

While black boys generally held negative views about their educational experience, they demonstrated positive attitudes toward education and learning in and of itself.

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Contextualizing black boys' use of a street identity in high school

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INSIDE A NUMBER OF low-income urban high schools exists a small but core variant of black boys who identify as oriented to street life. While literature is filled with theoretical and empirical analyses of these boys' performance in school, it has been difficult for social scientists to comprehensively frame the educational experiences of street-life-oriented black boys in particular. Specifically, they struggle to understand the young men themselves and the social structural conditions that deeply shape their use of a street identity in high schools. Social-structural systems (economic, educational, political, criminal justice system, and others), the institutions that represent them, and the gross inequalities that these systems and institutions produce deeply affect the lives and decisions black boys make.¹ Understanding the use of a street identity within and from the standpoint of black boys in high school can prove to be useful and informative to educators and scholars who genuinely seek to reach them.

Theoretical framing

This study conceptualizes street life as a site of resiliency in street-life-oriented black boys.² A sites-of-resiliency theoretical analysis argues that the streets offer particular psychological and physical spaces that operate in tandem to produce a site of strength, community, and ultimately resiliency for street-life-oriented black men. *Street life* is a phenomenological term essentially viewed by the young men as an ideology centered on personal and economic survival. Street life also is conceptualized as a spectrum of networking behaviors that manifest through bonding and illegal activities. In addition, a sites-of-resiliency analysis theorizes resiliency in the context of race and racism, sociohistorical patterns, the intersection of concentrated economic poverty (capitalism) and resiliency, and a phenomenology to understand personal constructions of resiliency.

Mainstream socialization practices

Burton, Obeidallah, and Allison argue that black students unfairly are expected to “adhere to mainstream educational aspirations, adult monitored activities, and academic protocols.”³ They note that this expectation ultimately contributes to the negative relationship that is often experienced between students and their teachers and the larger school. White and Johnson argue that what they refer to as acculturistic learning models are an ineffective means or system to educate black children.⁴ Like Burton et al., they argue that traditional models of learning that are grounded in white middle-class assumptions in fact facilitate the breakdown in relationships between students and teachers. White and Johnson ultimately call for the development of a curriculum developed specifically for and through the cultural standpoint of black students.

Several arguments have framed black boys’ use of a street orientation in high schools as a use of “oppositional identity” developed to cope with mainstream socialization practices.⁵ Ferguson’s ethnography examined the attitudes and behaviors of a group of street-life-oriented black boys in elementary school who were part

of a school-based crew or gang named Niggers For Life (NFL).⁶ Ferguson noted that differential value systems ultimately engendered an unproductive relationship between members of NFL and the school at large. Ferguson concluded that academic achievement had more to do with the “mastery of middle-class” value systems as opposed to the mastery of the school’s curriculum. In fact, she reported that the black boys in her study who acquired a middle-class value system were more likely to academically succeed.

Street life as a site of resiliency for black boys in high school

Several investigators have reframed the behavior of these boys as a form of coping or resiliency implemented to survive inside school.⁷ Ogbu notes four alternative or survival strategies employed by inner-city black adolescents to excel in high school: competition and conflict, collective struggle, clientship or “uncle tomming,” and hustling. Ogbu asserts that at least three aspects to the hustling dimension can describe some of the attitudes and behavior of street-life-oriented black boys in high school: (1) students who refuse to respect white teachers because they represent an extension of white economic and political oppression; (2) students who seize social opportunities to manipulate people for personal gain; and (3) students who come from a strata of the inner city that is so economically impoverished that street life activities are ultimately the only viable means of survival. These students are most likely to drop out. According to Foley, the apparent lack of motivation of black children may in fact be a coping response to oppressive schooling conditions and experiences.⁸ What sense would it make for street-life-oriented black boys to be excited about a learning experience that does not recognize their academic contributions as legitimate or intelligent? Foley says: “Is not anti-motivation a word with negative emotional overtones. . . . Why is it not more useful to explore motivation problems as a possible expression of the distance and rejection felt by teachers and their students from the slums . . . a gap both teachers and students find difficult to understand?”⁹

