1-1-2013

A Phenomenological Study To Engage African-American Youth Voice In Deliberations Regarding Their Response To Schooling

Donna Michelle Coulter
Wayne State University,

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO ENGAGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH VOICE IN DELIBERATIONS REGARDING THEIR RESPONSE TO SCHOOLING

by

DONNA M. COULTER

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2013

MAJOR: EDUCATIONAL EVALUATION AND
        RESEARCH

Approved by:

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Advisor   Date

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this manuscript to God, my father. Father, your love and care for me is unfailing. I am grateful that you are my rock and shield. I give you all the praise for every challenge and test. I am wiser, stronger, and more loving as a result. Father God, thank you for getting me to this place in life.

To Branson, my husband: I dedicate this document to you because of you unfailing support, leadership, and overall good spirit. You have been patient, supportive and kind and I am very appreciative to you. God has done a great work in you Mr. Coulter, and I pray that he continues to richly bless you and everything you touch.

To Imani, my daughter: I dedicate this work to you because you have been faithful and supportive of my studies. I want to share this achievement with you because of the personal sacrifices you have made when I had to study, go to the library, or take quiet time to write. You have accompanied me to classes, stayed with others until I came home from classes or the library, and with all the sophistication of an adult, offered sound advice when I did not want to continue. You have prepared numerous meals, offered words of encouragement, as well as transcribed field notes and read manuscripts. You are a wise and nurturing young woman, and I am thankful for your influence in my life. May the will of God be your guide and heart beat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It has been fifty years since Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka (347U.S. 354, 1954), and ample empirical evidence has shown that an academic gap between African-American (also referred to as Black) students and other groups still exist (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). This is true regardless of the type of standardized measure used to assess academic intelligence, scholastic aptitude, or proficiency (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Racial disparities even occur with building-level indicators like course-level enrollment, grade point average, graduation rank, and percentage heading to college (Ferguson, 2002). The gap appears around early childhood, and the differences become more pronounced as students continue through the educational system (Fryer & Levitt, 2006). By the time many African-American and Latino students reach Grade 12 (provided they do not dropout), they are approximately four years behind their Asian and Caucasian peers (Nord, C., Hicks, L., Hoover, K., Jones, et al., 2011; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). Thus, the results indicate that African-Americans on average enter the workforce, military, or higher education having the ability level of most seventh-grade Caucasian children (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009).

Even when students are matched on social class indicators such as zip code, family income or educational background, the racial disparity remains (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Although African-American suburban students presumably have greater cultural, economic, and social capital and the same per pupil spending, teacher-to-student ratio, and teachers as their suburban peers, the advantages have not translated into competitive scores across urban and suburban schools (Ferguson, 2002). Among African-Americans, residential and

school setting does not seem as predictive of school performance as do childrearing practices and educational strategies (Fordham, 1996).

Although there has been significant achievement in African-American college matriculation and completion rates, the National Center for Educational Statistics also showed that greater numbers of African-Americans than Caucasians dropped out of high school (2011). As well, the college matriculation rate for those groups remains below those of Caucasian high school graduates. In fact, Hispanic and African-American young adults who enroll in college were only half as likely to earn a degree as their Caucasian counterparts (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2011).

Explanations for the Gap

Within the last decade, there has been a resurgence of socio-cultural theories which have advanced the notion of inherit differences. Sometimes informed by student voice, more research makes distinctions in social norms, practices, and language, rather than innate deficiencies. Research shows that genetics may have some minor influence on individual natural ability; however, the extent to which performance is associated with race has not been proven in the data available (Hunt, 2007; Jensen & Rushton, 2005; Nisbett, Aronson, Blair, Dickens, Flynn, Halpern, Turkheimer, 2012). The literature does, however, include evidence of social and cultural influences which has contributed to the differences in students' participation across racial groups (Centrie, 2003; Hale, 1986). Examples of contributing factors exist at the societal level, e.g. historical factors like laws supporting physical and psychological marginalization and regulation of African-Americans to the underclass, media images, etc., as well as microcosm of society, the schools where school segregation through tracking and special education, social reproduction or preparedness to serve, and lower expectations (Anderson, 1999; Bronfenbrenner,

1979; Centrie, 2003; Steele, 1997; Demo & Hughes, 1990; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Tatum, 1997). According to Howe, the educational values of African-Americans are often shaped in response to such discriminatory and oppressive practices experienced (1997).

Ogbu (1983) came to a cultural-ecological theory of minority adjustment and performance that highlights the effects of oppression on people's perceptions, perspectives, and attitudes, and came up with two groupings, the involuntary (nonimmigrant) and "voluntary" (immigrant) minority students (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Often criticized for such broad depictions, Ogbu defined nonimmigrants as groups of people who have historically been dominated or subjected to servitude in America (e.g., Mexicans, Native-Americans, and descendants of enslaved Africans). In contrast, most East Indian and Chinese immigrants are examples of people who came to America voluntarily seeking opportunity or the "American dream" (Foley, 2004; Ogbu, 2003).

In this view, two groupings of interconnected factors contributing to African-American student success exist: system factors and community forces (Carter, 2003; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). System factors relate to ways that society at large and the schools treat certain minority groups (e.g., social reproduction, student control or hegemony, low teacher expectations, social-class inequities, testing bias, etc.), whereas community forces include the ways disenfranchised students perceive and respond to educational systems which are shaped by a youth's background and minority status in the country (2003). In Spring's view (2006), African-American students:

- believe they must 'act white' to achieve academically often resulting in feelings of guilt and shame

- fear school success means rejection of racial identity, which can result in low academic effort

- fear loss of peer group due to accusations of 'acting white', which can result in performing below ability and no challenge

- harbor hostility toward dominant culture which can sometimes be provoked by the direct actions of marginalizing behavior

- suspect school policies and practices favored dominant cultures and design for their benefit

- doubt own ability to achieve, which can result in low academic effort or peer pressure of those doing better.

Such thought processes result in what Ogbu called *low academic effort syndrome,* or a conscious decision to do enough to pass (2003). Low academic effort is a factor and presents asBlack students making poor grades, not applying themselves, and/or taking below ability courses (Ogbu, 2003). Although the messages from homes encouraged these students "to work twice as hard" as their white peers," youth often felt conflicted, i.e., expecting that the rewards were not equitable despite increased efforts (Ogbu, 2003, p. 153).

It was this type of student attitude and response which Ogbu felt had not been addressed in educational reform, and thus argued for a type of system forces-community forces dependent relationship (2003). Efforts to address the black-white gap, historically, have involved the adults and professionals making school building and personnel reforms (e.g., vouchers, charter, performance contracting, merit pay, etc.). Strategies and research, on the other hand, to address community forces are rarely approached.

No Child Left Behind

Thus, strategies to close the achievement gap have continued to involve remaking system policies and practices. Such is the case with the recently re-enacted No Child Left Behind Act

originally signed more about 12 years ago. The tenor of the legislation placed pressure on school districts and buildings to ensure that all students meet grade level proficiency by 2014. The strength of the legislation was the heavy financial sanctions placed on underperforming schools. Within a school, if any student subgroup persistently fails to meet performance targets, districts must provide public school choice and supplemental services to those students – and eventually restructure the school's governance. Even schools that performed well overall were at risk (Bridglall & Gordon, 2003; NGA Center for Best Practices, 2005). Naturally, school districts and building staff relying on federal money engaged in various types and levels of reform (e.g., multiculturalism, African-centered education, project-based programs, etc.) to address the issue.

While some improvements have been seen for the lower grades, certain contributing factors at the high school levels persist, particularly in urban areas. Understanding why kids in this group respond to schooling as they do, and identifying meaningful strategies to address the issues is critical. Sustaining the public educational system is of importance to many, but moreover generation after generation of Black young men and women continues to be left behind without any more clarity or solutions (Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991; Fine & Weis, 2003; Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Morris & Morris, 2002; Ogbu, 2003; Solomon, 1992; Steele, 1997). Particularly as recent labor reports indicate that equally prepared students can earn comparable wages despite their race, this issue needs to be fixed (Fryer & Levitt, 2006).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this research was to learn how these youth think and talk about their response to schooling. As will become clearer in what follows in Chapter 2, this research was guided by a convergence of three theories. It builds upon Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of minority adjustment and performance earlier introduced (Ogbu, 1983; Ogbu, 2003), provides a summary of the work of critical race theorists and ethnographers who have engaged African-American student voice in research and deliberations regarding racial educational disparities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Davidson, 1997; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Fine, et al., 2003), and then engages the democratic education writings of Gutmann (1987; 1998), Howe (1997), and Freire, (1974) as a strategy to involve inner city kids to influence their peers' performance.

Adults have historically been the deliberators regarding school reforms and the subjects for change (Carter, 2006; Fletcher, 2004a, Fletcher, 2004b; Williams, 1996) The phenomenon has been extensively examined using various lenses (e.g., positivist, post-positivist, critical, etc.), yet those directly impacted by the decisions, the Black urban student, are often missing. Understanding the essence of students' feelings, thoughts, and responses must be fundamental to how reforms meet the need (Freire, 1974; Mitra, 2008). Although a growing body of the extant literature supports the efficacy of engaging student voice in school reform, in education it represents yet another area, however, where minority youth are left behind (Beaudoin, 2005, 2004; Ruddock, 2003). The answers seem neither simple nor easily achieved; however, the importance of additionally informing the literature with authentic expression of the Black youth constituency is, at a minimum, consistent to the American democratic way, but more ideally, good research practice.

Hence, three research questions guided my inquiry:

- What are youth's thoughts on achievement and how they engage as citizens in community discussions about achievement?

- What do youth know about and how do they act regarding participation in democratic activities serving their community's interests?

- How do they talk about educational opportunity and about their schooling relative to their hopes, dreams, and desires?

Chapter 3 describes a quasi-ethnographic, phenomenological research method, which provides a vantage point for answering these research questions.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Often characterized in the literature as oppositional, resistant, dissonant, anti-intellectual, alienated, youth's reactions can be understood in the larger context of identity development. Based on their experiences working with younger children, veteran teachers and scholars Delpit (1988), Foster (1998), and Ladson-Billing (1997) found that efforts to marginalize African-American children are subtle and began early in the educational process. In their view, the policies, curriculums, books, pedagogy, teacher-student relations, and verbal and nonverbal messages, at a minimum, promote social reproduction, i.e., more of the same. As an example, Hale found that African-American children having the same ability level as white children get relegated to special education or lower ability courses, while the white child gets placed in a regular classroom (1986). Children recognize differences in treatment based on race, and the effects are often internalized (Centrie, 2003; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Tatum, 1997).

