Re/Making Identities in the Praxis of Urban Schooling:
A Cultural Historical Perspective

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In cultural historical activity theory, the entities that make a system are not conceived as independent but as aspects of mediated relations. Consequently, an individual, a tool, or a community cannot be theorized in an independent manner but must be understood in terms of the historically changing, mediated relations in which they are integral and constitutive parts. Drawing on a case study that focuses on the identities of two of the authors, we show how, by participating in the activity system of schooling, the identities of students and teachers are continuously made and remade. A teacher changes from being “someone unable to control the class” to being a respected and successful school staff member; a student changes from being a street fighter to being an A student. Identity, we argue, should therefore not be thought of as a stable characteristic of individuals but as a contingent achievement of situated activity. Our case study suggests that cogenerative dialogues involving students and their teachers provide contexts for the reflexive elaboration of mutual understanding of the identities of individuals who occupy different social locations in the activity system.

Setting: Environmental Science Lesson (Juniors and Seniors), City High School, Mr. Cristobal Carambo, mid October 2001

The teacher Cristobal told students the grades that they had received on a recent test. A number of students including Ya-Meer noticed that Charles, who normally is a B or C student, had received 93%.

Ya-Meer asked the teacher what his grade was. Cristobal did not remember the grade but thought it was 83%. Ya-Meer asked, “Hey, how I get an 83?” But when Cristobal actually looked up the grade, Ya-Meer had received 65%. Ya-Meer asked, “How I get a 65?”

In this class, Ya-Meer thinks of himself as and is considered by his peers to be one of the two best students. Ya-Meer is proud of having been on the honor roll and having been selected re-
recently as student of the month. Cristobal, an experienced teacher who had moved from teaching urban students in Miami to teach at City High, felt that after a turbulent first year characterized by many problematic interactions with his students, gradually he had earned their respect. He was confident that he could resolve the dispute with Ya-Meer without creating an unmanageable classroom situation. Cristobal wanted to resolve the contradictions that were emerging about Ya-Meer’s grade, his expectations, and the discrepancy between this score and his usual performance. He invited Ya-Meer to review the test with him, stating “Let’s see the test. Maybe I made a mistake.” Together, they looked at the test.

Cristobal: You didn’t answer the questions fully.
Ya-Meer: Damn. I did give the right answer, a paragraph and a third. For each question, yeah.
Cristobal: You didn’t answer my questions.
Ya-Meer (mumbled): Man. I don’t wanna hear that. That’s bullshit.

Ya-Meer stormed out of the classroom. Cristobal followed him into the hallway and called, “Ya-Meer.” However, Ya-Meer continued to walk away. Soon after, the coordinator of the small learning community (SLC) informed Cristobal that Ya-Meer had told her that he would not go back into the classroom. Cristobal located Ya-Meer and returned with him to the SLC office. The coordinator, teacher, and student then tried to resolve the situation. However, during the meeting Ya-Meer exclaimed, “You teachers always want to be right.” Cristobal endeavored to reason but decided that further attempts would likely be futile. As he left the office Cristobal announced, “I don’t want to talk to him anymore. He’s crazy.”

Later, the coordinator arranged a second meeting in her office. Cristobal declared that after looking over the test again, he felt that 77 was a more appropriate grade.

Cristobal: If I was wrong, you know me, I have no problems. What did I do wrong to make you go so crazy?
Ya-Meer: When you told me the grade, you told me the grade incorrectly. You first said it was an 83, then you said it was a 65. That really got me upset.
Cristobal: I am sorry if I did that. In the future I’ll try to be clearer about the grades.
Ya-Meer: OK, I am fine. I will go back to the classroom.

In this situation, the identities of student and teacher are at stake. For Ya-Meer, the grade he received is unjustified and a contradiction with being an A student; for Cristobal, who he is in relation to other students (e.g., someone “who is not in control of a class”) is at stake. Every moment of schooling, we suggest, constitutes a moment in which identities of students and teachers are at stake and must be made and remade. Thus, both Cristobal and Ya-Meer, as their biographical narratives reveal, had undergone considerable changes in who they are to themselves and others. In both cases, urban schools in general and City High School in particular are places that have formed them and have become an integral part of their identities. More specifically, their existing identities have continuously been transformed; their new identities continuously emerge from participating in an activity system focused on teaching and learning.