Oppressive schooling conditions

Stanton-Salazar and Spina argue that social structures or “institutions” play a direct role in shaping how low-income nonwhite students formulate resilient strategies within them.¹⁰ They note that adults should place less emphasis on the fixed psychological traits of students and work to better understand the relationship between social structures and the ideologies that guide them to that of the students’ relational style and help-seeking orientation. The schools these boys attend often are underresourced and the buildings themselves are often in desperate need of major renovations. A number of these schools are overcrowded and in great need of desks, bathrooms, and supplies. Akom notes that black students are unjustly subjected to “filthy and dilapidated educational facilities, white police officers, and racial epithets.”¹¹ Schools with such conditions have been found to be more likely to track or place black boys into remedial, low-level courses or special education.¹² Placing these boys on a remedial track often completes the cycle of learning generally meted out to them: (1) difficult relationship with teachers and other school officials; (2) suspension or expulsion, which greatly increases the potential for the young men to engage in crime and be incarcerated; and (3) if they return to school, tracking into remedial courses or special education.

Schools across the country have adopted zero-tolerance policies as a way to respond to concerns with school violence. This has, in part, resulted in an elevated presence of surveillance and disciplinary practices in schools.¹³ Curry and Spergel’s study of 450 nonwhite male students across four Chicago inner-city schools found that black male students were more likely than students of any other ethnic group to have a school discipline record and to have been arrested.¹⁴ According to Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers, schools have become more “militarized” and notes that ninety children, mostly black and Latino, are expelled each week from Chicago high schools, most commonly for nonviolent deeds.¹⁵

The community-based study reported in this article examined the experiences of street-life-oriented black boys in high school and

is guided by the following research question: How do street-life-oriented black boys frame experiences with teachers and other school officials? To what extent do these boys feel prepared to locate economic and educational opportunities as functions of these relationships?

Methodology

The study organized four street-life-oriented black men into a participatory action research (PAR) team to explore the educational experiences of a community sample of street-life-oriented black boys enrolled in high school. More specifically, this study examines how a community sample of black boys between the ages of sixteen and nineteen frame and use street life as a site of resiliency inside schools. Mixed methods were employed to collect data in the form of 156 surveys, ten individual interviews, and one group interview.

Survey subsample

A total of 156 participants completed a survey for this study. Sixty-five percent of surveys were collected in the streets of New York City and 32.1 percent of surveys in the streets of northern New Jersey. The young men ranged from sixteen to nineteen years of age. Survey data overall were proportionate across grade levels. As a condition of the internal review board, data were not collected from students under sixteen years of age. Consequently, 5.1 percent of our high school surveys are by ninth graders. The other grade levels were more stratified: tenth grade, 28.8 percent; eleventh grade, 28.8 percent; and twelfth grade, 30.8 percent. Most young men reported being enrolled in a mainstream academic track: special education, 3.8 percent; remedial or basic, 8.3 percent; regular or academic, 76.9 percent; and Advanced Placement honors, 9 percent. Data were missing for 1.9 percent of the survey participants. Also, nearly 11 percent of the high school sample had already attended more than one high school.

Individual interview subsample

Ten individual interviews were conducted with street-life-oriented black boys enrolled in high school. The average age for this subsample is 17.1 years, with ages ranging between sixteen and nineteen years. Also, the average grade level for the boys in this subsample is 10.5: one student was in ninth grade, four in tenth grade, two in eleventh grade, and three in twelfth grade. Individual and group interviews were conducted in a private location of the participant's choosing (for example, an apartment). Interview and group interviews ranged between forty-five minutes and two hours.

Group interview subsample

The group interview with street-life-oriented black boys in high school consisted of four participants between sixteen and seventeen years of age. Two of the students are enrolled in eleventh grade, one in tenth grade, and one in ninth grade.

Procedure: Organizing the PAR team

The four young men who made up the PAR team were asked to participate in a research methods workshop that consisted of four three-hour sessions.¹⁶ The research methods training consisted of exercises centered on theory, method, and analysis. Responsibilities for the research team, on successful completion of the methods training, included literature reviews, data collection, qualitative analysis, writing contributions, and professional presentations. All PAR researchers were monetarily compensated for all time contributed.