In what follows, I argue for the type of equal educational opportunity that involves African-American students as change agents to help reduce the achievement gap. (Anderson, 1999; Ogbu, 1983; Ogbu, 2003). Firstly, I discuss the limited achievement gap literature which has been informed by rarely heard from African-American student participant researchers to highlight the fact that kids recognize and respond, whether overtly or covertly, to injustice on a regular basis, (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Davidson, 1997; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Fine, et al., 2003), and building upon Ogbu's concept of community forces, I discuss the democratic education writings of Gutmann (1987, 1998), Howe (1997), and Freire (1974) as a strategy for educating youth to resist oppression in ways that promote their own good with student voice. What motivation might youth see to achieve to their ability? What controls do youth exercise that might help improve their circumstances?

Application of Community Forces

Notably, system level discriminatory practices exist which can preclude Blacks from making certain gains (Luis, 2011). In fact, for some, the very existence of programs such as Affirmative Action strongly suggests that the playing field continues to be unleveled (Ogbu, 2003). As a result, Mickelson asserts, African-Americans lack the solid examples that hard work can result in actualizing the American dream (1990). Consequently, African-Americans have skepticism about the value of schooling, and further lack a "strong norm of academic pursuit," because students do not understand, Ogbu contended, the relationship between school performance and post-high school opportunities (2003, p. 147).

Farrell supported the notion that students did not make a connection between school and work opportunities while in high school (1990). When asking students about their decision to drop-out of school, many reported leaving school because of the perceived disconnect between their academic identity and occupational prospects. Farrell reported: "Even if there [were] conflicting selves, they still search for a self-as-my-work. If school does not fit into this "self," they will leave it behind, paying no heed to the exigencies of the job market" (p. 94).

Imprisoned young adults interviewed about their participation in a jail-based post-secondary education program, however, came to establish a connection between school and job opportunities. Students reported getting serious about school and constructing a hybrid identity of new priorities and senses of themselves. Youth matured to have new resilient forms of aspirational capital by developing different academic identities from those in high school. As well, by learning to value and perform well in school, the students formed positive post-release goals for their futures (Luis, 2011).

The research does not seem to support earlier notions that related Black student performance to measures of innate ability or *g* (Jensen, 2005; Johnson, 1997). Rather, students make decisions regarding the extent to perform based on what is to be gained.

Social Justice

Generally, many African-Americans have come to accept the government and educators as the authority on education, a belief system often inculcated in theory and practice with African-American children (Irvine, 1996). Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin (1995) reported that:

> [P]assivity among minority families is often interpreted as reflecting numerous parental difficulties, such as lack of knowledge of their rights, or of the system procedures and policies; difficulties with transportation, child care, or work; unquestioning trust in, or deference to, school authorities (Harry, et al., 1995, p. 364).

Historian and scholar Carter G. Woodson in *Miseducation of the Negro*, described the behavior in a historical context:

> [African-American] have been terrorized to the extent that they are afraid even to discuss political matters publicly. There must be no exposition of the principles of government in the schools, and this must not be done in public among [African-Americans] with a view to stimulating political activity. [African-Americans] engaged in other spheres in such communities finally come to the point of accepting silence on these matters as a fixed [unspoken] policy (1990, p. 87).

Ultimately, there was an ever-present danger in not participating in the democracy, in not learning to locate the interests of one's community and identify those of others – and that danger was marginalization, common to which was suspicion and resentfulness of the larger systems only perpetuating the distance between (Fields, & Feinberg, 2001; Harry. et al., 1995). Thus, I began to wonder what youth know about, and in what ways they act, to participate in democratic activities related to serving their community's interests.

As a social institution, school has been one of the central places where ideas about democracy are learned. Some argue that schools should explicitly teach students democratic

principles (Gutmann, 1987; Howe, 1997). Gutmann determined that it was the responsibility of government, education professionals, and parents to help shape an educational environment that produces citizens with the motivation, knowledge, and ability to participate in deliberations affecting their own lives (Gutmann, 1999). Considering each entity's potentially competing interest, Gutmann identified two principles, nonrepression and nondiscrimination, to guide engagement in deliberations. As Gutmann explains, "discriminatory acts are an extension of repression…[t]he effect of discrimination is often to repress…the desire of [opposing] groups to participate" (p. 45).

Deliberative character was an important aspect of Gutmann's theory, whereby students not only knew enough to come to conclusions that affect their lives and community, but also understood enough about democratic principles to live by them, particularly exhibiting decency and respect. Gutmann proposed using threshold and authorization principles to achieve equal educational opportunity (1997). Her threshold involves the knowledge students have to exercise their political rights, while authorization requires individuals' ability to deliberatively and critically defend the best interests of their community—to hammer out complex compromises that allow for removing repression as a social norm where some must suffer   others have privilege (Taylor, 1992). Howe agreed:

> [T]he goal of democratic character requires fostering general habits of mind that render individuals capable of and disposed to gathering and evaluating information, scientific and otherwise….Educating its students for democratic participation…the first responsibility of public schooling (Howe, p. 83).

Howe felt, however, that the principle of non-repression did not go far enough. Democratic deliberation requires that the needs, interests, and desires of all citizens must be accounted for in what counts as schooling worth having (1997). In the absence or perceived

absence of such, some people choose not to participate in systems that they feel are not for their good. For instance, in the way schools are currently constituted, they fail to meet the needs of certain children (Hale, 1986; Madhabuti & Madhabuti, 1994; Marks & Tonso, 2006). Based on their examination of school structure, Bowles and Gintis identified that "[t]he educational system helps integrate youth into the economic system…through a structural correspondence between its social relations and those of production" (1976, p. 131). Weis and Fine wrote:

> Students learn attitudes and modes of behavior suited to that level in the production process that they will ultimately occupy. Thus, African-Americans, for example, who are concentrated in school whose repressive, arbitrary, generally chaotic internal order, coercive authority structure and minimal possibility for advancement mirror the characteristics of inferior job situations. Working class students...emphasize rule following, and close attention to the specification of others. In sharp contrast, schools in affluent neighborhoods have relatively open systems that favor student participation, less direct supervision, more student electives, and in general, a value system stressing internalized standards of control (2005, p. 11).

Beyond a nonrepression principle, Howe argued for a standard of nonoppression as a way to consider what personal controls, possessions, and ideals must be shared, surrendered, or developed in order to achieve a democratic society (Howe, 1997). The authorization principle requires that individuals participate in a democratic society in such a way to defend the best interests of their community – to critically think about the complex compromises that allow for removing oppression as a social norm where some must suffer while others have privilege. Howe argued for changing such school settings – what Ogbu termed the "context of choice." Context of choice represents a white identified social circumstance, when whites face a different sort of choices than do members of historically marginalized communities. As one student articulated:

> The only way to reform high schools that are equipped to reach all youth of this generation and the generations to come, is to have youth input on every aspect of the reform. There is no way adults will be able to reform high school without the input of youth. For example, I am going to create an institution for adults and everything…including the curriculum, will be designed by youth. Now I know all the

adults are thinking how can youth design an institution for adults without any adult input? That's the same question we ask when we hear about the changes that are supposed to better us (Wilson, 2009, ¶ 1).

Howe established that viable opportunities must not be "bare," or lack substance. In as much, an individual must also be equipped with adequate information and timely preparation in order for an opportunity to be meaningful. Considering the "tree-like" nature of education where prerequisites must be met for matriculation to the next phase, it becomes critical that youth are advised of options in advance. For instance, failing to take some courses can foreclose future opportunities, or make them more costly to choose (1997).

Overview of Student voice

Student involvement promotes ownership, research and critical thinking skills, empowerment of key stakeholders, and fosters effective and sustainable change (Cook-Sather, 2002; Marcia, 1980; Nastasi, 1998; Ruddock, 2003). Participation in this way offers youth a practical way to learn about their internal struggle, while gaining a sense of empowerment through increased consciousness and skills acquisition (Freire, 1993; Kaba, 2000; Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe, & Ross, 2007).

A process of engaging student voice as a norm can be an effective way to keep students invested in schooling (Fletcher, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2009; Torre, et al., 2003). When engaged, professional educators have found that kids can help schools become more effective educational environments for them, and as such, student voice can be a powerful tool for improving student performance and closing the achievement gap. In fact, because performance accountability ultimately rests on students, Levin (1999) argued that "education reform cannot succeed and should not precede without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects" (The Education Alliance, 2004, p. 3).

Across racial groups, good academic outcomes are linked to having a meaningful role in society (Bandura, 1977; Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe, Ross, 2007; Mitra, 2004; O'Brien, 2006). Schunk found that youth with a sense of purpose and occupation were intrinsically motivated to achieve academically (1991). The process of engaging student voice was an effective way to keep students invested in schooling (Byrd & Braxton, 2004; Dewey, 1916; Fletcher, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Gatto, 2006; Torre, 2005). Psychosocial theorist determined that adolescence was marked by the need for responsibility and occupation (Erikson, 1969; Marcia, 1980; Wilson, 1989). By engaging youth in meaningful ways that helped their society, they can be motivated to perform better. By having ownership in the decisions-made, they were more likely to willingly participate and sustain their efforts overtime, and their citizenship. According to Erikson (1968), having ownership in the decisions-made, youth were more likely to willingly participate and sustain their efforts overtime.

Purportedly, African-American students do not find schools welcoming or accommodating, and these youth are failing classes and dropping out at disproportionate rates as a result (Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991). This case was true even if the school staff was majority African-American (Kunjufu, 2003). Schools are microcosms of society, and the same social inequities affect institutions like schooling regardless of race.

According to Mitra, listening and learning from students provides a constructive alternative whereby adults may understand the source of what youth are not saying directly to adults (2008). Youth can exert their power to change without adult permission. Youth have shown themselves to be passive resistors, and waged a *silent protest* on education that gets attention in the media, research, as well as school policy and mandates (Fine, 1991; 2003; 2008).

Young people have different perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling and their insights warrant not only the attention, but also the responses of adults (Fine, 2003). Young people can provide meaningful perspectives on instruction and learning which might be foreign to adults, while also allowing students ownership and participation in actively shaping their education. Commenting on the difference in cultural frame of reference, Craig Meyer, high school administrator described:

> Most educational leaders in our district (including me) are white, and our school experiences were very successful, in school settings that provided us with numerous privileges. We cannot assume to know or understand the experiences of students of color through our own experiential lenses. Finding meaningful ways to include student voice provides us with a powerful mechanism to improve our effectiveness (2004, p. 1).

Seemingly, an alternative approach was needed for addressing this perplexing problem. So, I became curious about how youth talked about educational opportunity and about how they talked about (and considered) their schooling relative to their hopes, dreams, and desires. What has been learned from youth?

