the two communities of young people have to face. The idea is that the Riverdale youth suffer from having too tight a safety net, thus keeping them from learning from failures and developing the necessary grit and so on, and the KIPP South Bronx youth do not have enough of a safety net to develop these essential noncognitive traits. Noticeably absent is any commentary on *why* we have such disparity in our society: Tough makes comments like “James and Keitha and Kewauna [young people whose stories are told in the book] are all working far harder than I ever did as a teenager to remake themselves and improve their lives. And every day they pull themselves up one more rung on the ladder to a more successful future”(Tough, 2012, 197). The author quotes one of the Riverdale teachers on why ‘character’ is defined differently at KIPP and Riverdale, in which the teacher says “kids here already live in a successful community. They’re not depending on their teachers to give them the information on how to be successful”(80-81). There is no analysis of why the Riverdale youth, the supposedly already-successful youth, do not embody the dispositions that are said to be the hallmarks of success in places like KIPP: dressing, speaking, and interacting are casual for the Riverdale youth whereas KIPP youth engage in strict discipline and codes of speaking and interaction². In short, the production of risk is masked in this journalistic work that I

² Tough writes: “It’s the confusing thing about code-switching: the kids who are actually part of the dominant culture don’t necessarily act like it at school—or perhaps it is more accurate to say that at a

argue is indicative of the current educational reform movement. For all of the talk in Paul Tough's journalism about how the inability to develop performance character traits hurts youth who are both wealthy and poverty-stricken, it is the young people living in poverty whose lives are chronicled (or, perhaps, this is better described as 'caricatured') and discussed. The suggested interventions are primarily for youth experiencing poverty: *they* are missing the necessary traits to overcome poverty. This framing draws on and furthers discourses of meritocracy, and focuses the conversation on supposed deficiencies and individual competencies.

'CRISIS' AND POLICY: THE ETHOS OF NEOLIBERALISM

Why does the 'crisis' or 'moral panic' about young men of color obscure the social realities that are producing these effects? There has been much research and analysis arguing that the current educational reform movement intentionally shifts reform conversations from acknowledgements of extreme inequity to a focus on individual competencies, as in the case of Cooter and Cooter's article or journalist Paul Tough's work (Apple, 2006). How are we to understand this shift? Why does it happen?

The 'crisis' of young men of color must be understood in terms of larger sociopolitical uses of 'crisis' to drive policy both here in the United States and elsewhere. Neoliberalism, understood here as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills," operates through a framework that "seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market"(Harvey, 2005, 2). In areas where markets are not functioning properly or do not (yet) exist, state power is used to frame human activity and

school like Riverdale, slouching and wearing your shirt untucked and goofing around with teachers is dominant-culture behavior"(Tough,2012,89-90).

outcomes within the logic of the market. Rationality becomes reduced to individual rationality, and the neoliberal ethos disguises itself as empirical, verifiable fact. Calling it a “strong discourse,” and likening it to Erving Goffman’s (1961) reading of psychiatric discourse within an asylum, Pierre Bourdieu (1998) argues that neoliberalism is “desocialised and dehistoricised at its roots [and] has...the means of *making itself true*.” Bourdieu argues that the ethos of neoliberalism adopts a sensibility of pure rationality, using symbolic power to assume scientific status for what is at its heart a political project that “aims to create the conditions under which the ‘theory’ can be realised and can function: *a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives*”(Bourdieu, 1998). Delegitimizing sites of solidarity serves the production and reproduction of existing power circulations, maintaining or furthering concentrated wealth and power.

How does this work in the context of formal education? Mainstream political discussions of education have for the past several decades, at least since the release of the infamous *A Nation at Risk* report (NCEE, 1983), warned of impending doom. The ‘failure’ of American schools, standards, curricula, evaluative tools, teachers, and students are continuously said to be ‘in crisis.’ Systems of accountability are legislated and instituted, and have the effect of tightening budgets, limiting individual and collective agency, and diminishing space for political solidarity. Young men of color are one group that is targeted and blamed for declining productivity, decreasing economic competitiveness, and low test scores. This ‘crisis’ and sense of blame can be seen in the text on The College Board’s (2011) *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color* website, as described in the previous section.

Within conversations of education reform, neoliberalism works to mask inequities in the propagation of market ‘solutions’ that hide the production of inequity. To avoid furthering the recognition of vast inequities in terms of resource allocations and learning opportunities, the conversation of ‘reform’ becomes one of neutral best practices to improve learning, psychometric evaluative tools that assess cognitive abilities, and value-added standardized test-based evaluations of teachers. Any discussion of poverty, allocation of resources, or issues of access are reduced to “the soft bigotry of low expectations,” in the words of former president George W. Bush. Conversations about the ‘crisis’ of young men of color in and for education are analogous to the obfuscation in the broader education ‘reform’ movement: though there are many needs for growth in teacher and learner support and practice, the panicked calls for action mask deeper understandings of the ways in which social inequities matter and produce these effects. This particularly affects the ways in which young people are framed. Researcher Nana Osei-Kofi (2005) argues that

although a crisis of access, discrimination, and inequity affecting the lives of many adolescents exists, the moral panic about adolescents remains distanced from any real analysis of social inequality. Consequently, actions taken in response often result in blunt ‘remedies,’ such as the development of scripted curricula and symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) in the form of retention, disciplinary measures, extensive placement in special education, and tracking.” (Vasudevan & Campano, 2009, 316)

The framing of these issues, in obscuring the social inequities and processes that produce the conditions that lead to the dire statistics, engenders solutions that further produce risk for young people of color in particular.

NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION REFORM IN LOCAL CONTEXT

The current educational ‘reform’ movement is known for grand statements of accountability, for determining what ‘higher’ expectations look like, setting higher expectations for pedagogical practitioners and learners, and then instituting systems of accountability ensuring that these expectations are met. One recurring facet of the current reform movement has been to introduce competition between educational communities, which is akin to letting the ‘invisible hand’ of the market guide successful schools to further success and guide failing schools to closure. (Within the critique of neoliberalism, this is another means for diminishing sites of solidarity.) Ratings of schools based on complex metrics are made available in public forums. In New York City, where the following research was done, this has taken the form of yearly school progress reports and quality reviews that rate schools on quantitative and qualitative measures. In 2007, the New York City Department of Education proudly announced on its website, in a message directed at the parents of schoolchildren, “principals signed a landmark performance agreement with the City, winning increased autonomy to run their schools in exchange for increased responsibility for the outcomes of their students.” This is framed as the means for educators to have the “authority and resources to make the best decisions for students in their schools” because “in return, they [administrators] agreed to be judged on the results they deliver: the academic progress of their students.” This statement goes on to benignly mention that “the DOE [Department of Education] develops and manages evaluation tools to hold schools accountable for student achievement, and provides data, tools, and resources that educators and families use to improve schools and support student learning,” seemingly suggesting that this is the

organization's only role. This is characteristic of neoliberalism: 'problems' or 'crises' are best handled by market solutions, and policies that have very real material and social consequences are framed as benign measurements. The extensive profit-making and divestment from the public sector that comes from the creation and implementation of these evaluations has been well-documented (Ball, 2007).

Within financial markets, the neoliberalization that began in the 1970s gave rise to derivatives, securities whose price is derived from other assets. The fact that derivatives hide financial risk³, and that these hidden risks were the leading cause of the financial meltdown of 2008 has been well-established. I want to suggest that this hiding of risk is analogous to how the education market operates as well: the neoliberal educational reform movement both masks the production of "at-risk" youth *and* creates educational venues to literally hide the data 'risk' these young people present. One specific way that this happens in New York City is through GED programs. As these educational communities are legally considered 'programs' as opposed to 'schools,' they are not subject to the accountability measures and transparency policies that educational reformers hold as the promise for educational reform.

In 2002, when mayoral control in New York City led to the dismantling of the Board of Education and the genesis of the Department of Education, there was a cataclysmic shift in alternative education. The Alternative Education district, once the organizing body for small educational communities that provided an alternative for larger, factory-style schools, was turned into an amalgam of alternative *pathways* to the

³ Referring to financial risk, Martin (2007) writes that "Risk is not unilateral, but operates as a kind of moral binary, sorting out the good from the bad on the basis of capacities to contribute...those who cannot manage themselves, those unable to live by risk, are considered 'at-risk'" (37). I argue that risk is similarly produced and similarly functions as a sorting mechanism within the current educational reform movement.

diploma. No longer existing to serve as a space to explore new and better ways of teaching and learning—in the way that much popular discourse holds that charter schools (and *only* charter schools) do—the alternative education district became the Department of Education’s push-out zone for youth not on track to earn a diploma through the traditional pathway. In the parlance of high-ranking administrators of the district, practitioners were to see alternative education as a “safety net” for those young people who had “slipped through the cracks.” This “safety net” has increasingly become the solitary pathway of GED preparation in lieu of education.

In the ten-plus years since mayoral control radically reorganized educational missions and support systems in New York City, there have been more major organizational shifts as the reformers try to find the ideal systems of support for the “rolling-out” of seemingly-endless initiatives. These include the creation of the Autonomy Zone, later termed the Empowerment Zone, as a network of school support, a network that epitomized the approach of greater ‘freedom’ in exchange for greater accountability. Support associations named “Children’s First Networks” in true Orwellian fashion were claimed to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of schools than the earlier district-based support model. These ‘CFNs’ are not based on geographical location or learner age; it is not uncommon for a Children’s First Network to serve as the support model for 25-30 elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools spread across multiple boroughs and pedagogical approaches. These networks are organized into five ‘clusters,’ creating an additional layer of bureaucracy and taking decision-making power further from the practitioners who work directly with youth. (For a move made to counter an inefficient, bloated educational system, mayoral control has engendered many layers

of ‘experts’ and bureaucracy). Through all of these initiatives, though, there has been a need for a way to make the new system palatable, and the argument has been that more and more learners are succeeding through the new model. What is not reported is the fact that the Alternative Education district has been made into a dispossession zone for those young people dispossessed by the Department of Education. Alternative education is more and more becoming a pathway to a GED for young people who are often told that they have no alternative for formal education.

Claims of greater success under mayoral control rest on data that are shared with the public. Yet data on the GED Connect program⁴ are *not* shared with the public. Young people dispossessed from high schools are not coded as ‘drop-outs,’ i.e. ‘bad data,’ when they leave a high school and enroll in a GED program, often at the suggestion of guidance counselors. Instead, these young people disappear from the data map when they move from a Department of Education ‘school’ to a Department of Education ‘program.’ For all of the claims of transparency and the power of public accountability, the New York City Department of Education website has no publicly-available data for the GED Connect program—nor any other program designed to serve ‘at-risk’ youth such as those who are in facilities maintained by the Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), incarcerated on Riker’s Island, or in an addiction treatment program. Data are publicly available in the form of school “progress reports” for all schools, but the Department of Education programs, of which the GED Connect program is the largest, serving thousands of New York City adolescents, exist in a public information-free zone. If these

⁴ There were initially several GED programs in the New York City Department of Education; in 2012, smaller programs were rolled together with the GED Connect program. GED Connect is now a large “safety net” rather than several smaller ones, in the parlance of the Alternative Education district administrators.

young people pass the GED and earn the GED diploma, they are suddenly and magically moved from limbo—from being ‘hidden data’— to the ‘New York City Department of Education graduates’ column on the New York City “traditional data calculation”⁵ of graduate data.

Though there are no data available—even the program’s internal data does not include race or gender—many of the young people in the GED Connect program are young men of color. Pushed out of their high schools and often having scant access to educational support and resources, they are blamed for their educational ‘failure.’ Many of these learners fare poorly on standardized tests designed to evaluate their literacy proficiency, and are put into ‘literacy’ classes to learn basic skills before they are able to begin learning the skills required to take the GED exam⁶. Conversations on educational outcomes for these young people often center on shortcomings of their ‘culture’ as having explanatory power for why these ‘failures’ occur.

‘CULTURE’ AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The limited extent to which popular discourse engages with socio-cultural factors in this ‘crisis’ often leads to ‘culture’ as the cause of low educational attainment statistics and undesirable life outcomes. The role of culture has a long history in both educational research and popular belief on schooling and life-outcomes. The creation and expansion of public schooling is intertwined with the intention to acculturate and civilize newly-arrived immigrants to this country’s shores (Tyack, 1974). More recently, the past few

⁵ The New York State graduate calculation does not include GEDs and Special Education diplomas, and has not since 2005. New York City’s own data, though, does include all graduates, including local, Regents, IEP (special education), and August graduate diplomas in the way that they present graduation data.

⁶ These learners are called the “literacy students” in the parlance of the GED Connect program, and this positioning assumes that they lack literacy skills.

decades have borne witness to the staying power of the ‘culture of poverty’ (Harrington, 1962) concept, the pathologizing of poor learners to excuse the gross disparities that exist between ethnic and racial groups with regard to academic achievement or life trajectory. The explanatory power of ‘culture’ as the reason why some children succeed in school and some fail is a mainstay in educational research and reform discussions, and one that often serves as a “proxy for race,” a “code word for difference and perhaps deviance” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, 106). Given the oft-conflated categories of race and class and the strong relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement (Sirin, 2005), ‘culture’ becomes the catch-all term to explain away the existence of poverty and the seeming-inability of those born into it to rise through the power of what is assumed to be a meritocratic and fair educational system. Labels created through testing and sorting regimes merge with these debilitating notions of culture:

Traces of ‘delinquency’ categories—such as ‘deviant,’ ‘troublesome youth,’ ‘troublemakers,’ ‘truant,’ and ‘antisocial’—are often aligned with cultural deficit theories, which position minority cultural values as dysfunctional and leading to low educational and occupational attainment. (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, 316)

Home and community-based funds of knowledge are positioned as obstacles to be erased through acculturation to the dominant ways of being-in-the-world.

The literature has most often framed the issue as an “achievement gap,” a term that has helped in the masking of structural inequities. Scholar Camika Royal (2012) writes:

the term ‘achievement gap’ is inaccurate because it blames the historically marginalized, under-served victims of poor schooling and holds whiteness and wealth as models of excellence...as with all misnomers, the thinking that undergirds the achievement gap only speaks of academic outcomes, not the conditions that led to those outcomes, nor does it acknowledge that the outcomes are a consequence of those conditions.

Elsewhere, Royal (2012) writes that the term “achievement gap” is “inaccurate because of its inherent Anglo-normativity...it suggests that whatever White people do is right and whatever everyone else does is wrong, incomplete, abnormal, and/or ‘the other.’” In these comments, Royal is following the work of Dr. Asa Hilliard III (2004), who challenges the framing of the gap through an analysis of its dominant readings, noting:

when speaking of the ‘achievement gap’ it is understood by virtually everyone that this does not refer to a gap between Africans⁷ and Asians or a gap between Africans and Latinos or a gap between Africans and anyone else other than Europeans. Therefore, it seems that something more than achievement is being discussed when the gap language is used. (137)

Hilliard argues that “framing the problem in this way is itself problematic...it establishes European average achievement as the universal norm”(137). This, he argues, is “normative mediocrity,” and that all children deserve excellence rather than our system’s mediocrity. This framing persists because of the ways in which it contributes to social reproduction/hegemony:

by using the European students’ normative performance as the universal standard, not only do we use a low standard, but we tend to be satisfied with the performance of minority cultural groups when a substantial reduction in this gap occurs. The unconscious assumption seems to be that the traditional low performers cannot surpass—merely approach—the performance of the norm group. (138)

The framing of the achievement gap, then, perpetuates and reproduces established beliefs that children of color are unable to perform at the levels of the normed group, Americans of European descent.

Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (2006) has argued that these sets of issues are better framed as an “education debt” as opposed to an “achievement gap.” She speaks of

⁷ Dr. Hilliard prefers the terms ‘African,’ ‘Asian,’ and ‘European’ to ‘African-American,’ ‘Asian-American,’ and ‘European-American.’

historical inequities in terms of educational funding, economic opportunity, and voting rights/access to democratic practice when seeking to understand the statistical outcomes for historically minoritized peoples in our society. Not only is there a moral, sociopolitical, and economic debt that must be addressed, there is an opportunity gap caused by historical and current inequities. This is not simply a case of semantics or a simple substitution of terms: the framing of the “achievement gap” engenders a possible set of solutions that are intertwined with the analysis of the problem. Framed as the achievement gap, the neoliberal education reform movement addresses these issues through a focus on refining pedagogical ‘best practices,’ school choice, new educational technologies, and a heavy focus on outcomes-based accountability for teachers (Apple, 2001). Though continued refinement of pedagogical practice is always warranted, many aspects of the current reform movement shift the conversation from the social and political production of these outcomes while creating new economic markets that promote ‘growth.’ A focus on our society’s education debt and ensuing opportunity gaps can create fertile terrain for conversations on how best to create educational opportunity and support members of historically minoritized groups in meaningful ways.

Many of those who resist the educational reform movement’s focus on neutral, cognitive pedagogical ‘best practices’ and market-driven solutions as remedies to an achievement gap have focused, as several panelists did when discussing the College Board’s (2011) *The Educational Experiences of Young Men of Color* report, on the prison industry and the extremely high number of incarcerated young men of color. These factors, many argue, must be addressed, challenged, and changed if we are to have equitable educational outcomes, as the policies and practices of the prison-industrial

complex target young men of color. Scholars define these terms, “the growing ‘prison-industrial complex’” and its educational manifestation, the ‘school-to-prison-pipeline’” as “the escalating number of legislative and policy actions taken towards the disciplining and containment of youth”(Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, 315). Scholar Michelle Alexander (2012) has documented that more African-Americans are under correctional control, in the form of incarceration, probation, or parole, than there were prior to the Civil War. Further, more African-American men were disenfranchised due to felon disenfranchisement laws in the year 2004 than in the year 1870, the year when the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibited denial of the right to vote due to one’s race. Given these sobering facts, scholars have focused on the ways the institutions of school and prison are intertwined, coining the term “school/prison nexus.”(Meiners & Winn, 2011, Kreuger, 2010)

The multiple ways of framing the ‘crisis’ of young men of color in formal education—the achievement gap, opportunity gap, education debt, or the School-to-Prison Pipeline—engender and offer potential solutions and support structures to improve educational and life-outcome equity for young men of color. All framings point to literacy as one site that offers the possibility of different outcomes, though the fact that ‘literacy’ is a contested term is evident in the widely varying understandings of the ways that it matters.

THE ROLE OF LITERACY

Literacy plays a unique role in this discussion. Long considered the foundation for an education that offers social mobility, a belief particularly resonant in the African-American communal discourses (Morrell, 2009, Perry, 2003), there is a longstanding

belief in the power of literacy education and practices to either (re)produce or interrupt the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Winn and Behizadeh (2011) maintain that “the lack of opportunities for youth to engage in literate practices such as reading, writing, and speaking feeds the school-prison nexus”(149). They argue that “youth-centered scholarship focusing on cultivating critical literacy skills for urban youth can generate possibilities for disrupting and dismantling this pipeline”(148). Making a call to action, these scholars argue that “educational research should consider focusing on youth-centered research...studies that include the voices of youth could illuminate how youth are experiencing literacy, education, and School-to-Prison Pipeline issues in their school communities”(167).

Within the achievement gap framing, there is a focus on literacy as well, one that positions literacy achievement as a remedy to the ‘crisis.’ Scholars Vausdevan and Campano (2009) look at recent reports on literacy education as it relates to dire educational outcomes. Echoing some of the responses to the College Board report, one literacy report, *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy*, commissioned by the Advancing Literacy Institute, argues that enough is known, the issue is simply one of implementation. When reading this report:

the reader is immediately informed of the number of students who drop out of high school, lack literacy skills, or score ‘below reading level’ according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In suggesting that there is a need to improve ‘adolescent literacy’ and that ‘enough is already known about adolescent literacy, the report promotes a specific view of literacy as merely reading and presupposes that we know everything we need to know about adolescents’ literate lives. (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, 318)

There is a sense here that learners leave high school because they do not have ability; they are not literate and thus cannot succeed in formal education. The correlation between

the numbers of learners who leave or are pushed out of high schools and the number of learners who are “below reading level” is framed as a causal relationship. Another report commissioned by the Advancing Literacy Institute, *Adolescent Literacy and the Achievement Gap: What Do We Know and Where Do We Go From Here?*, refers to “certain groups” who do poorly on standardized literacy evaluations, rationalizing this low performance with socioeconomic status, referring to “dangerous neighborhoods and lack of access to educational resources, health, and nutrition—as well as sociocultural factors.”(Vasudevan and Campano, 2009, 317). Here we again see the staying power of the (1962/1997) “culture of poverty” argument. Vasudevan and Campano argue that, within the report:

culture is framed as a hindrance not only to literacy proficiency, which is reduced to reading comprehension, but also to academic achievement overall. Home literacies and family discourses are set as far removed from the expectations and norms of school and are framed as a challenge to overcome. (317-318)

This is the understanding of literacy within what is currently the dominant discourse on education, the neoliberal reform movement: literacy is understood to be a neutral set of cognitive skills that can be evaluated using similarly neutral psychometric high-stakes tests. ‘Culture,’ insofar as it is part of this specific conversation, is something to be overcome or waded through as learners access these socio-culturally neutral skills. Further, literacy is understood to be purely “inside the head,” that is, wholly cognitive and psycholinguistic in nature. As such, literacy is understood here solely on the individual level: either a person possesses it or he or she does not. To reconcile this understanding of what literacy is and how one employs, engages, or acquires it with the dominant framing of the ‘crisis’ of young men of color in and for formal education, the

only option is to view members of this demographic as deficient, lacking the skills that others possess to achieve educationally and otherwise. Needless to say, this framing of these issues, and this understanding of what literacy is, are problematic⁸.

Framings that understand the ‘crisis’ as deriving from institutions like schools, or the political economy, see literacy as a means of potentially reinforcing hegemony based on race, gender, and class, along with other ways of grouping people. Though no longer understood as the autonomous model that locates the ‘problem’ within the learners themselves, this ideological model acknowledges the culturally-embedded nature of literacy practices (Street, 1984). Acknowledging the socio-cultural nature of literacy highlights issues of access and equity. As literacy researcher and theorist Hilary Janks (2010) writes:

‘Who gets access to what? Is a key question for critical approaches to education in general. ‘Who gets access to which languages, linguistic varieties, literacies, genres, discourses?’ is a key question for critical approaches to *literacy* education. This question takes us to the heart of the relationship between access and power, that is, to mechanisms for social inclusion and exclusion. (127)

⁸ The new Common Core Standards also serve the interests of the neoliberal reform movement. The new Reading Standards are largely based on New Criticism, the school of literary criticism that argues for the autonomy of text. Learners are encouraged to hone in on textual aspects like diction or structure, and discouraged from discussing extra-textual themes or making personal connections. In this sense, literacy is being codified as a cognitive or mechanical skill wholly apart from the social. Meaning is understood to be the product of relationships between textual elements as opposed to meanings born of context, prior understandings, or larger conversations. Though the Common Core standards differ from New Criticism in their interest in authorial intent, the criticism that literary theorist Terry Eagleton (1983) made of New Criticism, that it is a “recipe for political inertia,” arguably also holds for the Common Core. The standards are the foundation for the next battery of standardized exams, including the 2014 GED exam that is on its way. Largely considered a skills-based approach to literacy, the Common Core standards also “mandate certain critical types of content for all students, including classic myths and stories from around the world, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature, and the writings of Shakespeare. The standards appropriately defer the many remaining decisions about what and how to teach to states, districts, and schools.”

What counts as literacy— and who gets to decide the answer to this question— are concerns with much at stake for learners who do not possess the necessary cultural capital when they enter school.

One's literacies can serve to track people along certain life trajectories. Gowen (1994), in "I'm no fool': Reconsidering American Workers and their Literacies," poses the question:

In what ways do American educational policies and workplace structures contribute to men and women like Edward Stone [a man trying to ascend professionally after earning a GED] remaining in entry-level jobs for a lifetime? And why is it that in a time of staggering economic and social change, workers' literacy levels are blamed for the economic distress of the nation? (Gowen,1994,164)

Rather than focusing on the literacy level or functioning of the individual, Gowen wants to look at the political economy and understand what, at the macro-level, is causing certain skills to be valued or taught. She discusses how many jobs were reorganized in the industrial model to put the need for specialized or personal knowledge and control "in the hands of professional highly educated managers"(164). Thus, schools have a:

heavy emphasis on obedience, punctuality, good manners" and "problem-solving, critical thinking skills, and other forms of more creative reasoning were generally left to the elite classes who could fill managerial positions...it could be argued that our schools have, through scientific, isolated, instruments of precision in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment reproduced the industrialised model that has driven the economy. (165)

It is not so much that schools are failing to produce learners with sufficient literacy levels in Gowen's view; it is that the economy is demanding minimally-skilled workers who are obedient. It is the 'public discourse' that "has chosen to focus on the literacy levels of the current workforce and the 'failure' of schools as the problems that must be solved to make America great again"(165). Shifts and reorganizations in the mode of production

lead to changes in the demand for certain skills. Gowen's point is that individual's or group's literacy levels, however defined, are an all-too-easy scapegoat for fluctuations in the political economy. She writes:

The crisis in the American workplace is not simply about literacy...but also about the organisation of work that does not allow workers to use the skills they already possess. [Reform efforts] mistook deep-seated organisational problems with the distribution of power, privilege and wages for literacy problems. (168)

Literacy, in the case of Gowen's argument, is determined by what is advantageous for a particular work environment, one that serves the larger interests of the elite within the social order. Within this framing, literacy is continuously (re)defined, and always serving political interests and the dominant group. As sociocultural linguist James Gee writes:

The most striking continuity in the history of literacy is the way in which literacy has been used, in age after age, to solidify the social hierarchy, empower elites, and ensure that people lower on the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites, even when it is not in their self-interest or group interest to do so. Our new global capitalism may well change the sorts of skills and values the society wishes to distribute to 'lower' and 'higher' 'kinds' of people, but, without strong resistance, it will not eradicate these 'kinds.' (Gee, 2008, 61)

Given these understandings of the political economy's relationship to literacy, it is difficult to conceive of a meaningful literacy education that can challenge structural forces. Within the extreme version of this framing, literacy practices only serve the processes of social reproduction and the furthering of existing power relations.

This work takes as a premise that other and better understandings of literacy and meaningful support for young men of color both exist and can be furthered through research and action projects. I argue here, in agreement with many others, that the field must document the social processes that produce these inequitable outcomes for young men of color as a means of offering ways to interrupt these processes. Though socio-

cultural approaches to literacy exist and continue to gain acceptance, and counter-framings to the ‘achievement gap’ continue to proliferate, research has rarely seen young men of color as resources in and of themselves as we seek better educational and life outcomes. We, as researchers, policy-makers, teacher-educators, and practitioners, cannot know enough about the understandings and experiences of young men of color.

NEGOTIATING DOMINANT DISCOURSES

...the widespread perception that street-life oriented Black boys do not care about education, undoubtedly plays a significant role in how schools deal with these boys—more often through punitive and exclusionary means than through strategies to keep them academically engaged...much research on street-life-oriented Black boys is not analytically grounded in the boys’ own phenomenological perspectives. (Payne and Brown, 2010, 317)

In light of the gross inequities documented in educational and life-outcome statistics for boys and men of color, it is imperative that we seek interruptions to the processes that produce these outcomes. As has been discussed above, the endless recitation of these statistics further continues the sense that there is something intrinsically wrong with members of this group. One central goal of research on these issues must be to “attempt to name the world differently, to positively refuse to accept dominant meanings, and to positively assert the possibility that it could be different”(Apple, 1996, 21). I take as a premise that “young people [can] create counter-narratives to the dominant characterizations about the source of their educational ‘failure’”(Canella, 2008, 205). Further, I argue that young men of color *do* do this, or at least attempt to do so in and out of school. The goal of this dissertation is to build knowledge on young men’s understandings of how they are represented in educational and life-outcome disparity discourse, and how these young men work to challenge these

representations. By exploring the young men's understandings of how they are 'named' in disparity discourse, we learn more about how they are resisting, navigating, and negotiating negative discourses that position them as deficient and lacking.

The questions that drive this work are:

- *How do young men of color understand the ways in which they are represented in educational and life-outcome disparity discourse?*
- *How do these young men renegotiate and resist these namings?*

Building knowledge on the young men's understandings and the agentic actions they take to challenge prevalent negative perceptions of who they are/can be offers possibilities for educative processes that support young men of color in the endeavor of resisting these negative perceptions. Further, this can illuminate ways in which literacy education can be framed, conceived, and harnessed as a site of support for young men of color as they challenge dominant discourses that position them as deficient, uneducated, and unable to become educated. In this, this study can contribute to ongoing understandings of literacy practices as "local act[s] of self-construction within discourse"(Yagelski, 2000, xiv).

It is important to acknowledge that what is happening to boys and young men of color in and out of schools is shaped by circulations of power at and across multiple levels, operating as a circuit (Fine and Ruglis, 2009). Though schools alone cannot erase social inequity or level the playing field, sites of formal education are "intimate places where youth construct intimate identities, build a sense of self, read how society views them, develop the capacity to sustain relations, and forge the skills to initiate change"(Fine and Ruglis, 2009, 25). Schools and other institutions are "identity-producing and self-defining...youth develop a sense of self from the messages they

gather from adults and peers, structures, and institutions around them”(25). For young men of color, this is overwhelmingly not a positive message but rather an instantiation of what Fine and Ruglis call the “circuits of dispossession and privilege:” educational policy and practice, at multiple levels and operating multi-directionally, dispossess youth of color while privileging Whiteness; policies and practices wrapped within “ideologies about merit, deservingness, and blame drip feed into the soul, tagging some bodies as worthy and others as damaged”(20).

Policy and practice— and other modes of positioning— shape selves and identities and both enables and constrains agency, actions, and ways of being-in-the-world. Dorothy Holland and Kevin Leander (2004) write:

The social positioning of persons and groups, whether through everyday discourse, spatial arrangement, text, film, or other media, is now considered a primary means by which subjects are produced and subjectivity forms. Power relations, in particular, are thought to shape a person’s self (or a group’s identity) through acts that distinguish and treat the person as gendered, raced, classed, or other sort of subject. (127)

These social positionings, or positioning practices that occur in a multitude of spaces and ways, as described above, play a central role in how group identity is produced, resisted, negotiated and (re)negotiated. Given what I and others argue is a debilitating ‘at-risk,’ crisis-laden and deficit-framing of young men of color, understanding more about how these positioning practices live and are negotiated in the bodies of individual young men of color is of great importance.

CHAPTER TWO:

PARTICIPANTS, CONTEXT, AND METHODOLOGY

THE FIRST DAYS OF COACHING

During one of my first days as a literacy coach for the GED Connect program, I entered a drab classroom for a pre-arranged supportive teacher-observation. When I walked in, I noticed that nothing was on the walls save that GED center's schedule, and an educational aim on the whiteboard that announced: "to improve writing skills." The wall of windows in the room looked out onto a roof, and tan brick outdoor walls coated with soot. The air inside smelled of dry-erase marker. The windows were lined with thin metal criss-crossing bars that keep anyone on the roof from breaking in, but seemed to me to give those inside a feel of being trapped. Overhead, a missing patch of panel in the ceiling revealed a complex network of pipes and wires, one of which was hanging, connecting to a computer on a cart front and center in the room. I was wearing a suit—again, it was one of my first days in my new position, and I was eager to make a good impression, particularly while working with teachers who were decades older than me—and carrying my scratched and dented tea canister. The teacher was a woman in her late fifties, a worn smile and brash manner. I smiled back at her, thanking her for inviting me in to participate-observe, and sat down among the students.

The class is comprised of eleven learners, all in their late teenage years and of color. They are mostly young men. The teacher barks a command at the learners, telling them to settle down and be quiet. A worksheet is handed out— on homophones, and subject and object pronouns. On each side of the worksheet are an example and a series of cloze and multiple-choice questions.

I sit and observe, amazed that someone who calls herself a veteran teacher, and expert on instruction and support, can hand out a worksheet, treat young people in this manner, and have the nerve to blame the young people. Because this is, in effect, what this teacher does with me, after class, when she tells me that “these kids” can’t behave (particularly the young men), that they are “a problem,” that they need to want to be there, that they need to make a decision to get serious and start learning. I want to shout, to scream, to demand of her that she be the one to get serious— that she decide that she wants to get serious about teaching.

After the briefest of mini-lessons (reciting the example given on the worksheet), the teacher instructs the learners to be quiet and do the work. They comply with the instruction to do the work, but they continue to chat while reading the out-of-context sentences and examples. A young man named Jabari does not agree with the answer for a multiple-choice question. The possible answers for the subject of the sentence include ‘The teacher and I’ and ‘The teacher and me,’ and Jabari is adamant that it should be ‘the teacher and me.’ The teacher, Ms. Kaplan, does not wear her worn smile as she tells him, harshly, that he is wrong, that he should listen, that her answer is the right one, end of story. He protests, wanting to explain his reasoning. It is then that he turns to me.

“Wouldn’t you want to know why one of your students feels his answer is right? Wouldn’t that help you teach?” Ms. Kaplan glances at me, witnessing this exchange, and appears to soften a bit, but then: ‘Jabari, listen to me, let me explain— you’re wrong...’ Jabari interrupts her, almost pleading, but with an edge in his voice, as if he cannot believe that she is shutting him down, not engaging his query, not taking his ideas seriously. He is angry, but is doing an amazing job of restraining himself, I think.

“Wouldn’t it help you to know why I think...” Ms. Kaplan barks at him: “listen to me, how can you learn unless you listen?” and then, in the same tone of voice, goes over the (inadequate) exemplar on the front of the sheet. She glances at me as she does this, wanting to see my reaction. I, too, am doing an amazing job of restraining myself, looking down at my hands as she speaks and does symbolic violence to this intelligent, capable, and eager young man. I pour myself another cup of tea from my battered canister, feeling frozen. I don’t know how to support this young man without destroying the relationship that I am supposed to be creating with Ms. Kaplan. I witness this symbolic violence in quiet, screaming at my insides to find a platform to shift this, to stop this, to not allow this woman to hide behind her claims of expertise, her ways of positioning and blaming the young men for crimes they have not committed. I decide to try to build a supportive relationship with Ms. Kaplan, and to offer her ways of engaging her students in authentic and meaningful learning projects. If I can do this, I think to myself, it will be worth biting my tongue now.

Ms. Kaplan, after allowing me to do one demonstration lesson, refuses to engage a critique of my practice and rebuts any suggestions I have to offer. Two weeks later, she decides she does not trust me, and does not want to work with me.

How do I make sense of what I have witnessed, what I have participated in?

ENTERING THE GED WORLD

Rereading some of my writing concerning those initial stages [as an ethnographer in classrooms], I realize that I was quite taken with the postmodernist and poststructuralist discourses, which, in the parlance of the times, interrogated hegemonic relationships and have done an admirable job of locating asymmetries of power and domination. What is not evident is how practitioners, within the limits of their very real structural constraints, can realistically carry out emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies when they themselves

are victims of disempowerment and their circumstances preclude full professional development. (González, 2005, 2)

Entering the GED world as an educator can be confusing, to say the least. What might this experience be like for a new student?