After training, the research team mapped out street communities of interest into street locations classified as “cool” sites (low street activity), warm sites (moderate street activity), and hot sites (high street activity). As described in the theoretical framing, “activities” refers to both bonding and illegal activities. In each of these locations, the research team identified a set of “street allies,” or gatekeepers to these street communities. A snowball sample was

organized, and with the permission of street allies, we entered the street community to collect data. The PAR team and principal investigator collected survey data in five spaces classified as hot sites. Among the data collection sites were street corners, schools, corridors of apartment buildings, and personal homes, for instance.

Survey and interview data were collected primarily from street communities in Harlem in New York City and Paterson, New Jersey. Participants received ten dollars for completing a survey and twenty dollars for completing an interview. Also, participants received an informed-consent form as well as a resource package with information about employment and educational opportunities.¹⁷

Instrumentation

The 142-item Opportunity Gap Survey is designed to assess high school students' attitudes on educational and economic opportunities in the United States.¹⁸ It includes twelve opened-ended items in which participants are asked to write a brief response. Two items were selected for analysis for this study. The first item reads, "Circle the rung of a ladder that best represents the participant's current school experience." The top of the ladder (or 10) represents the best possible experience in school, and the bottom of it (or 0) represents the worst possible experience in school. The second part of this item asked participants to identify their best and worst possible school experiences. The second item selected for analysis consisted of an excerpt of a comic that presents a caricature of President George Herbert Walker Bush speaking to a diverse group of students in a classroom. President Bush, in the comic, says, "I'm here to emphasize values. Remember . . . work hard, aim high and always use your parents' connections." Participants were asked on the survey to briefly write a response to the question, "What do you think this comic is trying to communicate?"

Data coding process

The principal investigator and two members of the PAR team used a content analysis to generate codes for this study. This coding group met two times a week for approximately three weeks in a

private classroom located in the social-personality psychology department at the Graduate Center at City University of New York. Each coding session lasted for approximately two hours. At the beginning and end of each session, the principal investigator reviewed the dimensions of sites of resiliency and a grounded theoretical framework.¹⁹ The men were then instructed to code transcripts of qualitative interviews in relation to these theories.

Five domains were developed from the men's data coding: (1) education/school, (2) socioeconomic, (3) social structural, (4) attitudinal affect, and (5) phenomenology/positionality.²⁰ The analysis for this article focuses on data associated with the education/school domain (see Table 2.1). Student-teacher interaction was the core code generated for the education/school domain.

Interrater reliability

A reliability score of 1.0 was generated for the core code of student-teacher interaction. A subset of six codes and corresponding reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, as well as Career Interest (.60), Positive Experiences (.70), (Dis) Respect, (Lack of) Preparation (.90), (Inadequate) School Resources (.80), and Race/Racism (.40).

Table 2.1. Qualitative coding scheme: Data analysis process

<i>First Phase of Qualitative Coding: Broad Domain</i>	<i>Second Phase of Qualitative Coding: Core Code</i>	<i>Interrater Coding Alpha</i>	<i>Third Phase of Qualitative Coding: Subcodes</i>	<i>Interrater Coding Alpha</i>
Education/school	Student-teacher interaction	1.0	Career Interest	.60
			Positive Experiences	.70
Education/school			(Dis) Respect	.70
			(Lack of) Preparation	.90
			(Inadequate) School Resources	.80
			Race/Racism	.40

Results

In general, street-life-oriented black boys in this study demonstrated that they valued and understood the importance of a quality education. All of the boys interviewed in this study said they wanted to go to college. In fact, all who were interviewed looked positively on those who were fortunate enough to attend college or secure quality employment.

The study explored how street-life-oriented black boys frame experiences with teachers and other school officials and to what extent they feel prepared to locate economic and educational opportunities as a function of these relationships.

Although most interviews revealed a negative relationship between street-life-oriented black boys and their teachers, at least seven boys in the individual interviews noted something positive about teachers or their overall school experience. Also, most boys interviewed expressed an interest in having a professional career. When asked in interviews what career they ideally desired, a number expressed aspirations to be lawyers, teachers, engineers, and construction workers. Unlike the group interview, several boys in individual interviews described their school experiences in a positive way. Some said that their relationships with teachers and school were productive, respectful, and even fun. Several reported teachers who respected them. Wah Benz, a seventeen-year-old eleventh grader, who offered mostly negative criticisms about his educational experiences, nonetheless noted in the group interview that he also had some quality educational experiences: “[There are] teachers in here [school] who try to do their job fairly and try to work with everybody.”