Black Voice in Research & Deliberations

Student voice is the collective perspectives and actions of young people relative to instruction and learning (Fletcher, 2006). Many representations of student voice exist in the educational literature, albeit limited from the standpoint of African-American youth, and particularly those from the inner cities. The African-American student voice which does exist is largely based on the experiences of middle-class youth and their families living in racially integrated communities.

Of the black student voice on the gap, more has develop since the formation of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), a national coalition involving youth and professionals from more than 25 racially-mixed school districts whose purpose is to study school

practices affecting the black-white achievement gap in those communities. To this end, district students and staff worked collaboratively to inform and publish research, policy development, and practices purported to affect the academic performance of students of color. Through this organization, African-American youth were engaged in both research and deliberations to reduce the gap (Ferguson, 2002; Fine, 2004; Fletcher, 2003; Fryer & Levitt, 2006; Hale, 2001; Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), 2003; Mitra, 2008; Myer, 2004; Ogbu, 2003; Olsen, 2002; Pappas, 2004; Silva, 2003; Torres, 2005).

Youth voice in research

On the black-white gap research, African-American youth have been most typically engaged as informants, and participate in informal (e.g., focus group, impromptu, etc.) and formal (e.g., structured, semi-structured, etc.) interviews. Findings indicated that students, too, focus on schools and teachers as the appropriate targets of reforms (Mitra, 2008). Student responses from a large student survey helped shape the development of Minority Student Achievement Network, an organization chartered with incorporating student voice to reduce the gap. Ferguson surveyed more than 40,000 students from 95 schools representing 15 school districts across the nation about their perception of their academic, family, and personal conditions (2002). Findings suggested racial differences in family resources, student skills, and student's perceptions of their relationships with teachers which attributed greater importance to teacher encouragement as a source of motivation and less to teachers' demands, compared to white students. Results from the survey sparked several initiatives in the MSAN districts, including projects to: 1) address teacher low expectations by increasing student graduation requirements and offering alternative mathematical instruction, 2) support teachers to build relationships with their students (2002). Researchers identified four core divisions based upon

student input: mathematics, literacy, with an emphasis on youth literacy, student-teacher relationships, and conversations about race and achievement (Ray-Taylor, 2005). None of the recommendations which emerged highlighted the role or responsibilities of the students or their families.

There are other examples in the research of adults coming to decisions based on student voice. Granthem's (2004) examined youth participation competence expectancy, participation outcome attainment expectancy, and value of participation outcomes. Ogbu studied racially integrated and middle class Shaker Heights where 80% of the "D" and "F" grades were earned by the African-Americans students, and they reported not feeling less intelligent or capable, but instead did not want to spend their time doing the work. One student described, "I maintain a 3.0, but I won't do anything over that" (p. 23). When asked about school effort, a common theme was doing "enough to get by." McWhorter interpreted the phenomenon as "anti-intellectualism" on the part of blacks to resist assimilating into a culture that rejects them (2001). Because of feeling "shut out" of society and distrustful, blacks developed an oppositional attitude that considered willing participation in school with "acting white" (Ogbu, 1994; Schwartz, 2003). However, McWhorter contests the notion that black students were afraid to do well in school because of fear of being rejected or accused of "acting white." McWhorter believes that black students, regardless of income, do not perform well in school out of a subconscious desire to "not wanting to do but so well," because "it is inherent to the culture they have been immersed in since birth." In short, kids are not "trying hard" in opposition or indifference to schooling, rather an investment in a social culture that values relations, balance, and acceptance. Kunjufu and Ferguson have built upon this "acting white" theory, and found that performing well puts student loyalties into question. Modeling behaviors that were commensurate with good performance

meant compromising one's allegiance to their Black identity. Ferguson, Social Policy professor at Harvard University Professor and Director of Achievement Gap Institute challenges Ogbu's research (2002). During a phone interview, Ferguson stated that although the "acting white" threat does exist, it is not commensurate with academics, but personal style. Youth take issue with other African-American youth who do not speak or act "Black."

When involved in co-constructing research, and taught relevant educational and research principles, students have meaningfully helped with planning, developing, and interpreting research that informed changed (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mitra, 2008). The themes which emerged, however, consistently examined and made recommendations of school and teacher level issues. A major theme, again, was teacher-student relations.

Youth voice on school deliberations

Increasingly, youth are influencing school re-designs and professional learning communities where they are partnering with adults to change schools (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Carter, 2003; Fine & Weis, 2003; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; MSAN, 2006). Although most continue to view student disposition as a problem rather than a symptom of a deeper issue, many adults lower expectations and dismiss students as incapable (Mitra, 2008). However, involvement has typically been at a cursory level. When students were involved, they were typically the best students in college preparatory and advanced placement classes. They are the students who are already on the Council, or in clubs. The low-performing students are often not engaged. Mitra further found that these youth insiders had limited preparation to meaningfully participate in deliberations (2008).

The inner city African-American student voice is not well-represented in the educational deliberations and school reform initiatives (Bandura, 1977; Grantham, 2004; Kilroy, Dezan,

Riepe, Ross, 2007; Mitra, 2008). Yet, the authentic voices of youth can offer new insights that further add to our understanding of who they are, what they need, and how they might best receive it. There is no expectation that youth can or should re-direct the course of schooling, but lend their voice to democratic decisions affecting their lives.

Summary

Although limited, students have told us amazing things about their view of the achievement gap. But in addition to consistently focusing on systems and teachers changes, rather than identifying community forces which need to also be addressed. Most recommendations focus on system and structural issues, i.e., how can schools and teachers change (Cohen, 2010; Solomon, 1992; Ogbu, 2003). As well, participants have primarily been from integrated middle class schools in America suburbia.

Anderson provides a social typology of two opposing value orientations within the inner city: decent and ghetto or street, again based on the inner city Black experience and voice (1999). Although communities, families, and even individuals may possess decent and or street behaviors depending on the circumstances, there are distinct features of each. Placed on a continuum, youth from decent families exhibit more openness to governing bodies and institutions, such as schools, and more inclined to follow the rules of those social institutions. Whites having experienced more success as a result of schooling tend to believe in the dream that more schooling leads to better outcomes. Decency was conveyed by family unity, work, and a belief in school as a path to upward mobility. The "street" families, on the other hand, were rife with instability and uncertainty. Children from street families did not often place a value on education, and often violence became a strong competitor for the talents and abilities of vulnerable young African-Americans, particularly boys (Anderson, 1999).

Research Questions

The research was designed to uncover youth's perspective on their roles and responsibilities for changing the school environment:

Hence, I wonder:

1. What are youth's thoughts on achievement and how they engage as citizens in community discussions about achievement?

2. What do youth know about and how do they act regarding participation in democratic activities serving their community's interests?

3. How do they talk about educational opportunity and about their schooling relative to their hopes, dreams, and desires?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm & Rationale

To address the research questions for this study, I applied a quasi-ethnographic approach. I applied this approach to learn what meaning youth ascribed to their response to schooling, the phenomenon of interest. This naturalistic approach drew upon the subjective interpretation of the real-world events, people and activities experienced. In this way, I could begin to discover how students in this study perceived and understood their schools, school activities, and the people involved.

The interview was the primary source used to gather insights (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). During in-depth conversations with the youngsters, I captured details about the real-world events (i.e., their schools, school activities and events in their lives) from the student's perspectives and experiences (Atkinson, 1992). As the research tool, my particular point of view influenced the direction of the process, interviews, and analysis. This natural approach seeks depth of understanding which statistical representations could not convey (Padgett, 2008; Richards & Morse, 2007).

This qualitative process of discovery has some constraints. Although I am often acclaimed as "balanced" and "objective," I see the world through the lens of a caste-like minority, who however was reared in a decent family that valued community, church, and education. My mother graduated high school and my father the 6th grade, but all six of their children were taught to aspire to more and went on to college. I continue to live with the ideals of my formative years, which were further inculcated in my child. I see through the lens of a woman who traveled to other parts of the world, and believed that little West African boys and girls begging for money to cover their tuition, or paper and pencil for school conveyed a true

value for education. This was an experience that made me question, 'why do American Blacks seem to be so different' in this way. As well, I see through my favorite theories, including Bronfenbrenner who accounts for multiple levels of influence on a child's identity and development (1979). More qualitative studies are done collaboratively to add to the scope and gravity of what is ultimately communicated, but that is not the way of the doctorate process (Padgett, 2008).

Recruitment & Selection of Participants

I used criterion sampling and snowballing techniques to locate public school students from the ages of 13 to 17 years of age. Initial recruits were referred by individual members of a foster parent support group to whom I presented the merits of my research study. This process resulted in the identification of a couple of students who referred others meeting the selection criteria. In addition to these and the recommendations of family members and co-workers with whom I discussed the study, the process resulted in a more than adequate sample of students for the phenomenological approach taken.

A comparatively larger sample of 12 African-American youth in the 8th to 11th grades, eight males and four females, were selected for participation. The students were enrolled in Urban Heartland, USA public schools. Equal numbers attended selective as did non-selective schools. All students resided within less resourced areas, including the two who lived in a suburb of the hub city. The students shared the commonality of being enrolled in an urban public school, but were otherwise varied in terms of the school attended, grade level and age.

Anderson would characterize most of the students as being from decent families, i.e., they had hope for their future and felt that education was a worthwhile pursuit (1999). Contrary to "ghetto" children who distrusted social institutions, e.g., school and church, and become more

responsive to immediate gratification versus delayed much as in getting a good education. Every effort was made to recruit children with less community and familial support for attending school, however, all the children in this study had the support of their parents and/or extended family and community members.

"Street" children were more difficult to recruit. As an example, one mother who had recently regained custody of her two children was told about my research and gave her permission for me to make contact. When she returned my call, she seemed annoyed and asked how I got her name and number. I assured her that I did not know the person who referred her, but assumed that she must have since they told her about my study. Her tone became calmer, and I moved ahead to described my research to which she was amiable to her children participating. Once determining that both children qualified and were independently agreeable to participating in the study, the mother and I discussed a good time for meeting. I told her that I had Friday after school and Saturday available. She responded by then asking her children if they had decided whether they would go to school or not on Friday. Overhearing her inquiry, I interrupted and clarified that my intention was to meet at a time that did not conflict with the children's schooling. Although she insisted that it would be 'okay' for me to either pull them on that Friday or pull them from class for the interview, I told her that I would neither pull them from school nor their classes for my purposes.

We eventually agreed to meet at the library on the following Saturday. She proposed 11:00 a.m., because she had planned to take the kids to the library anyway at that time.