James⁹ is a twenty-year old Black¹⁰ young man who, at the time of this study, was seeking his GED credential. James and the other young men profiled here were all current students in New York City's GED Connect program, a program I will describe in depth in what follows. To begin, I share with you a sketch of James' experience when he decided to seek the General Equivalency Degree.

When James made the decision to seek his GED— after choosing to leave two other secondary-level programs— he began his journey into the GED world at the Manhattan GED Central Center. James had seen a posting about GED counseling in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) newspaper, and he eagerly wanted to complete his secondary education. He traveled from his home in the housing projects near Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to the west side of Midtown Manhattan, leaving the neighborhood of both of his previous high school programs. When he arrived at the Manhattan GED Central Center, he walked underneath the dark metal letters announcing the educational complex's name, and passed through a narrow hallway to a security desk, where he checked in with school security agents before entering an industrial-sized elevator to head to the ninth floor. Just before entering the elevator, he passed by two signs: one highlighted with yellow Caution tape and warning that there is no excuse for bringing a knife to school, and the other warning that BB guns that look like real guns are

⁹ All names, including the names of the educational centers, are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ In this and other writings from this study, I use the identifiers that the young men themselves use. James identifies as Black.

illegal. These overshadow a white, blue, and green banner that reads ‘GED Connect’ and features an image of a hand clutching a diploma.

After a battery of skills tests and a session with a placement counselor, it was determined that James had sufficient skills to do pre-GED-level preparation work¹¹, and he was offered a spot at The Opportunity Center¹², a small storefront GED Center located on the east side of Midtown Manhattan. Roughly six months after The Opportunity Center’s founding as a GED Center, James was placed there and began his career as a GED-student.

Once placed at The Opportunity Center, James’ day would begin with an hour train ride from the housing project near Bensonhurst, Brooklyn where he lives with his grandparents and two siblings. If he arrived before 8:25 am, he could have the breakfast provided by the school, sitting on long cafeteria-style tables that crowd the school’s “community room”, which, in addition to serving as the cafeteria, houses the school’s tiny library, a collection of teen fiction haphazardly arranged within five tall bookshelves. At 8:25, the bell would ring, signaling first period. James would head to his class, which had been grouped according to ability. This tracking is based on how James and the other learners had performed on the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) exam, an

¹¹ Learners who do not have near GED-prep level skills spend time at the Central Center working on basic skills until they are ready to transfer to a more-challenging GED-prep level program, like the one that James attended at The Opportunity Center. As mentioned earlier, the learners are called the “literacy students.”

¹² The Opportunity Center was formerly an educational program for ‘court-involved’ youth who would study there upon release from prison or jail, as incarceration would cause extended periods away from traditional secondary-level programs. The only program of its kind in New York City, The Opportunity Center was a partnership between the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), and focused on the specific needs of learners seeking to reconnect with formal education (InsideSchools, 2005). Though not a diploma-granting program, formerly incarcerated youth would study at The Opportunity Center until they were deemed ready to attend a traditional or alternative diploma-granting educational program. The NYCDOE closed down The Opportunity Center and re-opened it as a GED Center in the fall of 2010; a spokesman for the NYCDOE reportedly stated that there were “better options” for formerly-incarcerated learners.

“assessment of basic skills” that, in the opinion of many administrators and teachers in James’ GED program does not correlate with the skill sets needed to do well on the GED exam. The rationale behind the tracking is that learners will be in classes that appropriately challenge them, but differentiation of instruction is rarely practiced.

The academic day at The Opportunity Center, seven academic periods of forty-two minutes each, would officially begin with the bell at 8:25. If James or any other student came more than ten minutes late to the center, he or she would wait in the Community Room until second period, often reading the stack of New York Post newspapers that were delivered free of charge each day to the center. Once in class, James and the other learners would move from Social Studies to English Language Arts to Science to Math, along with tutoring, lunch, and (during the 2011-2012 academic year) elective periods.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MEN’S GROUP

The elective periods were an attempt on the part of the administrative and pedagogical staff to do more than test-prep at The Opportunity Center, to encourage learners to come to the center regularly and to connect with staff members in ways not easily afforded by test preparation. These electives were held after-school for their first year, 2010-2011, and in 2011-2012 were made part of the regular academic schedule during the school day. These electives included Pilates fitness, chess, visual art, SAT math practice, and poetry appreciation/interpretation. In the spring of 2011, I, along with colleagues from GED Connect, the umbrella program that runs The Opportunity Center, started the Men’s Group. I had joined the GED Connect program as a literacy coach for Manhattan GED Centers the previous fall, in September 2010.

Having taught in the New York City Board/Department of Education since 1998, I was very familiar with the idea of the General Equivalency Degree, an alternative diploma I will discuss in greater detail in what follows. Though I had taught high school and supported teachers at the secondary level for nine years before entering the GED world, I had not thought much about what GED-preparation was like. As a believer in performance-based assessment, I was resistant to the idea of an ‘equivalency’ exam for the high school diploma. However, many of the students who were not academically successful at the second-chance high school where I taught English opted to go for GED preparation¹³. When internal politics and vehement disagreements caused by increasing data demands from the Department of Education caused the four campuses of Satellite Academy, the alternative high school where I had previously taught and supported teachers, to break into four separate schools, my literacy coaching position was eliminated and I found myself seeking a new position in spring 2010. Though I was suspicious of the GED world and wondered if meaningful teaching and learning could happen in the service of such an evaluation, I accepted the position of Manhattan literacy coach because the hiring committee administrators said that they were trying to move to project-based pedagogical approaches and deep, authentic learning. My work entailed supporting teachers who were often vilified by administrators as inept. I was to support them in developing learning projects that moved beyond skill drills and worksheets.

Though my primary role was to collaborate with and support the teachers, I wanted to continue working with students. I found myself in the difficult position of

¹³ Though the “pushing-out” of students is unfortunately a common practice in many NYCDOE high schools, staff members at the educational community I was part of, Satellite Academy, generally tried to convince learners that our community would give them a better education than a GED center. Unfortunately, due to persistent myths that a GED is faster and easier, some of our students who were struggling with either academics or attendance opted to go for the GED.

many literacy coaches: I was often asked to take the side of the administrators or the teachers. Entering a longstanding feud between the two groups, it seemed the administrators continuously denigrated the teaching staff and argued that better outcomes for the students were not possible with the existing teachers, while the teaching staff wanted to place blame on whatever challenges existed within the GED Connect program on the administrators and the Department of Education in general. Though I held (and hold) strong opinions about great needs for improvement on both the part of the administration and pedagogical staff, my usual response when pulled into these conversations was that I was on the side of good teaching and learning, and that I wanted to avoid the politics as much as possible so that I could collaborate with as many people as I could to create constructive change during my tenure with the program. One frustration, though, was the way that many of my colleagues would speak about our students, who were/are overwhelmingly young men of color. Internal data on student demographics do not focus on gender or race, instead focusing on attributes such as reading test scores and age (as will be explored in what follows), but it was not uncommon to walk into classes at the centers where I worked and find a class comprised entirely of learners of color, with young men comprising seventy to ninety percent of the students. When discussing learning activities, suggesting pedagogical approaches, or reflecting on demonstration lessons with teachers I heard many comments that began with “these kids can’t...” While a literacy coach at Satellite Academy prior to coming to the GED Connect program, I had been involved with the Umoja Network for Young Men, a group that offered mentoring, support, and leadership opportunities for young men. I worked with colleagues to start a similar group at the GED Connect program as a

way of, first and foremost, creating a space for the young men to support each other and be supported, but a key secondary motivation was to create a group that would showcase exemplary attributes of individual young men that I felt some of my colleagues were overlooking with “these kids can’t...” statements.

Though my work as literacy coach spanned several sites (I was the sole non-administrative support person for teachers in the fourteen GED Connect sites in Manhattan, an impossible task at the outset), I was directed to primarily work with teachers at two centers, The Manhattan Central Center and The Opportunity Center. At The Manhattan Central Center, I tried holding an after-school Men’s Group program, and at The Opportunity Center, I had greater administrative support and was granted permission to hold weekly Men’s Group sessions during the third period of the academic day, despite the fact that the during-school elective program did not begin until the following academic school year. The idea was that the reading, writing, and discussion activities that we would do in the Men’s Group would constitute strong academic work, and that this work could be shared with members of the teaching staff in ways that might begin to shift both dominant perceptions of the young men as well as encourage more authentic learning activities in the GED classes.

The group at The Opportunity Center flourished, with young men looking forward to Tuesday’s third period, where we would read and discuss various excerpts of auto/biographical writings, and write about and discuss moments from our own educational histories. The group at the Manhattan Central Center floundered; only two or three young men were willing or able to come after school to the group; work or home responsibilities often began soon after the school day ended. Despite some degree of

success with the initial iteration of the Men's Group at The Opportunity Center, the administrator made the decision the following year that the academic periods were too important to the goal of boosting the site's testing data, and he created an elective period. While this was a good thing for extracurricular offerings for the learners at the center, the Men's Group was unable to continue because I was not at The Opportunity Center regularly enough to facilitate the group due to my literacy coaching schedule (at that time, I was working with teachers at two additional centers, traveling between four sites to support teachers). Neither of the colleagues who were co-facilitating the Men's Group at The Opportunity Center wanted to continue it, so it unfortunately ceased. In January of 2012, I re-started the group as an after-school program offered to young men from all of the Manhattan GED centers¹⁴, and secured space for twice-weekly sessions in a room provided by the Graduate Center's Urban Education program. The idea was that space in an institution of higher education would be a draw, an exciting space for the young men.

PARTICIPANTS

There were twelve young men who joined the group, some coming only a few times and others coming to many of the thirty-two sessions we had during spring 2012. They came from all five boroughs of New York City, having chosen to travel to Manhattan because they wanted a different educational environment than their previous zoned high schools—or because they were counseled that a center in Manhattan was where they could find an available seat for GED study. The young men were all between

¹⁴ Though young men from all of the centers were invited, only students from the Manhattan Central Center and The Opportunity Center joined the group. I attribute this to two factors: the first geographical and the second personal. The Graduate Center is almost directly between these two centers, one being a few blocks to the east, the other a few blocks to the west. The second factor was that these were the centers where I was a familiar presence, and the personal relationships I had established with students and teachers likely made these young men more willing to try an after-school program in an unfamiliar location.

the ages of eighteen and twenty-one at the time of the study, and all of color with the exception of one young man who attended sporadically, Andrei, who had emigrated from Russia to Brooklyn when in elementary school.

The young men who participated in the group with some degree of regularity and offered much to the group were James, Elijah, Axel, Terrell, Hector, Dante, Marquise, and José. James, the young man whose decision to go for the GED is chronicled at the beginning of this chapter, was twenty during the time of the study and was also from Brooklyn. James, a Black young man, described himself in a write-up for a conference we attended together as “a person who excels and looks forward to continuing to excel all his life,” and described his favorite activities as photography, BMX bike riding, and volunteering at the Apollo Theater. Elijah, also twenty and Black, had grown up in Staten Island where he played football at a large comprehensive high school, Curtis High, before an injury lead him to lose his spot on the team, an incident to which he attributes his decreasing academic success and eventual “dropping-out.” He then moved to the South Bronx with his father, who is a police officer in the South Bronx’s 41st precinct. Axel, twenty years old and originally from the Dominican Republic, grew up in Queens but was living with his mother in Brooklyn. Axel often recounted stories of the several years he spent dealing drugs in Brooklyn and Queens. Dante, a Black nineteen year-old, had grown up in the South Bronx but was living in the Lower East Side. Dante described himself as a “lover of foods from different cultures and a strong student” who works as a boxing instructor, and as someone who “loves to play pool, bowl, play video games, and write poetry.” José, twenty-one, is Dominican and was living in Washington Heights. José often came back to conversations about how being in the wrong place at the wrong

time in his neighborhood had derailed his life path. Hector, 21, is Puerto Rican and from the South Bronx, and relayed stories about how he used to fight a lot and has learned to resolve things verbally. Terrell, 20, a Black young man, is from Brooklyn, and often spoke about his responsibilities taking care of his two younger brothers and two younger sisters. Marquise had grown up in the South Bronx, but was living in a residential drug-treatment program in Brooklyn after he had “caught a case.” In the chapters that follow, I identify relevant experiences and common understandings of the young men.

THE ORIGINS OF THE GED: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

All of these young men were studying to take the GED, the General Education Development exam and diploma. Like many educators, I knew little about the GED exam before I started to work for the GED Connect program. I soon learned that it consisted of five multiple-choice sections: reading, writing, science, social studies, and math (half of the questions could be answered with the use of a calculator, half without). As I began the challenging work of promoting authentic learning activities and experiences that lead to success on such an evaluation tool, I realized how little I knew about the history and origin of the GED.

The GED began in the 1940s as a placement tool for returning World War II veterans to demonstrate their college-readiness when their armed forces service had conflicted with the completion of high school. Challenging the belief of the ‘unit’ measurement of high school preparation and requisite seat-times that had become the norm by the early twentieth century, the “general education” curriculum was predicated upon the belief that scientific assessments could measure the skills and abilities needed in the adult world of work (Quinn, 2002). The American Council on Education (ACE), a

group formed during World War I to involve institutions of higher education in the war effort, specifically to ensure that college-educated men were not ‘wasted’ on the front lines, became involved in debates on what high schools ‘ought’ to teach in 1940. ACE issued a report arguing that high schools for the general public should move away from college-preparatory coursework as well as vocational studies in favor of a ‘general’ education that involved work-experience programs, arguing that “a large portion of American workers held jobs that required little skill or training”(Quinn, 2002, 8).

Shortly after the United States entered World War II, the U.S. Office of War-time Education Commission pushed for an accelerated system of high school completion for young men who were eager to enlist. The draft age was lowered from twenty to eighteen several months later, and educators wrestled with the question of whether to grant diplomas before drafted students left high school or to encourage the students to seek deferments for their military service. Some educators argued that returning veterans would have the experience that would warrant a diploma, but ACE vehemently opposed the idea of awarding diplomas early, a practice it called “blanket-credit.” This practice, the ACE argued, had led to returning World War I veterans being unprepared for the rigors of work or higher education. Instead, returning World War II veterans should only be given credit warranted by their educational competence. During the war years, ACE created the “General Education Development” diploma, or GED, as a means to evaluate and certify this educational competence, and worked to convince state boards of education to value a passing score on it as a credential equivalent to a high school diploma. Having created this pathway and evaluative tool, ACE aggressively worked to discourage state boards of education from awarding wartime high school diplomas to

returning veterans who had enlisted before completing high school. (Quinn 2002)

In 1947, ACE began to market the GED exam to high school “drop-outs” who were not veterans. (Quinn, 2002) For the latter half of the twentieth century, there were minor revisions but no major changes in the exam, with the exception of an added essay to the traditional multiple-choice question format in 1988. (Murnane et. al, 1999) In 2002, the exam underwent a deeper revision that did not alter the format—at this point, a series of multiple-choice tests and one essay—but made the exam more difficult in accordance with higher standards. The GED is currently undergoing the largest revision in its history now, which will be unveiled in 2014. This new exam will be aligned with the new Common Core State Standards, and will no longer be solely under the auspices of the non-governmental agency the American Council on Education (ACE), which has long been a not-for-profit organization.

NEOLIBERAL EDUCATION REFORM AND THE GED: SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

We need to do a better job preparing our students so they can have a shot at a successful future. The current General Educational Development curriculum does not teach them the skills needed in today’s workforce. By working closely with all of our partners to raise the bar and open more doors for our students, we will restore the promise this certificate once held for students who are unable to receive a high school diploma. –New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg

Understanding how this new GED exam came to be requires locating it within the neoliberal education reform movement. Beneath the veneer of expanded access and raised standards lies policy initiatives that further concentrate wealth through market ‘solutions.’ In discussing the concept of critical bifocality, Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (2012) describe the ways in which neoliberal policies further privilege affluent

communities while diminishing opportunities for working-class and poor people. They write:

By facilitating market-driven reform to determine how and for whom opportunities and burdens redistribute, neoliberal policies tend to facilitate the upward flow and control of resources, opportunities, and power toward wealthy communities, privatization, and corporate interests and a downward drip in surveillance in the form of testing, policing, and restricted access to quality institutions for working-class and poor youth. (Fine and Weis, 2012, 188)

This is the case with educational reform in the GED world: even while restricting educational access for working-class and poor youth, and creating massive opportunities for profit for corporate interests, the reforms that lead to the creation of the new Common Core GED mask themselves as harbingers of expanded opportunity and access.

How is this expanded opportunity and access described? On December 9th, 2010, press releases from New York City government and the MetLife Foundation announced a grant and pilot program, as well as a new direction for the GED. Christine Quinn, the speaker of the New York City Council and current mayoral candidate, declared:

Today a staggering 1.6 million New Yorkers don't have a high school diploma and are struggling with unemployment, lack of opportunity, and the sheer weight of competing for jobs with others who are better educated...The GED is the first step toward helping them realize better lives, and we want all New Yorkers to be able to take advantage of the opportunities a GED provides. This pilot program will lead the way in preparing more GED candidates for the test, which will open the door to new opportunities for their futures. (nyc.gov)

The press releases praised all that was to come: through a three million dollar grant from the MetLife Foundation:

administrators will develop and assess curricula designed to help accelerate students' competence in literacy and numeracy, train GED instructors on the new test and curricula, construct new implementation guidelines for states and districts to ensure they are prepared to help students meet more rigorous standards, and test items for the new GED

and interim assessments aligned to the new GED test. (nyc.gov)

Within days of the announcement of the three million dollar grant from MetLife and the partnership with New York City's Alternative Education district, there was an echo chamber in the mass media. An op-ed piece by the editorial board of The New York Times appeared three weeks later, describing how some states had terrible pass rates for the GED, and expressing that:

A GED program developed by New York City's Department of Education may help show New York State—and other states with poor results—the way forward. The program uses innovative instructional techniques to make sure students are fully prepared. Over the last several years, the program has a pass rate of about 78 percent, more than 20 percentage points higher than the statewide rate. (nytimes, 2010)

As an employee of the program mentioned in this editorial, and as one of the facilitators of some of the trainings for the GED instructors, I can attest to the fact that the high pass rate had nothing to do with new or innovative pedagogical practice, but with a restructuring that began in 2007 and restricted access to the GED exam. As New York State was and is one of the states that mandated that test-takers would pay no fees to take the test, there were, pre-2007, high numbers of people taking the test who were not prepared for it. Though there were still options for people to take the test at a local library or through a community-based organization, the alternative education district started mandating that GED learners in its programs achieve a high score on practice tests before sitting for the real exam. *This* is what led to the pass rate of roughly seventy-eight percent mentioned above, yet the editorial continues to talk about the impressive GED program and how it led to grant funding:

The city's program has so impressed the American Council on Education, the nonprofit group that owns the GED, that it will soon begin a pilot program...underwritten by a \$3 million grant from the MetLife

Foundation, this pilot program is intended to develop a model for educating more adults more quickly so they can pass the GED and move on with their careers.

The goals of the grant-funded pilot were to “to achieve three high-impact outcomes: delivery of a more rigorous GED test aligned with the Common Core Standards; implementation of a national preparation program featuring customized instruction; and support for a transition network that connects GED test-takers to career and post-secondary opportunities”(philanthropynewsdigest, 2011). Other media reports were just as effusive about these goals as The New York Times’ editorial: one report stated that the pilot program’s accelerated learning “offers GED candidates the best possibility of achieving measurable gains in math and reading performance regardless of their initial proficiency level”(WDHstore, 2011).

A little more than a year later, the nonprofit American Council on Education (ACE) and Pearson VUE LC, the world’s largest corporation that produces educational materials, announced a new “collaboration” at the heart of this new direction for the GED. Again, this was heralded as an ‘innovation’ that would expand access and would be “a fresh approach toward solving an old and pernicious problem—the incredible waste of human talent represented by the millions of Americans who lack a high school diploma,” according to the American Council on Education press release announcing the new partnership (ACEnet.edu, 2011). The partnership with Pearson is needed, the ACE press release holds, in order to “expand access to the GED test, ensure its quality and integrity, and adapt the GED Test to 21st century testing practices.” The new entity formed through this partnership, the GED Testing Service, will unveil a new, more rigorous GED aligned to the new Common Core standards in 2014, and there are serious concerns about how

the new test and for-profit entity will affect accessibility and cost.

ACE offered extensive justifications for the new for-profit partnership with Pearson, saying that the resources and “marketplace expertise in education” brought to the table by Pearson will allow the new college-ready GED to be rolled out “in the fastest and most efficient manner possible”(ACE, 2011). A press release from the new for-profit entity justifies the hybrid entity by arguing that “the investments necessary to increase the speed and amplitude of our response to the growing problem called for outside-the-box thinking...this work could no longer be considered the exclusive domain of nonprofit organizations and the government if real results were to be attained.”(Gewertz, GED Overhaul, 2011). As with other neoliberal educational policies, the marketplace is heralded as the savior of a failed public system, resources are directed upwards, opportunities for corporate profit soar, and the burden for working-class and poor people increases.

The new GED Testing Service has not released any information about its expected profit margins, nor has it released information about the price increases for test-takers that many believe are to come. When a representative from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* asked the executive director of the ACE’s GED program about cost increases in March 2011, there was no answer (Valleyadvocate, 2011). In New York, some journalists are suggesting that the fee will become twenty-five dollars for each section of the test, making the fee one hundred and twenty-five dollars for a learner who passed all five sections the first time. The GED Testing Service has reported that the new exam will be computer-based, raising concerns about “how many test sites there will be” and, for those who live outside areas with reliable public transportation, “how accessible

[these computer-based testing centers] will be to those without cars.”(Valleyadvocate, 2011).

In the previous chapter, I suggested that here in New York City, as the GED has become the dominant alternative pathway to a secondary credential within the NYCDOE, this pathway serves as a means to hide the ‘risk’ of young people considered to be ‘bad data’ in this era of accountability based on narrow quantitative measures. Distinguishing GED Centers as part of a ‘program’ as opposed to a ‘school,’ which would require data transparency (as per the idea that this transparency lets markets decide which educational communities will survive and thrive), the NYCDOE does not publicly release data on GED students’ progress or needs. Learners are hidden away, classified as ongoing students (as opposed to ‘drop-outs’ or ‘push-outs’ from the schools) in a program that releases no information about their needs or progress. Thus, those learners who are pushed out of the school system enter into a Department of Education-run limbo that obscures and neglects their educational needs, hides their ‘bad data’ to make the schools look more successful on quantitative grounds, and, if they do pass the GED exam by the time they are twenty-one and a half years of age,¹⁵ then counts them by moving them into the ‘graduate’ column of New York City’s ‘traditional data calculation’¹⁶. Given the very real issues with economic and other forms of accessibility to the new GED exam that may arise in 2014, more and more ‘data undesirables’ may be pushed into the limbo of a GED program with few means to advance beyond it.

¹⁵ This is the cut-off age for New York City learners to stay enrolled in a high school or non-adult GED Center. GED students who turn twenty-one and six months have the option to transition into an adult GED learning center.

¹⁶ New York State graduation data does not include GED graduates, though New York City’s ‘traditional data calculation’ does.

LOCAL CONTEXT: THE GED CONNECT PROGRAM

The GED Connect program serves over five thousand learners aged seventeen to twenty-one each year within the five boroughs of New York City. There is a Central Center in each borough, where learners are referred to a center appropriate to their academic level, and where “literacy students” work on basic skills until they are deemed ready for transfer to a high-level satellite site. There are scores of centers throughout the five boroughs, fourteen in Manhattan alone. These centers range from serving over a thousand learners per year to just over a hundred students in a year.

In my role as a literacy coach for the GED Connect program from 2010-2012, engaging both the pedagogical and administrative domains, I began to hear whispers in meetings with administrators that GED Centers within Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) would eventually be shut down. The logic at work is that these CBOs are not well-positioned for accountability measures, and that they will not be able to adopt the rigorous testing regimes nor the technology necessary for the new 2014 GED exam. While this has not yet come to pass, there were other whispers in the many meetings that this new exam would provide educators with much deeper information and ‘flexibility:’ the new test would provide more nuance than a simple numerical score; it would delineate the work or college potential of each test-taker, and GED Centers would then be poised to help the student find appropriate employment or study. Again, this makes sense within the cultural logics of neoliberalism; the role of education is the production and efficient management of human capital, effectively enlisting formal education in the service of reproducing and furthering socioeconomic inequity.

Who are the students who are to be transformed into productive human capital?

One way to begin exploring these questions is through the GED Connect program's internal data, some of which are reported in the Appendix. During 2011-2012 academic year, the year that the data in this dissertation were collected, there were 5,130 learners aged seventeen to twenty-one in the GED Connect program centers throughout the five boroughs of New York City. However, many of these learners come and go; the average monthly register (record of registered students) for the program was 2,289 students, putting the program at 59% of its full monthly capacity. Though the young men in this study were from many neighborhoods in the city, including neighborhoods in the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Staten Island, they all were students at GED Centers in Manhattan. Over a four-year period, from Fall 2008 to Spring 2012, these Manhattan GED Centers served over 6,000 learners. The two centers where the young men studied, The Opportunity Center and the Manhattan Central Center, had 24.3% and 28%, respectively, of its student population classified as special education learners with pedagogical accommodations detailed in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)¹⁷. Though these accommodations are federally mandated through the (1990) Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the (1975) Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), learners were made to sign a waiver¹⁸ for these services and accommodations

¹⁷ For the GED Connect program city-wide, 17% of new students were special education students with federally-mandated IEPs during the 2011-2012 school year.

¹⁸ It is an open question as to whether or not the new students in the program realized that the waiver would deny them support and accommodations. As will be shown in Chapter seven, one participant in this study did not realize that he would no longer have his testing accommodations or extra support. The one special education teacher for the pilot at The Opportunity Center (see footnote 10) said that her students who did understand the waiver were often eager to disassociate themselves from the stigma of a special education label. A good number of the learners who had to sign this waiver to gain access to GED preparation were likely at a reading comprehension level (based on the DOE's own evaluative tools) that hindered their understanding of the document.

before they could enroll in the Department of Education GED Connect program¹⁹. As with the lack of data transparency and accountability, the Department of Education maintains that the GED Connect program is not required to offer special education services and accommodations because it is a ‘program’ and not a ‘school.’²⁰

It is not hard to see why the Department of Education does not make these internal data public: overwhelmingly, the learners in the program do not graduate, move to another district or city, or transfer to other educational programs. These sorts of transfers are ‘positive’ or ‘neutral’ transfers. The majority of the learners who enter the GED Connect program are ‘negative’ transfers: they either leave or are pushed out before graduating, or “age-out” and do not continue in an adult GED course (see charts in the Appendix). Within two years of enrolling in the program, over sixty percent of learners at The Opportunity Center and the Manhattan Central Center, the two sites where participants in this study were enrolled, would leave with no diploma. Learners who earned the GED diploma in those two years range between eleven to fifteen percent.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY: DATA SOURCES

James and eleven other young men participated in fifteen focus groups over the

¹⁹ There was one notable exception to this. In the Fall of 2010, the Alternative Education district began a pilot program with the Special Education district, and twenty-four learners (over a period of two years) with special education needs began studying for the GED at The Opportunity Center. One special education teacher came to the Alternative Education district from the Special Education district to run this pilot, which is still continuing as of Spring 2013. According to this special education teacher who ran the pilot for the first two years, the program serves as a “dumping ground” for learners in the Special Education District who are not making progress towards their IEP diplomas. The idea was to encourage these learners to go for a GED instead, and these learners are the only ones with access to a special education teacher.

²⁰ At the time of data collection, there were no services or accommodations for learners with special education needs, save the pilot program that served roughly twelve students per year at The Opportunity Center. Due to repeated requests from teacher representatives from the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), the administration of the GED Connect program said that some support would be offered during the 2012-2013 school year, but to the best of my knowledge, this has not yet happened. There is a means of petitioning the New York State Education Department for additional time for special education students, but it is rarely used, requires contacts with and knowledge of the state education department functionings, and takes much time and energy.

five months of data collection. Not all of the young men were present for each focus group, and I followed up with individual interviews with several of the young men. The primary data for this study are narratives culled from the focus group discussions and individual interviews.

As shared in the previous chapter, the research questions that guided this study are:

- *How do young men of color understand the ways in which they are represented in educational disparity discourse?*
- *How do these young men resist and (re)negotiate these representations?*

To generate rich data in the focus groups, a variety of strategies were employed. I shared selections from the educational histories written by former members of the Men's Group the previous year, and asked the young men if the writing spoke to their experiences. This engendered rich conversations including many narratives. Other conversation-starters included discussing texts, including a transcribed interview with Michelle Alexander, the author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, popular music lyrics that the young men and I brought in for discussion, and newspaper articles. Another activity was the creation of collages that represented the young men's learning past, present, and future, created from selected images from popular magazines marketed to young men. Throughout, I asked the young men to talk about their paths to the GED world, to share their experiences in and out of school that were important to them as we engaged in semi-structured focus groups.

During the time of data collection, the Men's Group met at the Graduate Center thirty-two times. Fifteen of these conversations were audio-recorded focus groups, and

other sessions were devoted to our Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project. Together, the young men and I chose to explore how a GED education could better support young men and connect with experiences outside of formal schooling. The discussions and reflections that we turned into a series of recommendations for creating these connections were shared by the young men at two conferences, and in a workshop at the GED Connect program. The YPAR project and the dissertation research intermingled in organic ways, and the YPAR work informed my emerging analysis of the young men's narratives.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY: DATA ANALYSIS

The young men's narratives serve as indexes of the sorts of people they are both encouraged and able to be; they can be read as "stories...both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances...include(ing) the possibilities for self and reality construction that are intelligible within the narrator's community, local setting, organizational and social memberships, and cultural and historical location"(Chase, 2010, 214). Narrative, understood here as a "recounting of things spatiotemporally distant," with those things being a "perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events,"(Toolan, 1988), often "implies a change in situations as expressed by the unfolding of [the] specific sequence of events"(Franzosi, 1998). In this, narrative is a rich data source that embodies the complexities of both cultural understandings and lived realities. In the context of this study, analyzing narrative allows me as researcher to explore tensions of selfhood, and the negotiation of identities. In the words of Jane Hill (2005):

discourse is 'duplex' not only in the sense that it both enacts and produces culture, but in the sense that as social actors produce discourse, they

simultaneously negotiate emergent meanings and draw on shared understandings. (Hill, 2005,159)

It is these negotiations, the tensions between dissimilar conceptions of self and possibility, and the ways in which the young men worked to reposition themselves through these narratives, that were the focus of my analysis. I listened for commonalities in the young men's narratives, and for conflicting meanings, understandings, and positioning/repositioning practices that emerged through analysis.

Analysis was done using a framework inspired by the work of Catherine Riessman (1993, 2008) and James Gee (1991, 1999, 2011). The collected oral discourse—the young men's narratives shared during the audio-recorded Men's Group sessions—was transcribed and rendered into strophes and stanzas (Gee 1991, 2011), facilitating structural as well as thematic analysis. Stanzas, a naming Gee borrows from the realm of poetry, are groups of “idea units about one important event, happening, or state of affairs at one time or place, or it focuses on a specific character, theme, image, topic, or perspective”(Gee, 2011, 74). When the idea units shift to a new or different focus, the narrative is partitioned into a new stanza. Each idea unit is made into its own line within a stanza. If there are shifts in the idea unit, these are delineated by a backslash, and two backslashes signify a final intonation contour (Gee, 2011). Idea units or particular words that were said with emphasis are underlined.

Strophes are collections of stanzas that are thematically connected in some way (Gee, 1991). In analysis, close attention was paid to not just the content, style, and tensions/shifts in what is recounted in the narratives, but the order of the narrative, as rendered through strophes and stanzas. Reading an idea unit as a continuation of or resistance to the preceding idea unit(s) can yield new analyses of a narrative. When this

sort of structural analysis is integral to my argument, I include the entire narrative, rendered as a data display set up to facilitate structural analysis. This rendering of a narrative allows the researcher to “notice how a narrator uses form and language to achieve particular effects”(Riessman, 2008, 81).

Thematic readings of the narratives are also essential to my analysis. In thematic analysis, “content is the exclusive focus”(Riessman, 53). When analyzing this content within the context of the narrative, close attention was paid to connections with dominant discourses so that dialogical relationships with cultural stories, stereotypes, or other narratives could be explored. Particular attention was paid to ‘signposts,’ words or expressions that signaled a change in audience, shifts in position, or tensions between direct experience and dominant perceptions of young men of color. Noticing shifts in the use of pronouns, or using context to determine to whom pronouns were referring, were also key tools in the analysis.

Before delving into my narrative data and analysis, I want to explore the ways in which people negotiate identities. In the following chapter, I draw on elements of socio-cultural theory to describe my understandings of how positioning practices live in the bodies of people, and how people can take them up, resist them, and negotiate/(re)negotiate them.

CHAPTER THREE:

IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND POSITIONING PRACTICES

POSITIONED FOR SUCCESS

Little things matter, especially when you first meet a student. I recall meeting Tyriek, a young man who was waiting to start at one of the GED centers where I was working as a literacy coach. Though my role was primarily to mentor and support the teaching staff, the assistant principal had asked me to help with the orientation sessions that welcome new students, lightening her load a bit on Wednesday and Friday mornings. One such morning, I walked into the aqua-green lobby of the Manhattan Central Center and overheard a loud exchange between one of the counselors and a young man. One of the guidance counselors, Rosa, was explaining to the young man that he would have to wait for the orientation to begin, and that it was a bit behind schedule today as it was pouring outside. He was resisting the idea of waiting, loudly. I walked over and heard his complaint: he had come a few minutes late the last session, and was told that because he was late, he had to return home. Now that he had gotten here extra early, he was told that he would have to wait for the late students to have his orientation session.

The young man was African-American, short, about my height, and had a scar that started just above his eye and went just below it on the left side of his face. He seemed about to leave, outraged by the unfairness of the situation. I motioned to Rosa that I'd like to speak to him, and respectfully asked him to sit down for a minute to speak with me. He hesitated for a second, and then sat down at the round brown circular table by the elevator. I told him that I agreed, that it was unfair— but that the extreme weather outside had made it difficult for some people to make it in on time today. I asked him

where he lived, and he reported that he had traveled from the South Bronx, and told me his block. I told him that I had taught for a number of years near his neighborhood, and that I thought that he should be proud to have made it on time when coming all the way to Midtown Manhattan from his home, especially in this bad weather. Tyriek— we knew each other’s names at this point— sat up a bit straighter when he heard this. I thanked him for waiting patiently, and during the orientation shared a positive comment about his diligence and patience in front of the group. He spoke enthusiastically during the orientation session, and seemed engaged with the idea of a fresh start to his education.