While black boys generally held negative attitudes toward their current educational experience, they nonetheless indicated across methods positive attitudes toward education or learning. Survey responses indicate that 75 percent ($n = 153$) of the boys agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I care a lot about my grades”; 75 percent ($n = 154$) agree or strongly agree with, “In my school, all students can achieve if they try hard”; 80.1 ($n = 154$) think that it

is important or very important to be “going to a good school”; and 86 percent ($n = 154$) think that it is important or very important to “get a good education.” However, it should be underscored that 71.8 percent ($n = 155$) of these young men strongly disagree or disagree with the statement, “Basically people get fair treatment in the United States, no matter who they are,” and 67 percent ($n = 155$) strongly disagree or disagree with, “In the United States, a ‘low-income’ student has the same chance of a good education as a ‘wealthy’ student.”

The young men were asked on the survey to circle the step that best represented their standing or overall experience in school on a ten-step ladder. The ten steps ranged from negative (0) to positive (10). A mean score of 6.8 was recorded for this sample. Furthermore, they were asked on the survey, “Describe what you imagine to be the best possible school experience.” Content analysis was used to organize survey responses into three types of responses: getting a good education or doing well academically ($n = 30$); graduating from high school ($n = 26$); and going to college ($n = 12$). Some of the responses follow:

Getting a Good Education or Doing Well Academically

- “Receiving a good education.”
- “Getting a real education.”
- “Pass all classes with 95 percent and up.”
- “Work that makes me work very hard.”
- “If I was cool with all teachers to the point where they help me so I can pass. Also, if I mess up [in school], they would give me a chance.”

Graduating from High School

- “It would be graduating high school [and] having a good relationship with teachers.”
- “Get out of school [graduate].”
- “Graduating the twelfth grade.”
- “To graduate on time.”
- “To get my diploma.”

Underpreparation for economic and educational opportunities

Although the educational experiences of street-life-oriented black boys are diverse and vary from positive to negative, the study's findings overall strongly suggest these young men have troubled relationships with teachers and other school officials. Most of the boys in the study, across methods, did not view school as a nurturing or supportive learning environment and generally expressed feelings of alienation and frustration inside their schools. Several of the young men described school personnel (teachers, disciplinarians, and school security) as "racist" and "phony." Also, the young men described teachers, other school officials, and the institution itself as entities that were not genuinely interested in their academic development. This left several participants feeling unprepared to pursue quality educational opportunities after high school.

The four young men who made up the focus group asserted they wanted to pursue either vocational or undergraduate opportunities but noted their high school experience did not equip them with a skill set to achieve this educational endeavor.

Wah Benz said:

They ain't preparing us for the world. . . . As black people, we need to go to college if we're going to be something higher in life than just this high school diploma. . . . What they're teaching us in here is basically nothing. . . . We have like low-budget [inadequate] computer classes and stuff like that in here. You feel [understand] me? Like we can't use the computer to like learn new stuff on . . . and like basically what they're teaching us has nothing to do with what's outside in the [real] world. . . . If we go to college . . . we're not going to be prepared . . . or nothing like that because of the classes we're taking here.

Sixteen-year-old Iceberg, a ninth grader, said:

Me, personally, when I leave [my high school], I know I ain't going to be able to go to college, because of what they taught here and like basically what I did while I was here. So, me, personally, I want to be in something like lab technician, computer science, so when I leave here, I'm going to

go to an institute like at DeVry or Citone or something [technical schools] like that.

The young men unwaveringly discussed how their identity and value system are summarily dismissed—how their construction and framing of their educational experiences are unrecognized by their schools at large. Wah Benz noted at length how he experienced “racism” and other forms of “disrespect” from school officials: “[I don’t] feel respected as a Black man in this school.” He and others also spoke of how their educational opportunities are compromised by overcrowding, or “pack classes,” as well as a lack of learning resources. Said Benz:

Especially in these schools, where it’s pack classes . . . you’re sitting there squished up together. . . . I don’t feel like too much respected from the teachers in the school. . . . Like teachers in different races [who are not black] . . . sometimes I feel discriminated [against], because if I do something and another person do something of a different color . . . they . . . get treated less harsh than what my punishment was. Yeah, I feel discriminated [against]. I don’t feel respected as a black man in this school at all.