At 9:00 a.m. on Saturday morning, I called the mom to confirm our appointment. She asked if we could meet at 12:00 p.m. instead. I arrive a bit earlier to identify a removed area where I might talk with each child. At 12:10 p.m., she called to say that she was delayed. She

said that her daughter was "on a trip," and would not bring her as the child would be uncooperative. She asked what would I like for her to do, and since I was there already, I asked if she could bring her son to which she agreed. At 12:55 p.m., she still had not arrived although claiming to be 15 minutes away. When I called, no one answered the phone, and after waiting another 50 minutes, I left. At 2:13 p.m., the mother called and said that she was at the library. I refused to return and thanked her for her time. The final list of participants follows:

Table 1: Study Participant Descriptions

Code	"Student name"	Program	"School name"	Grade	Age
1	Diamond	Non-selective	Oprah	8th	14
2	Sapphire	Non-selective	Ricki Lake	10th	16
3	Turquoise	Selective	Tavis Smiley	9th	14
4	Pearl	Selective	Jimmy Kimmel	11th	16
5	Spinel	Non-selective	Anderson Cooper	9th	15
6	Amber	Non-selective	Sally Jesse Raphael	9th	14
7	Quartz	Selective	Phil Donahue	9th	14
8	Jasper	Selective	Rush Limbaugh	11th	16
9	Onyx	Non-selective	Jerry Springer	11th	16
10	Emerald	Non-selective	Al Sharpton	10th	17
11	Topaz	Selective	Starr Jones	8th	13
12	Garnet	Selective	Jay Leno	8th	13

Informed Consent & Confidentiality

My research was conducted in compliance with the Wayne State University (WSU) research protocol which was based on the Belmont Report and the federal government's Common Rule, 45 CFR 46 for behavioral research (2011).

Because all of the students were minors, I contacted the parents using the name and phone numbers provided by others. I initially talked to the parent of each child, explained my

research, and requested permission to talk to their child or children to assess their independent interest in participating and ability to convey their thoughts and feelings about schooling. For each child deemed study eligible, I then arranged a time to meet the parent, obtain a signed parent consent form, and conduct the student interview. In several instances, the parent could not be available at the time of the interview. In those cases, I met the parent in advance of the scheduled interview or per their request emailed the forms for their signature. Each student knowingly and voluntarily committed between one to two hours of their time to express their thoughts and feelings about their responsibility for schooling.

Throughout this process, I informed both the parent and child of what was expected, that their participation was voluntary and they could opt out at any time. I assured each student that any information they shared would be kept confidential except where I am obligated under the law, and documents including their names would be kept in locked files to which only I have access.

Data Collection

I administered semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes) with a comparatively larger and diverse sample of 12 young people to gain a depth of understanding, but to also test preliminary impressions and conclusions made of the cultural group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two of the twelve participants agreed to a second, although shorter, conversations to further clarify findings and explore certain themes which emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were collected over a period of three months from the latter part of December through mid-February 2012. Most of the interviews were conducted in secluded areas of various public settings, e.g., meeting room of a public library, except for those with a set of siblings whose parent requested the interview be done in the home.

I constructed several open-ended questions to guide the process. The questions were open-ended and can be "fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee, and…enhanced by probes" (Schensul, et al., 1999b, p. 149). In this way, an understanding of the relevant factors and subfactors for each domain can emerge. The benefit of this approach, over that of a structured interview with pre-determined questions that are asked for each person in the same way, was that it allows for co-construction of meaning between me and the students (Schensul, et al., 1999b). Semi-structured interviews "combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level" (Schensul, 1999b, p. 149).

Schensul et al indicated that the domains should be clearly defined to ensure that the points of interest are maintained during the study, and the content specific to those areas was available for analysis (1999a). Thus, interview questions were constructed based on those identified domains drawn from the research questions. From my questions, the domains include: roles, controls, and responsibility, as they all relate to schooling.

I used an interview log to record notes and observations made during the interview. The memo-ing process was used to document what I heard, saw, experienced, and thought in the course of inquiry (Groenewald, 2004). Groenwald cautioned that researchers may easily get involved with the collection of data and miss opportunities to document their reflections (2004). Instead, researchers should "maintain a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as hunches, impressions, and feelings" (Groenwald, 2004, p. 14) for each interview. To capture this information, I used a process originally described by Leonard Schatzman and Anselm Strauss' for categorizing interview notes as follows: (a) observational notes (ON) – what happened notes deemed important enough to the researcher to make; (b) theoretical notes (TN) –

attempts to derive meaning as the researcher thinks or reflects on experiences; (c) methodological notes (MN) – reminders, instructions or critique to oneself on the process; (d) analytic memos (AM) – end-of-a-field-day summary or progress reviews (Groenewald, 2004, p. 15-16).

Data Storage Methods

Interviews were audio-recorded onto cassette tapes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Following each interview, the audio files were transferred to my personal computer, and backed-up to an external hard drive. The proper name for each person, place, or thing was replaced with a fictitious or non-specific name. For example, each of the participants was assigned the name of a precious gemstone.

The tape was labeled with the code assigned to the family along with the actual interview date (Belmont, 2011). The tapes were kept in a secured lock file, separate from signed consent. The interview notes were kept in an encrypted excel database on the researcher's personal computer. Each study file was password protected.

A file was maintained on each interview participant. All forms, documents, and data resulting from the project were securely maintained in a locked file box of my home office (Groenewald, 2004).

Data Analysis & Validity

To give meaning to the naturalistic data gathered, I applied Spradley's analytic approach (1980). Considering the context of the open-ended remarks study participants used to describe their culture and my own journal notes from those experiences. I utilized Spradley's theme, domain, taxonomic, and componential analyses to derive meaning from how kids think and talk about their responsibility for schooling.

Spradley defined a theme as a recurring principle, "…whether tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems cultural meaning" (1980, p. 141). Early in the inquiry process, clear themes emerged. As additional interviews were conducted, certain things about which kids talked were re-occurring e.g., sense of safety, a theme which presented when talking about key school events, high performing versus poor performing students, or school image.

A domain analysis involved a search for patterns of sameness, and included three parts: included terms, semantic relationship, and covered term. To uncover these broad categories, I started by searching for nouns, that is the "names for things, including objects, places, people, and the like" (Spradley, 1980, p. 92), and then identified phrases, expressions, or single unit words (i.e., included terms) that related to it. Then, I assessed how the included terms related to the overarching term (i.e., attribution of, way to, rationale, etc.). I exhausted this discovery process until more than 25 domains were uncovered (Spradley, 1980). This process was followed by the taxonomic analysis, or looking for relationships both within and between each domain, i.e., subcategories. The componential analysis was the final phase, and provided a way to search for patterns of contrast across subgroups (selective v. non-selective schooling) (Spradley, 1980).

Uncovering the data in this way allowed me to understand and interpret the essence of the phenomenon which individuals shared and transformed the data into a "descriptive account that extrapolated a typical form of that experience or phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21).

Trustworthiness

There are four elements of trustworthiness, or good qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used techniques

from each to ensure empirically based findings that were constructed from good guiding questions, rigorous processes, and sound ethical practices.

I then treated the interview data as if it were drawn across both the observational and interview sources which had implications for trustworthiness. Credibility, the extent to which findings can and do get at what was happening, depended mainly on triangulation across a large study sample (N=12). Having a comparatively larger sample also allows for facets of credibility linked to observational data, as well as to ensure that I have referential adequacy - enough data to see the central commonalities and variations. Also, credibility in naturalistic research depends on checking with insiders to see if my preliminary findings seem reflective of the data or need further refinement. Also, I engaged some colleagues knowledgeable about research practices and the community being studying for a peer review (Schensul, et al., 1999b, p. 5).

To ensure transferability, I provided a thick description of the findings which means I wrote a detailed account of the settings, informants, and activities. To provide dependability, I described the actual process by which the data was gathered and managed from the consent to final reporting, as well as maintained an audit trail (i.e., linking data from interview transcripts, to analysis worksheets and into written findings). For confirmability, I conducted an inquiry audit following the data collection back to its original source to the reported findings to ensure this aspect.

In what follows, I discuss the broad categories of meaning which emerged. Specifically, I describe how youth thought and felt about schooling, their responsibility for schooling, and their role in democratic processes in their schools.

CHAPTER 4: FINDING

Introduction

Anderson's (1999) social typology of urban families categorized two value sets, "decent" and "street," which will be applied here as a context for understanding the youth under study and their response to schooling. Study participants voiced decency, characterized by having a sense of future, personal responsibility, and community connectedness. Despite the often negative influences of the "ghetto" or "street" behaviors, common to which was a fundamental lack of commitment to civil norms and decorum, these student participants identified how they negotiated their respective environments to achieve their dreams.

Specifically, findings conveyed how these youth thought and talked about their rationales for the schools selected, managing school responsibilities, and their considerations for giving voice. Thus, this section is outlined in three broad categories: Youth on Choosing Schooling, Youth on Responsibility for Schooling and Youth on Student Voice. The first section is further divided and presented along the distinct views of students enrolled in selective versus non-selective schools. Themes of social life and violence are integrated throughout.

Youth on Choosing Schooling

In Urban City, USA, youth and their families have multiple public school options, some were selective and based on a theme (e.g., performing arts, college prep) for which kids must either audition or take a test to earn enrollment. Most others, however, were neighborhood or charter schools. Charter schools were also free and had an open enrollment policy.

When participants were asked how they came to select their school, those from selective and open schools articulated some of the same rationales, but the two differed on many other

aspects in this area. For example, seven (4 select, 3 open) out of twelve students indicated that tradition and or togetherness was a reason for choosing their respective school:

Students from selective schools said:

- "The fact that it's a family tradition, you know. I would be the fourth generation to graduate." (Quartz, Line 204).

- "In opposition to her father's preference for Elitist High School, Pearl said: I was like, 'no' I wanna go to Katie Couric. Mommy went to Katie Couric" (Pearl, Line 122).

- "Other people from family went" (Garnet, Line 15).

- "My mom was cool with it because my sister already attended there, so it was like a go for her so" (Turquoise, Line 136).

Students from open schools felt:

- "Yea, and my brothers was attending there and I was going to Hope of Urban City, USA [until I finished there]" (Sapphire, Line 62).

- "Family tradition….Keep the tradition alive" (Diamond, Line 13).