I followed his academic career at the Central Center with interest. He always made sure to stop me in the hallway to give me a handshake, and I would check in and ask how his classes were going. As I was mentoring his first-period teacher, I did a few demo lessons in his class and saw almost immediately that Tyriek was extremely bright and driven. He participated in a trip to the New York Public Library that his teacher and I coordinated, and took home a bag full of books— and reported what he was reading when I saw him in the hallway for days after. In less than six weeks, he was eligible to take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), the exam used to predict GED outcomes, and was deemed ready (solely based on his scores, of course) to be moved to one of the GED satellite sites, where he would begin GED practice in earnest. I congratulated him on his progress, and invited him to a Young Men’s Leadership Conference that I was taking several students to on Wednesday the following week.

I recall feeling really good about these early interactions with Tyriek. I don’t mean to minimize what he’s facing outside of our educational community. It’s just that I see the power in building relationships, and treating young people with respect.

Sometimes I feel that so much of what happens—or can happen—within the space of teaching and learning grows from how both the teacher and learner are positioned, and from how teacher and learner position each other. But how does positioning connect with conceptions of identity, agency, and culture? How might I connect my understandings of these concepts with the lives of young men like Tyriek?

DISCOURSES IN PEOPLE

The problem with many empirical data, empirically presented, is that they can be flat and uninteresting, a documentary of detail which does not connect with urgent issues. On the other hand, the ‘big ideas’ are empty of people, feeling and experience. In my view well-grounded and illuminating analytic points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded. –Paul Willis, 2000

As a “literacy student²¹” at the Manhattan Central GED Center, Tyriek leaves his home in the South Bronx each morning to take the 2 train to Midtown Manhattan. How is he positioned in the variety of social spaces he enters along this journey, and how does he position himself and others? What experiences and understandings of the world does he bring with him, and how do social structures shape/inform these experiences and understandings? Is he a representative of a particular culture, and if so, what role does culture play in how he both reads the world and is read in it?

Like many other literacy educators and researchers, I have been drawn to the works of Pierre Bourdieu in my thinking about how to understand the relationships between identity, agency, and culture. Bourdieu has been of much interest to those of us who want to understand identity and literacy from a socio-cultural perspective. Why the draw for educators to adopt Bourdieu’s lexicon and conceptual framings? In the words of one Bourdieusian literacy researcher:

²¹ As mentioned in chapter one, “literacy students” are those learners who fare poorly on standardized literacy evaluations, and must take basic skills classes before beginning GED-level study.

Literacy education is more than a set of classroom strategies and techniques. It makes commitments to what knowledge is valued, how knowledge is enacted, and who enacts knowledge and where. Bourdieu's sociology places subject formation as a central pedagogical issue. All pedagogies are interventions in the lives of people and in the multiple social fields they inhabit. (Albright, 2008, 27)

With subject formation at the heart of Bourdieu's sociology, there is a framework to reflect on how Tyriek comes to be Tyriek, how Noah comes to be Noah, and so on: there is a means to understand how subjectivity/identity is constituted and continuously reshaped in the social spaces that Tyriek (or I) inhabit. Bourdieu's work has been of interest in literacy studies, as it supports a critique of the notion of an autonomous, unitary, or purely-cognitive understanding of literacy. (Street, 1984, 2003, Gee, 2000, Heath and Street, 2008). Just as literacy is here understood as a socio-cultural practice, identity/subjectivity too is understood as resulting from socio-cultural forces, primarily through Bourdieu's concept of habitus²².

Though useful to what many have termed the New Literacy Studies (research and theory that understands literacy as social and cultural practices), and a powerful model of cultural/social reproduction, there are severe limitations as well. Victoria Purcell-Gates (2007) writes that:

Theories of social and cultural reproduction, epitomized by the writings of Bourdieu (2001), frame much of the theorizing and research by literacy researchers writing from multiple and/or social literacies perspectives...Bourdieu holds that dominant discourses are perpetuated

²² Habitus consists of internalized dispositions, and functions as the conceptual pivot in Bourdieu's sociology: habitus is the means through which Bourdieu attempts to resolve tensions between what he called objectivist—focusing on social structures—and subjectivist—focusing on individual representations and meanings—approaches to understanding subjectivity. Bourdieu describes habitus as a “structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices” and also a “structured structure” that organizes perception of the social world (Bourdieu, 1984, 171). Some scholars have argued that the habitus is an unwieldy concept, one that Bourdieu tries to use to resolve theoretical tensions by making it so flexible and all-encompassing. (Mutch, 2003, King, 2000) How habitus is formed and (re)formed has not been satisfactorily described in theoretical terms to many scholars, and it has been argued that Bourdieu's work falls closer to what he calls the objectivist mode of sociology.

and reproduced through official institutions of schooling, which control access to cultural and social capital. Schools commit ‘symbolic violence’ by disallowing marginalized discourses as capital and convincing even those marginalized that dominant discourses of the privileged, to which they will have no real access, are legitimate. This position, in the eyes of many, represents a frustratingly closed discourse/power loop. (Purcell-Gates, 2007,7)

It is this frustration, the “inability to adequately account for both difference and human agency...two of the most persistent critiques against Bourdieu’s theorizing” that I wish to explore here (Albright, 2008, 17). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,” explores the ways in which structures live in people and can shape action, but it does not work as well to describe how people can push back against social structures²³. In arguing for the durability of the dispositions that make up the habitus, Bourdieu sees these dispositions as entrenched in a way that makes resistance and (re)negotiation difficult. In the world of educational research, this theoretical framework has often been taken up in what is called “cultural mismatch” theory, suggesting that the field of formal education privileges the cultural capital of some groups and devalues the cultural capital of others (Heath, 1983, 1996). Within this framing, I argue that ‘culture’ is understood as a bounded unit with a strong

²³ Loïc Wacquant attempts to rescue the concept of habitus by writing “Habitus is...a principle of *both social continuity and discontinuity*: continuity because it stores social forces into the individual organism and transports them across time and space; discontinuity because it can be modified through the acquisition of new dispositions and because it can trigger innovation wherever it encounters a social setting discrepant with the setting from which it issues”(Wacquant, 2006, 7). Despite this attempt, I find critiques that habitus is much more useful to show social reproduction at the expense of cultural innovation and resistance—continuity rather than discontinuity—to be compelling. Sewell (2008) writes that “...Bourdieu’s habitus retains precisely the agent-proof quality that the concept of the duality of structure is supposed to overcome. In Bourdieu’s habitus, schemas and resources so powerfully reproduce one another that even the most cunning or improvisational actions undertaken by agents necessarily reproduce the structure.”(138-9)

degree of fixity, and I will explore both the limitations of this understanding and other, more generative framings in what follows²⁴.

Understanding these critiques, and building on Bourdieu's work through them, leads to my theoretical understandings of how the young men in this study (and, indeed, all people) embody the circuits of privilege and dispossession in complex ways that allow for resistance and rupture. Ultimately, critiques by Dorothy Holland (1996, 1998, 2002), Paul Willis (1977, 1981, 2004), Lesley Barlett (2002), William Sewell (2008), and theoretical approaches by Norma González and Luis Moll (1992, 2005), Harré and van Langenhove (1999), Adams and Harré (2001), Michelle Fine and Lois Weis (2012), and Holland et al. (1998), shape my theoretical understandings and framings in this study.

PRACTICE, CULTURE, AND FIGURED WORLDS

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.
--Raymond Williams, 1983

As much of Bourdieu's vocabulary and framework has been operationalized in service of "cultural mismatch" theories and studies to explain social reproduction and circulations of power, both in terms of privilege and dispossession, I want to explore

²⁴ The framing of the problem associated with this theoretical model suggests that the answer is to find ways to bridge the cultural differences of learners' home lives with the demands of schooling. Shirley Brice Heath uses this language in the epilogue to the 1996 edition of *Ways with words*, the (1983) landmark ethnography that describes the dissimilar socio-cultural and linguistic practices of Trackton, a working-class African-American community and Roadville, a working-class White community. In the epilogue, Heath writes "when *Ways with Words* was first published, its final word pointed to the merits of bridging between classrooms and communities in efforts to create opportunities for more students to demonstrate accurately their competence with and through language. The bridging metaphor remains viable today, but the span of the bridge and the vehicles that cross it will differ. Community youth organizations, like families, have to be encompassed in that span"(Heath, 1996, 376). Heath goes on to discuss the multiple bridges that are needed to build generative connections between inside-of-school spaces and outside-of-school spaces such as families and youth organizations. I argue that this framing suggests that the habitus and its accompanying/ensuing cultural capital of the learners in Trackton and Roadville is fixed to a large degree (though Heath does not explicitly use the terms 'cultural capital' or 'habitus'). There is not simply a tendency towards social reproduction, but a durability in the concept of the habitus that requires endless recitations of the bridging metaphor: internalized dispositions possess a fixity that engenders a need for more and more bridges between them as people inhabit complex socio-cultural landscapes.

what culture is and why it matters in this discussion. ‘Culture’ has been a problematic concept to the extent that many social scientists and researchers have stopped using it in the past few decades (Sewell, 2008). Despite challenges to the Geertzian notion of culture as a bounded, coherent meaning-making system, most notably through Paul Willis’ (1977) landmark ethnography *Learning to labour* and the concept of cultural production, understandings of ‘culture’ continue to be mired in essentialism. Researchers Norma González, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti have found the term to confuse conversations to such an extent that they avoid it altogether, writing:

Because the term *culture* is loaded with expectations of group norms and often-static ideas of how people view the world and behave in it, we purposefully avoided reference to ideas of culture. The term presumes coherence within groups, which may not exist. (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2005, 10)

Instead, these researchers “focused on practice—what households actually do and how they think about what they do. In this way, [they] opened up a panorama of the interculturality of households, that is, how households draw from multiple cultural systems and use these systems as strategic resources”(10).

Like other researchers and theorists engaged with practice theory, including Bourdieu (specifically through the habitus concept), the goal is to show the agent or actor in activity, negotiating, intersecting and engaging with multiple forces. Norma González writes “we have interrogated many of the assumptions of a shared culture, and have chosen instead to focus on ‘practice,’” defining practice as “what people do, and what they say about what they do”(González, 2005, 40). Others define practice as:

a meta-theory in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, education and other fields of study...[that] signals a shift away from fetishizing culture, language, literacy, and other social phenomena. No longer do we distill these processes from social life and conceive them as self-perpetuating

essences capable of animating human actors. Instead we use the phrase ‘in practice’ to invoke pragmatics and a core of actors using cultural resources (which themselves undergo transformation) toward some culturally given end, all the while immersed in the flow of social life. (Holland and Bartlett, 2002, 151)

This general approach, often referred to as practice theory or activity theory, is a move away from the idea of culture (or some other ‘self-perpetuating essence’) “forcing individuals into prefabricated molds”(González, 2005, 36). Instead, practice/activity theory highlights the ways in which actors are not mindlessly reproducing structures or cultures, but are “manipulating and tinkering with cultural elements”(36). This approach is generative, she argues, because it is not “simply documenting a mismatch between the school and the community”(40). González argues that “the ultimate value of going beyond culture is that it opens up spaces for the construction of new fields wherein students [or people in general] are not locked into an assumed unilineal heritage”(43).

To replace the concept of ‘culture,’ González and her colleagues suggest a pragmatic approach: begin with the fact that all people have life experiences that give them knowledge. These “funds of knowledge” will not be the same for all members of a community; there will be “variability within populations rather than only between populations”(43). She argues that “the funds of knowledge of a community occupy that space between structure and agency, between the received historical circumstances of a group, and the infinite variations that social agents are able to negotiate within a structure”(43).

While leaving behind the culture concept and engaging the funds of knowledge approach appeals to me greatly on a pragmatic level—in my experience, conversations about ‘culture’ and social location often become reduced to a pejorative explanatory

power, one founded on notions of debilitating and malignant coherent meaning systems—I do view the culture concept as worthy of rescue, and very much useful to the question of how discourses live in people. I agree with William Sewell (2008), who argues that, although one can no longer neatly apportion the social world into ‘societies’ or discrete ‘cultures’, it is nevertheless the case that:

...the pluralizable concept of culture also gets at something we need to retain: a sense of the particular shapes and consistencies of worlds of meaning in different places and times and a sense that in spite of conflicts and resistance these worlds of meaning somehow hang together. Whether we call these partially coherent landscapes of meaning ‘cultures’ or something else—worlds of meaning, or ethnoscaples, or hegemonies—seems to me relatively unimportant so long as we know their boundlessness is only relative and constantly shifting. (Sewell, 2008, 174)

The nomenclature that I find compelling is the “figured worlds” concept, which I see as centering on an agent/actor within fields of activity or practice, explored in ways that get beyond reductive notions of culture that assume strong coherence, essentialism, or permanence. Dorothy Holland and her colleagues (1998) write that “by figured world...we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others”(Holland et al., 1998, 52). Engaging elements of social constructivist and culturalist approaches to identity, and drawing on the works of Bourdieu, Vygotsky, and Bahktin, Holland and her colleagues develop a conceptual framework that:

pays our attention to the contexts of meaning that people construct, contexts entailing a certain conception of characters, events, actions, and artifacts. It focuses on how actors conceptually come to construct identities by placing themselves and their actions in relation to socially produced and culturally constituted activities. (Vagan, 2011, 49)

A figured world is born of activity/practice: it is an interpretive realm where particular social practices are accorded status and produce new positions and situated or performed understandings of self-identity. How, though, are figured worlds “socially and culturally constructed?”

First, ‘culture’ is not understood here as a bounded and coherent system of meaning members that tags all members of a perceived group, but as a set of resources or tools that individuals take up in service of a goal or action. In this, culture is “not a coherent system of symbols and meanings, but a diverse collection of ‘tools’ that, as the metaphor indicates, are to be understood as means for the performance of action”(Sewell, 2008, 162). This conception of culture has been in play since the 1980s, when social scientists such as Ann Swidler (1986) argued that “culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed. Thus culture appears to shape action only in that the cultural repertoire limits the available range of strategies of action”(Swidler, 1986, 284). Actors’ identities are shaped as people draw on cultural tools and artifacts to “enact and perform their senses of self, thereby establishing certain social positions of influence and prestige in (and across) a figured world”(Vagan, 2011, 49). These identities are shaped as “people experience certain positions—what one might think of as labels, although not necessarily articulated discursively—[and] they come to imagine future positions and their future selves moving within and across those positions”(Moje and Luke, 2009, 430).

Positioning practices are integral to understanding how figured worlds, these conceptions, future positions, and future selves come into being. Dorothy Holland and Kevin Leander (2004) write:

regimes of power/knowledge are conceived to create social categories such as the ‘disabled,’ ‘troubled youth,’ or ‘attractive women.’ A person or group is ‘offered’ or ‘afforded’ a social position when a powerful body, such as a governmental agency proposes a particular sort of subject, a ‘felon,’ say, or a ‘sexual harasser,’ or an ‘at-risk’ student and calls on an individual to occupy the position. Faced with such an offer, the person may either accept the position in whole or part, or try to refuse it. (Bourdieu, 1977, Davies and Harré, 1990, Foucault, 1975, Harré and Van Langenhove, 1991, Holland and Leander, 2004, 127).

Further, understanding positioning is central to understanding the discourse effects of positioning practices; Vagan (2011) maintains that “a positioning perspective is needed to accentuate material aspects of the living of figured worlds”(Vagan, 50). Social positioning and the figured worlds that are largely produced through them carry significant material consequences in terms of life opportunities and trajectories and access to social and material resources (Gee, 1996, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje, 2007).

These positioning practices and the ensuing figured worlds are not deterministic in the sense of wholly defining an individual’s life trajectory or ways of making meaning in the world. People exercise agency, the “strategic making and remaking of selves, identities, activities, relationships, cultural tools and resources, and histories, as embedded within relations of power”(Moje and Lewis, 2007, 18). To understand how this happens within the figured worlds concept, it is useful to employ positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999, Adams and Harré, 2001, Yoon, 2012). Theorizing positioning “enables researchers to make sense of the dynamics of evolving social interactions, how individuals are positioned by others, and how they position themselves within a specific context”(Yoon, 2012, Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Being positioned—in one of the many ways articulated by Holland and Leander above—engenders some actions and limits others and “can be understood as the discursive

construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations"(Harré and van Langenhove, 395). These 'personal stories,' or landscapes of meaning-making can be understood as figured worlds, socially and constituted realms of interpretation that assign meaning and value. This is the space of identity-production: "subjectivities and identities are produced in and through not only activity and movement in and across spaces but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces and how they take up or resist those positions"(Butler, 1997, 1999, Davies, 2008, Davis and Harré, 1990, Luke and Moje, 2009). How people negotiate identity through resistance to these calls and positioning practices will be explored through the concepts of the double-bind (Bateson, 1965) and double-consciousness (Dubois, 1903) in what follows. To connect the work of identity-negotiation with larger conversations about circulations of power, I am guided by the concept of critical bifocality (Weis and Fine, 2012).

THE DOUBLE-BIND AND DIMINISHING SOLIDARITY

To place this within the conversation on young men of color and their educational/life outcomes: how are young men of color positioned, and what figured worlds of identity are engaged or produced as a result of these positionings? More importantly, in what ways can young men of color challenge these positioning practices, and how can we as researchers, educators, and policy-makers support them in doing so?

As referenced in the first chapter's discussion, The College Board's website dedicated to the (2011) meta-analysis *The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color* conveys both a sense of warning and blame regarding young men of color. Visitors

to the website are met with enlarged numbers that relate statistics stating how much higher the status dropout rate for a shifting group of minority men aged 16-24 is than the rate for these young men's "female counterparts," suggesting that not only the young men's minority status but their maleness is at fault. Below these statistics, the visitor to the website reads "The fastest growing populations in the country are those minority groups with the lowest levels of male educational attainment...the goal of ensuring the global competitiveness of the U.S. cannot be met without the full participation of our nation's young men of color." The challenge of maintaining the United States' economic hegemony seems to rest on these young men's shoulders, or perhaps our current economic malaise is somehow due to their educational outcomes.

I suggest that young men of color are caught in what is known as a 'double-bind.' A double-bind²⁵ is a situation in which no matter what a person does, it seems that he or she 'can't win'"(Bateson, 1965, 201). Much of the research and many of the conversations centered around support structures or 'interventions' for young men of color consist of endless recitations of negative statistics, further producing deficit constructions of who these young men are or can be in life. These discourses, in which educational research plays a not insignificant role, serve to position young men of color as uneducated and unable to become educated, as deficient, deviant, and in need of some sort of fixing. As mentioned in the first chapter, causality is inverted, placing blame on those negatively affected by social policies and practices that benefit some at the expense

²⁵ Gregory Bateson uses the term 'double-bind' to explore the situations that give rise to schizophrenia. While I find this term useful, I by no means want to pathologize young men of color with my use of the term. I employ the term to describe the challenging and complex circumstances that young men like those described here are forced to negotiate, and I agree with recent scholarship that argues that "researchers often locate the problems of street-life-oriented boys within the boys themselves, as individual and group 'pathology,' 'deviancy,' or 'delinquency'... it is imperative that more scholars...effectively document how and why their activities inside schools make sense in their lives." (Payne and Brown, 2010)

of others. The double-bind comes into play with regard to solidarity and social support: dominant discourses position young men of color, as a group, as deficient and deviant, or as disabled by their deficient ‘culture,’ thus sully group identity. This tarnishing of group identity shapes the figured worlds of young men of color, engendering a need for them as individuals to distinguish themselves from the group. Without a positive group-identity, young men of color often latch onto discourses of meritocracy and individualism in an attempt to negotiate positive educational identities.

DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS: CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE

This latching-on to prevalent discourses does not happen in a passive way: people negotiate and (re)negotiate multiple discourses that are in conflict. When there is a dominant discourse that exists in tension with one’s own direct experience and understandings, a double-consciousness can come into play. Here I am drawing on the work of W.E.B. Dubois, who pioneered the notion that ideologies can be damaging or convey privilege through identity-generation in ways that can have severe material and psychological consequences. Dubois (1903) begins his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* with the question that lingers between him and ‘the other world:’ “how does it feel to be a problem?” This opens a discussion of race and America, on a double consciousness, which we might understand as an internalized oppression, an embodiment of racism, or the color line alive in people’s bodies. Dubois elaborates:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

In the century-plus that has followed this work, theoretical conversations on how

discourses interact, position, take root, solidify and are enacted and resisted in people's bodies, with significant material and psychological consequences, owe much to Dubois' concept of double-consciousness. Double consciousness entails looking at oneself through the eyes of another while still having "unreconciled strivings" that place the two self-conceptions—or figured worlds—in conflict. Within the context of this study, the young men are engaging in negotiated-identity work, and are both being pushed into acceptance of a positioning practice *and* attempting to reposition themselves through the use of cultural tools (artifacts) and resources.

CRITICAL BIFOCALITY: TRACING CONNECTIONS

The ways that the young men in this study both take up and resist dominant discourses will be articulated through an analysis of their narratives in the following chapters; I describe the figured worlds at work in the young men's stories and document the young men's negotiated-identity work. In doing this work, though, I want to trace the linkages between our sociopolitical moment, current social and educational policy, and the contours of the young men's figured worlds. In this, I am guided by Lois Weis and Michelle Fine's (2012) notion of critical bifocality. To engage critical bifocality is to simultaneously document how people make meaning *and* to trace these meanings to larger discourses or policies, to "make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals"(Weis and Fine, 2012, 174). Not to suggest or document these connections is to locate the source of dispossession or privilege in people or communities themselves: "Isolated studies of individuals, cultures, or community life

white out structures, histories, and cumulative state neglect; camouflage circuits of disinvestment; and simultaneously fail to reveal the production and reproduction of privilege.” (176) Attending to both people’s meaning-making processes/lived experiences/understandings and larger systems/circulations is to document how these circulations live in people. Weis and Fine “...enable and encourage researchers to examine how *specific* contextual elements operate on actors to produce outcomes,” while recognizing that this stance inevitably raises methodological and other concerns”(177).

Though the specific context that this research takes place within is described in detail in the second chapter, I want to further situate this work within our current sociopolitical ethos. In short, I want to frame this study within the conversation on neoliberalism that I introduce in chapter one. Neoliberalism, a “political, economic, and ideological system that privileges the market as the most efficient platform for distributing social goods, minimizes the role of government responsibility in ensuring collective well-being, and highlights instead individual responsibility for individual well-being”(Harvey, 2004, Weis and Fine, 2012, 188). In discussing the shift toward neoliberalism under former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher in both a global and UK context, David Harvey (2004) writes that “all forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favor of individualism, private property, personal responsibility and family values”(13). This is a central tenet of neoliberalism globally and as it manifests in New York City as well: solidarity is diminished in the name of private enterprise and growth, and there is an intense focus on the individual. This works to invert causality in a way that lays blame at the feet of those negatively affected by social and economic policy. In David Harvey’s words:

The neo-liberal state emphasizes the importance of personal and individual freedom, liberty and responsibility, particularly in the marketplace. Social success or failure is therefore interpreted in terms of personal entrepreneurial virtues or failings rather than attributable to any systemic properties (such as the class exclusions typical of capitalism). (Harvey, 2004, 21)

These attributes are evident in educational policy trends over the past several decades, both in locating success or fault within individual learners and in the sense that the educational field has been reconfigured as a marketplace. Weis and Fine point out that neoliberal policies often work to reproduce privilege and dispossession:

With little regard for histories or structures of oppression, and often enacted in the name of reform or progress, neoliberal policies of dispossession are typically implemented as if they are demographically neutral or color-blind. In terms of consequences, however, they tend to benefit, or widen options for, those already privileged and deny access or burden those already limited. (189)

When people try to resist the effects of neoliberal policy, they are met with great resistance. Having shaped discourses of success and failure as matters of individual competence, merit, or effort, people are cut off from sites of resistance or support, and from solidarity with people similarly affected by harmful policies and practices. Harvey explains:

the neo-liberal state is hostile to, and in some instances overly repressive of, all forms of social solidarity (such as the trade unions or other social movements that acquired considerable power in the social democratic state) that put restraints on capital accumulation. (19)

What is true in terms of state power and hostility to social solidarity in the form of, say, a trade union, is also true in terms of state power in the form of social and educational policy and hostility to social solidarity amongst young men of color. There is a sense of deviancy and deficiency in policy and research statements like that of *The Educational*

Experience of Young Men of Color, work that locates the ‘problem’ within young men themselves.

This is the double-bind at work: with group identity sullied, young men of color are left to navigate the effects of harmful social and educational policies with little support and few spaces for solidarity. In discussing the difficulties in challenging or re-framing neoliberalism, David Harvey writes of the irony that neoliberalism, with its focus on the individual, does not serve as a generative platform for human rights work. Harvey describes the difficulty of mounting successful challenges to neoliberalism based on a human rights framework as a trap, or perhaps something of a double-bind, writing:

[human rights] opposition cultivates methods that cannot escape the neoliberal trap. The neoliberal attachment to the individual is allowed to trump any social democratic concern for equality, democracy and social solidarities. (38)

By focusing attention on an individualism that is only about rights and not participation in democratic governance structures, neoliberalism masks the production and reproduction of privilege and dispossession as the means to realize one’s right to the ideal educational system, crime-free neighborhood, economy, and so on. So, too, in the case of young men of color: educational research, ‘support’ systems, and academic/social interventions often serve to further deficit constructions of young men of color, diminishing spaces for solidarity and meaningful support structures. The inverted causality that locates the ‘problem’ in those most negatively affected by inequitable social policies and practices forces young men of color into the double-bind of repudiating a positive group identity and latching on to discourses of individual merit.

The positioning practices that tarnish the young men’s group identity occur in many spaces, with one central site being schools. Yet within these positioning practices

and the ensuing figured worlds, there are, through re-positioning, spaces to develop figured worlds of identity that resist dominant deficit constructions.

AGENCY THROUGH RESISTANCE: CULTURAL ARTIFACTS AND REPOSITIONING IN FIGURED WORLDS

People can be positioned by other people, institutions, or by/within discourse, but, as positioning is a discursive practice, there is no final word: people can continually exercise agency to challenge and renegotiate positioning practices. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) assert that “In any discursive practice, positioning constitutes the Self and the others in certain ways and at the same time it is a resource through which all persons involved can negotiate new positions”(398). From this theoretical perspective, people, specifically young men of color in this study, have the possibility of (re)positioning themselves when negatively positioned by people, institutions, or dominant discourses. It is this repositioning that can be seen in analysis of the young men’s narratives, and that is the focus of this dissertation.

How do young men of color, or any people, work to reposition themselves? It is through drawing on cultural tools and resources. Identity-formation happens within activity; it is a process that involves continuous positioning and repositioning within social space. To reposition, “actors conceptually...construct identities by placing themselves and their actions in relation to the socially produced and culturally constituted activities”(Vagan, 2011, 49). In Holland et al.’s work, a central means of placing oneself in relation to these meaning-laden activities is through the use of artifacts. Identities:

are mediated by cultural artifacts...whether one refers to their more conceptual dimensions (e.g., forms of knowledge), material (e.g., objects, instruments), or social dimensions (e.g., characters, events, activities), [artifacts] also provide means to evoke a figured world because of their association with certain people and social practices. The meanings that

people learn to ascribe to these artifacts as typical of a figured world, and of the social types that populate them, 'are part of collectively formed systems of meaning, products of social history' (Vagan, 2011, 49, Holland et al., 1998)

People exercise agency in using these cultural tools to either accept or resist a positioning practice or experience.

Within this framework and understanding of identity, how might we understand literacy and its role in these positioning and repositioning processes? Literacy within the identity-as-position metaphor might be understood "as an enabling tool, a device for making meaning of and speaking back to or resisting the call to certain positions"(Luke and Moje, 2009, 431). In short, literacy here can be understood as "a tool for saying no to interpellating forces"(432)²⁶.

This, I argue, is our task as researchers and practitioners in the field of socio-cultural literacy education, particularly when we are researching or teaching/learning with members of historically minoritized groups: literacy must be understood as a toolkit for participation in socio-cultural practice, an ever-expanding repertoire that engenders strategies of action and ways of repositioning when one is faced with negative positioning practices. The expanded toolkit provides the resources for learners to develop strategic actions to meet their desired goals, to exercise their agency even in the face of severe structural limitations that are produced and reproduced. In the chapters that follow, I share analysis of several young men's narratives and suggest the ways in which the

²⁶ In discussing this understanding of literacy, Luke and Moje caution us to remember that agency differs in different social spaces or fields: "the subject is agentic in some spaces and not in others; literate practice plays a role in that agency, but the ways that youth are called by others in power and the ways they respond to those calls depends in part on the space and time they inhabit"(432). Our subjectivities and identities, and our agency and power along with them, shift within and across social spaces due to the various ways we are positioned and our resources for repositioning: "it is the shifting nature of these positions, as well as the call to inhabit them, that produces both the subjectivity and enactments of subjectivity that are subsequently identified (by self and others) and used for the next positioning act"(432).

young men feel positioned and attempt to reposition themselves. Supporting these young men, and offering them cultural tools and resources that they can use to reposition themselves, must first start with a recognition of the negotiated-identity work they are doing. In sharing these narratives and analysis, I argue for a radical, deep listening to and with young people like the ones introduced in this work. It is through this radical listening that we can develop meaningful structures and learning activities that will support young people in resisting negative positioning practices and drawing on the cultural tools that will help them to reposition themselves, in whatever ways possible, in some social spaces.

In the next four chapters, I share my analysis of the young men's narratives. The first of these chapters explores themes that are common across all of the young men's narratives. The following three chapters look at three individual cases to illustrate the different ways the young men strive to reposition themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR:

NEGOTIATED IDENTITIES AND THE DOUBLE-BIND

WHO CAN BE PRESIDENT?

It's mid-March 2012, and we—the Men's Group—are walking to the Graduate Center from The Opportunity Center. Our numbers are small today: only Hector and Dante are making the six-block trek with me. The weather is unseasonably warm, feeling more like June than March, so we decide to stop at the 7-11 on Madison Ave. and thirty-third. We head to the cold drinks section in the back and grab a soda for Hector, a juice for Dante, and a water for me. As we continue our walk, we talk about the upcoming New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) conference, at which we are both attending and presenting as a group, and share ideas about what we want to discuss with our workshop participants. We get to the Grad Center, and the young men share their IDs with the security officer behind the desk and sign in, a drill that has become rote.

We make our way to the fourth floor, and settle in to the Urban Education thesis room. It is our space for the next two hours. We continue to lay the groundwork for our workshop, to be entitled Educational Histories: Dialoguing around Our Stories to Explore Meaningful Teaching and Learning, our goal being to share experiences and engage teacher-participants in a discussion of how formal education can better connect with lived realities, interests, and needs. This is one of the spaces in which we will continue to share our YPAR work around this question—in the upcoming months, we will do a similar workshop at the Critical Race Studies in Education conference at Teachers College, and, finally (and most importantly), we will engage GED Connect teachers in a similar conversation.

Hector and Dante begin to share personal experiences around the themes we will be discussing in our workshop. Dante shares stories of growing up in the Bronx with a brother who was a high-ranking member of a local set of the Bloods gang, and the tensions he felt when he decided that he did not want to follow in his brother's footsteps. He spoke about the interventions at his junior high school where administrators would invite law enforcement officers in to the school to scare the students into avoiding participation in gangs, and how these interventions were misguided. Dante's decision came more from his childhood witnessing of the violence between people from the Castle Hill and Soundview neighborhoods in the Bronx. His mother eventually moved the family to the Lower East Side to get away from the sorts of violence he had seen in the Bronx as a child. Dante highlighted his formative experiences with his decision not to join his brother's gang, despite much pressure to do so, and poked fun at the "scared straight" approach of his junior high school, which he called a "Smokey the Bear" program because of its lecture approach.

Hector responded to Dante's depiction of school as a place of lectures divorced from his reality, sharing that he experienced similar things. But for him, the issue was a lack of understanding from his teachers. Hector told a story of a fistfight that was instigated by a class bully, and how the blame came squarely down on Hector's shoulders when he defended himself. He exclaimed that this happened time and again, and it was always unfair: he would respond to another boy's provocation, and a fight would ensue. In his teachers' eyes, he would always bear the brunt of the blame for the incident.

Then, Hector seemed to shift to accept his teachers' assessment of who he used to be, taking on the blame for those fights as a personal character defect. He said that he had grown a lot since those days, and that he didn't fight as much anymore. He was learning to control his temper. Still, though, he wondered aloud, sharing his thoughts with Dante and me: why is there so much violence in some neighborhoods and not in others? Why did people fight so much in the Bronx and not around The Opportunity Center [in Midtown Manhattan]? Was it because most of the people in neighborhoods like his in the Bronx were Latino and Black?

Before Dante and I could engage Hector in a discussion of these questions, Hector posed one more question that stunned me. "And another thing. How is it that Obama could be president? I thought only White people could be president."

I was shocked, not sure how to respond. It seemed that Hector was not commenting on power circulations and race, but saying that the law expressly forbade people of color from higher office. Dante said that Obama was biracial, White and Black. I started to share that Barack Obama's father was Black, from Kenya, and his mother White, from Kansas, recounting what I knew about how his parents had met while graduate students at the University of Hawai'i. Hector replied, "Yeah, but his father's Black. I mean, I thought you could be president if your mother was Black [and your father White], but with your father Black?"

Hector, a twenty-one year old Puerto Rican young man from the South Bronx, has lived a life that has taught him that high status life trajectories are barred for him and other young people of color. This question stunned me. This interaction makes me reflect on the power of the discourse of racial boundaries and segregation that Hector has

experienced. I imagine the things he has heard, seen, experienced, and how all of these things have positioned him and shaped his conception of what he, as a man of color, can and cannot do in this world.

Some of y'all in this classroom will not amount to anything. Some of y'all will either end up in jail, or even— or even worse.

-Terrell's fourth grade teacher, as recalled by Terrell, age 19

I didn't feel that that was right. And ever since that day, I wanted— like, I wanted to leave.

-Terrell, age 19

NEGOTIATED IDENTITIES AND THE DOUBLE-BIND

On Thursday, January 5th, 2012, seven young men joined me after school to walk the six blocks from The Opportunity Center to the Graduate Center at 34th and Fifth Avenue. The young men seemed excited as we made the short trek; there were upbeat jokes and a discussion of which hip-hop artists deserved legendary status. The young men arrived in the lobby of the Graduate Center, showed their state or school IDs, and joined me as we made our way to the fourth-floor Urban Education thesis room.