June, seventeen years old and in the eleventh grade, revealed that one teacher had told him, “he was not going to be shit.” He poignantly revealed how this same teacher, in a fit of anger, predicted for him a future of incarceration and a career of selling illegal narcotics. June shared in his individual interview that he felt disrespected by teachers and ultimately encouraged by them to no longer try in school:

Interviewer: What are some of the things teachers have said to you?

June: . . . They’ll be like, “Yeah, like you’re always in the hallway. When you graduate, when you get out of high school, you ain’t going to do shit.” Disrespect.

Interviewer: So your teacher told you “that you ain’t going to do shit”?

June: Yeah, [they say] I ain't going to be shit. I ain't never going to be shit, but be in jail, because I look like a hustler, I'm going to be hustling. As soon as they say that, I just sit there and laugh. . . . They [the teachers] be going all crazy about it.

Overall, street-life-oriented black boys in this study described teachers as lacking respect for them. Their descriptions of disrespect ranged from perceiving teachers to be more interested in the “check” that teaching provides to an unwillingness by teachers to adequately educate or prepare their students for life after high school. Spliff, a nineteen-year-old senior, described this situation in an interview:

Spliff: Seriously . . . our school is shit, man. Teachers don't really like care about you, man. You know. They're just talking to you . . . like, “We'll care about you” or whatever, but most of them teachers, they don't really care about you. We don't really get taught nothing anyway.

Interviewer: Do you think most teachers respect black boys in high school?

Spliff: . . . You got a lot of like nasty teachers in there . . . who really don't care. You failing out, you ask, “Who's going to help?” and they are not trying to help you. . . . A lot of teachers in there you can't get along with.

To analyze more closely how students framed the relationship between teachers and themselves, survey participants were asked to interpret a political cartoon that shows President George Herbert Walker Bush speaking to a diverse group of students, encouraging them to work hard, have high expectations—and use their parents' networks. When participants were asked what they thought the cartoon was trying to communicate, a number responded in writing that the comic brought attention to how student achievement or academic success is influenced by parents' connections. Forty-one participants agreed or wrote that they believed the influence

of parent connections plays a role in student achievement—for example:

- “Kids that have wealthy parents don’t have to do much to succeed.”
- “Parent connections wins you favoritism.”
- “Use your parents’ connections to your advantage.”
- “Kids need connections to get ahead in life.”
- “The only way a student can succeed is through connections.”
- “To work hard, and it’s who you know to get what you want.”
- “This comic is saying that you got to bend and cheat to make it.”

Eighteen of these students explicitly noted that white students were more likely to enjoy the privilege of parent connections—for example:

- “If your parent [is] white, you can benefit.”
- “Whites have connections.”
- “Racism.”

Conclusion

Typically the educational experiences of street-life-oriented black boys are poorly framed or misunderstood by educators, policy-makers, and social scientists. The dynamic aspects of many of the boys’ arguments are rarely captured, and most empirical analysis fails to incorporate a phenomenological framing of the boys’ activities inside schools. Allowing the phenomenological perspectives of the boys to drive or guide the analysis is an approach that would inform interventions designed to reach them.

Evidence was provided for these research questions: How do street-life-oriented black boys frame experiences with teachers and other school officials? To what extent do these boys feel prepared to locate economic and educational opportunities as function of

these relationships? A number of the young men reported they had negative experiences or unproductive relationships with teachers. Also, they noted they felt unprepared for college or quality legal employment after high school. Yet although they generally held negative attitudes toward available educational opportunities, they nonetheless indicated positive attitudes toward education or learning. At least seven boys in the individual interviews noted something positive about teachers or their personal school experience, or both.

As stated in the theoretical framing, research has shown that street-oriented black boys, like those who participated in this study, have often experienced oppressive schooling conditions, like negative student-teacher interactions, lack of academic and employment preparation, and underresourced schools. As a strategy for coping with these conditions, these boys may organize their identities around aspects of their lives related to street life—a space where they are seen and see themselves as competent, productive, and resilient. Unfortunately, schools do not provide such a space for street-oriented boys like many in this study.

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