Emerald commuted to the opposite side of town to attend school where there were family members. Each school morning his mother would drive him there. Although Emerald often arrived at school late, it was their preference over his neighborhood school where he reported: "There were too many fights. No one fights fair....My cousin and family at Al Sharpton High School….At Al Sharpton, I feel comfortable and relaxed" (Emerald, Line 33). In these kids' view, family was a key factor of pride, stability and as will become more apparent later, a source of security in kids' pursuits to beat-the-streets, a

phenomenon which Anderson (1999) interpreted as a type of insulation against the street culture.

<div align="center">Selective Students on School Choice</div>

To qualify for enrollment in their respective schools, Garnet, Jasper, Pearl, Quartz, Topaz, and Turquoise were tested and scored within the ranges required for each of their schools. Two were in a competitive middle school (Garnet and Topaz), and the remaining four were in test high schools. All articulated choosing their academically prestigious schools to gain a competitive edge. Jasper said, "[my decision] was driven by my desire based on my career dreams, and I didn't want to be at Bradshaw with all the gang violence. I wanted to be top" (Line 22).

Consistently, three additional themes could be heard: (a) perception of the schools' ability to prepare them for the future; (b) access to new experiences; (c) no school violence. Specific to academic preparation, students described greater opportunities to get scholarships and a college preparatory curriculum. In addition to the general college preparation offered, Jasper who wanted to someday own a mechanical engineering firm, felt the school could prepare him for his career. In addition to the pre-engineering courses he was able to take, he was attracted to the accounting courses offered. In his explanation, he wanted to do his [financial] records for his business. Turquoise, an academically capable and talented athlete, was initially resistant to attending his mother's alma mater. He felt that the school would be too hard. With encouragement from the coach and his two sisters who were enrolled, he was motivated to attend with the enticement of more scholarship opportunities supposedly available for ball players.

When asked how she came to the decision to attend Katie Couric, Pearl's eyes widened and she bounced up and down in the kitchen table chair as she exclaimed in a high pitch voice,

that Katie Couric was the only school for her since she was a small child. "[There] wasn't a second guess in my mind. My dad wanted me to go to Elitist" (Line 122), the premier public high school in the city. In Pearl's view, however, acquiring book smarts was as much a priority as having a social life, an element which she felt was missing from Elitist's informal curriculum. In addition to also offering a rigid college preparatory curriculum, Pearl felt strongly that unlike Elitist, [Katie Couric] had an ethnically and culturally diverse student pool and social life. In Pearl's view, the teen years should be about social experiences.

Students in these settings also felt the need to be insulated from the common violence, which sometimes came as an offense and threat to sense of future when it occurred.

- "There was a fight. That is not something that happens at our school. It made me so mad….We add to the statistics of how people see us. It made the media and spread all over. Then, when you apply to high school, they see what happened in your old school, and that they were involved in this and it looks bad on your application"(Topaz, Lines 16-17).

- "It was a confrontation between two girls and it got a bit rough. Jay Leno is the type of place that is very serious, and they try to push you hard to be successful by being strict. So, it is the type of thing that doesn't happen often" (Garnet, Line 12).

Largely, students enrolled in college preparatory schools made educational decisions based on their personal visions for the future. There was a general acceptance that their schools were in fact fulfilling their responsibilities in that way. Students trusted that their schools offered the challenging courses that would prepared them for the next levels, access to funds to support college matriculation, and ordinarily, freedom from civil unrest.

Non-Selective Students on School Choice

When Diamond, Emerald, Sapphire, and Spinel were considering where they might enroll, school climate and student behavior were also important factors. When asked to describe her school, Diamond expressed: "[o]ur school don't act hood, like the other schools" (Diamond, Line 129), thus corroborating a finding by Anderson (1999) that all urban schools were not street or hood. When asked to describe the nature of hood schools, she further advised, "shooting[s], kids getting suspended all the time, bringing weed, bullying, [and] getting stabbed" (Diamond, Line 133). In contrast, Sapphire and Diamond considered their school environment family-like. "I believe they offer us nothing but the finest teachers and friendliest. They care for us like we are their own kids" (Sapphire, Line 70). Similarly, Diamond expressed: "The school staff, they know our family and so we might get some extra help" (Line 140).

Emerald and Spinel decided to commute to their schools. "I didn't want to go to the neighborhood school, too many fights…No one fights fair" (Emerald, Line 33). Early in his school year, Spinel who was a 9th grader, transferred to a school on the opposite side of town, in part, to get away from his peers who were in gangs.

Amber and Onyx, however, experienced "hood" schools first-hand. Although it was not their first choices, they were the only ones of the six enrolled in their neighborhood schools. Now a 9th grader, Amber recalled, "I wanted to go to the School of Art and Design, [but], we never got…a confirmation letter, so I figured I didn't get in, but I did…Sally Jesse Raphael was closer to my dad's house, so that's where I went" (Amber, Line 88). Like Spinel, Amber felt it was best that she left her school. In addition to the blatant lack of respect shown across teacher to student, student to teacher, and peer to peer, Amber felt the school was getting increasingly dangerous, and innocent people get pulled in:

> So, we're in the lunch room and all of a sudden, it's just food flying everywhere and then the principal comes and then we have to wait till the bell rings to go to class. Then we have to go to class, and there's this huge hallway fight and everybody was fighting and its people on top of lockers and on top of the bannisters, and people are pushing toward the fight and security trying to get through but nobody letting them go and then you couldn't get to class (Amber, Line 84).

Thus, as well as threatening a persons' sense of safety, hood schools could also affect students' ability to learn (Hirschi & Hindelang, 1977). An advanced math student who spent his school day between his home and vocational technical school, Onyx reported ending up at his home school because he did not submit his application for a local suburban school in a timely manner. Having a low tolerance for catching the public bus to attend a suburban school, he decided to make the best of the neighborhood school. Based on 2010 crime rate indices, Onyx lived in one of the most notorious neighborhoods in Urban, USA, yet it was less threating for him to walk past the polluted streets and vacant lots, opened abandoned homes, and crowds of people idly standing around, than catch the bus with the "scary and weird people" who rode them. He explained:

> I procrastinated with applying to the [nearby suburban school,] and ultimately, I had to choose Jerry Springer School because it was too late to choose any other, and I am not much of a bus catcher. It is crazy on the bus. The people on the bus are scary and weird, and the bus driver does not pay attention (Line 15).

Even still, Onyx did not seem to have much regard for his home school when compared to Ricki Lake Vocational School, where he had been assigned for the last two years. "I talk about resumes, stock market and things like that [at Ricki Lake]. I feel half of the students at my home school don't even know how to write a persuasive essay, do a resume, or prepare for life, and we only have one language, Spanish… I know things that others don't, but they should" (Line 21 & 25).

School violence was more common than not in the view of these insiders. Noted in large cities like Urban City, USA, high levels of violence had been typically found in schools where there were lower numbers of male teachers, but higher counts of male students, a high student-to-teacher ratio and high disciplinary levels. In these settings, academic performance was also inversely related to antisocial conduct. Hirschi and Hindelang additionally found that lack of school attachment was associated with higher levels of antisocial student behaviors (1977). Ensuring that you chose a place where you can learn proved a priority. In areas like Urban City, USA, school choice was about more than future preparations, it was also about having a sense of safety and ability to learn.

Youth generally trusted that the administrative and teaching staff at their schools acted within their controls to prepare them for a brighter future. This included Amber who expressed concerns that her Algebra class was always out of control and nobody could concentrate: "[T]hey're teaching you to prepare for your future so it's not like they're preparing you, they're helping me prepare. They're helping me with what I need to know" (Line 92).

With few exceptions, kids felt confident that their schools were positioning them as academic- and civic-minded people. Academically: "The teachers give you resources on how to make it higher" (Onyx, Line 18). "They teach us self-confidence, and tell us don't be afraid to ask questions" (Topaz, Line 23). "They teach us to the point where they make sure we know it. They don't just say oh, they don't just write on the board and say figure it out, they help each student to get it. That's why I got an A- in math" (Diamond, Line 139). Then there was Emerald who was refused his request for a vocational class and instead placed in Honors Math, a decision he felt was made for his own good: "So, may be it was done in my best interest. Probably wouldn't let me have voc tech because they may think, he might slack off, let's keep him on the

right track" (Line 41). "My biology teacher she can umm like she don't like let nobody fall behind, because it's like if you don't get something she like keep going over and over it with you, but my English teacher she is a hard, she a nice lady and stuff but like her work is a lot we got like a book report every month, journals every day, it's hard" (Turquoise, Line 80). "They stick with you, they not just gone give you any work just so you can fail, so it's work that they know you can do and you know it's gone prepare you for college and your future life so it's pretty good" (Turquoise, Line 138).

Civically: "Dress code, they emphasized, "show up on time," "punishment if do anything wrong," "If distracting class, will give more work or something to do." "It is good discipline, if no knowledge – can't get the job" (Jasper, Line 22-26).

Relative to course offerings, Garnet said: "It seems they are doing everything they can. If they could, they would offer more electives. They used to offer robotics, but it seems they could not afford the teacher" (Garnet, Line 20).

When asked what additional things teachers might do, responses fell into two categories: instructional and relational.

Table 2: School Change Recommendations by Category

Category	Student Recommendations
Instructional	• Make school fun • Create fun things to d • Give feedback

Category	Student Recommendations
Relational	• Build student-teacher relationship
	• Talk with kids
	• Form relationship with kids
	• Be positive
	• Offer encouragement
	• Respect student's abilities

Amber had a tremendous amount to say about the structure and instruction provided in the one class: kids practice with supervision, let kids practice on the board, explain steps, give written examples, give more homework, give study packets, offer more practice test, give feedback, talk with kids, use a teacher assistant, control class. Pearl, in her observations, felt that teachers could provide more classroom activities, be positive, offer encouragement, respect students' abilities, build better relations with students. Sapphire's comments related to integrating more fun into the curriculum.

Overall, kids felt like schools did what they could. With a couple of exceptions, students seemed to have developed an impression that their teachers seemed knowledgeable, responsive to their needs, and generally well-intended.

Youth on Responsibility for Schooling

Youth viewed their response to schools' and teachers' efforts in the most ideal ways: exercising self-discipline, getting extra help from buddies, afterschool programs, teacher assistants, and even teachers themselves, as well as helping others, doing their assignments, and taking the right courses. Kids, however, seemed to draw certain boundaries or lines. Both those

in the selective and non-selective programs tended to share the sentiment that the phenomenon of "social life" was a strong competitor for students' attention and time.

Pearl, a 3.8 GPA honor student at a test school, was a cheerleader and involved in multiple other activities and organizations, proclaimed: "I don't want to be a bookworm," a situation which she felt "would bring more stress," and as she announced, "I'm not having it!" (Pearl, Line 124). I think I could and should [get tutoring]. It would help more, but I would have to give up social time (Emerald, Line 68). In other student comments along this vein, I saw yet another message. Given the choice between studying harder to achieve even higher or socializing, these students seemed to say that socialization was of equal importance.