This was the second session of the Men's Group at the Graduate Center, and the first audio-recorded focus group session. Analysis of the narratives collected during this first focus group, and the fourteen audio-taped discussions that followed, suggest cultural beliefs about what seemed possible and impossible in and for the lives of urban working-class young men of color. Further, analysis suggests several markers of group identity, one of which, paradoxically, is the desire to separate, the desire to *not* to be part of the group. In this, the young men's attempts to navigate the negative dominant discourses

about what it means to be a young man of color could be termed a ‘double-bind’²⁷, ‘a situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win’”(Bateson, 1965, 201). I argue that these young men attempt to distance themselves from the group identity, from being ‘read’ through the negative discourse about young men of color, through various means, as will be detailed in what follows. As Bateson says of double-binds, “in an impossible situation, it is better to shift and become somebody else, or shift and insist that [one] is somewhere else”(210). These young men are hyper-aware of negative dominant discourses about young men of color, and attempt to refuse interpellation as unintelligent, lazy, violent and unproductive members of society. The double-bind they experience stems from the impossible situation these young men find themselves in: there are few spaces for solidarity and positive group identity. In attempting to resist identification with the negative dominant discourses, these young men circumnavigate negative positioning practices in ways that largely lead to *further*-diminished space for solidarity and supportive group identity. Left without this space for support and solidarity, the young men take up discourses on meritocracy, self-overcoming, and, when faced with extreme challenges, self-blame.

AWARENESS OF NEGATIVE POSITIONINGS AND DISCOURSES

Members of this group— young men of color— are constantly negotiating, and struggling to negotiate, dominant perceptions of what it means to be a young man of color. This struggle involves cultural assumptions about how the world works in terms of

²⁷ Gregory Bateson uses the term ‘double-bind’ to explore the situations that give rise to schizophrenia. While I find this term useful, I by no means want to pathologize young men of color with my use of the term. I employ the term to describe the challenging and complex circumstances that young men like those described here are forced to negotiate, and I agree with recent scholarship that argues that “researchers often locate the problems of street-life-oriented boys within the boys themselves, as individual and group ‘pathology,’ ‘deviancy,’ or ‘delinquency’... it is imperative that more scholars...effectively document how and why their activities inside schools make sense in their lives”(Payne and Brown, 2010).

possible life trajectories and how they can expect to be treated in various social spaces, including sites of formal education.

This negotiated-identity work, this struggling with dominant discourses about what it means to be a young man of color, is present in overt ways, like Hector's question about who can become president in the narrative at the beginning of this chapter, and in covert ways such as meta-statements as well. In an early focus group session where we were discussing freedom and limitation, I asked the group to try to define the concept of freedom. Dante responded "It's all in your head. I mean, that sounds like a crackhead, but it's all in your head. It really does sound like a crackhead— but it's all in your head." By using this meta-statement— commenting on his response and feeling it important to acknowledge how he could be perceived as speaking like a crack addict might speak, despite the obvious fact that he is not a crack addict— Dante's response shows that he is constantly monitoring his statements to see if he is saying anything that might suggest that he is like dominant negative framings of what it means to be an urban African-American young man. Dante is not only aware of these perceptions; he is vigilant in monitoring his speech to ward off any suggestion that he is a nonsense-spouting drug addict rather than a bright young man dedicated to his education.

TAKING POWER BY LEAVING

To return to that first focus group, on January 5th: I put a prompt on the large computer screen, an excerpt from the journal of a young man named Omar who had been part of the Men's Group the previous year. I had led Omar and the other young men in a low-stakes writing activity, an exploration through weekly journals delving into educational histories. Each week, the young men would write about and possibly share an

important moment from their educational lives, leading to a rich discussion of a variety of experiences: meaningful support from teachers or family members, unfair castigations or assumptions from the same, regrettable decisions, victorious moments, laments, desires. While that iteration of the Men's Group had unfortunately given way to the scheduling demands engendered by test-preparation, I wanted to use the writings of the earlier members to generate discussion, and to explore whether or not the work of another group of young men would resonate with this new group-in-formation. And so I shared the following prompt from Omar's educational history on the screen:

There was a time in my life, as far as school goes, when teachers never had good things to say. It was like I did not know how to be a good student. To me, it just seemed like I had my own way of doing things. For a long time, my teacher would say really bad things that stuck with me.

I read it aloud, and then asked if this passage spoke to something that sounded realistic for the young men. The energy in the room seemed to become electric, and I recall feeling that a more honest conversation could ensue in the space of the Graduate Center, outside of the walls of the young men's GED Center. A young man named Freddy immediately said "Of course," and then proceeded to explain why he had left his high school. For Freddy, it was a sense that his teachers did not believe that he was capable or worthy of his education, and he took power by first refusing to go to a particular teacher's class, and then by leaving high school in general. He shares:

when I once was in high school, you know, I had teachers that really didn't put, like, effort into teaching me stuff, and like, doubted me the whole way through high school. And that was one of the reasons why I dropped out. And like, it felt like – like, I wasn't able to succeed in life, and they just put me down. Like – Like, put all my hopes down, and crushed all my dreams. And like, every day I'd come to high school, and like, I'd see this same teacher – and that's the teacher that teaches me. And like, I really wasn't, like – I really wasn't up for it, to go to his or her

classroom. So, I skipped that class. And ev – eventually, that lead me to drop out.

I asked Freddy to explain how he knew that the teachers doubted him, to help me to understand how one particular teacher could have such an effect on him. He explains:

Like, subliminal messages. Like, I wasn't stupid. Like, I could see that that person was sending me messages, and like, wasn't, like, putting effort of teaching me. And like, will just totally bypass me when I raise my hand, and go to the next student that didn't raise their hand, but see that that student has trouble, and help that student on working with that lesson that that person was teaching.

Freddy sensed that other students came first for the teacher, even if these other students were not requesting extra help or support as he was. To avoid these subliminal messages, as he calls them, Freddy left the class and then the school in an effort to take power.

Though the full story is sure to be more complex, the narrative Freddy presents here is that he sensed the extremely negative beliefs about him—and people like him— within the social space of the classroom and school, and eventually left these negative social spaces to be able to define himself differently. The narrative he recounted on this first day²⁸, though, does reveal a theme or trend that came to be a repeating pattern through the young men's narratives, that of leaving to take power, of separating oneself from the group or social space in an attempt to define oneself differently.

In that first focus group session, Terrell said that elementary school was the hardest for him; he asserts that negative relationships with teachers began during those years. He opens up to the group, sharing:

²⁸ I was never able to explore more of Freddy's narratives, as Freddy was soon after transferred to another GED Center in a different borough. From what I gathered with conversations with the teachers and administrator, Freddy had been involved in some sort of a verbal altercation at The Opportunity Center, and the administrator described him as 'defiant.' Apparently Freddy complained that his guidance counselor didn't "do shit for him," and the assistant principal told Freddy that there was nothing that could be done to help him if he refused to work with the staff.

And I feel like, um, this happened— this is a personal experience. Like, when I was in 4th grade— I don't know, I think it was 4th grade. But it was elementary school. And my teacher was telling, um, the whole class that, 'Some of y'all in this classroom will not amount to anything. Some of y'all will either end up in jail, or even— or even worse.'

This statement, the assertion that 'some of y'all will end up in jail, or worse,' lead to an eruption of talk, the young men were both chorusing assent that these sorts of things happened and upset that it happened to Terrell in the fourth grade. Terrell wanted to continue, to share how this made him feel and why it was such an affront:

And while she was saying it, like, she looked directly at me. And I felt that it was directed towards me, because of the way she, like, was looking at me. And I didn't feel that that was right. And ever since that day, I wanted— like, I wanted to leave. I didn't— I wanted to get, um, out of that school, and transfer to a different one, but I couldn't. And my mom was like— It was too— Like, in the middle of the year, so you wouldn't— it's not— it wouldn't be a good idea.

Since his mother would not allow him to leave, Terrell decided to try to prove this teacher wrong, to show her that he was “not a failure.”

These narratives are important in that they evidence a double consciousness: young men of color like Freddy and Terrell are negotiating a dominant discourse that positions them in negative ways. These young men are seeking ways to resist and to name or position themselves differently. Freddy and Terrell share stories about extremely negative interactions with teachers. Academic identities formed in earlier years in school are produced through complex processes that involve many factors, one of these factors being teacher-student relationships. These young men express painful emotions coming from negative teacher-student relationships: Freddy shares that he felt his dreams were crushed, that he did not feel up to attending a particular teacher's class any longer. James prefaces his sharing of emotion by sharing that “a lot of times, you're feeling some type

of way,” vernacular for being angry or upset. James then expresses frustration, sharing that he and his peers would try to talk with teachers, and it would appear as if understanding had been reached but would ultimately give way to continued negative interactions. Terrell shares that the teacher’s comment to him— “Some of y’all will end up in jail- or even worse”— was not right, and made him want to find another educational setting. All three of these young men resist the positioning practices they recount in their narratives about their experiences with teachers, and this resistance takes the form of leaving, or desiring to leave, the class or school. The young men develop a sensibility early on in their formal education that to take power, they have to leave.

Leaving, or desiring to leave, then, is one of the themes that emerge across the narratives of the young men. Terrell shares how he felt trapped at his school because his mother did not want him to transfer between schools or classes in the middle of the school year. Freddy attributes his leaving to the fact that his teacher did not see him as a worthy student in the classroom. Both of the narratives that these young men tell— and many others by their peers— evidence an awareness that they are not who the teachers (or the institution of school, or dominant society) position them to be: the young men have a double-consciousness, a sense of themselves as they perceive themselves to be, and an awareness of the prevalent negative set of assumptions about people like them (young, urban, working-class or poor men of color).

It has been documented in the literature that young people’s leaving of school can be read as “a strategy for taking control for lives fundamentally out of control” and as a means for schools to ‘exile’ those who critique of the process and market of education. (Fine, 1991, 4). I read the young men’s response to this tension— the tension between

who they feel positioned to be within the social space of school and who they desire to be— as leading to an attempt to take power by leaving. Coupled with the fact that many policies and practices foster the ‘pushing-out’ of young people who bring down test score data or do not fit the profile of those ‘deserving’ of a good education, young men’s attempt to take power by leaving becomes a double-bind: the challenges they face in larger society, and the added stain of being labeled a ‘drop-out’ or unsuccessful learner lead many of these young men to blame themselves for their educational ‘failure.’ They draw on the discourse of meritocracy, individual achievement, and self-overcoming as they work to take power and control over their lives. With few spaces for communal support and the challenges of navigating negative discourses of what it means to be a young man of color, particularly one who has left school, the young men seek to disavow group identity and adopt a rugged individualist narrative of self-overcoming, often leading to self-blame when facing challenges.

VIBRATIONS, CALLINGS, AND THE TRAP

How do the young men themselves make sense of this double-bind? First, the young men in the Men’s Group routinely spoke of the group of young men of color who had not ‘woken-up,’ as they had. There is a sense on the part of the young men I worked with that many of their peers— other young men of color— end up becoming what the dominant discourse encourages or positions them to be. In one of the early sessions of the Men’s Group, during a session that was not audio-recorded, Dante, James, Marquise and I discussed the differences between ‘education’ and ‘schooling.’ I asked the young men to explore how they thought schools could be more connected to the challenges that they had been describing outside of school. Dante asserted that making it in life was all about

who you know, and that school didn't really matter when you had— or didn't have— connections. James chimed in that he agreed, and that he believed that “the hood is a trap, mentality-wise.” Wanting to know more about why he considered his neighborhood a trap—was it because of the kinds of social capital accrued?— I challenged James by saying that if the neighborhood is indeed a trap, why is it that some people succumb to the trap and others don't? James mulled this over while Dante piped up: some people fall prey to the trap because the trap gives off ‘vibrations,’ which many people are not strong enough to resist. Some people can resist these negative vibrations because of something special that pulls them in a different direction, a ‘calling.’ We spent the rest of the conversation expanding these concepts of the trap, vibrations, and callings. Dante, who had, earlier that day, been complaining about his mother's “nagging” now credited her with helping him to find his calling. The young men began exploring who or what in their lives served as a calling to help them to resist the negative vibrations that they felt were emanating from their neighborhoods.

James talked about seeing his older brother, Manny, “do the street thing” by getting involved with a gang and use guns, and how this served as a “wake-up call” for him. James, a photographer— he rarely came to school or the Men's Group without his camera— had been showing the group some of his photos on his iPad earlier that day. Several of the photos were of a group of men from James' neighborhood, posing for the camera and ‘throwing signs’ (signing street organization/gang affiliations with hands and fingers). One of the men, James said, was Lamont Pride, who became infamous the month before for shooting a police officer in Brooklyn. Pride and several other men had attempted to rob a drug dealer, and Lamont had shot the first officer to arrive at the scene.

During our discussion of the vibrations, James offered this photo as an example of the vibrations: these were the men in his neighborhood, his brother was friends with all of these men. Other people see them and look up to them, and then follow in their footsteps. At this point, I challenged James, asking why *he* was different: Lamont Pride grew up in the building next door in the housing projects where James and his family lived, why were Lamont and James such different men if they had experienced the same vibrations? James said that he had “woken up,” and said that some people never wake up. James did not want us to have a bad impression of Lamont Pride— yes, he had done something horrible, but he just had not woken up and had been influenced by the vibrations. James said that everything he had read in the newspaper had made it sound like Lamont was a terrible human being, and a whole article in the New York Post had focused on the fact that he had smiled while in court. The article, entitled “Grinning Cop Killer...Apologizes After Shooting Death” begins with “He says he’s sorry— but that didn’t stop accused cop killer Lamont Pride from flashing a smirk in court Wednesday.” James shared with the group that he knew why Lamont was smiling that day— Lamont’s brother and a group of their friends had shown up in court to support him, and Lamont had turned around when he saw them to smile at them— and that this media misrepresentation made James feel that people from his neighborhood were always seen as bad no matter what they did.

Later in the conversation, James came up with the thing that he said helped him to resist the vibrations. He said that being a photographer made him want to explore new things and to travel to different neighborhoods to shoot photographs. The other young men came up with their ways of resisting the vibrations as well: Marquise reported that he had “caught a case,” had been arrested for drug possession and drug use, and that

experience made him want to change his life because he was tired of “having to look over [his] back for the cops.” Dante said that gang turf wars between people living in the Soundview and Castle Hill neighborhoods when he was a child in the Bronx made him “wake up” and want something different in his life.

Marquise built on Dante’s notion of a ‘calling,’ and held that having an escape or hobby, allows a person to resist the vibrations. He offered sports as an example, but quickly asserted that this is not his calling. For him, it is a desire to help people, and liking to make people smile and laugh. He wants to help people in life, and that was why he wanted to be a history or math teacher. He then told us that he had been suspended recently from the Manhattan Central Center because of this desire to help others. He had been in math class, and the teacher was absent. The substitute teacher had not shown up after ten minutes, so he decided to write an aim on the board and start helping his peers with math problems that the class had been working on that week. When the substitute figured out where she was supposed to be that period, she saw Marquise, who, though only twenty years old, both looked older and had dressed professionally for school, was at the front of the room working on a math problem. She assumed that he was the teacher, and asked if she needed to stay. Marquise, feeling that this substitute teacher never really helped the students learn, told her that she did not need to stay. When the assistant principal, Ms. R, found out what had happened, she suspended him for several days for impersonating a teacher. I could not help feeling that this was simply a misunderstanding borne of Marquise’s desire to help his peers and his frustration with high teacher absenteeism; my feeling was that a brief conversation explaining why having a teacher in the room at all times was necessary for liability purposes could have sufficed. In my

notes after the conversation, I also wondered if the penalty would be the same for a White student in a more highly regarded educational program.

The language of vibrations, callings, and the trap became a specialized vocabulary for the Men's Group, a shared lexicon particular to the group. The young men used these terms constantly, and introduced the terms to new members of the group. James became so intimate with these terms that he reported that he would use them in conversations with his friends and family, and even relied on them months later to express his life goals in a written application for a filmmaking internship. The terms' meanings remained fixed throughout the remainder of the academic year, though the young men did deepen their understandings of these concepts. When José joined the group in the spring, he challenged the notion of it being the 'vibrations' that made one susceptible to the trap, preferring the term 'the undertow' to 'vibrations.' He argued that it was like being at the beach and being sucked towards something, and that you had to fight hard to resist the pull of the neighborhood and the streets.

In one of the final focus groups, Dante and James were debating how the trap operated on people in their neighborhoods. James expressed the belief that

a lot of people that's in the trap, they have, they limited to the knowledge...they limit themselves to knowledge, like, they choose to hang outside all day all night, drink and smoke, but when they really could be out, but when they really could be in they books, or doing something positive instead of just hanging out...talk about everybody else when they could be talking about and getting themselves involved in themselves.

Dante questioned this, saying to James "you interpret that as the trap, I mean, not everybody else sees that as the trap. Like somebody that you believe that's inside the trap, 'why you trapped?', they gonna say 'I'm not in a trap.'" James is reproducing negative discourses about his neighbors, expressing the belief that they choose drinking

and smoking over studying, suggesting that succumbing to the trap is solely a matter of personal choice. Dante wants to add nuance to the discussion, later saying that “It comes down to you, psychologically, I mean. If you believe that you’re in a trap, then you’re in a trap. If you believe that you’re not inside the trap, then you’re not in a trap at all.”

James considers this, and then agrees, saying that he believes that those he and Dante would consider trapped might consider *them* to be in a trap. James appears to consider the matter resolved when he says that it depends on one’s mindset, that “they [those in the trap, as he sees it] see otherwise. The way we see things? They see it the opposite, basically. So for them, they just living life, and hanging out and having fun.” James is actively positioning himself as other, as opposite, to those he considers trapped. In this, he is engaging figured worlds of identity, and making claims about the types of people who occupy them.

Dante, like James, also works to position himself as ‘other’ to those he considers trapped, though how the trap operates is less clear-cut for Dante. He sees the trap less as the result of personal choice, saying:

People born in the trap, it wasn’t, you know, they wasn’t trapped by the vibrations, they was brought up full-blownly BY the vibrations. So, that was me. I was a trap-boy. So— learned to escape the trap because I lived in the trap so long.

A moment later, Dante pauses to say “Hopefully I escaped the trap, I mean. I might not be aware, I might still be in the trap.” At another point in the discussion, he says “that’s what I used to escape, escape the trap. So, I mean, I had to take up a different hobby instead of chillin’ out with these cats, you know.” Dante is speaking of the people in his neighborhood, and he agrees with James that “they do nothing but hang around, drink all day,” laughing with James, expressing agreement with “the same thing, everyday.” Dante

is referring to his interest in boxing when he mentions a different hobby than “chillin’ out with these cats,” a hobby engendered by a gift of boxing gloves from his junior high Math teacher, Mr. H.²⁹ Dante regularly mentions an interest in boxing in focus group sessions and conversations with his peers, sometimes suggesting that he wanted a career as a professional boxer. I asked him what he might do if not professional boxing, and Dante mentioned an interest in counseling. I had shown him the psychology lounge and offices at the Graduate Center when I found out about this interest, and Dante said:

If not a professional boxer? I do like to talk about problems. I like, you know, intermingle with people’s situations and issues...you brought me upstairs to the sixth floor where they teach psychology, right? Yeah, I wanna be a psychiatrist, I really, I’d like to work with a counselor, something that’s, somebody that’s inside that field.

Dante says that, unlike his peers, he has a talent for this sort of work, something that he developed when interacting with people with gang affiliations. He shares:

I’m not what they call a golden child [someone born into a gang] but this is a sibling of mine who was inside of a gang...he had got shot and wanted to speak to us about what happened. So I was one of the guys that spoke to him and I got him out of the, you know, situation. That’s one of the things that I found positive about myself, that I could speak to him and he got out of the situation and everything is okay now.

Dante also spoke of a time when he helped a friend who was associated with the Bloods gang but was dating someone who was from a Latin King family, saying that his knack for counseling helped this friend through another tough situation. Dante is drawing on his interest in boxing and his talent for counseling support to say that these ‘callings’ are helping him to build a sense of self different from those he considers trapped. He is

²⁹ Dante describes Mr. H as “one of the best teachers I ever had.” He says that Mr. H “didn’t show me that I could be what I wanted to be, but he showed me that I do whatever it is I wanna do...I don’t know how to put it but he would give me the tools if he sees me somewhere inside ...he would give me tools to that area.” This was one of the few times that one of the young men had positive things to say about a teacher.

building a figured world of identity to help differentiate himself from his past ‘trapped’ self, and to help him resist being positioned as someone who is ‘limited’ or just ‘hangs out.’ Further analysis of the young men’s narratives shows that many of them are doing similar work in and through their narratives, finding ways to differentiate and separate themselves from discourses that position them in negative ways.

THE TRAP AS DOUBLE-BIND: INDIVIDUALITY AND SOLIDARITY

In the lexicon that they created, the young men of the Men’s Group offer their take on why so many of their peers are ‘trapped,’ and how they have ‘woken up’ to be able to resist the trap. They argue that they have been able to find callings that help them to see the world and their life possibilities differently, and that these callings help them to ward off the vibrations. In doing this, the young men are doing negotiated-identity work, actively seeking to position themselves as other to the young men of color who have not yet ‘woken up.’

I offer an additional layer to the young men’s analysis, an interpretation of the ways in which they are making sense of their paths vis-à-vis their (largely disavowed) group identity. I argue that the trap that is in effect in these young men’s lives is that solidarity and group-identification has been sullied: there has been an undermining of the group that leaves them little choice but to latch on to narratives of individual self-overcoming and success. With so many stories about the ‘crisis’ of young men of color—proliferated, in part, through educational research’s fascination with portrayals of young men of color as damaged and deficient— young men desire to be separated from the group, and from being read as members of this group. This leads to the negotiated-

identity work that the young men are doing as they draw on cultural narratives in an attempt to position themselves as separate, and above, the tarnished group identity.

In the next three chapters, I go into greater detail to show how three men— Axel, Elijah, and James— are negotiating these dominant discourses in an attempt to separate themselves from being read as members of the group. These three young men attempt to (re)negotiate their identities in different ways, as shown through analysis of their narratives, and all three either overtly or covertly seek to set themselves apart from group identification.

CHAPTER FIVE:

THE DESIRE TO BE UNDERSTOOD — AND SEPARATE

TYRIEK'S DISAPPEARANCE

It's the morning of the Young Men's Leadership Conference. Tyriek is running late, and by the time he joins our small group outside of the Manhattan Central Center, he is nearly drenched from the rain. One of the young men had suggested that we dress professionally for the conference—I left it to the group to decide how we should represent ourselves—and we had all readily agreed. That morning, only Tyriek showed up dressed casually, wearing a red hoodie while the other young men wore collared shirts and ties. Miguel came wearing a suit.

Our group was nine people strong: Tyriek, Edwin, Anthony, Antoine, Miguel, Mr. Jackson, and me. Mr. Jackson, the parent coordinator from The Opportunity Center GED site, was extremely supportive of the early iteration of the Men's Group, and was eager to support in whatever ways he could. I was excited for the conference, which was being organized at Teachers College by former colleagues from the Satellite Academy young men's support network, Umoja. The founder of Umoja had invited me as a guest speaker, and I agreed on the condition that I could invite a small contingent from the Men's Group that I was trying to start at GED Connect.

We were running late, and the downpour didn't help any. I was curious how the young men would experience being at Teachers College, and respond to the invitation to dialogue with the numerous speakers on issues ranging from masculinity to media representations to economic empowerment. The moment conversations were opened, Tyriek became deeply engaged. He listened, reflected, and adamantly inserted his

opinions on the importance of education, what leadership meant to him, how to think critically about the world around us. Later on, he shared with me that he felt that he had to speak up and impress everyone in the room because he hadn't dressed up; he had to distinguish himself verbally to stand out instead. His comments so impressed the participants—the other young men and the academics and invited adult guests—that a post-doctoral fellow at Teachers College, Dr. Thurmond Bridges, took down his contact information and offered to send him both a reading list and copies of the books. I recall feeling like that day something powerful was happening. Tyriek was participating in deep discussions, the kind that rarely happened in his GED classrooms. He was meeting and connecting with intellectual mentors. But then he disappeared.

Except for one day when he came into the GED Center a week after the conference, I did not see Tyriek for two months. He had joined the fledgling Men's Group. In the Men's Group the week after the trip, he explained that he didn't know why he wasn't coming to the program anymore. The narrative that I built in my head was that we weren't finding ways for him to feel successful, or connecting his education to his lived realities. When I saw him that day, Tyriek reported that he had a court date the next day, and asked if I could write a letter describing his academic progress. I did so during my lunch hour, describing Tyriek as an avid reader and thinker. I wrote about the field trip we had taken to the Mid-Manhattan library, and how he had had to use a tote bag to carry all of his borrowed books home. I wrote about his powerful comments at the conference, and how, despite the room for growth regarding his attendance, that he was connecting with people who could support him on his path. In the final paragraph, I wrote "it is my belief that Tyriek is part of an educational community that supports his

needs,” hoping that if there was a debate about where Tyriek would continue his education that the letter would help him continue to be a part of our program.

Tyriek wouldn't tell me what the court date was for— all he would say was that it was just some “old stuff” that he'd gotten into— but he said that it wasn't serious.

I wouldn't see Tyriek for several months after that. The phone number I had for him had been disconnected. Against Department of Education policy, I tried to find him on Facebook so that I could encourage him to come back to the GED Connect program. I didn't know where he was or if he had that choice.

“What are we doing to get him back?,” I asked Dmitri, his guidance counselor. Dmitri shrugged. “There is nothing else we can do for him. We need to save room in our hearts for the next student.”

I don't feel that Tyriek is part of an educational community that supports his needs.

THE DESIRE TO BE SEPARATE FROM THE GROUP

Nobody wants to be the outsider. But my best advice right now is the best thing is to *be* the outsider.

-Axel, age 20

Axel joined the Men's Group late in the spring, but was quick to become one of its most vocal participants, both in our focus group sessions and in our preparation for our workshop and presentation at the Critical Race Studies in Education conference we attended in June 2012. A twenty-year old Dominican young man from Queens, he quickly connected with the other young men by showing off his impressive knowledge of the hip hop canon, reciting lyrics from memory and drawing from an encyclopedic

knowledge of albums, performances, and songs. He also had captivating stories from the streets of Brooklyn and Queens, tales of dangerous events he had experienced while dealing drugs, something he began doing at the age of fourteen when his father was incarcerated. Axel opened up to the group almost immediately, sharing his stories and latching onto our established YPAR project of wanting to explore how schools could be both more connected to lived realities and more supportive for young men like our group's participants.

As part of the workshop and presentation for the Critical Race Studies in Education conference, the young men decided to create a short film clip that highlighted some of their life experiences that they felt did not connect with the project of school. This short clip was made by James, José, Dante, and Axel, and is an amalgam of stories about the pressures of police stop-and-frisk tactics, group-based assumptions on the part of police officers and teachers, challenging relationships with parents, and familial pressures to join a gang. The clip begins with Axel saying "I don't have that dream life" and "we all have different stories to tell, but ultimately we tell it for the same reason." That reason, as will be explored further in analysis of two of Axel's narratives, is to be understood, to resist the negative positionings that he and the other young men have experienced in and out of school. The clip then shifts to a shot of José saying :

This was when I was in jail, that I was about to leave, and one of the C.O.s [corrections officer], he was even a Black, a Black— an African-American C.O., and he was like, 'it don't matter,' I don't know, he was having a conversation with another C.O., and I just happened to pass by, and the other one goes 'yo, good luck, I hope you do good, I hope you don't come back here' and the other guy said 'Why you even telling him that? He's gonna be back here in a couple of months.'

In other sessions, José reported how much this hurt him, how he was a good kid who didn't deserve to be castigated as someone who would live his life in and out of jail and prison. Later in the clip, José asserts "I shouldn't have been there. I shouldn't have been at Rikers Island. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time." A shot of Dante depicts him saying "I was always introduced to gangs, nothing but gangs" and later declaring "when my older brother was in jail, he had made me a recruiter and an enforcer at the same time." Axel shares that his life has been a "roller coaster," and that he has seen things that a kid is "not supposed to see." José shares that challenges in his life stem from his "neighborhood having an undertow towards [him]," undertow being his preferred way to refer to what the other young men have termed the 'vibrations' that can influence a person and guide them towards the 'trap.' The goal of this video clip, which was presented at the beginning of our presentation at the Critical Race Studies in Education conference, was to give our audience examples of how the young men felt that formal education was not working for them, not addressing their needs or connecting to their lived realities. Then, the young men presented a Powerpoint sharing their ideas about how education could better connect to their experiences outside of school, how extracurricular activities truly mattered, and how teachers and students might forge stronger relationships. The young men then lead the workshop participants in a discussion of these and other ideas for meaningful support for urban young men of color.

In preparation for the film clip that was used in this presentation, the young men told their stories into the camera as James videotaped. In Axel's videotaped narrative, he concludes the story of how he ended up leaving school and eventually seeking out the GED by sharing what he has learned from the process. He offers advice to other young

men who may be facing similar circumstances of entering adolescence without a father present, saying “nobody wants to be the outsider. But my best advice right now is the best thing is to *be* the outsider. ‘Cause then you’re not in no trouble when you’re the outsider. You’re not into stupid things, you know?” James interrupted at this point, saying “Word.³⁰ Separate yourself from others,” to which Axel replies “Yeah, separating yourself from others is really good.” José then chimes in, suggesting that if you do not separate yourself from others, you run the risk of being “judged by teachers to then fall into the wrong path.”

The theme of “separating oneself” or being “the outsider” plays a central role in Axel’s narratives. Without being seen as a member of a group, Axel maintains that his life would have been much easier. This is a variation on the theme of wanting to leave or separate oneself from the site of negative positing: as analysis of Terrell’s and Freddy’s narratives in the previous chapter suggests, assumptions about who these boys or young men are can lead to the desire to change schools or to leave school entirely. What Axel and José are suggesting leaving, though, is not so much a physical location but a positioning or identifying practice. For Axel, the range of selves he feels called upon to be within the space of school is limiting. He talks about why he advocates “being the outsider” in one of our focus groups³¹, reiterating his point that everybody wears a mask. He shares “every teenager puts up a front, understand? I don’t care who you are, where you from, when you get to school, you know, it’s more or less a little jungle.” He follows this with “everybody has a front, you know, they play that role, you understand?...so I

³⁰ ‘Word’ expresses agreement in James’ vernacular.

³¹ The full narrative that is excerpted here is shared below, in a data display rendered for structural and thematic analysis. It begins on page 130.

play that role and I played my role fine. I was myself at the end of the day, but you didn't know me, you understand?" Axel argues that teachers should:

get a better understanding instead of, you know, as soon as a kid disrupts the class, don't kick him out as soon as like (snaps fingers), like that. You understand? They kicked him out like this (snaps again). You understand? It's like— and what does that do for the student? You've given them a false reaction, the worst reaction ever, because—

José interrupts here, saying "everybody's going to kick him out all the time," to which

Axel replies:

Exactly. Then everybody looks at him like he's the bad seed. And most, most of the kids are like 'oh, you're cool,' you know? 'Cause you got kicked out of class, but then again, now he knows that in his mind, this teacher has a dislike for him, now because he made it himself, the class clown.

José interjects again, saying "This is some weird shit. Now you stuck between two walls, now you stuck between a teacher busting your balls and stuck between a bad crowd that thinks you're a hero." Axel again replies "exactly," following with "so now, the teacher dis-, dislikes you, and you know the teacher dislikes you, 'cause every time you walk into the classroom, she's looking at you, waiting for you to say something out of bounds."

Axel's discussion of this negative positioning mirrors that of researcher L. Janelle Dance, whose ethnography *Tough Fronts* (2002) describes how young men of color assume fronts, or variations of a "gangsterlike pose" for strategic purposes in and out of school. What is different in Axel's tale, and in the narratives of several other young men in the Men's Group, is that they are struggling to find a way to separate themselves from the group where they feel called upon, or positioned as, the sorts of people these fronts implicate them to be. There is a desire to step outside of the limited subject roles that

these young men feel they can occupy in their social spaces, in and out of school. Simply put, they want to separate themselves from the group.

THE DESIRE TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Analysis of Axel's narratives, in particular, suggests a strong desire to be understood, to be read as someone other than the negative dominant discourse of an urban working-class young man of color. During the course of a Men's Group session on a Thursday afternoon in mid-May, when we were preparing for our Critical Race Studies in Education conference, Axel told the story of why he left school two times: once to us (the other members of the Men's Group, and me) and the other time to the video camera, to the imagined audience of the conference-goers. At certain moments in both of these narratives, Axel peppers his stories with requests for understanding from his listeners. These requests primarily take the form of 'you understand?,' sometimes abbreviated to 'understand?' or said as 'you know?'. Looking at *where* Axel asks for this understanding, and comparing the two renditions in terms of their structure and orientation suggests that Axel's narratives do the work of demonstrating how he has been misunderstood in school, and why he ultimately had to leave his high school. They also demonstrate a continuing desire for acceptance from teachers and success in formal education.

In the first telling of why he left school, shown here as a data display rendered for structural and thematic analysis, Axel asks for understanding through 'you understand,' 'understand?,' or 'you know?' seventeen times.

Axel's First Rendition of Why He Left School

Stanza One: Where I Am Now- And Why

1. Alright um/I/I/I currently attend GED school/
2. I did not finish high school because I was in the streets//
3. I felt/I cared more about money than anything else/

4. I felt I had like responsibility to help my mother when/
5. during my father's absence//

Stanza Two: My Father Was Gone During a Critical Time

6. Um/I guess it most started when I was about fourteen/
7. just about fourteen years old/
8. My father had gotten incarce-/incarcerated//
10. So he was gone for like about two years three years/
11. Yeah two and a half years//
12. So during those two and a half years/that's fifteen sixteen and
13. some of seventeen//
14. So/to me the fourteen fifteen and sixteen/those years are the
15. most important years of a kid's life//
16. And/not having both of your parents there/really can/um/take
17. a toll on the mind/as far as answering questions that are not
18. able to be answered//

Stanza Three: My Mom Didn't Tell Me, But I Figured it Out

19. 'cause/ I can understand my mother as a parent not wanting to tell
20. me/everything that was going on/
21. but I was always the type of kid that wanted to know what was going on
22. because I wanted to be able to deal with the fact and not just wonder/
23. *You know?*/But/when my father lea-/when my father was incarcerated at
24. first I didn't know he was incarcerated//
25. At first/I thought he was in DR [Dominican Republic]//
26. Um/but as I started picking up on/you know/ what times he would
27. call/the funny number that would come up/you know/it/it/I'm not
28. stupid/*you know?*/ So-

Noah: so your mom didn't want you to know.

Stanza Four: It Hurt that They Kept It From Me

29. she didn't want me to know/until I found out through my cousin//
30. So/ that hurt me even more because I felt like my parents were keeping
31. things from me that/you know/ I should be able to know//
32. And after that/it was just like/ I felt like I didn't have/not nobody but I
33. didn't have that important somebody/*you understand?*/Cause I knew I
34. had my mother/and my mother had me

Stanza Five: I Had a Responsibility to Take Care of Myself

35. But/I felt though/as if/ just like/um/José³²/I had felt like I had a
36. responsibility/you know/my mom/my mom is working a job that pays at
37. least 500 a week/ I should be able to bring in some type of money too
38. myself//

³² Earlier that day, José had told a story of feeling like he had great responsibility towards his family.

39. And/*you know*/not mainly towards her but like to keep her from buying
40. stuff for me/*you understand?*/like the necessities clothing and all that//

Stanza Six: I Picked up Bad Habits Because My Father Wasn't There

41. So I/I found myself cutting school smoking weed/and I picked up a lot of
42. bad habits during those years//
43. And/and I've never had/I didn't have a lot of questions answered
44. because I didn't know any better/I was learning on my own//
45. So being out there learning on your own/when you make a mistake you
46. really have to learn//
47. It's not like I had/my father had to tell me that he's been there and done
48. that and it's no good for you/*you know?*/
49. And yeah/when I would speak to him he would tell me over the phone
50. but it's different/Over the phone/and him/him being incarcerated seeing
51. him through/you know/having to sit across the table from him and stuff
52. like that/ it's like/I really lost sleep overnight/*you know?*

Stanza Seven: I Was Confused, and I'll Never Be Proud of What I Did

53. So at the age of fourteen/boom/I started cutting school/I wasn't/um/I
54. was more worried about the girls/I was more worried about money/ I
55. was worried about my friends/*you know?*/and it was just like/how do I
56. say/I was living for the moment// Basically//
57. I was living for that moment/that time/didn't care about anything
58. else/*you know*/whatever I could come up with/*you know*/I'm not proud
59. of myself/still today because I've done/I've/I was/I was a thief at one
60. point/ José said he's never robbed anything and he's been through a
61. lot/*you know?*/ And I wish I could be half a man like that/because a thief
62. is the worst thing you could be called in the world//
63. So/knowing that I've done that/knowing that I've sold drugs/knowing
64. that I smoke weed/ smoked cigarettes at such a young age/It's not
65. that/I'm never gonna be proud of it//
66. It's/It's/It's hard to/*you know*/get over those things once you've/you've
67. been through it for years/you've been doing it for so many years/X
68. amount/and/*you know*/just I was a really confused/very confused kid//

Stanza Eight: I Put Up a Front, Like Every Other Teenager

69. And nobody would kno-/in school nobody understood that//Why?
70. Because every teenager puts up a front//*Understand?*/ I don't care who
71. you are where you from/when you get into school you know/ it's more or
72. less like a little jungle//
73. You got kids that think they're tough/you've got kids that are
74. nerdy/you've got kids that don't care about you/and will hurt you in
75. some type of way when you're not looking/so everybody has a front//
José: competition.

Stanza Nine: I Played that Role

76. Exactly/everybody's like/everybody has a front/you know/they play that
77. role/*you understand?*/
José: a free for all.
78. so I play that role/and I played my role fine//
79. I was myself at the end of the day/but you didn't know me/*You*
80. *understand?*/nobody knows you/until you have a conversation about the
81. rea/the real deal//

Stanza Ten: The Teachers Didn't Get It

82. And I think teachers didn't get at that/and it's not mainly their
83. fault/because *you know*/you have twenty-nine other students in the
84. class/and I can understand that/but what I don't understand is/when/a
85. teacher does try to get the students' conv/um/attention/and she
86. notices/you know/ that his lifestyle is way different/from theirs/I know
87. that you probably/that teachers mostly can't compare to us/but to get a
88. better understanding instead of/you know/as soon as a kid disrupts the
89. class/don't kick him out as soon as like (snaps fingers) like that//
90. *you understand?*/They kicked him out like this//(snaps again)
91. *you understand?*/It's like/and/what does that do for the student?/You've
92. given them a false reaction/the worst reaction ever/because-
José: everybody's gonna kick him out all the time.

93. Exactly//Then everybody looks at him like he's the bad seed/And
94. most/most of the kids are like 'oh, you're cool'/you know?/'cause you
95. got kicked out of class/but then again/now he knows that in his
96. mind/this teacher has a dislike for him/now/because he made it himself
97. the class clown (crosstalk)

José: this is some weird shit (laughing). now you stuck between two walls, now you stuck
between a teacher busting your balls and stuck between a bad crowd that thinks you're a
hero.

98. exactly//So now/the teacher dis/dislikes you/and you know the teacher
99. dislikes you/'cause every time you walk into the classroom/she's looking
100. at you/waiting for you to say something/out of bounds/Really
101. quick/one little comment-/

Crosstalk

Noah: did that ever happen to you?
102. of course//
103. I used to be the class clown//

By segmenting the narrative into stanzas for a structural analysis, it is possible to build meaning as to why Axel asks for understanding at certain points of the narrative. These requests for understanding come in the stanzas where Axel is moving away from speaking in generalities to speak about his direct experience, particularly about moments

of challenge, confusion, and hurt. Axel starts off by saying that he currently attends “GED school” because he “did not finish high school because [he] was in the streets.” He is quick to engage in self-blame, saying in this first stanza that during this time he “cared more about money than anything else” but tempers this divulged shortcoming with the follow-up that he “felt [he] had, like, responsibility to help [his] mother when—during [his] father’s absence.”

Axel then moves to the second stanza, which does the work of explaining that his father was incarcerated during a critical time in his adolescence. In this, he is orienting us, his audience, towards the context of his life decisions, explaining the situation that lead to his choices. He speaks in generalities, explaining to his audience that:

the fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen- those years are the most important of a kid’s life. And not having both your parents there really can, um, take a toll on the mind as far as answering questions that are not able to be answered.

Axel then shifts from generalities in the third and fourth stanzas to share the unanswerable questions that have caused him pain. He shares that his mother did not tell him that his father was incarcerated, that she tried to hide it from him. He was able to figure out that his father was not in the Dominican Republic, as his mother said, but was incarcerated because of the times that his father would call, and the “funny number” that would come up on the caller ID on the phone. Axel is recalling a painful time, as evidenced by the fact that he stumbles over the word ‘incarcerated’ in the second stanza, and then in the third stanza when orienting us he says that this was “when my father lea—[left], when at first my father was incarcerated, at first I didn’t know he was incarcerated.” It is here, during the sharing of a painful situation, that Axel first asks his audience for understanding, asking ‘you know?’ twice in stanza three, and ‘you know’

and ‘you understand?’ one time each in the fourth stanza. In the fourth stanza, Axel directly states that he was hurt by the fact that his parents did not tell him about his father’s incarceration, saying of his mother that “she didn’t want me to know, until I found out through my cousin. So that hurt me even more because I felt like my parents were keeping things from me that, you know, I should be able to know.”

Having oriented us to this emotional pain and challenging family situation, Axel now turns to his actions during these years. Stanza five focuses on the idea that Axel felt that he had a responsibility to take care of himself and his mother. He did not want her to have to spend her hard-earned money on buying things for him, so he wanted to earn money too. Here, he says:

my mom is working at a job that pays at least five hundred a week, I should be able to bring in some type of money too, myself. And, you know, not mainly towards her but like to keep her from buying stuff for me, you understand? Like, the necessities, clothing and all that.

Again, in speaking about his own experience during this challenging time, Axel asks for understanding with ‘you know’ and ‘you understand?’ in the fifth stanza. He then moves in the next stanza, stanza six, to explain that he picked up negative habits because he did not have the proper guidance. He shares that he was “cutting school, smoking weed” because “I didn’t know any better, I was learning on my own” and “It’s not like I had, my father had to tell me that he’s been there and done that and it’s no good for you, you know?” Again, as this is about his direct experience during a difficult time, Axel asks his audience ‘you know?’ twice in this stanza.

In stanza seven, Axel says more about what he was doing when he was not in school, and he wants his audience to know that he will never be proud of what he did. He describes “living for the moment,” thinking only of girls, money, and friends, that he

robbed and dealt drugs, smoked “weed, smoked cigarettes at such a young age.” Here, after cataloging some of self-described transgressions, he describes himself as a “really confused, very confused kid.” Then, in the next two stanzas, stanzas eight and nine, Axel delves more deeply into the subject of school, which he has at this point only referenced briefly in the first, sixth, and seventh stanzas. The first seven stanzas have been prologue to a rendering of his ‘front’ in school, a giving of context to help his audience understand why he had acted the way he did in school, and why he ultimately felt that he had to leave school. These are the stanzas discussed in the previous section, the space where Axel describes every teenager “putting up a front.” School is a “little jungle” where everyone has a role to play, and “nobody knows you until you have a conversation about the real deal.” In stanzas eight and nine, Axel says ‘you know’ and asks ‘you understand?’ two times each, again demonstrating his desire for understanding.

In stanza ten, the final stanza of this narrative, Axel states that the teachers did not get it, that they did not have a conversation about the ‘real deal’ with him. This is the space, discussed in the previous section, where Axel says that teachers should not be quick to kick a student out of class, that this leads others to “look at him like he’s the bad seed.” Teachers have not understood Axel and why he, by his own account, sometimes acted out in class by being the “class clown” or cursing.

Now, who is the primary audience for Axel’s narrative? I suggest that Axel is primarily speaking to me, as a representative of teachers, as well as to his peers who are present. In the tenth and final stanza, Axel says “I know that you probably— teachers mostly can’t compare to us” but that teachers should “get a better understanding instead of, you know, as soon as a kid disrupts the class, don’t kick him out as as soon as like,

[snaps fingers] like that.” Axel first knew me in the role of literacy coach at his GED center, and this narrative was shared during one of his first sessions with the Men’s Group. I read this as Axel speaking directly to me when recounting this narrative to me and the other members of the Men’s Group, and suddenly becoming cognizant of the fact that I might take offense when he is castigating teachers as being quick to judge or remove a student from the classroom. Axel quickly shifts from “you probably” to “teachers mostly,” perhaps wanting to add some nuance to spare my potentially hurt feelings.

QUICK TO (BE) JUDGE(D)

At the close of this first narrative, I asked Axel to share an example of a teacher being quick to judge him, and he launched into a story about the time he was kicked out of class and did not know why. The essence of the narrative, shown here and similarly rendered as a data display, is that Axel had been absent and did not know that there were new assigned seats, and that he was yelled at and then kicked out of class for sitting in his old assigned seat and talking back when he was told to move.

Axel’s Narrative: The Time I Got Kicked Out and I Didn’t Know Why

Stanza One: How I Would Come Into Math Class

1. alright/math class/uum/yeah this is math class third period/th/this is the
2. period I walk into//
3. we’re at Columbia high school/an old lady/you know I always had my
4. respect for her or whatever/but there would be times where I would walk
5. in the classroom and put my headphones on and just bump to music and
6. not even give a fuck whatever she’s saying//
7. I’ll come/I’ll come so high that/it’d be like/I’m just gonna put my head
8. down//
9. And then when she was trying to speak to me I was like ‘shut the fuck up
10. Miss/What are you talking about?’//
11. *you understand?/*

Stanza Two: I Wanted Attention

12. And I understand/I was the disrespectful one/but/ it was more a cry of
 13. attention//
 14. I wanted attention/But/stil-/but I was calling it in a negative way/hoping
 15. I would get something in a positive way//
 16. More/like/I'm hoping she would say/I/I would like for you to stay after class//
 17. I would like to speak to yo/*you know*' 'cause you seem like a bright
 18. student//
 19. Why can't you tell me I'm a bright student?/Even if I'm not a bright
 20. student/ even if I only get 40s on your test/why can't you tell me I'm a
 21. bright student?//

José: most teachers don't even care, 'cause after 3 o'clock they don't have to deal with your shit no more, they can just go out to their suburb and live in their little town country house and relax for a good eight hours, nine, ten hours, and they go ahead and deal with your shit again the next morning. But at the end of the day, she won't care, 'cause—

(9:13)Stanza Three: The Seat I Think is My Seat

22. this one day I remember I walk in/to the class and I was talking to some
 23. girl/some girl named Jessica/And—/
 Dante: it always starts off that way.
 24. no no no/this is funny though/because she sits next to the door/
 25. right?/Where I sit is the third row to the door/so she sits here I sit here//
 26. So I'm walking/she changed the/um/ class seats/But I didn't know this//
 27. She changed the seats the day before/and I came late the day before/So
 28. I didn't know about no seat changing//
 29. So I walk in/I say hi to Jessica/like 'what's up, baby'/you know/acting like
 30. me/She was like 'Axel, hurry up and get to your seat'// 'oh ok Miss'/ I
 31. was like 'alright Miss/this day I'm feeling nice'/You know/like/alright
 32. miss/you don't have to rush me/alright/ I'm walking to my seat and
 33. she's just watching me/waiting for me to go to my seat//
 34. So I sit down in the seat that I think is my seat//
 35. as soon as I sit down she says 'get out/' I said 'what did I do? I just sat
 36. down I haven't even busted your balls yet/what did I do?'/ She said 'get
 37. out, I don't wanna see you here/get out/you're disrupting the class'//
 38. I was like 'alright'/I left/I went down to my guidance counselor/ I was like
 39. Mister this time I really didn't do anything/I don't know what
 40. happened//

(laughter)

Noah: (smiling) this time.

Stanza Four: Unfairly Called Out

41. so he goes/ this time/Yes//
 42. alright/he calls/she's like/oh/ he didn't sit in his assigned seat I gave the
 43. assigned seats yesterday/And I was like 'I wasn't here yesterday/How
 44. would I know?/Why couldn't you stop me in the beginning, when I was
 45. walking towards that seat and say hey/pulled me over to the side and
 46. say hey that's not your seat anymore/I assigned seats yesterday'/'Cause

47. trust me/if I'm a bad seed in the class/you're gonna know when and
48. when I'm not there//
49. So/*you understand what I'm saying?*/You know when and when not the
50. class clown is not there//

José: everyone knows when Axel is not there. He's the only one that disrupts the class or calls for your attention.

Noah: so what grade was this, Axel?

Stanza Five: These Teachers Don't Even Try to Understand

51. ninth/Ninth grade//

52. And/ it was so funny to me /cause I was like/ these teachers don't

53. understand anything about anybody/they don't even try-/

José: so it's safe to say by that point she was just com- she already gave up on you.

54. yes, she had already given up on me//

José: so she kinda had it out for you, too, 'cause she obviously saw you come in and was not stop you and bring it to your attention. She obviously don't give a fuck, she just wanted to do it on purpose.

55. Exactly//

José: so then, and at that level- she's not doing it professional-wise, she's taking it personal. Why would you bring your personal shit to your job?

Stanza Six: It Was Not Fair

56. and/and/so not only/when th-/when the teacher does that/ it relates to

57. what's happening in my house//

58. Why?/'Cause my mother doesn't wanna see me/I'm a piece of shit/I'm

59. not getting any good grades/every time I get home it's always yelling

60. yelling yelling/But when I get to school then I gotta deal with your

61. attitude because/ you don't know what's going on at home/Maybe it's a

62. day I wanted to be quiet/*you understand?*/Maybe today I just wanted to

63. shut the hell up and work//

Noah: but she already decided she knew-

64. Exactly//

65. She thought I was just gonna come in like a regular old Axel and/you

66. know/be a little disruptive/be the funny guy/'cause even though I'm the

67. funny guy sometimes/I still do my work//

68. I'll be the funny guy/ I'll disrupt the class/but I'll still do my work//

This narrative, too, is peppered with 'you know' and 'you understand?,' and analysis shows this narrative to convey emotional pain as a result of being misread within the social space of school. Axel recounts in stanza two:

I understand, I was the disrespectful one. But it was more a cry of attention. I wanted attention. But, still—, but I was calling it in a negative

way, hoping that I would get something in a positive way. More, like, I'm hoping she would say, "I, I would like for you to stay after class. I would like to speak to you," you know? "Cause you seem like a bright student." Why can't you tell me I'm a bright student? Even if I'm not a bright student, even if I only get 40s on your test, why can't you tell me I'm a bright student?

In the final lines here, Axel is speaking not to me or his peers, but to the teacher who is the villain of his "The Time I got Kicked Out and Didn't Know Why" narrative. Axel not only wants understanding; he wants to be a successful student, to be recognized as someone who has potential to excel academically. Towards the end of this narrative, he expresses that he is upset that the teachers think that they know who he is, and that "these teachers don't understand anything about anybody, they don't even try." For Axel, it might have been a day when he was going to "be quiet;" in school, he does not feel that he has this option. He feels that he is immediately positioned as the troublemaker.

In saying that his teachers don't "understand anything," Axel is growing more comfortable with sharing his thoughts about his past teachers with me, and is perhaps directing his comments at his peers at this point in the narrative. He is perhaps interacting with José, who a few moments prior interrupted the narrative to comment that

Most teachers don't even care, 'cause after 3 o'clock they don't have to deal with your shit no more, they can just go out to their suburb and live in their little town country house and relax for a good eight hours, nine, ten hours, and they go ahead and deal with your shit again the next morning...at the end of the day, she won't care.

Axel's narratives here, as well as the comment by José, show a belief that teachers do not understand young men like them, and that young men like them are bound to be misread within the social space of school.

A DIFFERENT AUDIENCE

Now, twenty-five minutes later during this session of the Men's Group, Axel told the story of why he came to leave school again, this time to the video camera. This was done in preparation for the short film clip that, as mentioned earlier, served as the introduction to the Critical Race Studies in Education conference presentation and workshop that the Men's Group was preparing for at the time. Here is this third narrative, similarly rendered as a data display:

Axel's Narrative for the Critical Race Studies Conference

Strophe One: Hardship

Stanza One: Every Latino has a Different Story

1. um/it's rough because/you know/every Latino has a different story to
2. tell/every Latino has a different problem/Every Latino has a certain pride/
3. *you know*/things like that//
4. So it's hard for a Latino man/

Stanza Two: We were left Alone

5. because for me/for example/um/at the age of fourteen my father got
6. locked up/um/so I was/we were/ sort of left alone for quite a while/ two
7. and a half years//

Stanza three: Becoming a man Alone

8. and I'm not trying to knock my father/he was/he is a good father/always
9. has always will be/but he had missed an important three years of my life
10. where you know/the transition of a boy to a man starts to occur/and/ I
11. felt though/well/not that I felt/ I went through the process of becoming
12. a man/alone//
13. learning my mistakes on my own/and not having the best advice next to
14. you or the person that knows you best to/to speak to you so you can
15. understand/*you understand?*

Strophe Two: The Streets

Stanza four: I Hit the Streets Hard (I wanted to be like Everything I Saw)

16. so/at the age of fourteen I started cutting school/I wasn't doing that goo-
17. I passed ninth grade/probably by like that much/and it was like/ I hit the
18. streets hard//
19. I wanted to be like everything that I saw with my own eyes/yo like/what

20. you see with your own eyes in your own house and outside/ is that's
21. what you learn with the most//

Stanza Five: Why I Was in the Streets and not School

22. And that's/since I didn't have my father there it was like/whatever I saw
23. that's what I wanted to do//
24. And I put myself in the streets/You know/I thought why be in school
25. when I can make this hundred and forty dollars today/because in one
26. day/two hundred dollars/Like/ there's some jobs that don't even give
27. you that/A lot of jobs don't give you that/In a day/you know?/So it's
28. easy to fall into that// 14 years old/selling weed/

Stanza Five: Gateway to Selling Other Drugs

29. But then/like/you see how for drug addicts/people say that weed is a
30. gateway for the drug addicts to get to new ones?/Well/weed is a
31. gateway to sell other drugs//
32. *Understand?*/'Cause once you start seeing/'I'm tired of making tens and
33. twenties/I wanna make fifties/I wanna make hundreds'/so they you
34. start making from two hundred dollars a day to like two thousand
35. dollars a day/ three thousand dollars a day/Selling drugs/More powerful
36. drugs of course/more dangerous drugs/drugs that you can get locked up
37. for a long time/And I was fourteen years old/starting off like that//

Strophe Three: The Toll it Took

Stanza Six: Wasting Money

38. And I wasn't the smartest one/ because/you know/I was fourteen I
39. didn't know how to save money//
40. I would swear that/you know/hey money's money/it'll come back to me
41. tomorrow/*You understand*/and I would go out/you know/just waste my
42. money//

Stanza Seven: Unanswered Questions

43. it took a toll on me for those /for those two three years/because I had so
44. many questions unanswered//
45. So many that I didn't know how to/I didn't know how to/I didn't know
46. who to ask/I didn't know who to speak to/I was just all about the
47. money//
48. And-

Stanza Eight: Hiding Emotions Because Everyone is Out for Themselves

49. but in my mind/I knew that I was making myself si-/mentally sick//
50. Because when you have all those problems in/ throbbing in your
51. mind/it's like-/the only way I used to get those problems out was I used
52. to drink//
53. I used to turn to drinking to/to let out my real emotion/ I never used to

54. show my emotions to anybody/'Cause/ in the drug game/when you
55. show emotions it's a weakness/*You understand?*/
56. So I never had somebody close to me/well/I had somebody but I never
57. thought I had them//
58. Let me rephrase that/I thought I didn't have nobody but I really did/I put
59. that in my own mind/I thought everybody was an addict/I thought
60. everybody was out to get theirs/And/growing up/like I said/it's like that/
61. *you know?*/

Strophe Four: Lessons and Reflections

Stanza Nine: Everybody has a Front (So Be an Outsider)

62. Then you go into school/and it's like everybody puts up a
63. front/everybody does/everybody has their own personality/you
64. know/they/not so much themselves/but that's who'll they'll be for that
65. moment in time//
66. It's everybody/me too/'Cause you wanna fit in/you know/you don't
67. wanna be that kid that/ the outsider/nobody wants to be the
68. outsider/But/my best advice right now is the best thing is to be the
69. outsider//
70. cause you're not in no trouble when you're the outsider/You're not into
71. stupid things/you know?

James: word. Separate yourself from others.

72. Yeah/Separating yourself from others is really good//

José: so you judged by teachers to then fall into the wrong path.

Stanza Ten: The Teachers Knew

73. Exactly/And/the worst thing for me was that/more or less my teachers
74. knew what I was doing/'cause you could tell sometimes/I would/I would
75. come into school/and I would be the most tiredest person in
76. school/Everybody else would say/yeah they're tired/but then they get to
77. class on time/I'll be the kid that's just walking really slow/I'm not used to
78. being up at that time//
79. I'm/when everybody's waking up for school/I'm just going to sleep//

Stanza Eleven: Why I Did It

80. So it'd be really rare that I'd make it to school/and teachers would see
81. me in and um/'Axel what do you do? What is wrong with you?' *You*
82. *know*/ don't get me wrong/there are teachers that do ask/You know?/
83. I've had a couple/ And I tell them/I support my family/I try to support my
84. family//

The intended audience for this narrative was the conference-goers, and it was shared while we were talking about how schools and teachers could better help young men of

color to find their callings and resist the vibrations. There are changes to Axel's earlier narrative about how and why he stopped going to school when he recounts it for this intended audience; he contours it to speak to our conversation. The narrative becomes more a coming-of-age story than a critique of teachers for their inability to understand his life, perhaps due to the fact that Axel was aware that there would be many teachers and professors in the audience. In the first version of the narrative, Axel positions himself as the object of family hardship and teacher harshness; in the second, he is an active participant engaged in his and his family's survival.

In the first stanza of this narrative, Axel identifies himself as a Latino, and maintains that "every Latino has a different story to tell, every Latino has a different problem...so it's hard for a Latino man." He is orienting his audience to the idea that this narrative will be about an individual Latino man's travails, and that these travails are indicative in some sense of Latino struggles. Speaking as a member of a group, he shifts to his own individual experience in the second stanza, saying that "for me, for example, at the age of fourteen my father got locked up" and that he and his mother were "sort of left alone for a while, two and a half years." In the third stanza, Axel starts to discuss the burden of trying to become a man alone, without his father. Here is where Axel first asks for understanding in this narrative, saying "I went through the process of becoming a man alone. Learning my mistakes on my own, and not having the best advice next to you or the person that knows you best to, to speak to you so you can understand, you understand?"

It is at this point that Axel moves to what I consider to be the next strophe, or collection of stanzas, now focusing on the experience of the streets. In stanza four, he

asserts that “at the age of fourteen [he] started cutting school” and that he “hit the streets hard.” Axel declares “I wanted to be like everything that I saw with my own eyes.” Then, as if imagining that the conference-going audience might read him as lazy, uninterested in learning or unable to be educated, as per the negative dominant discourse about young men of color, Axel has the next stanza do the work of explaining why he was in the streets as opposed to in school. He says:

Since I didn't have my father there it was like, whatever I saw I wanted to do. And I put myself in the streets, you know, I thought why be in school when I can make this hundred and forty dollars today. Because in one day, two hundred dollars, like- there's some jobs that don't even give you that, in a day, you know? So it's easy to fall into that, fourteen years old, selling weed.

Here, Axel both says ‘you know’ and asks ‘you know?’ to his imagined audience. Again, he is asking for understanding, wanting his imagined audience to delay judgment until they know his story and why he is spending time on the streets instead of being in school.

Axel then draws on the discourse of drug addiction, comparing his selling of more expensive drugs to the notion of a drug-user seeking a more powerful high. He maintains that selling marijuana became

a gateway to sell other drugs. Understand? ‘Cause once you start saying, ‘I'm tired of making tens and twenties, I wanna make fifties, I wanna make hundreds,’ so then you start making from two hundred dollars a day to like two thousand dollars a day, selling drugs. More powerful drugs, of course. More dangerous drugs. Drugs that can get you locked up for a long, long time. And I was fourteen years old, starting off like that.

Axel is asking his audience to understand that he was only fourteen at the time, that he started off innocently enough, that the move from selling marijuana to more “powerful” and “dangerous” drugs happened because the initial step was a gateway. In a sense, Axel is asking his audience to have the same compassion as we might have with someone who

is chemically dependent, that he is a 'good kid' who became swept up in something beyond his control. He is moving his audience from an understanding of the challenges that young men of color face to his missing a role model to help him to overcome challenges, and then showing how he became caught up in drug dealing involving higher and higher stakes. In all of this, he is sharing this narrative in an effort to ward off the negative dominant discourse, the stereotype of a young man of color as intrinsically uneducated and unable to become educated, interested more in the lure of the street than academic learning.

At this point in the narrative, Axel begins what I consider to be a new strophe: he moves from describing his activities in the streets to describing the toll they took on him. In stanzas six and seven, he talks about how he wasted money, and suggests that he was simply acting out his pain on the street because of the unanswered family questions regarding his father's incarceration. In stanza eight, he goes into more detail about his emotional pain, saying that he was forced to hide his feelings and that he did not believe that he had any real support at the time. He says:

In my mind, I knew that I was making myself si-, mentally sick. Because when you have all those problems in, throbbing in your mind, it's like- the only way I used to get those problems out was I used to drink. I used to turn to my drinking to let out my real emotion. I never used to show my emotions to anybody. 'Cause in the drug game, when you show emotions it's a weakness, you understand?...I thought everybody was an addict, I thought that everybody was out to get theirs. And, growing up, like I said, it's like that, you know?

Axel asks his audience for understanding twice here, wanting them to understand the pain that he was going through and the experiences behind what he now views as mistakes in his past.

Axel now begins what I consider to be the fourth and final strophe, focusing on his hard-learned lessons from all of these experiences. This is where, as explored in the previous section, Axel suggests that it is best to be the outsider. He says in stanza nine that when you go to school, “everybody puts up a front,” that “everybody has their own personality, you know, they, not so much themselves, but that’s who they’ll be for that moment in time.” He says that he now believes that it is best for a young man to separate himself from as much of this as possible, to accept being the outsider rather than trying to play one of the established roles within the social space of school.

In the final stanzas, stanzas ten and eleven, Axel does not end with a theme of the teachers not “getting it,” understanding him or even trying to understand him, as asserted in the final stanza of the earlier version of the narrative of why he left school. That narrative, told with me and his peers in the Men’s Group as the intended audience, closed with frustrations about how the teachers were so quick to judge and remove ‘troublesome’ students from the classroom. This narrative, intended for the conference-goers, ends with the assertion that his teachers knew what was going on in his life when he was missing many days of school and dealing drugs. Axel says in the final two stanzas that

The worst thing for me was that, more or less, my teachers knew what I was doing. ‘Cause you could tell sometimes. I would, I would come into school and I would be the most tired person in school. Everybody else would say, yeah, they’re tired, but then they get to class on time. I’ll be that kid that’s just walking really slow. I’m not used to being up at that time. I’m- when everybody’s waking up for school, I’m just going to sleep.

His coda to the narrative is:

So it’d be really rare that I’d make it to school, and teachers would see me in, and, um, ‘Axel, what do you do? What is wrong with you?’ You know?

Don't get me wrong, there are teachers that do ask, you know? I've had a couple. And I tell them 'I support my family. I try to support my family.'

The contrast between the two endings is that in the first rendition of the narrative, teachers were at fault for not trying to understand or being patient enough with Axel and others, and in the second rendition, the teachers are aware of Axel's actions but just do not seem to care enough to really try to do anything to help him. Axel justifies his actions by saying that he has engaged these activities as a means of supporting his family.

What to make of this difference between the two tellings? Elliott Mishler (1999) argues that each retelling of a narrative is a new narrative, an "intent [on the part for narrators] to present themselves in a particular way and give a sensible account of their experience" to fit the context and audience (Mishler, 1999, 23). How might the difference between the two tellings relate to the fact that Axel tells these narratives with different audiences in mind? The first rendition focuses more on his emotional experience and pain from those years, an analysis bolstered by the fact that he asks for understanding through direct appeals to his audience through 'you know?' or 'you understand?'" almost twice as many times in the first telling. In this version, he is the object of family hardship, acted upon and having few options. His teachers' harsh behavior and indifference only compound the limits to his agency. The second telling or narrative focuses more on a description of the world as a cruel world, a hostile place for young men like Axel. The 'villains' of the first telling are the teachers who do not understand and do not try to understand; the 'villains' of the second telling are the cruel world of streets and teachers who know about Axel's activities but do not provide support beyond half-hearted questions. In this second version, Axel was simply doing what was necessary for survival: he is an agent in a cruel world, fighting for survival.

I argue that the differences in the narrative endings stem from the fact that Axel feels comfortable asking for the understanding that he desires in the space of the Men's Group, but that he feels the need to shift the narrative when speaking to a large group of new people. My analysis suggests that Axel does not believe that he will get understanding from the conference-goers, and he makes the narrative of why he left high school more of a coming-of-age story for this audience. He does structure the story to ward off perceptions of his being uninterested in education or a 'bad kid,' as shown above, but he closes by suggesting that he lives in a cruel world where not even teachers who know what is going on in his life really care. He defends his actions by saying that he has undertaken them to try to support his family, and says that he was driven to street activities because he did not have the proper guidance. In a sense, Axel puts on more of a 'front' with this larger and unknown audience, as might be expected. The version of the narrative told to me and his peers in the Men's Group is more focused on his direct experience and emotional pain, and includes many more requests for understanding through appeals of 'you know?' or 'you understand?'

Though Axel was new to the Men's Group during the focus group session where he relayed the narratives relayed here, this difference between the two renditions of why he left school suggest that he feels that he can ask for, and receive, understanding within the space of the Men's Group. This is a potential site of solidarity, a space where he can experience support from other young men of color who are similarly negotiating what it means to be a young man of color.

At the heart of many of these young men's narratives, they—like Axel—want to be understood. To be understood, practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers must

engage in a radical listening-with, a deep analysis of the negotiated-identity work that learners like Axel are doing when faced with negative dominant discourses. They are navigating the negative dominant discourses that malign them as lazy, uneducated and unable to become educated, or completely uninterested in formal learning. In an effort to foster the sort of understanding that young men like Axel crave, the next two chapters show in greater detail how two young men attempt to reposition themselves and renegotiate their identities through separation from group identity. These two young men are Elijah, the twenty-year old Black young man originally from Staten Island but living in the South Bronx while attending The Opportunity Center, a once-in-a-while participant of the Men's Group; and James, the twenty-year-old Black young man from the Bensonhurst neighborhood in Brooklyn, the most regular participant of the Men's Group. Analyzing their narratives in depth demonstrates the ways in which both of these young men struggle with the weight of these dominant discourses and accompanying positioning practices as well as their individual "separating from the group" strategies. These are the strategies that they employ to try to navigate the negative discourses to achieve their personal goals.

CHAPTER SIX:

TENSIONS BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND INDIVIDUAL MERIT

“YOU’LL NEVER GUESS WHO I SAW”

It was a ‘predictor day’ at The Opportunity Center. This meant that eligible students could take a shortened GED practice test that would determine whether or not they could sit for the real exam. As the teachers were proctoring or working one-on-one with students, I spent part of the morning in my office helping a young woman named Sheena with her resume. We’d started on it weeks earlier during a free period, and during that time Sheena had voiced much about her challenges managing her diabetes, and how she missed her twin brother who is imprisoned in Virginia. She’d asked that morning if we could finish her resume as she wasn’t taking the predictor test and there wasn’t much going on in her classes.

Sheena and I were heading back upstairs, after an hour of revising and adding ‘action words’ to her work role descriptions on her resume. We ran into Mr. James, the assistant principal, who let me know that Tyriek had just come into the building. I told Sheena we’d print a few copies of her resume later in the day, and bounded up the stairs. I saw Tyriek in Ms. Davies’ class and asked if I could speak with him in the hallway. He returned a smile and came into the hallway, giving me a big hug.

All he would say was that he had had to work— he was now a salesman working for the Cutco knife company. His court appointment had gone fine, and he said he would be back from now on. He’d give me his new contact information, and reported that he had just gotten in touch with Dr. Bridges, the postdoctoral fellow at Teachers College

he'd met at the Young Men's Leadership Conference. He was eager to begin reading the books that Dr. Bridges had suggested.

I told Tyriek about the Free Minds, Free People conference happening in Providence, Rhode Island in several weeks. At the conference, several of the young men and I were planning to present a pilot project for both our YPAR project and my dissertation research. I told him that the small grant I had received would cover another person's attendance, and he said that he would very much like to join.

The next time we spoke, Tyriek shared more about what has been going on in his life. He spoke of mandatory drug testing, visits to his parole officer, jumping turnstiles to get to school, and the need to work to help cover his family's expenses. His job selling knives was a way to earn money and explore an emerging interest in the culinary arts. He voiced a strong desire to read things that will make him think, and said that he wanted to start coming regularly to The Opportunity Center.

Over the next few days, I spent a lot of time on the phone with Tyriek's mother and parole officer, arranging for Tyriek to gain permission to attend an out-of-state conference. After hearing about the Men's Group, the parole officer agreed that this would be a good experience for him. His mandatory drug-testing schedule would have to be changed that week, but it could be done. And then I received a phone call from the parole officer the next day.

Tyriek had been picked up for something, a violation that had nothing to do with his original case. The parole officer could not tell me anything more than the fact that he would not be attending the conference. His mother didn't know what had happened, only that he had been picked up for something.

Months later, during the following school year, Dmitri, Tyriek's former guidance counselor stopped me in the hallway. Dmitri worked as a roaming counselor, and his work brought him to the educational programs on Riker's Island run by the Alternative Education district. He said I'd never guess who he'd run into when at Riker's Island earlier that week.

I don't know what happened or how Tyriek is doing. I don't know what kind of community of support could have lead to a different outcome.