- "It's hard, like I said, to keep up because you trying to work hard and like it's a lot of social life you got" (Turquoise, Line 12).

- "We just wanna have fun, I mean we want to learn but at the same time, we wanna have our social life cause we ain't just wanna be doing work all day and studying so social is what we want" (Turquoise, 264).

- "I am a B student. I am average. I do the work I have to do to keep my grades up, not extra smart…. am in this group [of high achievers], but I don't try hard" (Jasper, Lines 38-40).

Putting the time in to become familiar with the materials intended for their academic and professional development, however, was a barrier. Despite the grade point averages, for some, there seemed no real commitment to respond differently. In Quartz's explanation, "They practice socializing more than they do they school work. So, I guess they're very persuasive sometimes, I don't know" (Line 84).

It seemed of no concern to informants that other ethnic groups were gaining an edge over them. In their impression, these kids seem to sacrifice something that they are willing to give up.

- "I had a friend that was a Bengali last year. She was crying her little heart out. We had honors chemistry and my teacher gave her a B. And she was so scared to go home that night and I felt so bad for her…they are stressed out in school so much, like oh my gosh, 'I didn't get an A in this assignment, is that going to drop my grade?' and I be like oh my gosh, like I couldn't live like that, like my dad used to be hard on me like that when I was younger, but I mean he just had to understand, I'm not always going to get straight A's, so their parents are different, very different" (Pearl, Line 84).

- "I hear like Bengalis, like you have to get like all As or something like that, so it's probably pressure on her too get good grades." (Turquoise, Line 216).

- "They cry and get depressed when they do badly in school." (Garnet, Line 34)

- "I just think it's they culture, how they raised you know…not saying that our parents don't care, but they don't push us like their parents do to where they gone make us cry if we get this bad grade, an A I don't know" (Pearl, Line 222).

When comparing the participants' list of things that kids could do to perform better to those which they observed of the highest achieving students (typically the Bengali students) in their schools, there was very little that compared. Other difference they noted of Bengalis.

Table 3: Perception of High Achievers

Study Participants' Perception of:	What Characterized Highest Achieving Students?
Academic Identity	• Worked hard for 4.0 GPA • Focused on assignments/Not otherwise engaged • Enrolled in Advanced Placement(AP)/honor classes • Competed within academic circles • Used tutors
Social Conduct	• "Quiet"/not socially active • Don't overdo hanging out • Cried when earning below As • Assist/tutor others • Social group of high achieving peers • Idle time spent in study • Often stressed
Home environment	• Respected parents' high academic expectations • Feared parents

There was a noted cultural difference. Steinberg defines it as a "trouble threshold" which involved parental pressures, crying, stress that came with that process, as well as lack of social life.

"So, I try"

Similar to family supports, which Anderson characterized, the decent family is the best form of insulation against the streets," friends held similar traits. Kids also worked to influence

their peers positively and keep away from trouble (1999). "Some [of my friends] are in gangs. I try to talk to them. They told me that 'if you can show us that you can make it, we will try.' So, I try so hard." (Spinel, Line 26). It is hard to get away from surroundings and gang violence. I have friends and we help each other stay away from trouble (Jasper, Line 57). There is a code of streets that supports each other. Relative to her feelings about a fight at her school, Diamond described this way: "I really didn't care because I'm not on the football team…and none of my family members is on the team but I just thought it was kinda bold over a game" (Line 111). The suggestion being that she would have had to get involved if family or close friends were involved. Such alliances are recognized and respected, representing security.

Youth on Student Voice

Students' perception of giving voice fell into two broad categories: "No Place There" and "Teachers Would Be Blown Away".

"No Place There"

As I read student responses, I began to wonder if "no voice" is a sign of reverence and respect. To contradict the teacher or adults, or assume to tell them how to run their room, is disrespectful. "…we don't have no place there. We're already getting an education and that should be it" (Diamond, Line 282).

- "The older generation does not believe in us. We don't give them a reason because people may rob and steal. They don't feel safe around us. A few of us may make it. We can all make it, but it is hard to get away from surroundings and gang violence. I have friends and we help each other stay away from trouble" (Jasper, Line 57).

- "[Teachers] went to college so they should know what they are doing. They got a degree, we don't. We are just learning. If we trying to tell them how to teach or do something better, it's like what'd I go to college for if you're trying to tell me what to do. That's how I would feel if I was the teacher…I mean we should have a voice but like we shouldn't be able, I wish we could, but we shouldn't be able to change something in our school that's already been determined by the [principal] because that how she or he wants it, that's how it should be" (Turquoise, Line 260).

Thus, students did not see it as their place to critique their schooling, because they lacked the respect as decision-makers in their community, they lacked the expertise, and their teachers (upon whom so much depended) might find it an unwelcomed interference.

They Would Be Blown Away

Of the areas which students suggested reform, their voice was clearest relative to improving student-teacher relationships. To this topic, the collective identity of inner city youth resonated with a majority of their suburban peers (N = 40,000) in integrated schools nationwide.

- "Because if the teacher don't stick with you, I mean, you gone fail the class; that's how I think of it" (Turquoise, Line 138).

- "Build a relationship with teachers" (Pearl, Line 228).

- "Have a relationship with kids. Kids won't be afraid to talk to or ask questions about things"(Garnet, Line 155).

- "I asked for vocational tech. I didn't get it…[instead they gave me Honors.] I did good in math last year. I guess that's why. I like math so it doesn't bother me. So, maybe it was done in my best interest. Probably wouldn't let me have

'voc tech' because they may think, 'he might slack off,' let's keep him on the right track" (Quartz, Lines 267-282).

- "If I would say I had a mentor at school, it would be a man called Mr. Donald, because he the one who pushed me to my highest ability especially in math…he'll make me sit there and make me break down the problem piece by piece then put it back together, like I'll find the solution, then just to check it, I put the solution or whatever I came up with, the variable equals. I would have to substitute that number for the variable and do the whole problem over again to make sure it's right" (Sapphire, Lines 95 & 97).

As had been the case in students denying their right to critique teachers and schooling, students asserted the importance of teacher-student relations. Teachers mattered deeply to students' possible futures. If students had expressed their voices, it would be a call for students and teachers to build better relationships, such as that Sapphire had with Mr. Donald. Also, students would use their voice, if they exercised it, to interject more fun and social interactions in their courses. When asked about the meaning of fun, and its relevance to future dreams, goals, and desires, kids often responded that in making schooling fun makes learning less stressful and worthwhile.

- "I could tell you we just wanna have fun, I mean we wanna learn but at the same time, we wanna have our social life cause we ain't just wanna be doing work all day and studying. So social is what we want" (Turquoise, Line 264).
- "Do games, quizzes, give extra credit?" (Pearl, Line 233).

According to Sapphire, competing is a type of fun that makes work seem less hard, "competing makes it fun, you don't have to work as hard just to make it fun. Whatever if you

have a job that's not fun, but if you doing something you love, then you don't have a job (Line 120). Competitions involving peers, makes it fun: "I compete against my friends, if we get like one has a B+, and then they'll get mad (laughing) then I'll show them my grade" (Diamond, Line 254). I hang around my friend, Antonio, he's a [disc jockey] so he a positive influence to me, and we compete against each other. (Sapphire, Line 144). "Yes, I am the best. Well, in addition with my best friend but he pushes her too; she had him for two years. So sometimes we compete" (Pearl, Line 78). As Diamond expressed, "I mean even when we don't compete against each other, I still do good. But, it's just like, it's makes it more funner" (Diamond, Line 262).

Kids explain the reason for integrating fun in learning:

- "Sometimes needs a little fun. People got to relax at some point. Once you are grown, things will be serious enough. You will have a husband, children. Got to cook, clean, go to work, take kids to their sports, whew! Must have fun before become an adult" (Topaz, Lines 27-30).

- "Cause he don't gotta have so much stress. He can still live his life, not oh my gosh, high school took, even though I still be partying, I be trying, I be partying because, I am a party girl. My momma say it all the time. You party too much. My daddy say, she going to a party again this weekend? Yea, I am because I still be trying to be a teenager." (Pearl, Line 156-166).

- "They may think we want to go through without things being hard, that we just want to go through without a challenge. I like a challenge" (Emerald, Line 90).

Making their classes more "fun" meant more engaging and livelier classrooms, not diminishing the challenge of the content and learning. "Fun" meant recognizing that these teens

have deep desires to be teens and social beings, not full-fledge adults who live with adult pressures and stresses. These calls for fun thus implied messages about the pedagogical practices of their classrooms, about framing important content topic on ways that were meaningful to teens and that allowed teens to interact socially.

Having authentic inclusion of student voice in the democratic process, thus changing the roles and views of students was hard. It challenged steeply held institutional norms, values and beliefs about the divergent roles of adults and youth in the school (Mitra, 2008). When given the opportunity, youth can tell us a lot about how to bridge teacher and student relations by allowing them the opportunity to give voice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Students had a great deal to say about how they felt and thought about their response to schooling, most particularly the seemingly unrecognized conflict between their academic and adolescence selves, and how that sense of self is impacted by environmental conditions, e.g. violence. They provide rationale for their responses, often negatively characterized in the research and media, and further lend insight into their views on voice. In this next section, I draw comparisons between the body of scholarly research on this topic and what was gleamed from the study participants. The findings are discussed in three central categories:

1. Youth voice on schooling.

2. Youth voice on attainment in schooling.

3. Youth on student voice.

I close this chapter with a discussion on how to use student voice to bridge the conflicts, and follow that piece with a discussion of my study limitations and possibilities for future research.

Youth on Schooling

Inner city African-American youth voice on the achievement gap is scant. The dominant voices on the subject are those of middle-class African-American students from racially-mixed communities and schools, a culturally different segment from those in this study. Unlike the wealthier suburban kids who two-parent homes, study participants were typically from far less resourced communities with majority female head of households.

None of the twelve study participants saw their neighborhood schools, which they considered "ghetto," as a place to pursue their dreams, even if they were enrolled in one. The selective students had different reasons from those identified by the selective students for their

choices. In both cases, students felt the schools closer to their homes could not adequately prepare them for the futures they envisioned. Students did not consider all urban or inner city schools "ghetto," however, those in their communities were. The "ghetto" schools were those which Hirschi depicted as having high levels of antisocial behaviors and disciplinary problems which often resulted in misconduct and violence (1969). Research also corroborated kids' observations that the "ghetto"-behaving students in these "ghetto" schools were further not engaged in learning, bullied others who were, and this resulted in some of the lowest grade point averages and test scores earned nationwide (CDC, 2008). Anderson found that in such environments, personal responsibility was often ducked and challenged as a means of ensuring personal safety, and upward mobility was viewed as betrayal which could result in being harmed by community members who did not value education (1999). Thus, most of the kids selected alternatives to their local community school, and largely reported instead school environments where they felt "safe" and "relaxed."