ELIJAH AND THE DOUBLE-BIND

...there's a way. Even though it's gonna be hard and the door may be closed. But there's still that window that's open. It may be hard to get to the window, but you can get there.
-Elijah, age 20

When I first met Elijah, a twenty-year old Black young man originally from Staten Island, he immediately impressed me: he exuded self-confidence and made statements like the one above, suggesting that his drive and determination would give him the resilience to overcome any and all obstacles and pave a pathway to success. We met when he transferred to The Opportunity Center from the Bronx Unified GED Central Center, where he had studied for a year before being deemed ready for GED-level preparation work. He had been living in the South Bronx for roughly one year at that point, and was commuting to Midtown Manhattan to complete his path to the secondary credential. He often voiced that he would soon accomplish his goal of earning the GED and then immediately begin the college track. I introduced him to the other young men in the Men's Group, and invited him to join us after school, which he did, sporadically.

In my years of secondary-level teaching and speaking with adolescent learners, I was often impressed by statements similar to Elijah's comment that if the door is not

open, then one must go through the window. I had heard them often from my students, and was often perplexed when these professed statements of determination were not matched with regular attendance or academic accomplishment. At the beginning of this study, if I had to guess which of the young men in the Men's Group would achieve short-term academic success and embark upon a viable post-secondary path, I would have guessed Elijah. Though a surface-level reading of his narratives suggests something along the lines of the Horatio Alger myth of "pulling himself up by his bootstraps," deeper analysis of Elijah's narratives suggests that Elijah is caught in a double-bind, and that he is latching onto the myth of the meritocracy and discourses of self-determinism and overcoming as a lifeline.

Elijah's double-bind is that he craves support through belonging, but the space that served as a communal and supportive group identity early on in his high school career has been taken away from him. Without this space, he finds it difficult to achieve academic success, and he is pushed out of Curtis High School, the large traditional high school where he studied in Staten Island. Analysis of his narratives suggests that his response to being pushed out, and to negative discourses that castigate him as lazy, uneducated, and unable to become educated is to position himself as 'other' to that group. Without a space for collective belonging and identifying, Elijah attempts to separate himself from what he perceives as a negative group identity through his use of the discourse of individual responsibility, and, at times, refutes any notion of group belonging. The peer group that Elijah references is one characterized by self-imposed limitations, and occupies a figured world of entitlement and contentment. In short, the notion of group identity has been sullied by discourses of merit and blame. Without

collective support and identifying, Elijah draws on the discourse of meritocracy as his lifeline, voicing that he has the determination and drive that others in the group lack.

“THERE’S NO TEAM IN SCHOOL”

The space that afforded Elijah a collective belonging and identifying was the football team at his high school, Curtis High, in Staten Island. When I asked Elijah to share how he had come to be a GED student, he began to describe his motivation to do well in high school. To stay on the team, he and the other players had to have a certain grade point average. He shares “it’s basically, that was like, stay having my grades stay at a certain level to stay on the football team, that’s what made me go to school more...I was more motivated at the time...and once I got kicked off the team, I wasn’t as motivated as I was.” Losing his spot on the football team when he was injured led to a shift in his identity with the social spaces of formal education. Elijah recounts:

I had the football injury, so I came back off the football injury. They basically didn’t want me on the team no more, so I had to retry out for the team and like, I wasn’t as good as I was from the injury. So it was basically like we can no longer use you on the team. So, only thing that’s left open is to become a water boy and you don’t wanna become a water boy.

Losing this identity, and the figured world of identity as a football player, was a major loss for Elijah. When I asked him how he felt when playing football, he tilted his head back and smiled, exclaiming “all the problems in the world is just off your mind...best feeling ever.” Beyond this feeling, Elijah’s participation in football offered a social location and membership in a group identity, positionings in the social space of school that carried with them both social and academic support. Being injured and forced to give up his spot on the team was a demotion for Elijah; the only way to continue an

association with the team was as a water boy, which Elijah deemed a lower status than that of a former player.

When I asked Elijah if playing football made him feel powerful, Elijah relayed a narrative comparing his experiences and understandings of the figured world of football and the figured world of school. Early on in my analysis of Elijah's narratives, I noted that Elijah often speaks in the second person, an attribute that will be analyzed in what follows. Here, in the following narrative, I was struck by the shifts between the first and second person, as well as the shifts between individual and collective experience:

Elijah's Football vs. School Comparison Story

Stanza One: Football was a Team Effort

1. Football just made *you*/like football was fun/ like/ it made *me* just have fun/ it was just
2. fun/ *I* loved the sport/ *I* loved playing the game/ and every time *I'm* out there *I'm*
3. having fun/ *I'm* with a group of my friends/*we* all playing the same team sport/ and *we*
4. all have the same attitude as *we* wanna win/ *we* gonna help each other win//
5. so it's basically like a team effort/

Stanza Two: There's No Team In School (It's All on You)

6. but like/when *you* like *you* in school/ it's like/ there's really no team/ it's just really
7. based on *you*/ like the majority of people that's in school don't wanna get their
8. education/ *they* don't wanna get even be there/ *they* wanna party all the time//
9. so it's easier to fall in that/ and people that do wanna do their work and go to school
10. *they* really don't talk to nobody/ *they* really keep to themselves//

Stanza Three: People Get Sidetracked Because of the Group

11. so it's harder to make a group of people that wanna go to school/than it is to make a
12. group of people that don't wanna go to school//
13. so that's where a lot of people get/ that's where a lot of people get sidetracked then//

The shifts between the first and second person, and the shifts between the individual and collective, say much about where Elijah has a figured world of identity built from his own experience. Analysis of these shifts shows where Elijah feels

connected with his individual identity, with group identity, and where he speaks in the voice of others, referring to himself in the second person.

In the first stanza, which I label “Football was a Team Effort,” Elijah begins in line one with ‘you’ before shifting to ‘me,’ saying “Football just made *you*, like, football was fun, like, it made *me* just have fun. Though Elijah often speaks in the second person, at times referring to himself as will be explored in what follows, I argue that Elijah shifts from ‘you’ to ‘me’ when speaking about football here because this activity provides/provided a powerful direct experience for him, and engendered positive identification and a figured world where he had agency. In lines two and three, he speaks about football exclusively in the first person, saying “*I* loved the sport, *I* loved the game, and every time *I’m* out there *I’m* having fun, *I’m* with a group of my friends.” In line three, he starts to speak in a collective voice, saying “*we* all have the same attitude as *we* wanna win, *we* gonna help each other win,” describing football as “basically like a team effort” in line five.

Contrast this with the next stanza, which I entitle “There’s No Team In School (It’s All on You).” When speaking about school, Elijah immediately shifts back into speaking in the second person. He says in lines six and seven that “when *you*, like, *you* in school, it’s like, there’s really no team, it’s just really based on *you*.” I argue that Elijah does not have a desirable and positive identity born of his own experience within the social space of school; he often refers to himself from someone else’s perspective. I suggest that the ‘you’ in Elijah’s narrative here is the voice of an authority figure, a parent, teacher, or perhaps guidance counselor. Elijah reproduces this sense of himself as

an authority figure might see him; it is as if he is voicing an authority figure's words. In short, there is a dialogical relationship between his words and the authority figure's.

In line eight of the second stanza, Elijah shifts from 'you' to 'they.' Here, he is locating the 'problem' of school, which is that the "majority of people that's in school don't want to get their education." Elijah separates himself from this group, positioning this group as 'they.' It is this group of students, the majority, who are the locus of the problem; "*they* don't wanna even be there; *they* wanna party all the time." Then, in lines nine and ten, Elijah begins to speak of two sorts of students in the third person. He contrasts this "majority of people" with "people that do wanna do their work and go to school, *they* really don't talk to nobody, *they* really keep to themselves." Both of these sorts of people are 'they,' Elijah is not speaking from the first person and is, in a sense, separating himself from them, perhaps because he is voicing an authority figure's point of view.

In the third stanza, which I entitle "People Get Sidetracked Because of the Group," Elijah maintains that this lack of positive group support leads to many people getting 'sidetracked' in school. He says in lines eleven and twelve "so it's harder to make a group of people that wanna go to school than it is to make a group of people that don't wanna go to school. So that's where a lot of people get, that's where a lot of people get sidetracked then." The fault with school lies with this group: because of these other learners who do not take school seriously, school is all on the individual. There is no 'team' in school because the majority of the learners don't want to go to school. The locus of the blame for the challenges of formal education is, for Elijah, his peer group, or at least the majority of them.

The use of the second person, the ‘you,’ that emerges when Elijah speaks about schooling and other spaces demonstrates that Elijah does not feel connected with the person he is positioned to be in these sites. ‘You’ is deictic, that is, it is a word that only conveys meaning based on information yielded from context. Exploring how Elijah uses ‘you’ adds much to analysis of both his understandings of self and his complex relationship with group-based identity. There are times when Elijah uses ‘you’ to refer to himself and his own experience; the ‘you’ here can be understood as an ‘I.’ Other times, it is clear that Elijah’s use of the second person refers to a universal or generalized ‘you.’ At other times in Elijah’s narratives, ‘you’ denotes a specific person or someone in a specific role, such as a guidance counselor or police officer. These uses of ‘you’ will be explored in the analysis of narratives that follows. What is most interesting to the conversations/discussions raised in this research are the times when the ‘you’ is referring to himself, or to himself and other youth. When Elijah uses the second person in this way, I argue that he is giving voice to how others view and position him and other young men of color. This gaze, imbued with the negative dominant discourses about what it means to be a young man of color, fuels Elijah’s desire to differentiate himself from the group, primarily through his latching on to discourses of merit, value, and deservingness that require him to face structured inequities as an individual with little to no support.

TENSIONS BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FIGURED WORLDS OF SCHOOL

Though there are, at times, traces of frustration with systemic roadblocks to success within the educational system, Elijah’s stories often circle back to the theme of individual responsibility. His narratives highlight obstacles he has faced and is currently facing, but, as the protagonist, he returns in his narratives to the notion that he and any

other individual has the potential to rise above and achieve no matter the odds. He shares that he has “never been a person to give up. If it’s a challenge, [he] gotta overcome it.” These tales of overcoming evidence a complex interplay between discourses of personal responsibility and ‘entitlement,’ as well as his own analyses of structured inequity. Further, this interplay complicates his voiced desire for solidarity and support in challenging this inequity.

Immediately following his statement that he has “never been a person to give up. If it’s a challenge, [he] gotta overcome it,” I asked Elijah why education is important to him, and what motivated him to return to secondary-level formal education after six months of being out of Curtis High. He replied that he is seeking his GED because there is something specific he has to ‘overcome.’ He exclaims:

To me, I feel like it’s a challenge. A lot of people, a lot of people that I know don’t have their GEDs that’s my age. So I see like there’s a challenge I have to overcome. I have to be— I don’t wanna be a statistic.

Note that Elijah switches here from what he ‘has to be’ to what he ‘does not want to be.’ Elijah is trying to live his life in opposition to the negative prevalent expectations of him. Not being a ‘statistic’ is extremely important to Elijah. He has adopted this term from a popular dictum in his community: “don’t be a statistic,” a piece of advice which serves to caution young men of color from becoming yet another man of color who is incarcerated, unemployed, or killed through street violence.

Yet Elijah does not connect the word ‘statistic’ to his mathematical understanding of ‘statistic.’ When I asked him what it means to be a statistic, he responded with notions of a stereotype or negative assumptions about Black men. He shared that what being a statistic, for him, means is:

to be a Black male, unemployed, have no job, that's basically a statistic of a Black male. And to like, basically commit crimes and stuff. That's not, like, how I wanna live.

Elijah is stating, overtly, that he wants to resist this (unfortunately) prevalent notion of what it is to be a Black man. In resisting this 'statistic' of Black men, Elijah draws on the discourse of personal responsibility and meritocracy as a means of differentiating himself from the group of young Black men who he believes fit the negative stereotype. I asked Elijah to share how he is different from the 'statistic,' to share how he has resisted and challenged the deficit framings he had been referring to and he replied:

My story would be— even after all the troubles, I went through school. I didn't even thought about giving up on school. I'm still here. I'm still trying my hardest and my best to pass, and to get it over with, to go to college and make something better of myself. That should let everybody know there, like, I'm not a statistic. *I'm not just gonna live off welfare for the rest of my life. I want better.*

This response evidences two figured worlds of identity at work, and the tensions between the two. The first figured world, is that of those who are 'statistics;' people who give up on school and do not want to strive or accomplish anything. The people who inhabit this figured world are content to "live off welfare," which I term the figured world of (supposed) 'entitlement.' It is ironic that Elijah terms these people 'statistics'—in Elijah's lexicon, those who fit or fulfill a dominant stereotype—as I argue that the educational research community's fascination with and endless recitation of the statistics—here I am referring to dominant notion of statistics, the mathematical practice of organizing numerical data—has furthered deficit constructions of young men like Elijah. There is a damaging discourse-effect of both Elijah's and the standard understanding of 'statistics:' both further negative notions of who young men of color are and can be. This first figured world of identity is that of those who choose laziness and entitlements,

succumbing to or enacting the negative prevalent view of young men of color; the second figured world of identity referenced here is that of individual responsibility. In this figured world, people achieve because they decide to overcome obstacles. People in this world refuse to give up and sacrifice whatever is necessary to achieve their life goals.

Elijah's comment that he has "never been a person to give up" and his statement that he "wants better," implicitly separating himself from those imagined to be 'entitled' or content to "live off welfare," were at odds with other comments he had made in the Men's Group. He had referred to times during the six months between leaving Curtis High and entering the GED Connect program at the Bronx Unified High School when he felt like he could not accomplish his goal of a diploma. His comments on personal responsibility, sacrifice, and overcoming obstacles also seemed at odds with his sporadic attendance at The Opportunity Center, his educational program at the time.

Immediately following his comments that he had never thought about giving up on school, and his statement that even after all of his troubles, he still went through school, I asked Elijah if there had not been times when he had felt like he could not accomplish his goals. He reported that he considered giving up when he first entered the GED program and realized how hard it would be to pass the test. He considered his test scores on his first predictor test, an evaluation meant to predict how one would do on the actual GED exam, to be a failure, which led to a decision to "get [his] grades up." He shares that, after briefly considering giving up, he decided to make major changes then and there, saying that he "like...really sat down, stopped partying, stopped being with my friends." Then, Elijah shifted to the second person, as if offering advice to any given young person. He shares:

Like, you gotta make sacrifices. If you make your sacrifices while you young, your life is gonna turn out better when you older. You start making sacrifices when you too old, it's just like it's gonna be even harder.”

It is interesting to note that Elijah sees removing himself from his peer group as necessary for success: he states that becoming more serious about school meant that he had to stop being with his friends. The ‘you’ here is a collective ‘you;’ Elijah is speaking to, and admonishing, his peer group for their alleged complacency and willingness to avoid the hard work that is necessary for success. He faults other learners for not taking school seriously; they are actors within the figured world of entitlement and contentment, where people do not strive and are happy to “live off welfare.” Elijah draws on the figured world of personal sacrifice and responsibility here, a world in which he and others measure success in terms of an individual’s orientation to push oneself and make sacrifices. Through distinguishing himself from his peer group—his friends—Elijah sees a way to succeed and accomplish his goal of “making something of [him]self.”

The challenge of the interplay between these two figured worlds of identity—the world of ‘entitlement’ and the world of sacrifice and personal responsibility—is that the desire for any support is seen as repudiating one’s responsibility to strive and overcome. After losing his athlete and football team-member identity, and accompanying social/academic support, Elijah’s grades slipped and he did not earn the necessary credits to be on track for graduation at Curtis High³³. He began missing school days, and had a conference with his guidance counselor. He did not speak with his counselor to seek out a GED program or another school; his intention was to stay at Curtis. He says “I was really trying to get reinstated back in school, but somebody told me, like, as much credits as I

³³ Elijah’s mother also passed away either just before or just after he stopped attending Curtis High, though he did not want to talk about this, and only mentions it once in his narratives.

was missing, might as well just take your GED. So, it's like, I got started with the GED program." Elijah speaks in the first person here, relating his direct experience being "pushed out" of his school (Fine, 1991, Cammarota and Fine, 2008). It was his guidance counselor who encouraged him to leave high school to go for the GED. When I asked Elijah if his counselor had spoken with him about the support he might need to earn his high school diploma at Curtis High, or if she had spoken about the supports that might exist in a GED program, he said no—that had not been part of the conversation at all. Instead, "she [his counselor] just told me it would be faster to get your GED than it is to basically try to get all one, all these credits in one year. It would just be easier to get your GED." Feeling overwhelmed with the credits he would need to earn in a short period of time, Elijah opted for the GED, a decision he later came to regret. He says:

I felt that time when, especially when you in high school and you behind in your credits, and you have to do so much to get your credits to like, the standards of passing. That's when like, I think a lot of people drop out of school. 'Cause it be, like, too hard. You be like 'I gotta um, basically go to school like 9 to 5 like a regular job, just to get my credits up.' Probably stay even later, take up extracurriculum classes. And like, that's a lot to do. And like, the easy way out— a lotta people see is the GED, 'cause they, like, think it'll be easier than all they credits. And it's really not.

The notion that the GED is faster and easier is the way that Elijah accounted for—and was encouraged to account for by his guidance counselor—his decision to 'drop-out' of school by leaving Curtis High. As the final words of this narrative demonstrate, Elijah now disavows this common-sense notion that the GED is the easy way out, or even the easiest path forward. This can also be seen in his use of pronouns here: in this section of narrative, Elijah starts speaking in the first person and then shifts to the second person, using 'you' as a universal or generalized 'you.' In doing this, he is signaling that this is a process that many others in his peer group experience; he is not alone in having thought

that the GED is the easiest path forward. Having realized that this is not the case, he refers to those who still see the GED in this light as ‘they,’ other than himself.

Elijah continues the use of the universal ‘you’ as he explains the challenges of the GED, and the lack of support in meeting those challenges. Though he describes the challenges facing learners who are encouraged or pushed to go for a GED as “basically impossible,” he eventually returns to a narrative of overcoming and personal responsibility. The challenges stem from the fact that the GED often involves a game of catch-up with missed learning, Elijah says. If a learner missed a whole year of learning, he or she might have to learn all of that material quickly for the GED exam:

You might have to learn in the matter of a couple of months to take the GED that [academic material] you didn’t know existed. So, like, if you drop out in the eleventh grade like I did, you miss like half of the, like, eleventh— you miss most of the eleventh grade, then the twelfth grade. So to jam pack two years of missed- well, of learning that you haven’t learned in six months is like— it’s, like, *basically impossible*.

Here Elijah uses the second person to suggest that this is the experience of many people who find themselves in this situation, but he includes details from his own life such as missing half of the eleventh grade and being out of school for six months.

Now moving from a generalized ‘you’ to his own experience, Elijah voices a desire for greater support before his narrativized account of the challenges of the GED returns to the realm of personal responsibility. He again compares the experience of being a student and being a football player. Being a football player “was the best to [him].” He elaborates:

You have a lot of friends that’s on the same path as you. A lot of people got the same goal of ‘I wanna go to college and play football for the rest of my life.’ So you got a lot of people that have the same goal as you. It helps you wanna get to your goal, it helps you to, uh, struggle. It helps you fight for your goal more.

Continuing to mingle the sense of a ‘you’ that relates to himself and one’s generalized experience, Elijah describes here the support he felt and received as a football player. There was a sense of belonging, common understandings and life goals amongst the members of the team. This, Elijah, says, was what helped him to “struggle” as he “fought for [his] goal.” Without this collective belonging and support, and with his peer group tarnished in dominant discourses about young men of color, Elijah draws on those discourses and engages in self and peer-group blame for the challenges he faces. He is left feeling as though he should be able to handle the challenges of school alone. He contrasts the teamwork and group support he felt as a football player with his experience of being a student, expressing the belief that GED study is individualistic, with little support:

I feel the GED is on yourself. I feel like the GED is more on yourself than as in a lot of group people, because if—if you really want it you can get it. But if you wanna follow the people that just wanna sit there, play around, don’t do they work...it’s more of them that there is people that do their work and wanna go to school, you know, and finish. So it’s more easier to get to the side that you don’t wanna do this no more. You just wanna have fun, play around, then I want to go to, I wanna do work, put in hard work and dedication and get to my goal. So, like, it basically comes down to the individual themselves. And, like, a lot of people don’t have the willpower to overcome stuff.

Not earning the GED is a function of not “really want[ing] it” because it all comes down to the individual, to one’s personal responsibility and willpower. There is no group or team to follow if one wants to earn the GED, but this is not due to any external or structural force: it is the fault of members of the group themselves. Elijah’s peer group, in his account, “just wanna sit there, play around, don’t do they work.” Here, in this section of narrative, Elijah starts in the first person, speaking of his direct experience as a student

desiring support and group belonging. He then speaks in the second person; the ‘you’ here is a universal you referring to all GED learners. Towards the end of this passage, Elijah returns to the use of the first person, voicing the way he has made sense of his experience: he has tried to “put in hard work and dedication and get to [his] goal,” but he felt pushed to the ‘side’ of those who do not apply themselves or work hard in school.

The ‘problem’ is the other students, the ones populating the figured world of entitlement. This framing of the problem wavered when Elijah and I discussed the fact that Elijah was denied his federally-mandated special education accommodations in the GED Connect program, both during his time at the Bronx Unified GED Central Center and the Opportunity Center. Elijah had to sign a waiver when entering the GED world, essentially giving up his mandated accommodations even though he did not understand that he was doing so. I had not been aware that Elijah was a special education student—he was not one of the learners at Opportunity Prep who were participating in the Special Education district and the Alternative Education district’s pilot program mentioned in Chapter two—but he shared this when I asked him what his advice might be to a friend considering a GED in lieu of a traditional high school program:

I would tell him, um, don’t even waste your time going to take the GED. Just stay in school and basically just do it that way. ‘Cause it’s easier. Like, with the GED, everything is more facts-based. In school, some people might have a learning disability. I might need extra time. On the GED, you don’t get extra time. So it’s better to take the school way. You get extra time. You could pass; you could even get help. And it’s, like, easier that way. On the GED, it’s just, like—it’s basically you’re on your own—if you don’t have your level at this peak, you can’t take the GED. So you have to study this subject. Then while you studying this subject, probably in math or something, you forgot a little bit of this. The you have to, like, brush up on that. Then it’s, like, basically, a longer process than just going to school and learning in those four years, which is on the test, than it is to take it.

Elijah spoke in the first person when he said “I might need extra time” on the test, and I realized that he was very familiar with special education testing accommodations. Also, Elijah suggests that he was duped into thinking that the GED was a better option for him, and that he was not aware of many important details when he was encouraged to transfer from Curtis High to the GED Connect program. This is where I read hints that Elijah locates the source of some of his challenges with formal education on the lack of support structure, yet when I asked him specifically about his special education status and accommodations, Elijah once again returns to the discourse of personal responsibility. He voiced that he had been classified with a learning disability, and had been labeled as dyslexic since elementary school, saying:

I found out when I was, like, about third grade? Or probably, fourth. Like, I just started realizing, like, the words that’s, like, the letters the teacher was filling out on the board wasn’t what I was seeing. I was, like, ‘why you spelling it backwards?’ And in reality I’m the guy—I see it backwards and everybody sees it right. So I had to go through, like, I had to go—I had to do extra stuff on that, too. I had to go to school, I had to stay overtime, learn little routines and stuff to like basically put the words in order and see how it is. Like, over the years? Your skills get better and you learn how to, like, deal with it.

As is the case with many students who learn differently, Elijah has been encouraged to locate the problem within himself, to be “in reality...the guy” who sees it backwards while everyone else sees it right. To rectify this, the burden was on him to do “extra stuff” after school so that he could read like everyone else. I asked if Elijah had received any support at all, and he was direct in his response:

Um, with the dyslexia? With GED, there’s no help. Like, basically my grades is, my reading level is higher now so, like, you wouldn’t tell like I have dyslexia. So I don’t tell like a lot of people, just keep it to myself.

Elijah has had to hide his challenges with reading, and has resorted to not talking about it with his teachers. He proudly reminded me that he improved his reading abilities, as measured by the TABE-reading evaluations, over the course of one year at the Bronx Unified GED Central Center to the point of being transferred to The Opportunity Center to do preparation work more aligned with the GED exam. He had to do this without an awareness that his transfer to the GED Connect program would involve no dedicated support or accommodations for his dyslexia; his guidance counselor only said that the GED would be faster and easier for him. When I asked if the guidance counselor had been right in any way, he said “in my perspective, she was wrong.” He described everything in the GED world as “crammed-like,” and that he had to “step [his] reading level up there...had to get [his] math skills up” in a short period of time. He found that with the GED, the “learning you missed...you might have to learn in the matter of a couple of months.” Encouraged to see the GED as the best path forward, he found a rushed skills-based educative process where he had no support or accommodations for his specialized learning needs.

Speaking of the time when he began the program, he said “at the time, I was in the mindset of ‘oh, the GED is nothing, I could take six months out, get my GED, I’m done.’ But it really doesn’t work that way.” What he found was a lack of support, and a sense that everything was “on [him],” that he was alone. When faced with a practice exam early on in his GED career, he asked if he would still get extra time on tests, he was told no and exclaimed:

so it’s just like, ‘oh, I really have to step my whole game up, period.’ So I have to read faster, I have to comprehend faster, I have to look for, like, messages faster. Like, it’s a whole different pace than when you in just regular school.

To enter into the GED Connect program, Elijah must have had to sign the waiver referred to in Chapter two, though he has no recollection of this. When I asked him how he felt about this, he said:

It was like signing one of them contracts and that's in the fine print. Yeah, it's like one of those deals...I wish I would known, 'cause I probably, I probably just woulda did, try to jam pack everything in that one year. But, it's, like, over now. So it's, like, too late for me to go back to high school. This is, like, my only option.

Elijah is aware in some sense that his rights have been violated; he refers to the process of becoming a GED student “one of them contracts and that's in the fine print.” Yet, ultimately returns to the figured world of personal responsibility, saying that the GED is his only option at this point. If he could have gone back in time, he would have tried to earn all of the necessary credits in his final year of high school³⁴. He had decided to go for the GED because of the time challenges he thought he faced at Curtis High; he expressed that the thought of the credits he had to earn, and the individual weight of doing what he would need to do in order to earn them was overwhelming, saying:

It was like, in order for you to get enough credits you have to do so much extracurriculum classes. You have to stay past the school day. You have to stay just like, after school. You have to do after school, you have to do a little bit of night school, and that's a lot. To have night school, you have night school, and you have a job³⁵? That's a lot for one person.

Elijah felt as though he had no support, and the ways in which dominant negative discourses frame his peer group—other young men of color—lead him to locate the ‘problem’ of achieving educational success in the group, those who are ‘entitled’ and do

³⁴ Elijah does not seem to be aware that he has the right to stay in a public high school in New York City until he is twenty-one years and six months old. In reviewing his narratives depicting his conversation with his guidance counselor, it seems that she did not make him aware of his rights in this regard, and let him think that he had to finish high school in four years.

³⁵ At that time, Elijah had a part-time job working at Burger King, the fast-food chain.

not strive, those who do not work hard or take school seriously. Success, in this view, is based solely on one's willpower and ability to overcome the lack of willpower assumed in the group.

TENSIONS BETWEEN SOLIDARITY AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE FIGURED WORLDS *OUTSIDE* OF SCHOOL

Despite negative experiences with police officers that Elijah recounts in the narratives, describing experiences with racial profiling and stop-and-frisk tactics, there is some sense of group-blame and themes of personal responsibility in narratives depicting outside-of-school challenges as well. Ultimately, though, he has a more nuanced sense of where responsibility lies and expresses a need for solidarity. Elijah discusses structured inequity, race, and racism in the context of negative interactions with police officers in his neighborhood in the South Bronx. He shares a story of being harassed—stopped and frisked with zero cause, as is the case for thousands³⁶ of young men of color in New York City every year—on the block where he and his father lived in the South Bronx³⁷. He shares this story after I let him know that the Men's Group had recently been discussing the murder of Trayvon Martin, and our collective frustration with the fact that much time passed before it was even considered a crime. Elijah shared that he was very familiar with law enforcement abuses, replying that he had seen police officers abuse their authority many times. When I asked him if he had experienced this personally, he answered in general terms:

Um, like, for a stop and frisk you just can't stop nobody just walking

³⁶ In 2012, New Yorkers were stopped 533,042 times, and eighty-nine percent of these people were completely innocent of any crime. Eighty-seven percent of those stopped were Black or Latino (NYCLU, 2012).

³⁷ By a strange coincidence, this is half a block away from where Rafael and I were stopped by undercover detectives in the narrative I shared at the beginning of the first chapter. Elijah and his father live right by the school where I taught for nine years. Unfortunately, stop and frisk tactics are prevalent throughout demographically-similar neighborhoods throughout New York City.

down the street, minding their own business by themselves. You just—to me, I feel like you just can't stop nobody. Now if you see a group of people walking down the block I can understand, but just one person, like, why would you just stop them? They're not doing nothing to nobody and they're just minding their own business, listening to music.

Here, Elijah's use of 'you' refers to a police officer, and he is questioning who a police officer should be able to stop. For Elijah, stopping a group is warranted—there is a sense that people in a group, or perhaps young men of color in a group, must be up to no good, and are therefore fair game for investigation—but it is an abuse of power to suspect and stop an individual, someone “minding their own business,” without cause. Sensing that this was a difficult topic for Elijah, I asked him if this had ever happened to him. He replied that it had happened numbers of times, stuttering (not something he normally does) as he relayed this. He said that the most recent incident was two months prior to our audio-recorded session, and proceeded to tell the story, recounting:

Um, I got stopped and frisked. And even though I was cooperating, the cop was still being, um, negligent. He was, like, saying a whole lotta stuff for no reason. I showed him my ID; I got searched and they wanted to run my name and stuff. Ask me if I have warrants and stuff. I told 'em no. It's just like a whole long process of—I don't understand why they do it. Maybe if I did understand why they do it, I could relate more. But I really don't know why, what's the purpose of it.

In this narrative, Elijah's (justified) frustration and hurt from this most recent stop-and-frisk incident is tempered by a belief that there must be a good reason for the practice, and he expresses that he would be willing to endure these incidents if he understood the reason. As is the case with the way Elijah understands his special education accommodations, the burden is on him to understand and learn ways to adapt as he says “Maybe if I did understand why they do it, I could relate more.”

Elijah moves away from this individual burden and shifts to a critique of

structured inequity when he begins comparing his experiences growing up in Staten Island with his current experiences living in the South Bronx. He shares:

Well it's just like— when I was living in Staten Island, I never got stopped and searched or nothing. But like I lived around houses and the majority of people around there was Caucasian. So it's like different when you move to, like, a neighborhood a majority of Black— it's like different rule systems with cops. I don't know, like, things change. Like, I never got stopped, I never got frisked. And they, like, they more friendly when you're in that type of neighborhood, a Caucasian neighborhood. But when you in like a, uh, majority Black neighborhood, they attitude is like, completely different. They think that every Black person's a criminal or something. Like, every Black person's not a criminal.

Here Elijah is pointing to how he is positioned within the two social spaces, and who he is interpellated as being when he is in his current neighborhood. Who he is as a Black man is different in these two social locations; in the South Bronx, Elijah feels he and other men of color are positioned as criminals. It is important to note that Elijah shifts to the second person when he says “when you in a, uh, majority Black neighborhood, they attitude is like, completely different.” This ‘you’ refers to young men of color, as a group; Elijah is saying that these negative assumptions and positioning practices affect every young man of color.

I asked Elijah to share exactly what happened during his most recent stop-and-frisk incident, and he said that an officer just came up to him and:

They said I looked like, um, like a man off a wanted picture. So they had to run my name and stuff, ask me where I live. I was like, “cause I look like somebody off a wanted picture?” That could be true, probably, but I haven't committed no crimes in my life, so I knew it wasn't me.

Though further in the narrative it becomes clear that Elijah is speaking about one police officer, he uses ‘they’ to refer to this officer, here positioning police officers as a group who are apart from people like him. As he describes the incident, he shifts back into the

singular, referring to the officer as ‘he.’ He continues:

They just, came out of nowhere and grabbed me. Like, “freeze.” I was like “hold up!” And he was in plain clothes. So it was just, like, I didn’t know if it was a cop at first or nothin’. I was just stunned, like, “what’s going on” till he pulled out his badge and told me “oh, you fit the description of a person we looking for.” Then, that’s when the process went down. He asked me my name, where I live, but I was like, “how come every time when I’m in this type of neighborhood, I always fit a description, but when I used to live in Staten Island I never fit, I never fitted a description?”

I asked Elijah if he had asked the officer this question, or if he was expressing how he felt at the time. He responded that he did indeed ask that, and that the officer heard him and told him the real reason why he had fit the description and had been stopped: “Yeah, like, and he was just, like, ‘You just do [fit the description]. You all look alike.’ That’s what—that’s what—that’s what caught me, like, ‘we all look alike.’” Again, Elijah stuttered, repeating himself here, which is not a usual practice for him, suggesting that he is (rightfully) extremely upset about the incident and has difficulty talking about it.

Elijah is positioned here as the ‘you’ who fits the description; he is framed as a criminal while in his neighborhood. When I inquired about the race of the officer, Elijah replied that he was White. When I asked Elijah how this comment made him feel, he said “I was like, there’s still racism in this day and age. I was, like, ‘we’re not over that?’” I was curious as to whether Elijah had expressed this to the officer, and he said that he didn’t; he was thinking it. He began to repeat himself again, saying “I didn’t want— I didn’t want” before saying “I didn’t say nothing. ’Cause I didn’t want to step too far over the line, and I might get locked up. And they might go farther than when they have to go. So I just took that, ate it and just went home.”

Despite his acknowledgement that a gross injustice had been committed against

him, Elijah feels that he has little recourse; there is a sense that he has to accept this. If he stands up for his rights, he feels as though the police officers “might go farther than when they have to go.” When Elijah reported this, I told him that I was sorry that the incident had happened. He paused, and then said “So that’s why I feel like some cops overuse their, like, they overuse their authority as well. You— you’re supposed to be here to protect us, not to make me feel as a criminal in my own environment.” Here, Elijah’s ‘you’ refers to the police officers in his neighborhood. I asked if he had felt as if the police were protecting him when he lived in Staten Island, and he replied that he had. For Elijah, this is about the “different rules” in operation regarding the role of the police in the South Bronx and Staten Island.

One thing that is interesting is that Elijah’s father is a police officer, and a police officer in the South Bronx. When I asked what his father thought about this most recent stop-and-frisk incident, Elijah said:

He was, like, that’s, like, totally unprotocol. Like, I can’t believe that. He actually wanted me to report it and, um, I can’t remember the cop’s badge number or his name so, it was basically we can’t report it or nothing.

I asked him how he felt about his father being a cop, given that there are police officers who say things like “you all look the same.” Elijah said:

It makes me feel like I’m happy that my father’s a cop. At least I have somebody that I know that’s on the force that can relate to, like, where I’m coming from. So- So if I do get stopped, I hope that, like, a person like my dad will stop me. Be, like, “oh, you’re being stopped ‘cause of this.” Like, keep it real. Just don’t say you stopping me just ‘cause you wanna stop me ‘cause I’m Black. Like, just tell me “oh, you do look like this person on this photo” or “we have somebody that’s fitting the description of you that’s, like, ran away from a bank or something so we have to stop you to see what’s going on.” I can understand that, than just “stop.” And you walking up on me, saying “you there.” I’m, like, “who’s you?”

Police officers like his dad will “keep it real;” they will talk with young men like Elijah

and foster understanding as opposed to immediate assumptions of criminal actions or intent. Here, Elijah has moved away from the discourse of personal responsibility to assert that “people like [his] dad” will know more about where young men like him “are coming from.” Though his earlier general comments suggested a sense of group blame—or a sense that officers are justified in stopping a group—Elijah asserts that the “different rules” that exist between places like Staten Island and the South Bronx evidence a need for greater understanding through solidarity.

MERIT AND BLAME

“You could overcome any challenges you have in your life. You can be poor, you can do anything.” –Elijah

Though his narratives relating his experiences with stop-and-frisk manifest a critique of the social order, and a more nuanced understanding of individual responsibility within unequal power relationships, Elijah’s narratives about success and social mobility come down squarely on the side of merit and deservingness. He continuously mentioned that his drive and success came from his family, and that other people who lack this mindset have their families to blame. His family has given him a disposition that orients him to school and learning, and to value focus and hard work. I asked Elijah why some people have this disposition and others don’t, and he explained:

Me, it was my parents. My parents is hard on me. It was “you can’t go outside until you finish your homework, if you didn’t go to school there’s no outside.” So that’s how I was brought up. So, it was, like, school is a main important thing in my family.

Elijah maintains that he learned to value school, and other learners have not learned this. There is a sense of blame on these other families; they have failed their children by not instilling this mindset. He continues to explain how this deficiency or lack in how these

young people were brought up by their families leads to a diminished life station, and makes it hard for those with the right disposition to learn. He says:

You have some people, like, some people, they just go to school to play around. Then you have— and people like me, that really go to school to learn, try to get their GED and make their life better. That's what they [those who play around] wanna do. And that's the people that really do need help. And there's some people that's just stuck in their own mindset and their own way that "I don't need this" and "I don't need that." So I was just like "you wasting our time" by coming here. You might as well not come to school, period.

It is these other people— those who do not take school seriously— who are to blame; they do not understand that they need what school has to offer. Here we see the figured worlds of entitlement and personal responsibility once again in Elijah's narrative: those who occupy the figured world of entitlement, the "they" in the chunk of narrative above, are "stuck in their own mindset" and are "wasting our time." The source of any problem is located within the people themselves. Elijah does this as a means of positioning himself as someone opposed to 'them;' he is laying claim to a figured world of identity where people take personal responsibility and carve out their own destinies. As such, he is positioning himself as someone who is deserving of opportunity and success, as opposed to other people who simply do not get it and will not strive or take school seriously.

This tension between the figured worlds of entitlement and personal responsibility has to do with merit, blame, and deservingness. Blame is placed on those who do not push themselves or take personal responsibility for themselves; this is why their lives are challenging and they do not encounter success. Those who deserve good things are those who rise through the hard work that moves them up the social ladder to success. In

positioning himself as other than these people who occupy the figured world of entitlement, he also places blame on the parents of these children, saying:

Like, some people parents, they don't really care about they children. "Well, you can do whatever you want." Like, that's not good parenting at all. That's how some people grow up to be messed up. Like, not messed up, uh, that's how some people grow up to be, like, they don't wanna go to school, they don't wanna learn. This is my life, like, that's not your life. You can make your life better if you try hard.

These people in the figured world of entitlement do not "try hard;" their parents do not care about them and do not push them to use school as a tool of social mobility. If these people would just try harder and take life a bit more seriously, they could achieve. This is essentially the myth of the meritocracy, the notion that people are where they belong in the social order because of their effort or lack thereof. If there is a lack of success, Elijah maintains the belief that young people have failed to see the consequences of their actions. He asserts:

It's all about the— it's all about that one individual and they willpower. Like, you have to see your goal. You have to know "if I go on this path, I'm not gonna reach my goal." And a lot of people can't see that. So that's where they need help at.

Again, Elijah is positioning himself as apart from this group of people who do not have the requisite willpower to succeed. Those who do not succeed are not pushing themselves; the reason is a lack or deficiency in the people themselves. He is someone who does have this willpower, and he suggests that what these others need is a corrected mindset, saying "they really need it broken down to them, like 'you can do better with your life.' Like, they really need to be taught 'you can do better with your life.'" These others need to understand, to be taught, as he has been, that they can do better and should not accept their low life station. This mindset, and its accompanying effort, can overcome

anything within Elijah's figured world of individual responsibility. Elijah offers advice to a hypothetical, generalized struggler:

You got to have the mindset that 'I wanna get out of here, I wanna do better with my life' to even go to school. So I'm thinking, if you go to school, if you attempt to go to school and you have that mindset. So the only the thing that they need help with is to see, like, you could overcome any challenges you have in your life. Like poverty. You can be poor, you can do anything.

Anything in life, including poverty, is something that can be overcome within the figured world of personal responsibility. He positions himself within this figured world, saying boldly that "I always been there [in school] to learn." He, unlike those others he wants to separate himself from, has his priorities right.

Though Elijah uses the figured world of entitlement to position himself as a responsible and worthy individual, he does, at times, refer to structural challenges that interfered with his education. He mentions the fact that the high school classrooms were overcrowded at Curtis High, yet he circles back to the theme of these challenges being due to the other learners' lack of seriousness and dedication. He says:

the teachers in Curtis, it was, like, it was too much students cram-packed into one class. So it was, like, you can really get that much focus, then there's a lot of people talking. There's only a handful of students that wanna learn, and you gonna get distracted. There's, like, hard to, like, try to learn something, keep your head when a whole bunch of people's talking about nonsense.

Though learners were "cram-packed into one class," it was the other learners who interfered with his learning process. It was hard for Elijah to learn not because of school overcrowding and a lack of resources, but because of "a whole bunch of people's talking about nonsense."

Similarly, Elijah at times faults his teachers for not providing enough guidance and strong instruction. This critique, though, also comes back to blame on the group, on the others who inhabit the figured world of entitlement and do not take school seriously. Elijah speaks of one teacher in particular, Mr. M., and says that he was the sort of teacher who would not help his students. Mr. M. would not support learners who required extra help or direct instruction. Speaking of his time in Mr. M.'s class, Elijah says:

He just tell you it was in the reading. Look it up, if you don't know it. I felt like you should at least give an effort to try to help the students—it did—even though there was a lot of people that don't wanna learn there's still a handful of people that do wanna learn. And it's not right that they get neglected for the people that don't wanna learn.

Though Elijah suggests a lack of effort on the part of Mr. M., his sense of injustice is not that the teacher had low expectations of the learners or was not willing to provide instruction, it is that he lumps all of the learners into the same category. In some sense, Mr. M.'s behavior is legitimized when teaching the others—those people who “don't wanna learn.” Elijah does not want to be positioned as part of this group, and it is unfair that he too, despite his participation in the figured world of personal responsibility, is cast among those who do not deserve to be taught. Elijah latches on to the figured world of personal responsibility as a means of differentiating himself from those he positions as less deserving and driven.

SEEKING SOLIDARITY AND SUPPORT

In the realm where Elijah seems most comfortable pointing to structured inequities—in his new neighborhood, which is rife with stop-and-frisk tactics and racial profiling—Elijah mentioned that he is happy that his father is a police officer, because he understands what it is like to be of color in this society. Given the dissimilar places Elijah

locates the ‘problems’ of police-community relations and the social space of school—one is located in officers who are quick to assume the worst and position people of color as criminals, and the other is located in a group of learners who do not strive or take school seriously—I was curious as to whether Elijah would want more teachers who understood “where [he’s] coming from.” This is what Elijah said of police officers like his dad; they can relate to his life experience and thus have the potential to build understanding. I asked Elijah if it was important for young people of color to have teachers of color. He relayed that this was important due to shared experiences and familiarity, saying:

Yeah, it is. ‘Cause maybe, like— to see a Black or Latino person you could, like, “yeah, they probably come from where I come from. They probably familiar with the South Bronx. They probably know how it is to live in this environment.”

This shared familiarity, Elijah maintains, could be fodder for understanding and better relationships, ones unlike the relationships plagued by negative assumptions and stop-and-frisk tactics.

Given Elijah’s discussion of the differences between how people of color are positioned in Staten Island and the South Bronx, I asked if a person of color who was from a community very different from the South Bronx— say, the primarily-White communities he described in Staten Island— would still be a good role model for youth of color. My question was based on whether “understanding background and where you’re coming from” was based on someone’s racial identity and/or phenotype, or whether or not people of other heritages could be seen as being understanding in Elijah’s eyes. Elijah maintained that people of color from a mostly-Caucasian community like ones he experienced on Staten Island would be good role models, because they could show youth of color that:

even though you're Black you don't only have to stick to this one lifestyle. You can change your whole way of thinking, your whole lifestyle, completely. Then you could better yourself. Lotta people think this is just— this is just my life, I can't do nothing about it. I saw a lotta people fall victim to the trap.

In this response, Elijah is circling back to locate the 'crisis' of people of color in and out of education in the people themselves: the issue, according to Elijah's response, is that people "only stick to this one lifestyle" and have a "whole way of thinking" that keeps them from "bettering [them]selves." The issue of social location and life opportunity is one of meritocracy, of individual choice.

When I asked Elijah how young people could resist his formulation of the 'trap'— like the other young men in the Men's Group, he adopts this term, though for him it is one of accepting or 'choosing' limitations— he relayed that it would be important to have teachers who understood where the learners were coming from. He says that resisting the trap would be easier if every school followed the rule that "there should be at least a teacher or two that knows where you're coming from. To understand how it is to be where you grew up at. A lot of teachers can't relate 'cause they never been there before." When I asked him if he had ever had a teacher like this, he reported that teachers rarely discussed things other than things pertaining to the "school manner;" schools were never sites to engage in public discourse or spaces to explore the world outside of the walls of school.

In his years of schooling, Elijah has had only one Black teacher, Ms. Johnson. In his seventh-grade Social Studies class, a subject that Elijah described as his least favorite, he describes how she motivated him and pushed him to succeed. He says that "she would help you to like the best of her—the best of her power. She would help you to, like, try to

get your grades up, make sure you study.” When speaking of Ms. Johnson, he commented that she was a rare educator, that “a lot of teachers, they don’t give the extra effort. The just be, like, ‘if I can’t help you in these couple hours, that’s just it.’” Elijah expresses the need for this, for teachers willing to stay after-hours and support learners. The ‘you’ in these passages is a collective you; he is speaking of the ways in which teachers like Ms. Johnson help their students.

In expressing this need, I read Elijah as voicing a desire for solidarity and support. My analysis suggests that he wants a space of belonging and support, a space where people will listen and understand where he and his peers are “coming from.” This voiced desire exists in tension with, and is often drowned out by, the drive to focus on individual responsibility and the discourse of meritocracy. Elijah’s narratives do not connect challenges within the world of school with this lack of support and solidarity; he shifts back into a description of a figured world of entitlement, where his peers do not strive or take school seriously.

Elijah does, though, move beyond the figured worlds of entitlement and individual responsibility when speaking of his life goals and the injustices that he has experienced outside of the realm of school. When discussing his experiences with stop-and-frisk, he shares that his ambitions are to become a lawyer and a judge. He connects these ambitions with the fact that his father is a police officer and his mother, when she was alive (she passed away either just before or after he stopped going to Curtis High), had been a lawyer. He shares his mother’s influence on him, saying:

Yeah, my mom personally got me into the whole— I was already into the law enforcement, but I never wanted to be a cop. I always wanted to be something higher, and— I just like lawyers. They can become into a

judge. So, it's like my main— my long-term goal is to become a judge, short-term goal is to become a lawyer.

When I asked Elijah why he wanted to become a judge, he said:

So, like, I could actually be fair. When somebody, like— when a person of color come to court, it can be more fair to them than just having a judge don't know nothing about your background and where you come from.

When discussing his life ambitions, Elijah holds that the justice system is not fair, and that spaces for solidarity—such as having lawyers and judges, people in positions of power, understand where other people of color are “coming from”— are necessary for the system to “actually be fair.” The fact that Elijah speaks of “your background” suggests that Elijah is speaking about his belonging to a group, particularly a group of people who experience inequity at the hands of the justice system. It is interesting to note the dissimilarity between these notions and Elijah's use of the figured world of entitlement and lack of striving to explain inequitable educational outcomes for young people of color.

It had been my hope that the Men's Group would become a space where Elijah found the desired space for solidarity that I see in his narratives. Elijah did participate with the group for a time during the early spring of 2012, but by the late spring he had stopped coming to both the Men's Group and his GED program at The Opportunity Center.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

(RE)POSITIONING THROUGH CULTURAL TOOLS/RESOURCES

MORNING MEETING

I usually didn't attend the weekly morning teacher meeting on student progress at The Opportunity Center. I didn't know most of the students well, and several of the teachers did not seem to be comfortable with me. (I've found that trusting relationships take much time to develop when so many teachers feel vilified and unsupported.) But I asked to sit in on the weekly meeting when one of the young men from the Men's Group was being discussed, and I knew that James' progress was up for discussion that Thursday morning.

My colleagues all agreed that he was a nice young man, that he tried hard and came to the program regularly. But they said that he was hiding behind his camera. The phrasing one of my colleagues used was that the camera was a "crutch;" that James was hiding his weak skills behind his constant photo-shooting. I didn't agree, though it was not my place to disagree—I voiced some positive comments about James' contributions to the Men's Group and talked about what I had noticed in his writing. After analysis of James' narratives, I vehemently disagree with the idea that his camera is a "crutch." It is a cultural resource.

NEGATIVE POSITIONING PRACTICES

You just pick the camera up and just do something better than hanging out with them and doing nothing at all. So I just started picking up the camera. And then it turned from me doing nothing into me being good at what I do. And I like the fact that I actually did it, because now I have like— a little, a little title for myself, a little name.

-James, age 20

James, like Elijah, is seeking his GED at The Opportunity Center. He grew up and lives in a housing project near Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Counter to the dominant cultural story about young men of color, James cares deeply about his education. Several months after data collection, he earned his GED and is currently attending community college in the CUNY system. Rather than frame James as some sort of ‘failure’ for leaving his first two high schools, or for his non-traditional path to college, I argue that James’ path evidences his agency and ability to resist the negative ways he felt positioned. Why he left his first and second educational communities, and how he developed the strong educational identity to eventually succeed in his goal have much to teach us.

Like the other young men from the Men’s Group, analysis of James’ narratives shows that he is hyper-aware of having been positioned negatively in the social space of school. As discussed in Chapter four, an awareness of negative positioning practices in sites of formal education appears to be a shared understanding or belief, part of what it means to be a young man of color in a second-chance academic program. This theme appears often in James’ narratives: throughout the several months of focus groups, he references feeling that many of his teachers did not care about him and his peers. He mentions teachers’ saying that they did not care if the students learned or not, that they would be paid either way. He describes not “feeling right” in this environment, and leaving two secondary-level programs because he was “looking for a different feeling.”

James’ narratives show him resisting the way he was positioned in these educational communities, both by his teachers and as a member of a group. James resists group identification by saying that he didn’t want to attend a school where he ‘knew everybody.’ Like Elijah, James sees his peer group as part of the ‘problem’ of school.

When I asked James to elaborate on the significance of knowing people, he explained that it was not so much that he knew the actual or particular people, but that even so he still *knew* them, the feeling of being in that environment was the same. This is, in his words, the primary reason why he left both his first and second secondary-level educational communities. Speaking of the second community, he reported that:

Um, it felt like I was in my regular high school. 'Cause *everybody that I knew that was in my regular high school was not the same people, but I knew everybody*. Everyone that was in that high school. So it felt the same. I didn't want that feeling. I wanted a different feeling.

It was a matter of James' aspirations to be elsewhere, to participate in different sorts of activities and ways of being-in-the-world that undergirds his insistence that 'knowing' people was what kept him from wanting to be at that school. James shares that knowing people was "making [him] lose interest," but he is quick to point out that he was still interested in the idea of school, just not that particular school.

In a later discussion, I asked more about this 'knowing,' and why it mattered so much to him. I asked James what the consequence might be if he continued to attend a school where he 'knew' people. He responded:

I don't know, like— I feel like, like me knowing them I would feel comfortable and wanna joke around and play and laugh and then wouldn't make me get focused into doing my work. So that's why I felt like I had to leave. Like, I felt like me knowing the people that I know, and, just me being around them, I wouldn't get any work done. So that's why I wanted to leave.

This is reminiscent of Paul Willis' (1977) landmark ethnography *Learning to Labour*, in which a group of young men known as the 'lads' resist school by "having a laff," or mocking the processes and functions of school. The lads' resistance is a group resistance, a tacit understanding that formal education does not lead to social mobility. The ways in

which the lads resist aid working-class social reproduction, with the young men enacting a hyper-masculinity associated with the shop-floor jobs of their fathers. James is voicing a desire to separate himself from a group resistance that may be similar to that of the lads': in order to realize his dreams or goals, James does not want to participate in the resistance—the joking and playing of his peer group. Like Elijah, James is suggesting that getting off track stems from a lack of seriousness and focus on education on the part of his peer group. James seeks to disavow membership in this negatively-perceived group. My analysis of his narratives suggests that he (re)positions himself as someone 'other' than a member of this group by drawing on a figured world of identity built through the cultural practice of photography.

WAYS OF SEEING: PHOTOGRAPHY AS A CULTURAL RESOURCE

When I first met James in my role as a literacy coach at the Opportunity Center, I immediately noticed the camera. It seemed to be part of him, hanging around his neck or cradled in his arm most of the time. In the morning meeting that The Opportunity Center teachers were having about students they were concerned about, James' teachers mentioned him as a student who was clearly trying—he came to school regularly, and was eager to earn his GED diploma—but that he was a student with poor skills, and that he was “hiding behind his camera.” This is one way of seeing, or reading, James. There is support for such a view: he took the camera with him to many spaces that may have provided new or familiar challenges for him such as his classes, field trips, and special GED Center events. Whenever the opportunity arose, James would start shooting photos. The camera was certainly what one notices when first meeting James—but was he hiding behind it, using it as a crutch as his teachers suggested?

My analysis of James' own narratives suggests a different reading, one that informs our notions of what culture is and how to employ it in pedagogical practice and research. The themes in James' stories relayed in the Men's Group sessions suggest that the camera was not something for James to hide behind, but an act of becoming something other, better, different. One early story about the camera that James shared is as follows:

You just pick the camera up and just do something better than hanging out with them and doing nothing at all. So I just started picking up the camera. And then it turned from me doing nothing into me being good at what I do. And I like the fact that I actually did it, because now I have like— a little, a little title for myself, a little name.

What do the themes in this narrative suggest about the role that photography plays in James' life? The 'them' referenced here is James' peers from his neighborhood, and he regularly shared in focus groups that he felt that his friends from the projects were "doing nothing." More detailed expressions reveal this 'nothing' to be an engagement with what James calls 'street' activities: drug-dealing, gang-participation, stealing, and hanging out on the corner. Like Elijah in the previous chapter, James wants to differentiate himself from his peers, particularly those who engage such activities, yet James does not take draw on the discourse of individual responsibility to separate himself. Instead, he sees his practice of photography as a positive 'something' to counter his peers' 'nothing.' The camera affords him a sense of "being good at what [he does;]" it affords him the ability to name himself through his chosen title that is removed from the dominant discourses about young men of color from similar communities.

This is *not* James hiding; this is James engaging a cultural practice to differentiate himself and further develop a sense of who he is and what he can do in the world.

Photography opens up a new figured world for James. Being a photographer allows him

to understand himself as a particular sort of agent or actor, one he believes is better than who he once was and who others (often) perceive him to be. He is not a ‘street kid,’ but a photographer, a professional; not a skills-deficient student but someone who is good at what he does.

I argue that James uses photography as a cultural resource: the camera is a tool that helps him to reposition himself as someone who can learn and enter new social spaces. The very first time that James spoke about his passion for photography in the Men’s Group was in reference to how his peers treated him because of the way he carried his camera. In a focus group session, Terrell, one of James’ peers, reported that he didn’t like it when people talked down to him, and that he advocated a strategy of “defeating one’s enemies with success.” Marquise, another peer, chimed in that he agreed, saying that one should not “let them get to you.” The thread of the conversation was that, in Terrell’s words, “if you put your mind to it, you can do anything.”³⁸ There was a sense of frustration with being talked down to, or with people limiting what sorts of activities or expectations were permitted for young men like Terrell, Marquise, and James. James voiced that he had an example of this happening. He voiced that his interests in BMX biking and photography had led to ridicule within his own peer group in his neighborhood. James shares the following narrative:

I got an example. Like, um, these people by my way, um. Like sometimes— well, not now— but like back in the day— they used to make little jokes, like, um, like— ‘cause they were street kids, all they knew was the streets, how to follow all these older guys that’s in the street selling drugs. Or just whatever the negative stuff that they was doin’. And they used, um, to brag—you, um— at the time, I was doing, um, BMX. And [mimicking their voices]“oh you goin’ be a BMX rider? Dadada!” “Biker Boy? Dadada!” Um, or, even when I was, um, had my camera, um,

³⁸ This is similar to Elijah’s use of the figured world of individual responsibility and notions of merit and blame.

they called me Peter Parker and all that.

James' interest in photography and BMX biking are evidence of differentiation and distinction, of being separated (and separating himself, through his narratives) from the group. James volunteers this narrative as an example of not allowing others to talk down to or limit one's self. Though his peers try to ridicule him, my analysis of James' narrative suggests that these activities and their associated identities— being a BMX biker or a photographer, in James' case, or a “street kid” for those who taunt him— conjure figured worlds in which these activities are laced with meaning and status, interpretive realms that are peopled with particular sorts of actors. James wants to resist being positioned as a particular sort of actor or person, and is engaging in activities to position himself differently, to open new possibilities for himself.

James' discussion of his reaction to his peers' taunts shows the power of the figured world to resist others' negative positioning practices. When James recounted this narrative, the other participants in the focus group laughed at the Peter Parker comment— Peter Parker is the weakling photographer identity of the superhero comic character who fights crime under the guise of Spiderman— and James responded with an extended coda to his narrative:

And the only way I could think of to defeat them [those who called him Peter Parker and Biker Boy] is, like, just to— like whatever they say goes in one ear and out the other. It makes me, it makes me stronger actually. And I want to actually achieve and succeed in my goals. So I just stay focused and they make me stronger, and keep going. Like, I can't explain it.

James is referencing his identities as a BMX biker or a photographer— later discussions evidence that his identity as a photographer is far more important to him at this point than his identity as a biker— as serving as a means to both be something other than a “street

kid” and as a means of aspiring, to set further goals and draw strength. This, too, is an example of James drawing on a cultural practice to create a new figured world of identity. For the uninitiated, the Peter Parker/Spiderman story is the archetypal superhero narrative: the put-upon and weak youngster discovers a newfound strength and power, and, assuming an alter-ego and thus new identity, fights back against those who have caused him and his loved ones pain. The non-superhero identity, that of Peter Parker, is that of a mild and unassuming photojournalist. James is drawing on this cultural story when he says that the taunts “make him stronger” and make him “want to actually achieve and succeed in [his] goals.” This cultural story serves as a resource to help James separate himself from ‘them,’ to “defeat them” by resisting the taunts and succeeding, to distinguish himself through this new figured world of identity.

In our next conversation, I asked James how he had become interested in photography. He recounted that a “criminal friend of his...somehow...had these cameras” and gave him one. He said that his first reaction was “like, wow, like these are some professional cameras.” The cameras, as tools for a professional, were enticing to James, and, over time, have become a central part of James’ activity and identity. He shares that he went from using his camera once a week to having the camera with him every day. It became a cultural tool that is intertwined with James’ sense of self.

In learning to use this tool, James employs the language of school. In discussing how he began as a photographer, he shares:

I’ve been doing my own homework since I actually picked up the camera. And how to use it, and the light and exposures, and just learning different things about it. Every day as I do my homework on it. And then, like I will actually go out there and shoot different things...just get the, just get the feel for the camera. And just see how, at, how good it works. So I learned from that, with the camera.

Here, James is using the figured world engendered by the cultural practice of photography to reposition himself as a learner. He is not a former drop-out or skills-deficient student; he is someone who does homework and learns on his own. His identity as a photographer is a site for imagining a different sort of self than the one that he is resisting, that of the 'street kid' or a 'nothin'' with no future. He is, instead, a learner who has learned not in the space of school, but on his own. In the story of how he got into photography, James shares that when he would meet other photographers:

they would, when they see my pictures too, they would ask me if I go to school for it. And I always say no. And like "yo you're really good and I think you should really keep, keep going with that." And that right there sticks in my head to this day, to actually go to school for it. But I don't know. For me, I think I, not mastered but I learned a good amount of what I know today just on my own. And I don't think you need to go to school to learn how to become a photographer. For instance me, like it wasn't easy, but it took time. I've been doing it for like five years and when I first picked up the camera it was, it was type frustrating. And what I mean, like I would take a picture, but it wouldn't come out the way I wanted to. Or the lighting wouldn't be as I wanted to. So that frustration led, led me to, to more, to more seeking better pictures. And just looking forward to a nice picture, or a nice shot to come out. So I learned from that just on my own, just free time and just spending it working with my camera.

My analysis of this narrative is that James is proud of what he has accomplished on his own. Successful learning is, for James, different from formal education because school is a place where he has not experienced self-directed learning. Bringing the camera to his GED program is a way to resist the identity as a skills-deficient learner, an attempt to reposition who he is within that space. Further, in negating the idea of 'going to school' to study photography, James resists merging his passion for photography with the spaces of formal education, where he has not had the opportunity to develop the figured world of identity as a successful and self-directed learner.

Holding the camera became a license for James to explore new and other ways of being-in-the-world, new neighborhoods and social spaces. He has shared that he traveled to many different parts of the city to shoot pictures, and I witnessed this when the Men's Group traveled to the Upper East Side of New York City for the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) conference. I, along with the other members of the group, had to continuously wait for him to rejoin the group after he disappeared down a street to shoot a picture. This theme appears in James' story of how he first became a photographer. He shares:

And just me having my camera on me, I would meet new people. Because they would, um, I would meet other photographers. They would be like, um, they would come up to me and like— what— ask me what type of camera is it, and I would tell them, and I would show them actually what I shoot and let them know that I'm a freelance shooter.

His interactions with 'other photographers' led him to meet new people, and helped him to imagine a new sense of self, that of someone who learns on his own and travels to new social spaces.

In short, James is a cultural actor; he is exercising his agency. Moving beyond the outmoded culture concept, that of an essentialist or bounded 'culture' that tags all members of a perceived cultural group with a collective meaning-making framework, creates opportunities to see and highlight James' agentic actions that stem from cultural practice. Analysis of his narratives suggests that the cultural practice of photography allows him to create a figured world of identity where he is a successful learner of photography rather than a skills-deficient high school dropout seeking a GED. He has been combating some version of the narrative of him being an unmotivated learner without a promising future since at least the first grade, and his figured worlds of identity

help him to resist this narrative to (re)position himself.

POSITIONING AND (RE)POSITIONING: JAMES' USE OF 'JUST' AND 'ACTUALLY'

As mentioned above, James, like the other young men in the Men's Group, is hyper-aware when he is being positioned negatively in or out of school. In his narratives, there is a consistent and likely unconscious signal in his stories when James does not like the way he is being positioned. The word 'just' serves as a signpost when James feels that he is being positioned negatively. Similarly, there is a consistent and likely unconscious signpost that signals when James is resisting this positioning and working to reposition himself. The word 'actually' is a signpost that James is about to speak to his own experience as opposed to the dominant perception of what one might think of him or somebody who looks like (and speaks, lives near, etc.) him. Like Dubois' concept of double-consciousness, James' narratives embody conflicting discourses about who he is and who he can become. 'Actually' is the signal that we are about to hear his actual experience and not the reading that others— or dominant society— might casually assign to him. These other, perhaps more dominant readings, are the ones signposted by 'just' in James' narratives.

'Just' appears again and again as James tells stories about his former secondary-level educational programs, and why he chose to leave them. In the narrative about his first high school he explains why he felt he had to leave. He exclaims "when I went to Coolidge High School, I never had no problems there, but I *just* wasn't feeling it in there, in the school. 'Cause I knew everybody in there, and I *just* wasn't feeling it." Earlier in the same focus group, James read aloud a journal entry he had written, sharing:

I knew my old school wasn't for me when I started seeing kids that I knew from my old school and from my neighborhood. The reason why I say this

is because I wanted to start fresh, not knowing anyone. I didn't want to get that comfortability where, where I was...I also felt that the teachers wasn't there to teach, but *just* there because they got paid. They would *just* hand us books and pages of work and that's it. Like where do the work, where do the, where...where do you start teaching, that was my question.

Here, James is locating the challenges of his education both in his peer group and the perceived low expectations and insufficient work ethic of his teachers. He is resisting the way that he feels he is positioned within the social space of this school; his perception is that he is framed as someone who either could not learn or was not worthy of teaching. His use of 'just' serves as a signal of his perception of a negative positioning practice and a resistance to it. During this same focus group session, I asked James if there was a specific moment in time when he decided to leave the second program. James reported that he observed what was going on in the classes— how the teachers would not teach, and shares that he “was like, nah, I can't be here. Like I don't feel like I'm getting anything done, or I'm not gonna go anywhere *just* being here. So I left.” This is an instance of James taking power: to avoid the negative positioning signified by his use of 'just,' my analysis suggests that he leaves to seek other possibilities of selfhood, of who he is allowed and encouraged to be within a social space.

This analysis is built on the way that James uses the signpost 'actually' to counter the negative positioning signaled by his use of 'just.' Speaking of memorable moments from his junior of high school, James tells a story about his least favorite teacher. He shares:

she would have a – a smart remark. So, someone would say something smart to her, and she would, like “Yeah and that's why you're in this class now. You either get your shit together or...” Something. She would say some – it wasn't a positive thing, it was always a negative thing that came out of her mouth. And that right there, that would get me upset to the point – even though she wasn't talking to me. At one point at one time she was

talking to me. And like that right there *just* triggered in my head, like “wow, I’m not even supposed to be in this class.” Like I don’t want to be around her and her negative energy. So what I did was I *just* stopped going to school. ‘Cause that was like the only way I could get out the school was to stop going and *actually* trying myself to get back into another school.

This is James repositioning himself: he resists being the person he feels that this teacher is encouraging him to be, and leaves the school so that he will no longer be that person. He is aware that his leaving castigates him as a ‘drop-out,’ though, and he immediately speaks to his ‘actual’ experience: he is not leaving because he does not want to be in school; he *actually*— as opposed to what the dominant discourse about a young man of color who stops going to school might be— was trying to get into another educational program.

James continues this narrative, rendered here for structural and thematic analysis, in a way that further resists the positioning of himself as lazy, unmotivated, or uninterested in education. He shares his narrative of how he came to be a GED student:

James’ Story of How He Found the GED

Strophe One: My Role in Finding a School (What Actually Was Going On)

Stanza 1: Looking for a School

1. well when I was looking/um/I was looking on the internet/I was looking
2. in/what else was I looking?/ I was looking/I was looking on the internet/ I was
3. looking/um/since we have/ we have like/uh/an NYC/a New York City Housing
4. Authority newspaper like/and I would look in that/and they would actually bring
5. up lists of schools/different schools/different GED/and stuff like that

Stanza 2: I Actually Found Coolidge High School

6. And/I found/um/I actually found one/I found Coolidge High School/that’s
7. actually right across the street from the high school that I went to

Strophe Two: My Experiences at The School

Stanza 3: I did not Like Coolidge because I knew Everyone there

8. and I went there/and didn’t like it/I didn’t like it because of the fact that/because
9. of the fact that/I knew everyone there/and (tapping fingers)/I didn’t/I knew

10. everyone there/and/I don't know

Noah: From – From your neighborhood?

Stanza 4: I Knew a lot of Kids at Coolidge

11. from my neighborhood/or just being/the fact that I go to the school and a lot of
12. kids that was from my old high school/they transferred over and went to that
13. school/so I knew/I knew/I knew a lot of kids there

Stanza 5: Feeling it, but not feeling it

14. and at the time/well/at the time I was/I was feeling it/but I wasn't feeling it at
15. the same time/and like/what I mean by that like/I was feeling the mood to go to
16. school/but I just wasn't feeling the school and what was in the school/and it was
17. making me lose interest

Stanza 6: It Wasn't Something I Was Looking For

18. and then after that/the teachers that was in there/they were like/um/there was
19. bookwork and stuff/I could do it/but it just wasn't something that I was looking
20. for/seeking

Strophe Three: Actually Choosing Work and School

Stanza 7: I Was Actually Doing Something: Working and Going to School

21. So I stopped doing that/and I continued to/to work/so I wasn't in the street
22. doing nothing/I was actually/I was actually doing something/I was either going
23. to school or working/and at that time/I was working and going to school

Stanza 8: I Worked Until I Actually Found Another School

24. and then I decided to/um/to stop going to school/and I just continued to
25. work/just work/work/until I actually found another school/and that was at the
26. Opportunity Prep (current GED Center)

In the first stanza, he uses the words 'look' or 'looking' multiple times to show that he is taking an active role in seeking out new schools, and, again, 'actually' signals that this is his experience as opposed to what one might think about a young man like James.

Rereading this stanza, with a focus on these words, highlights their function:

Well, when I was *looking*, um, I was *looking* on the internet. I was *looking* in, what else was I *looking*? I was *looking*, I was *looking* on the internet. I was *looking*, um, since we have, we have like, uh, a NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] newspaper, like. And I would *look* in that, and they would *actually* bring up lists of schools, different schools, different GED, and stuff like that. And, I found, um, I *actually* found one. I found

Coolidge High School. That's *actually* right across the street from the high school that I went to.

This focus on looking at lists of schools in the New York City Housing Authority (the city department that runs the housing project where James and his family live), newspaper and on the internet is James positioning himself as an active participant. He is seeking his education rather than passively accepting a dominant discourse about young men of color who leave school, which might frame James as somebody who does nothing or does not care about education. James uses 'actually' three times here, first in reference to the Housing Authority newspaper. This newspaper, read mainly by those living in the projects or receiving public assistance, 'actually' has lists of schools in it, as opposed to what the dominant perception of what a newspaper for this demographic might highlight (or what James' conception of this dominant perception might be).

In stanza two, James, when looking for this new educational program, 'actually' finds one, again running counter to the dominant perception. A better educational fit (or, what he thought would be better for him at the time) was 'actually' right across the street from the traditional program, as opposed to what the dominant perception of a neighborhood like James' neighborhood, might be.