In their minds, safety was a priority more important than curriculum, teacher quality, student-to-teacher ratio, or extracurricular options, factors which Ogbu (2003) considered important selection criteria. For some, it was critical enough for them and their families that they would take a morning drive five days a week to the other side of town to have a safer option. As they saw it, personal safely was an *educational ideal* (Howe, 1997).

Selective students Turquoise, Pearl, Quartz, Jasper, Topaz, and Garnet, on the other hand, chose a selective school to qualify for greater opportunities, e.g., college prep and advanced-level courses, scholarships, cultural experiences, etc. Such options, as non-selective student Onyx discovered, were not as frequently available at his ghetto school where he had no choice but to enroll after missing the application deadline to enroll in another school district. With the

exception of family background, the study participants were homogeneous. Students who chose selective schools tended to have a somewhat stronger "norm of academic pursuit," a phrase coined by Ogbu (2003). That is to say, in addition to having the "smarts" like some of their non-selective peers, they had personal examples of kin and other significant others who successfully pursued the more rigorous paths provided in competitive schools (Ogbu, 2003). Moreover, these students seemed more versed than their non-selective peers on the types of classes needed to qualify for acceptance or admissions into the colleges of their pursuit.

Although feeling more comfortable, with their school choices, students in both groups reported at least one fight which in their minds was considered the most memorable event of their school year. For some, it upset their sense of safety and stability when the fight occurred. Kids in the competitive schools, however, felt the fight tainted the school's image, an important aspect of their academic identity as they believed the infraction would reflect back on them personally. Such ideas corroborated with findings by Ogbu of middle-class students in mixed communities, where the school's image and reputation were valued educational opportunities (2003).

Students tended to think favorably of their teachers, and described school staff as having done their part to "get them to their highest ability," "stick with them until they got it," and otherwise challenged them, if not always with "fun." This finding was dissimilar to the scholarly research accenting the voice of African-American students in integrated schools (Thernstorm & Thernstorm, 2003). Amber was an exception. When describing her Algebra teacher, in particular, she depicted someone who lacked good teaching skills and did not expect much of students. Her premise that her math instructor was further uncaring, a notion challenged by Ogbu (2003), was also her experience. Comparing Black American students to other minority groups who face

prejudice, he proposed that families and youth instead consider the teachers' ability to instruct (2003). Yet, for Amber, teacher expectancy also spoke to his credentials as an effective instructor.

Youth on Their Response for Schooling

Many authors have found that African-Americans high schoolers, regardless of their social capital, miss the connection between measures of "success" and ability to access certain post-secondary institutions and careers (Mickelson, 1990; Ogbu, 2003; Solomon, 1992). Even in their schools where the threat of physical violence may have been less pervasive, the efforts of study participants still did not always translate into the decent grades likened to the way they considered themselves. Often coasting along with grades unmatched to their visions, these youth genuinely seemed to feel they were doing what was necessary to achieve their academic and professional goals. Students admitted not "working hard," yet found no contradictions between their less than stellar grade point averages and being "smart." They disentangled grade point average and being smart. As such, they seemed to not understand the salience of grade point averages as a stand-in for academic accomplishment and readiness for college. For example, Amber wanted to be pediatrician, but had a 1.5 GPA at her regular school and only aspired to get a 2.5, because then "[colleges] would think [she] was smart," and Quartz had a 1.4 GPA at his elite school and was at risk of getting kicked out, and then there was 10th grader Turquoise who wanted to attend the top state school, although he only had a 2.3 GPA. These youth seemed not to recognize the decided lack of credentials encompassed in their phrase, "being smart." Ultimately, in academic realms, grade point average is a type of credentialing and indicator of "being smart," and youth's disentangling the two failed to appreciate educational realities.

Granted, youth seemed to understand that college completion was necessary for certain professions. Where they tended to miss the mark was relative to the levels of achievement needed to matriculate into their colleges of choice. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) reported that more African-American boys and girls are getting into college. However, the percentage who must then take remedial or bridge courses prior to taking the basic core classes is increasing (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). While African-American youth may have the aptitude to do college-level work, they often lack practical skills to compete with their non-Black peers (Jencks & Phillips, 2003). In fact, Black kids enroll in college four years behind their non-black peers, and are only half as likely to earn a degree as their White and Asian counterparts (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2011).

The bi-directional influence and power held by the quasi-adults in response has traditionally not been of equal importance. Notably, certain systemic factors (e.g., hegemony, test bias, teacher-student ratio and quality of school resources in urban schools, etc.) which hinder Blacks' educational and economic outcomes persist (Cohen, 2010). The existence of various laws, policies, and programs—e.g., Affirmative Action, Head Start, etc., to help this disadvantaged group access the same opportunity structures—suggest as much (Gutmann, 1999; Howe, 1997; Spring, 2006). Some research posits that urban low-income African-Americans, in particular, lack the solid examples that hard work can result in realizing the American dream, hence their low-efforts (Ogbu, 2003). According to Mickelson, for Blacks to believe many of the same opportunities and access paths exists, is unrealistic given Blacks' collective history of discriminatory practices designed to relegate them to the underclass (1990).

Yet, the success of school reforms is dependent upon receptive students. In the case of African-American middle and high school students, however, they have been characterized in the

educational literature as oppositional, resistant, dissonant, and anti-intellectual (Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Fine & Weis, 2003; McWorther, 2003; Ogbu, 2003; Solomon, 1998, 2002). Some researchers have proposed that African-American students see a disconnection between their academic selves and work selves because of historic discriminatory practices: controlled environments designed for social reproduction (Fine & Weis, 2003); resistance to competition (Steel, 1997); response to teacher's style and care (Hale, 1986); limited opportunity structure (Solomon, 1992); lack of role models (Ogbu, 2003); and thus depict the opportunity structures as bare, that is lacking real opportunity (Howe, 1997). Students in this study believed school was a path to upward mobility. Aside from the occasional budget cut that did not allow schools and teachers to make certain advantages available, which students understood, they seemed to feel that schools offered good opportunities, and teachers did what they could. However, study participants, those in both selective and non-selective schools, had an alternative explanation that added to the research. These students described conflict between their academic selves and their teen selves.

Where students in this study were concerned, they seemed to have drawn a line relative to how much social life they are willing to sacrifice in order to get better scores and grades. Rather than asserting their sense of blackness in a way consistent with the civil rights movement, a call to "uplift the race," these youth saw themselves as teens, and not necessarily as Black teens, and they focused on shifts to their school worlds that enhanced being advantaged as teens, which in their 21st century notion meant having fun and participating in social activities. Even when they noted the importance of education, these youth wanted to be youth and not take school too seriously, which in their universe meant not being like Bengali kids, most particularly the social stress and burden which the Bengali kids carried. These students drew a line in the sand when it

came to their social life, and this was a line that they culturally were not willing to cross. As kids saw it, they were not refusing to try hard in opposition or indifference to schooling, rather an investment in their teen culture, which they consider important to their development. In fact they liked their schools and teachers for the most part. But students wanted to take part in a social culture that valued their teen identity.

Students seemed to view teachers and schools as authorities or experts in useful knowledge, skills, and a language for school success and later success in the job market. Ogbu reported their collective response as a conflict in values, and not wanting to work hard. In their view, the dissonance was toward a didactic that was neither engaging, nor age or culturally appropriate. These kids reported wanting a balance of social and academic engagement.

Youth on Student Voice

This brings into question what, if any, structural, relational, or instructional changes, as those recommended by students could help reduce or close the gap if they too are participating in foreclosing on opportunities extended to them (Noguera, 2001).

The authentic voices of youth involved in this study offered new insights that further added to our understanding of who they are, what they need, and how they might best receive it. Some researchers might perceive student resistance to voice as a result of hegemony in the community, home and school (Hale, 1986). Rather, some students in this study seemed to consider giving voice a form of disrespect. In the classroom, like in some decent African-Americans' perspective, the head of household is to be respected as the provider and protector, a parallel to the decent parent in Anderson's research (1999). Even in modern research, African-Americans' parents view the government and educators as the authority on education, a value set that undoubtedly is inculcated in their homes (Irvine, 1999).Thus, students did not want to go

there, feeling that it was the teachers' domain, not the children's. Youth did not consider themselves on equal footing with the teacher, to the point of telling him or her how to change their rooms, curriculum, or rules.

Thus, inner city youth feel a sense of powerless and that school deliberations is a place where they do not belong. According to Freire "Every person, however ignorant or submerged in the culture of silence, can look critically at his or her world through a process of dialogue with others, and can gradually come to perceive his personal and social reality, think about it, and take action in regard to it" (1974, back cover). Youth can play a meaningful role in overcoming the societal, but also self-imposed oppressive community forces impacting their schooling (Bandura, 1986; Grantham, 2004; Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe, Ross, 2007; Mitra, 2008). Students have power, although silently enacted, to go beyond collective identity advocacy, and additionally promote personal responsibility for schooling, and engaged to further think in what ways they and their families might be responsive to educators in ways that promote their common interest (Freire, 1974). Freire stated that "as individuals learn to identify contradictions in their own lives, they become more aware of the forces that oppress them…with growth in awareness; youth can begin to transform their lives" (p. 27). This evidence suggests that there has to be a better job of helping kids to understand the true nature of the opportunity structure, and how they might get out of their own way to get the most out of schooling. The shift must be integrated at the school level and family level, and among the students who must be engaged in promoting change in attitudes and efforts at the peer level.

Youth on Schooling, their Response, and Voice

There is a growing body of research that supports the efficacy of engaging student voice in system change initiatives. Yet, in education it represents yet another area where inner city

African-American students are left behind (Clark & Hollander, 2005). According to Young, most urban classrooms are structured hierarchically (1999). The teacher has ultimate authority, and the students have no input in the curriculum, classroom format, or rules established. As well, the parents do not consider it their place or within their ability to tell the teacher how to conduct their classes. Seeing it also as a form of respect for the teachers' position and a reluctance to challenge the system, students can be engaged to create classrooms based on principles of democracy, community, and consensus in which students are empowered over their own lives. Thus, students can meaningfully inform, but also act as change agents to address external oppressive practices, but also bring awareness to the internal thought processes that can hinder their dreams.