In stanzas five through seven, James refers to the fact that he worked when he left school, further resisting the dominant discourse about young men of color as unmotivated or lazy. As mentioned above, he is quick to point out that it was not formal education in general he was leaving, but a particular program that was not working for him. His use of the word 'just' signifies his discontent. Rereading these stanzas with a focus on his use of 'just' and 'actually' highlights the identity-work that James is doing:

I was feeling it, but I wasn't feeling it at the same time. And like, what I mean by that like, I was feeling the mood to go to school but I *just* wasn't feeling the school and what was in the school and it was making me lose interest. And then after that the teachers that was in there, they were like, um, there was bookwork and stuff. I could do it, but it *just* wasn't something that I was looking for, seeking. So I stopped doing that, and I continued to, to work. So I wasn't in the street doing nothing, I was *actually*, I was *actually* doing something. I was either going to school or working. And at that time, I was working and going to school.

'Feeling' in James' vernacular suggests liking or wanting in an empathic way, and James did want to be in school, but his particular school did not connect with the outside-of-school goals or the educational identity he desires. 'Just' appears twice as James speaks about this lack of connection, and he counters this negative positioning with his 'actual' experience that he is not lazy or uninterested, but an active person, someone with a job, someone other than a person "in the street doing nothing." It is this prevalent perception that James is working to challenge with his actual experience: the dominant discourse about young men of color as "nobodies."

'ACTUALLY' BECOMING SOMEBODY

To highlight the utility of James repositioning himself in and through his narratives, particularly through the figured world of identity he creates through his photography, I offer analysis of one final narrative. In focus groups, individual interviews, and during presentations on the Youth Participatory Action Research project of the Men's Group, James would tell one narrative again and again. The narrative recounts a beginning for James, the first time he recalls being negatively positioned in the space of school. The narrative is about his first-grade teacher, and a moment etched in his memory when she told him that he "wasn't gonna be nothin' in life." While a painful story for James, he returns to his elementary school years later to challenge that teacher

and her representation of him.

James begins to tell the story of when he went back, years later, to confront that first grade teacher, but he at first finds it difficult to articulate. He begins:

She told me I was gonna be nothin', and then turn around, and I see her years later. At the same school, doing the same thing. And then I had my, um, *I had my camera in my hand* at, at the time. I was taking pictures and stuff. And I don't know. That was it, really.

When James shared this during a focus group session, I asked him to bring us back to that day, eager to hear the tale of how he had felt when the teacher saw him with his camera in his hand, but James wanted to talk more about how he had felt as a young boy when the teacher told him that he was “gonna be nothin'” in life. He recalls:

At the time I was just thinking. I was like damn— she just really told me that. And not only from that, it was like, um, other situations in class, like— I didn't like the teacher. 'Cause the way she would, um, the way she would handle things in class. And the, the things that she would say to other students too. So, that right there just lead to that— me not liking her. And I showed her otherwise, like, when she said to me that I was, wasn't gonna become nothin' in life, showed her otherwise. And that was it.

I asked James to explain how he had showed her otherwise, to share more about the day that he had gone back to his old school with the camera and had seen his teacher, and James paused, thought for a minute, and then said “With the camera, oh. That day, um. Oh wow, it's recording too, I forgot.” I was concerned that the conversation was bringing up challenging emotions, and I asked if he wanted to shut off the audio-recorder, but James continued:

No, it's good. That day, um. When I went back, I felt, I felt type³⁹, type- I felt like I had type ownership of myself. Like, I went there with the, with the, not the low standards that she left me with. Like, “you're not gonna

³⁹ Again, in James' vernacular, 'type' means really, very, something that is a particular way to such a great extent that it warrants its own category or classification. When James is saying that he felt he had “type ownership of himself,” he is saying that he felt so much agency and self-determination that it deserved a class all its own.

become nothin' in life,” but I went there with the, with the brains of, like, um. Look, look at her. She's doing the same thing and you *actually* did something with your life. And you *actually* became something. So that's how I looked at it, at the time. But, it felt, it felt type good just going there and seeing her. And *actually seeing me not in the position that she thought I would be in, but in a position that I see myself in.*

Note that James uses ‘actually’ to signify that this is his own experience, one that exists in tension with the prevalent negative discourse on what it means to be a young man like him. I asked what position James was referring to, and he responded:

Like, just doing good. Um, putting myself out there, not in a bad way but in a, in a good way. Putting myself out there, seeking help, just trying to do better for my life. And not become that nobody like she said I would become.

Being a photographer, as evidenced by the physical object of the camera, allows James to feel his agency, to feel ownership over his life’s direction and to overcome the “low standards that she left [him] with.” Here, notice that he moves from the first person to her vantage point, shifting from ‘I felt’ and ‘I went there’ to ‘you’re not gonna become nothin’ in life’ and ‘you actually did something with your life.’ He has made his experience into a narrative of overcoming, seeing himself through her eyes and imagining the shift. Not only is he in a position that he sees himself in—he has (re)positioned himself—but he is entering her subjectivity and looking at himself as he imagines she sees him: a young man, in school, working hard to graduate and explore the world. James’ imagined ‘actual’ viewing of himself through the teacher’s eyes is challenging the longstanding effects of her judgment that he will not become anything in life. This harkens back to Dubois’ conception of double-consciousness: in this instance, James has internalized both his own ‘actual’ self-image and the negative image of himself that he imagines his former teacher has had since he was in the first grade. James is able to push

back against the negative image of himself. This is the power of the figured world that James has created through the cultural practice of photography. Not only is he in a position that he “sees himself in,” he is entering her subjectivity and looking at himself as he imagines she sees him: a photographer, in school, working hard to graduate and explore the world. Through his use of a cultural tool— the camera, and the figured world created through his identity as a photographer— James is able to resist the teacher’s perceived negative image of himself and replace it with “you actually became something.”

Drawing on the agency he feels as a photographer, James feels able to challenge the low expectations from key people in his life (in this case, his first grade teacher) and dominant discourses about people like him. As mentioned earlier, his teachers at the GED Center see the camera as a crutch. This misses the function of James’ decision to bring the camera wherever he goes, even when he is not shooting. It is a cultural tool, a badge of an emerging social identity, a resistance to the dominant discourses of what a young Black man from the projects is imagined or ‘supposed’ to be like. Identifying as a photographer is a source of value, a way of seeing differently for James. It represents his identity as a professional, as someone other than the ‘street kids’ from whom he wants to separate himself. Identifying as a photographer gives James license to meet new people and travel to other neighborhoods to explore other ways of being-in-the-world, but more importantly, it allows him to develop a figured world of identity counter to the figured worlds of a ‘nothin’ or ‘street kid.’ James uses the camera as a cultural tool to build a figured world of identity that distinguishes him as an individual, a photographer, someone other than a member of a disparaged group.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

RADICAL LISTENING AND CRITICAL SOCIO-CULTURAL LITERACY PRACTICE

“IT’S JUST A STORY TO YOU”

It is a Tuesday, a beautiful May afternoon. James and I are at the Graduate Center, editing the short film clip that we will use to open our workshop at the Critical Race Studies in Education conference in a few short weeks. He has brought a new camera, one that can video-record for several minutes at a time in addition to taking stills. As we are editing our film clip on my laptop, talking about which fragments of narrative to use and in what order to present them to our imagined audience at the conference, James asks if he can record our conversation with his new camera. I inwardly smile, loving the role-reversal: after months of focus group conversations that I have audio-recorded, James wants to record our conversation. I immediately agree, and we continue our discussion and work.

As the brief video we are making takes shape, I cannot contain my excitement for our workshop, and joyfully exclaim that our workshop and ensuing discussion will be amazing, the highlight of the conference. James gets a serious look on his face at this, and turns off his video-recording camera. He looks at me and says “it’s just a story to you, but we gotta go home to it every night.” I pause for a moment, looking at him, and then thank him for reminding me of this. “You’re right, James— and please don’t let me forget it.” I explain that I am excited for the work that we are doing together, for the discussion that I am sure will grow out of our video and presentation, but that he is right:

the trust built from my relationship with him and the other young men carries with it deep obligations.

These young men have trusted me with their stories, and have wholeheartedly supported my voiced goals of contributing to a teacher education that supports listening to and with young people, to connecting formal education with lived realities. What might this sort of education look like? How is literacy understood within this education? As I endeavor to begin a career devoted to exploring these questions, I hope that whatever excitement I feel for a project, presentation, or piece of writing, that I never forget James' comment, or what is at stake in this work and in these conversations.

THE YOUNG MEN'S USE OF CULTURAL TOOLS/RESOURCES

James, Elijah, Axel, and their peers in the Men's Group—Dante, José, Terrell, Marquise, Hector, and the others—are young men of color who have been identified by our educational and societal systems as 'at-risk' youth. Analysis of their narratives provides insight into their experiences and understandings of how they are framed—and more importantly, how they resist and attempt to renegotiate how they are framed—as somehow deficient, deviant, uneducated and unable to become educated. This is true within the world of GED Connect: many these young men started the program as “literacy students,” the label for learners whose test results are so low that they need remedial skill-work before they can enter GED-level preparation classes. From the beginning, they are labeled as deficient; they are not viewed as possessing resources and knowledges from which they and their teachers can draw on and support.

All of the young men who participated in this study displayed an awareness of negative positioning, of the dominant discourses about what it means to be a young man

of color. They attempt to refuse interpellation as lazy, unproductive, unintelligent, or violent people. Though the individual strategies and cultural tools drawn on in the effort to reposition themselves differ, the young men's narratives suggest that the young men are caught in the double-bind of tensions between group solidarity and individual merit. Without spaces for positive group identity, the young men's strategies appear to lead to *further*-diminished space for solidarity and supportive group identity. Without this more positive sense of collective identifying, the young men who participated in this study are caught between accepting some sort of negative interpellation and renouncing membership in the group. In spite of the mostly negative experiences these young men share within the worlds of formal education, these young men are all, in varying degrees, committed to the GED as a path to the lives they want to lead. In pursuing this and other paths, though, they are left without spaces for support and solidarity, and take up discourses on meritocracy, self-overcoming, and, when faced with extreme challenges, self-blame for perceived failures.

Within the space of the Men's Group, several of the young men—specifically, Terrell, Dante, James, and Marquise, with later refinement from José— developed a theoretical vocabulary to explore the challenges and negotiations that they feel young men like them face. The ideas behind the trap, which is understood to operate through internalized vibrations given off by the neighborhood, and can be mitigated by individuals who find a calling that helps to resist these vibrations, became a framework of meaning- and sense-making for the young men in the Men's Group. In the layer of analysis that I add to this framework, the vibrations are associated with the people in the neighborhood; they are understood to be an effect of group participation and

membership. In an effort to resist the negative positionings associated with the group, the young men seek individual callings, which I understand as drawing on cultural tools and resources in the effort to reposition oneself. Within the group of young men who were participants in this study, the use of cultural tools and resources to seek repositioning varied.

For Axel, this takes the form of a desire to both split himself off from the group and to split his own identity between the things he is proud of, such as trying to help his mother, and the things that he feels he should not be proud of, such as stealing and drug-dealing. This leads to his advice that one should “be the outsider,” resist participation in and enactment of group identity, which for him has been tarnished. He has a desire to be on his own, and analysis of his narratives suggest a deep desire to be heard and understood. He does not want to be known by the actions he is not proud of, and does not want to be castigated as a ‘bad kid.’ In his narratives, he continuously asks for understanding when sharing moments of struggle or personal hardship, asking his audience to understand the context of his actions. He asserts that there are established roles within the social world of school, and that his teachers have cast him as a ‘bad kid.’ Axel voices a hope that the listeners of his narratives will understand that he is a good kid who has been caught up in some bad things; his advice to be the outsider can be understood as a rejection of the available roles he feels he has within the social worlds of formal education. His narratives can be read as an attempt to cast off the negative dominant discourses of what it means to be a young man of color, a call for understanding and a wider range of identity-options.

Elijah attempts to separate himself from the group by drawing on discourses of individual responsibility, overcoming, and merit, thus positioning himself as ‘other’ to a group identity that his narratives suggest he perceives as sullied and tarnished. He craves the support and belonging that he felt during his initial years of high school while he was a member of the school football team; without this space for collective identity, he finds it difficult to be successful in school. After being pushed out of school, he employs tropes in his narratives that suggest he sees his peer group as occupying a figured world of entitlement and contentment. Elijah draws on the discourse of the meritocracy as a lifeline, suggesting that he has a tenacity and drive that other young people lack. The use of this discourse is a cultural tool that Elijah is using in an effort to reposition himself.

For James, the ‘problem’ he experiences in his first two secondary-level educational programs is also associated with his peer group. He describes not “feeling right” in these spaces both because of how he is positioned, but also because of the other learners. Like Elijah, he portrays his peers as occupying a figured world of identity where school is not taken seriously, understanding his peers’ actions as stemming from a lack of focus on formal education. He attempts to reposition himself as ‘other’ to the group through his drawing on the cultural resources of photography and, to a lesser extent, BMX biking. To separate himself from the figured world of the “street kids” in his neighborhood, James engages in the cultural practice of photography, positioning himself as someone who learns and engages with a variety of social settings. Photography opens up a new figured world for James; he becomes a professional and someone good at what he does as opposed to the “street kid” others sometimes perceive him to be. This identity is powerful for him: analysis of his narratives suggest that being a photographer allowed

him to challenge his first-grade teacher's negative perception of him and to show her that he did, indeed, "become somebody."

THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS (RE)FRAMINGS

Analysis of the narratives these young men share highlight just what is at stake in the ways in which group membership, educational 'crisis,' and literacy education are understood and enacted. Framings that position Axel, or Elijah, or James, or other young men of color as possessing some sort of intrinsic problem, as deficit-laden or deviant, contribute and add to the negative discourses that the young men are forced to contend with as they negotiate their identities. This is, of course, true for all people: identity is a process, a continual negotiation, but the prevalence of negative dominant discourses of young men of color engenders a double-bind for these young men. Faced with some sort of interpellation as members of a tarnished group, these young men latch onto individualistic discourses of self-overcoming and seek self-worth based on their ability to rise above challenges that are produced through the circuits of privilege and dispossession.

The ways in which these young men work to negotiate their educational identities—to position and reposition themselves as capable young people able to learn, to be heard, and to accomplish—are acts of learning in and of themselves. Learning, particularly with the field of literacy, understood here as a set of symbol-laden socio-cultural practices formed through contending interests and institutions, is about the making and re-making of selves and identities. Each of these selves and identities affords certain types of position-taking, for ways of being-in-the-world that either expand or constrict individual agency. The ways that literacy, as a field, is understood very much

shape how particular learners are positioned. The young men who I collaborated with in this study, as members of historically dominated groups, often performed literacies that are perceived as deviant or incorrect within cognitive or psycholinguistic conceptions of the field. Embracing socio-cultural approaches to literacy and learning in their various forms—including the New Literacy Studies, Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogies, literacies that are “culturally-relevant,” “culturally-responsive,” or “culturally-sustaining”—opens terrain for reading various literacy practices as people’s cultural tools for identity negotiations and participation in activity, for position-taking and position-making.

Documenting the ways in which these young men attempt to reposition themselves points to a path that can bridge ‘critical’ approaches to literacy education and culturally-responsive pedagogies. In this neoliberal moment, it is comparatively easy to rally against damaging policies like high-stakes testing, narrowly-conceived evaluation instruments, lack of funds for public education and the distribution of the available funds; less easy is articulating how and why educative processes and practices can change for the better⁴⁰ within a field such as literacy education. At the beginning of this work, I maintained that the role of continued research around these sets of questions should be twofold: one, to challenge the framings of educational issues, as the ways in which a ‘problem’ is framed engenders the range of possible solutions, and two, to shine a spotlight on ways in which to support young men of color. It is this second purpose that I

⁴⁰ This is reminiscent of my time teaching in an ‘alternative’ school: my colleagues and I were much more comfortable stating what we did not like about the established school system than positively articulating what it was we advocated and practiced. Defining ourselves in opposition to the Board/Department of Education led to many strengths, but did not in and of itself help us to come to a coherent vision of our praxis. Similarly, I argue that one role of research around the sets of questions I engage here is to point to a path forward with these positive articulations of praxis, to assist in the creation of visions that go beyond the negative or reactive.

want to focus on here, arguing that this research leads to the necessity of supporting and assessing learners through listening in new ways, in a way that bridges aspects of culturally-responsive pedagogy and critical approaches.

Though critical, socio-cultural, and culturally-responsive/sustaining approaches to literacy education have the potential to open new pathways of support and learning in ways that psycholinguistic and cognitive approaches to literacy do not, it must be acknowledged that a professed critical or socio-cultural stance does not by itself create more support or learning or life-outcome opportunities. Further, established orthodoxies in these approaches can stifle the ability for educators, researchers, and policy-makers to listen to and *hear* the people they profess to be helping; there is no single best method or approach that works for all people and in all instances (Luke and Freebody, 1999). I argue that grounding an approach to support and learning in the position-taking and identity-negotiations of the learners is crucial as a starting point.

This in itself is not new: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy has long advocated that literacy education begin with "cultural circles" that engage participants social worlds, struggles, and hopes (Freire, 1970). This approach, though, is often laden with a historical-materialist theoretical framing and focused on resisting the false consciousness engendered by the ruling class ideology, suggesting that once dominant ideologies are challenged, an undistorted and more accurate view of social reality can be accessed (Luke, in press). It is not surprising that the resulting 'more accurate' view often resembles the politics of the pedagogue's reading of the world and word, suggesting that the 'critical' approach is simply a matter of substituting the educator's or facilitator's politics as a regime of truth as opposed to the dominant ideology (Buckingham, 2003).

Other approaches to critical literacy, such as the models dominant in Australia and the United Kingdom, focus on analyzing the structures, features, and ways of positioning prevalent in different genres and modes of communication, at times eschewing learners' lived realities when advocating for the questioning of textual representations. Approaches here in the United States that draw on critical race theory and postcolonial studies can, at times, generalize about a group's members' linguistic forms and textual practices in ways that are reductive, limiting or statically defining that group identity and its needs (Luke, in press). This, too, happens in many culturally-responsive and culturally-sustaining approaches to literacy education, which are grounded in the understanding of culture discussed in Chapter three: culture is seen as a bounded unit; members of a perceived cultural group are assumed to view and interact in the world in the same way, and to have the same cultural resources and tools at their disposal.

What I see as necessary to build on and bridge the strengths of these approaches, and to better support minoritized learners, is to move beyond the essentialism of culture or an imposed political stance to listen to, for, and with people's ways of sense-making, identity-negotiations, and chosen tools/resources for navigating challenging positioning practices. This study documents identity-negotiations through analysis of the narratives of Axel, Elijah, James, and the other young men; and is of course limited in scope. Though I suggest similarities at the level of group identity, namely the desire to separate oneself from the group because of the group's perceived tarnished status, this study is not intended to document the identity-negotiations of all young men of color. Where I see utility in this research is as an exemplar of listening to and with a group of minoritized learners. Though I had worked with all of these young men through my role as a literacy

coach, I knew little of their individual lives, aspirations, struggles, and ways of making sense of their social worlds through this role. The sort of listening documented in this study has the potential to create conditions for literacy events and practices that connect with and stem from learners' figured worlds, identities, and funds of knowledge or cultural resources. The enthusiasm with which some of these young men participated in this research and accompanying YPAR project highlights the potential of a space of solidarity and positive collective identity, and participatory collaboration can be a site of meaningful growth and identity-development as well (Morrell, 2008). Further, this listening can help to navigate the ever-present challenge of resisting reification of a pedagogical or support approach as the next regime of truth. A critical socio-cultural literacy practice that has this listening at its origin and as its core can move the field from assuming a moment of conscientization where awakening has occurred and social reality appears undistorted to a continuous listening for nuance and ongoing negotiations. Rather than imagining a fixity to the cultural worlds and practices of learners, a deep listening can build understanding of complexities, tensions, and people's struggles as they engage, speak, challenge or take up funds of knowledge or cultural tools.

Before sharing more detail on what this listening might look like, I want to comment that reification is also a pitfall for educational research as a whole. The ways in which the larger field of educational research has sought to understand the 'crisis' of young men of color and educational/life outcomes has led to established orthodoxies that can limit potential solutions and practice for educators, researchers, and policy-makers⁴¹.

⁴¹ As critical literacy scholars Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan write: "the 'technologies' of formal assessment inevitably involve some forms of regulation and surveillance...assessment practices entail a struggle for control over knowledge, meaning, and taste...they act as a gatekeeping mechanism to maintain the privileges of those who belong to the 'right' class, ethnic group, or gender

The current framing of the crisis that seeks to challenge deficit models about young people of color is the School-to-Prison Pipeline, the notion that, implicitly or explicitly, policies and practices in educational institutions channel young people of color from sites of education to sites of incarceration. I argue that the School-to-Prison Pipeline runs the very real risk of becoming an entrenched trope that seeks to guide praxis without fostering the kinds of listening-with and responsiveness that I see as integral to resisting the negative practices that minoritize learners. Like any framing, the School-to-Prison pipeline highlights some courses of action and obscures others. Its utility, to my mind, is as a frame within which to push for change within the policy realm for things like funding equity or meaningful assessment practices. As a trope that works within and frames literacy education and micro-level praxis, though, I have concerns about its utility. Identifying a set of pedagogical or literacy practices as the ones that have the power to interrupt a linear guiding of minoritized learners from schools to prisons seems to simplify these issues. This is said in no way to disavow the horrific and expanding prison-industrial complex in our society, but to again argue that the way an issue is framed delineates the range of potential actions that can be taken to engender change. Many scholars who work in the policy realm are working for more meaningful modes of assessment, learner support through after-school programs, arts education, discussion-based civics education, mentoring and solidarity/support networks, restorative justice practices and youth courts, and so on. This sort of policy work can lead to the possibility of sites of solidarity and positive group identities, and change on the policy-level is absolutely needed. In addition to this work, I argue that we also need to challenge the

group...this may happen as much in the assessment practices of critical literacy as in those of more conservative literature-based curricula" (Misson and Morgan, 2006, 204).

doxa, or dominant wisdom, of literacy education praxis in ways that lead to support, resistance, and powerful pedagogies.

What might constitute this support, resistance, and powerful pedagogical practices? First, these approaches must resist codification. Regarding framings of educational or social ‘crises,’ discourses about a group of people, or approaches to literacy education, there is a danger of working within an entrenched framing. There is a need for a continuous questioning of frames, a dynamic (re)framing that can only come from a listening-with practice, a conversation that allows for responsiveness and the possibility of new meaning-makings. This sort of continuous (re)framing can come from a radical listening.

THE POTENTIALITIES OF RADICAL LISTENING

What do I mean by radical listening? Here I am arguing for the importance of the ways in which people make sense of their experiences and understandings, as opposed to the ways in which others, including researchers, teachers, or policy-makers, might understand them. Building on Kathy Weingarten’s (1995, 1997) concept of radical listening, which she defines as “helping a voice to be heard,” I envision a means of educational assessment and instruction that listens for and supports the position-taking identity negotiations of learners.

Though this concept grows out of psychotherapy, I see it as a useful import to the realm of socio-cultural understandings of literacy education. A feminist psychotherapist who engages narrative analysis, Weingarten (1997) found that possibilities for understanding and courses of action were opened when she moved from focusing exclusively on her analysis of an issue to her patient’s knowledges and understandings.

Rather than attempting to explain someone's behaviors, she shifted her understanding of her role as a therapist to support her patients' processes of understanding. Through dialogue and an awareness of position-taking practices, Weingarten found that radical listening helped people to grow into new narratives and understandings, ones that did not necessarily accord with her (Weingarten's) narratives or understandings. Weingarten's role as therapist became one of listening and dialoguing to create the possibility of these new, and more nuanced, narratives and meanings to emerge.

Though there are important differences between the role of a therapist and the role of an educator, the concept of assessment within the world of education was once much closer to a form of radical listening. Assessment, a word whose etymological root is the Latin *assidere*, meaning to sit beside, has largely been replaced by mechanistic forms of evaluation within the neoliberal education reform ethos (Rose, 2011). Teacher education and practice are being overcome with a hyper-focus on "evidence-based practices" that are "data-driven." What constitutes evidence and worthy data is preordained, falling within positivist traditions of measurement and objectivity, and what constitutes knowledge itself is fixed at the outset. The mechanistic forms of evaluation, including high-stakes tests for which preparation and application continue to siphon off more and more of public education budgets to private interests, view education along the lines of the banking model (Freire, 1970), where preordained knowledge is delivered by those who possess it to those who are lacking. Knowledge and culture are not produced through social (including pedagogical) processes; they are viewed as preexisting and fixed, a matter of simple transmission.

Situating a radical listening-with at the beginning of a pedagogical process can do much to create a space for shift. Rather than assuming the need for a particular approach or textual resource based on a learner's phenotype or linguistic resources, listening to develop some sense of the learner's figured worlds and cultural tools can lead to a dialogical and more meaningful pedagogical practice. This has implications not only for teaching and learning, as will be explored in what follows, but for 'disciplinary' processes as well. It has been well documented that boys and young men of color are disproportionately suspended and more harshly penalized for disciplinary infractions (Skiba and Sprague, 2008). That this occurs in part due to dominant perceptions of who these boys and young men are seems evident; having tools to listen-with can open up spaces for young people to be heard, and to position themselves in ways that run counter to prevalent negative discourses⁴². A radical listening-with has the potential to open spaces for those in positions of power within the world of school—teachers, administrators, counselors, deans, and so on—to understand the sense-making that goes into the position-taking actions and negotiations of young people, and create opportunities for young people explore their position-takings and, when desired, to push back against positioning practices⁴³.

⁴² In agreement with Pedro Noguera (2008), I do not intend to portray boys and young men of color as passive victims to policies solely based on these prevalent negative discourses: ethnographic work has provided examples of how and why (what I and many other educators would consider to be) harmful actions on the part of some young people make sense within the context of their lived realities. One notable example is L. Janelle Dance's (2002) ethnography *Tough Fronts*, which documents why some learners enacted "gangsta-like poses" as cultural tools within the social space of formal education, in some cases leading to disciplinary actions and, because there was no space to discuss and explore these position-taking practices, disconnect with school.

⁴³ Though there is great potential, I also want to acknowledge the very real organizational, structural, and hegemonic forces that limit the enactment of radical listening. I agree with anthropologist Norma González, who writes "What is not evident is how practitioners, within their very real structural constraints, can realistically carry out emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies when they themselves are victims of disempowerment and their circumstances preclude full professional development"(González, 2005, 2).

In the first chapter, I quote one of the co-authors of the (2011) College Board report *The Educational Experiences of Young Men of Color*, who said while discussing the implications of the study that “if men of color didn’t commit crimes, their incarceration rates would not be what they are.” Another discussant of the study on the same panel, community college student Kadeem Palmer, exclaimed that the issue was “African-American males themselves” who see higher education as a betrayal. These simplistic statements evidence the need for greater depth and nuance in understanding identities and positioning/repositioning practices. This greater depth and nuance has the potential to engender spaces to interrupt the negative effects that grow out of reductive framings.

OPERATIONALIZING CRITICAL SOCIOCULTURAL LITERACY

There are promising approaches that are being conceived and implemented, creating spaces that offer what I call radical listening. Though I recognize the limitations of descriptive research, I want to conclude by highlighting work that moves us towards the practice of an operationalized radical listening-with.

As mentioned above, many in the field of literacy education have seen promise in culturally-responsive literacy and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006, Gay, 1995, Lazar, 2007). Moje and Hinchman (2007) survey the literature on culturally-responsive approaches and find that there are three strains of thought at work: cultural responsiveness as a means of bridging bridges between mainstream and nonmainstream groups, cultural responsiveness as a tool for negotiating multiple discourse communities, and cultural responsiveness as a tool for social and epistemological shifts. As discussed in

Much work must be done to create spaces and structures to support radical listening and socio-cultural approaches to literacy education.

Chapter three, these approaches hinge on differing notions of ‘culture.’ Moje and Hinchman argue that culture is often reduced to “ethnic, racial, or—less often—social class backgrounds,” leading them to suggest:

rather than naming a particular sort of responsiveness (i.e. ‘cultural’), we prefer to simply talk about *responsive teaching*. By responsive teaching, we mean that which *merges* the needs and interest of youth as persons with the needs and interests of youth as learners of new concepts, practices, and skills. Such teaching also recognizes that needs and interests are always mediated by membership in many different groups of people and by activities engaged in many different times, spaces, and relationships. (Moje and Hinchman, 2007, 322)

This is argued with the recognition that the cultural knowledges and ways of being-in-the-world of learners of color, recently-arrived immigrant learners, and emergent bilinguals are often those that are marginalized. Focusing on responsiveness while avoiding the label ‘cultural’ is an attempt to avoid reductive assumptions about people’s practices, and can afford space for “knowledges and Discourses of the youth’s homes; ethnic, racial, or geographic communities; and youth culture, popular culture, school culture, classroom culture, or discipline-specific culture”(322).

In short, ‘culture’ is not understood here as a bounded unit, a closed system of semiotics that tags all members of a perceived cultural group. This understanding of culture has been at the heart of many uses of ‘cultural mismatch’ theory to frame educational inequities. Moje and Hinchman’s approach has much in common with the funds of knowledge approach (González et. al, 2005). Rather than locates the ways of being-in-the-world of an individual or group in a bounded unit, these scholars posit that people draw on a variety of systems and practices, and use them strategically as resources and tools. The way to begin working with and supporting people in an educative process is to listen for how people are strategically engaging practices.

Not creating a space for such listening and dialogue has dire consequences, making schools complicit with— or intensifying— the production and reproduction of social inequities. Through a radical listening-with, educators can begin to hear identity-negotiations as opposed to assuming an entrenched negative nature. Researchers Wendy Luttrell and Caroline Parker (2001) maintain that:

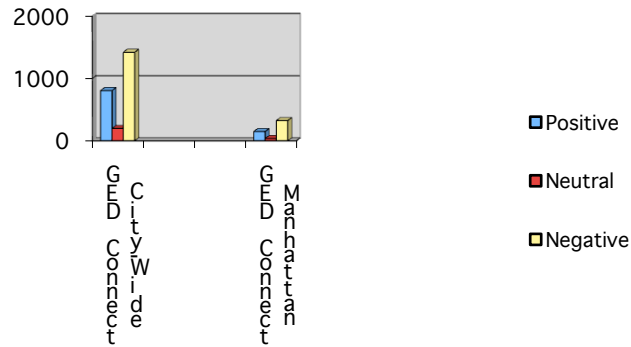
what seems most crucial for educators to understand is that students' *positions* within their figured worlds need not be equated with their *dispositions*...teachers who mistakenly equate their students' positions within their figured world as essential dispositions (i.e. that students are unmotivated or slated for a particular future) can play a limiting role in students' lives. (Luttrell and Parker, 2001, 245-246)

Understanding that identities are produced and are constantly being negotiated has the potential to create wider possibilities of self and action for young people. This understanding can grow out of radical listening-with, and can lead to educators connecting young people to texts that are enabling and speak to their lived realities (Tatum, 2006). It can lead to educators understanding young people's socially-situated identities, and making connections between readers' reading-ideologies and socially-situated identities with a wide variety of texts and textual practices (Kirkland, 2011). Listening for and hearing young people's identity-negotiations has the potential to support spaces of solidarity, and to invite young people to participate in and critique discursive practices and literacies. Though I do not want to romanticize the work that the young men and I did, the degree of engagement with which the young men connected to our shared goals through the YPAR work and my research contrasted greatly with the sorts of relationships I generally witnessed between young people and adults at The Opportunity Center and the Manhattan Central Center. This evidences the possibilities of tapping into the lived realities, negotiations, and understandings of young men who are

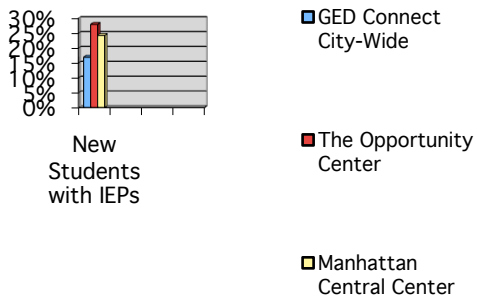
marginalized in and out of formal education; there is the possibility of shifting schools and other social spaces from being sites that ostracize people and reproduce negative discourses to sites of where young people develop an array of cultural tools to resist these negative discourses. Tapping into and building on these funds of knowledge and strengths seems a better approach than labeling people like the young men described in this study as 'literacy students' because of their perceived learning deficits. For young people who have to contend with negative dominant discourses, like young men of color in a second-chance program, listening to identity-negotiations can lead to meaningful support in and out of formal education.

Appendix

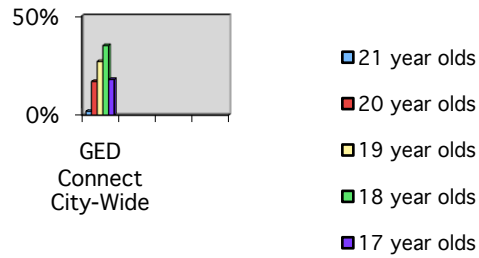
Data Describing the GED Connect Program



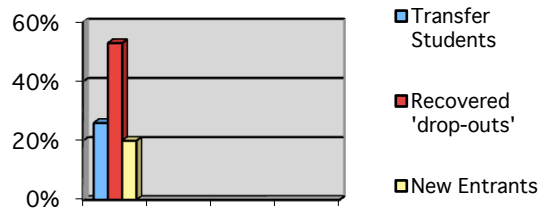
Discharged students in the GED Connect program



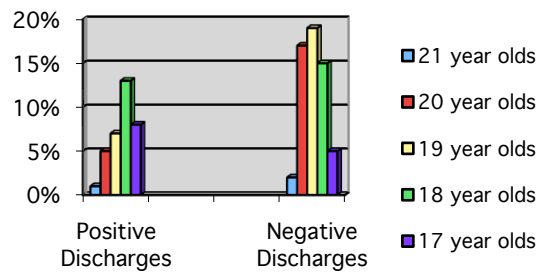
Percentage of New Students with IEPs for the 2011-2012 school year



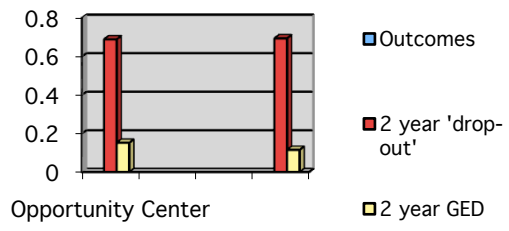
New Students by Age, GED Connect City-Wide



New Enrollees by Admit Code (transfer, former 'drop-outs,' or new entrants)



GED Connect City-Wide Discharges by Age, positive and negative (2,230 students total for 2011-2012 school year)



Outcomes Over a Two-Year Period at The Opportunity Center and Manhattan Central Center

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