Considering the broadness of the influences on human development, the solutions would have to be as comprehensive and complex in scope. Traditional solutions put towards the disparities have demonstrated limited promise, but kids' voices encouragingly offer perspective into how this issue might additionally be addressed. For one, youth must be involved in informing adults about viable solutions, but further be part of core groups who are educating their peers on the effects of their choices and a different way.

Peer-to-peer projects are best practices used in multiple fields today, health education, mental health service delivery, and youth delinquency to name a few. This is prime area for youth engagement and an area where they can use of their voices to bring about relevant change to promote understanding regarding the tree-like nature of schooling, a love for learning, and personal responsibility for schooling.

Summary

For this study, I used the snowballing sampling technique which is useful with populations who are less likely to participate without a referral from another individual within

their network. While I believe it was an appropriate choice on those grounds, I lacked control over the appropriateness of the referrals. People were willing to help, but tended to refer kids who were high achieving. As my daughter later pointed out, 'no one wants to refer a bad child for you to talk to.' Even still, the referrals were sometimes slow to come, and the recruitment process spanned over a longer period than I had anticipated. Although my original design called for students from non-selective schools, the final pool was evenly divided between the two groups. In the end, it allowed for some useful comparisons between the two, however.

Some may consider it a limitation that the findings cannot be generalized, however, that is rarely the aim of naturalistic research. Gathering research from this point of view allowed for an understanding of how the voices of these kids corroborated, negated, and added to the extant research, as well as the peers in middle-class communities. The voice of inner city youth is rarely heard in the scholarly literature. Thus, hearing how their unique voices emerge was useful. While their stories and accounts corroborate what the youth in multiethnic schools and communities have shared, the kids in this study attended predominantly African-American schools with African-American teachers. Thus, we came to see them as they defined themselves, as teens.

I would have liked to know more about students' ideas on social stressors as it related to high value placed on having a "social life." Having this insight would add to a community action program to help kids understand the tree-like nature of education, and the consequences of their choices. This would inform development of a project to teach kids, as co-researchers discovering their own contradictions, to look at their response and responsibilities only and develop a project to help their peers. My goal would not be so much to help kids perform as the Bengali's, but inform them of what is missed in the way of opportunities when they do not "try hard."

APPENDIX A: NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB Administration Office
87 East Canfield, Second Floor
Detroit, Michigan 48201
Phone: (313) 577-1628
FAX: (313) 993-7122
http://irb.wayne.edu

NOTICE OF EXPEDITED APPROVAL

RECEIVED JUN 06 2012 BY:

To: Donna Coulter
Deans Office Medicine
640 Temple, Suite 750

From: Dr. Scott Millis
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: December 19, 2011

RE: IRB #: 117711B3E

Protocol Title: A Phenomenological Study to Engage African-American Youth in Deliberations Regarding their Response to Schooling

Funding Source:

Protocol #: 1111010364

Expiration Date: December 18, 2012

Risk Level / Category: 45 CFR 46.404 - Research not involving greater than minimal risk

The above-referenced protocol and items listed below (if applicable) were **APPROVED** following *Expedited Review* Category (#6 #7)* by the Chairperson/designee for the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (B3) for the period of 12/19/2011 through 12/18/2012. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals that may be required.

- Revised Protocol Summary Form (received in the IRB Office 12/19/2011)
- Protocol (received in the IRB Office 11/17/2011)
- Receipt of letter of support from Families on the Move, Inc. (dated 11/16/2011)
- Parental Permission/Research Informed Consent (dated 12/12/2011)
- Behavioral Documentation of Adolescent Assent for Ages 13 to 17 (dated 12/04/2011)
- Data Collection Tools: Interview

- Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. You may receive a "Continuation Renewal Reminder" approximately two months prior to the expiration date; however, it is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. Data collected during a period of lapsed approval is unapproved research and can never be reported or published as research data.
- All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB BEFORE implementation.
- Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://www.irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:

1. Upon notification of an impending regulatory site visit, hold notification, and/or external audit the IRB Administration Office must be contacted immediately.
2. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB website at each use.

*Based on the Expedited Review List, revised November 1998

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO ENGAGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH

IN DELIBERATIONS REGARDING THEIR RESPONSE TO SCHOOLING

Interview Guide (timeframe: 90-120 minutes)

1. Tell me about yourself. Probes: goals, dreams, roles & responsibilities, school name, location, school activities, after school activities, non-school activities

2. Tell me about the school that you attend? Probes: location, niche or theme, image, racial make-up, opportunities, preparation of students for future

3. Looking back over your experiences at this school, what stands out in your mind when you think about your school? What makes this event stand out in your mind?

4. How did you and your family decide that you should enroll at (school name)?

5. Probes: roles, responsibilities, after school activities

6. What are all the ways that your school seems to help you prepare for your future? Which of these seem the most important to you? What makes these more important? *Probes: helping adults plan, make decisions, assess process and/or outcomes*

7. What are all of the things that you wished your school did to prepare you for the future? Which of these are the most important? What makes them important?

8. Are there others places in your community that contribute to preparing you for the future? Tell me how [name (then do each place in turn)] helps prepare your for the future.

9. How would you describe yourself as a student? What do you have to do to do well in school? Which of these are the most important?

10. Describe the effort students in your peer group give to their schoolwork?

11. Tell me about the high achievers in your school?

12. What are all of the things that account for their success? Which of these things do you think are the most important to their success? What makes these more important? Which things are the least important? Help me understand why these aren't as important.

13. What are all the things kids can do to get more out of school?

14. What are all the things that keep youth from doing their best in school?

15. What advice about how to get kids to do their best would you give to teachers and other adults?

16. What do you think about "student voice" as a way to help improve schooling for kids? Could you give an example to explain your answer? *Probes: student's responsibility to give voice, best way to hear student voice*

17. Is there other information that would help me understand what kids know about schools that would help adults do a better job preparing them for the future?

18. The next thing to do is I write up what I thought I heard you say during this conversation. Once I do that, I would like to talk to you again for about 30 minutes and be sure I got it right. Would you mind if I contact you again for this purpose?

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY TO ENGAGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH VOICE IN DELIBERATIONS REGARDING THEIR RESPONSE TO SCHOOLING

by

DONNA M. COULTER

May 2013

Advisor: Karen Tonso, Ph.D.

Major: Educational Evaluation & Research

Degree: Doctorate of Philosophy

To examine disparities in education, the researcher utilized a naturalistic approach to uncover how youth think, talk, and feel about their response to schooling. Findings are based on in-depth conversations with 12 inner city African-American kids enrolled in Urban, USA middle and high schools, rarely heard from in the scholarly literature. Students conveyed a belief system that schooling was the route to upward mobility, however, their responses to academic exercises seem to suggest an indifference. Primary findings suggest that students' (a) sense of safety and family tradition were key factors of student school selection; (b) understanding of how levels of success correlate with the opportunity structure was limited; (c) decision to not give voice was an attribution of respect for their teachers; (d) choice for "social life," often to the neglect of schooling, was to have a balanced teen experience rather than opposition to schooling. Future research recommended was to help students discover how their own contradictions impact their educational opportunities.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

My name is Donna M. Coulter. I am employed with Wayne State University as a Recovery Project Lead for a community based program designed to engage mental health stakeholders in advocacy, training, and research. The common thread with my dissertation work is one of social justice, and helping marginalized people have a voice.

I am a southern-reared African-American woman. I completed all of my primary and secondary schooling in Savannah, GA which at the time was a racially mixed pleasant industrial city of about 200,000 people. During my formative years, I was bused to the "white side" of town for school. My white peers were bused to our side for high school. For me, school was a means to an end. As a child, I knew that I wanted to get a Ph.D. and be a white collar professional, and there was really only one path to that end. I knew that I must successfully graduate high school to get into college, and then successfully complete college to get into a decent graduate program.

My parents, like others in our community, had a healthy respect for the schools and the teachers. Teachers were the experts and my parents were willful partners to them. My mother baked for every sale, attended each school, community, and church event that my siblings and I were involved, and my father encouraged us all to do our best and behave. Although he only had an 8th grade education and until his death worked for a lumber plant, he too was a factor in my decision to pursue a career path. From a young age, our father indoctrinated us to think of going to college. He would be proud that all six of his kids have college degrees, three of whom have Master's in education.

I never really tried hard in school. I did enough to achieve my life goals and I was clear my studies did not have to get in the way of my youthful priorities: watching television, creating art, or playing football and kickball in the street. I can clearly recall telling myself: 'I only need to pass the test. I do not need to remember this stuff.' In my conclusion, my learning strategies worked, or so I thought. My grades were good and my parents were pleased.

My first year of college was a disaster and shock. I made a "D" in a subject which I once excelled. After that my study habits improved, but months before graduation I was placed in a remedial writing class because I could not pass that section of Georgia Southern University Exiting Exam. I did graduate on time, June 1989, even if with a bruised ego.

After college, I moved to Detroit with the goal of establishing a career in social work or counseling. Initially, I regretted my decision to sidestep getting the social work certification, but I eventually landed a job with a private social work agency. For about three months, I worked on a low paying grant teaching life skills to teen moms and dads. Then July 23, 1990, I started working for Wayne State University Martin-Luther King-Cesar Chavez-Rosa Parks College Day Program as a university counselor assistant II. The state funded program was designed to increase middle and high school students' preparedness for college.

I earned my master's degree from Wayne State University (WSU) in December of 1997. Similar to my current focus, my master's thesis examined racial disparities in education: *A meta-analytic review of intelligence difference between black and white students on test of intelligence.* Based on my studies, I found that the academic gap between African-Americans and European-Americans and whites had narrowed since the 1970s, and thus neither intelligence nor academic performance were fixed phenomenon. The literature proposed many explanations, but only a few considered the responsibility of youth for their academic outcomes. Based on my own experiences, I knew that youth had the capacity to exercise controls over their educational decisions. As well, it became apparent that the educational experiences of youth are not singularly influenced by one factor, e.g., the parent(s), the school, the teacher, or the peer group. Rather, educational decision-making can be complex as it is influenced by multiple cultural and environmental factors, e.g., people, things, events, or moments in time.

After completing my master's, I took a position as a Research and Evaluation Coordinator with the Developmental Disabilities Institute (DDI), also at WSU. There, I researched disability issues until I was loaned to the School of Medicine in 2004 for a new research project. I have been with WSU Project CARE since.

Outside of academic and professional pursuits, I have a family. My husband, Branson, and I have been married for three years. Combine, we have four adult children. I gave birth to one, Imani. She is in her final year of college, well-traveled, and passionate about the theatre. Beyond the Ph.D., I plan to learn how to play an instrument and learning various art mediums.