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2The school is divided into 10 SLCs, each with approximately 200 students and five to seven teachers. SLCs operate as schools within a school and are administered by a coordinator who is a senior teacher.
At the same time, both also have a sense of a stable identity (Self) that they carry around and that appears to remain constant throughout their lives. In the opening vignette, Ya-Meer thought of himself as an A student independent of the situation; this Self was inconsistent with and threatened by the grade that he had received. In their biographical narratives, they use the same pronoun, "I," to refer to themselves reflexively across time. Some aspects of identity, it seems, are continuously made and remade, whereas other aspects of identity seem to remain the same (Chandler, 2000). Especially in moments of crisis or when people change from one activity system to another, the constancy of identity is called into question, thereby continuously threatening the sense of a constant Self that is maintained over time. In each situation of their daily praxis, students and teachers are involved in the struggle of making and remaking who they are, how they understand themselves, and how they are understood by others (Brickhouse & Potter, 2001). Identity, therefore, is not a stable entity that individuals take in and out of situations; rather, identity can be regarded as one of the outcomes of a person's participation in ongoing activity.

The purpose of this collaborative, longitudinal investigation is to articulate and exemplify the continuous making and remaking of the identities of teachers and students as they participate in the praxis of urban schooling. We are particularly interested in the role of the activity system as a whole in this process of producing and reproducing individual participants, and with it, the culture of which each individual, in this case Cristobal and Ya-Meer, is a constituent part.

CULTURAL HISTORICAL ACTIVITY THEORY

Activity Systems and Contradictions

We have framed our work in urban schools in terms of cultural historical activity theory, which articulates not only agency and structure common to sociological theories (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984) but also the possibility for historical change (Cole & Engeström, 1993; Leont’ev, 1978). Social analyses in terms of cultural historical activity theory focus on what people (participants) actually do, the objects that motivate their activity, the tools they use, the community of which they are part, the rules that pattern their actions, and the division of labor they take in activity. Tools, community, rules, and division of labor are the social and material resources (structures) that both enable and constrain human agency (Sewell, 1992); that is, they are resources that mediate the relationship between human agents and the object of their actions. In this article we refer to these resources as nodes of an activity system. Each node is understood not as a constant entity but as undergoing continuous change, which in part is brought about in the system’s response to contradictions. The research focuses on teachers and students as agents in the activity of schooling, particularly the historical changes they undergo through their involvement and the associated evolution and coconstruction of their identities.

The identification of contradictions within and across activity systems is a central component of an activity-theoretic analysis (Engeström, 1987). Contradictions may exist (a) within each of the nodes of an activity system (tools, object, etc.); (b) in the relation between two nodes; (c) in the relation between the object of one activity system and the object of another, technologically more advanced, system; or (d) between the nodes of different interconnected activity systems. Because of the dialectical logic embodied in activity theory, contradictions are regarded as positive constituents (e.g., El’konin, 1971; Il’enkov, 1977), that is, they are potential growth points that allow the
system to improve while affording the making and remaking of the participants and their identities. It is of particular importance to understand that individuals may come to internalize and express as personal problems the contradictions that really exist somewhere else in the activity system (Holzkamp, 1983). For example, the “brothers” described by MacLeod (1995) are a type of African American working-class student who, despite buying into the reigning achievement ideology of schools and working hard, does not achieve the goal of going to college. These students may blame themselves for the failure when in fact this failure was brought about by the contradictions between a bourgeois achievement ideology and systematic institutional bias against African Americans succeeding in society.

Identity, Culture, and Activity

Activity theory maintains that cultural characteristics, development, and psychological phenomena such as identity are the outcomes of social activities (Ratner, 2000). In an activity-theoretic approach the power to act (agency) is a fundamental characteristic of human beings; it allows individuals not merely to react to, but, of importance, to change their material and social worlds (Holzkamp, 1983). The material and social structures on which individual draw both constrain and enable their own transformations (Sewell, 1992). Through their praxis, on one hand human beings can actively create and consciously control their social lives. On the other hand, human beings are constrained in their activity and their consciousness by objectively experienced material and social conditions (structures), which they help to create in collective, object-oriented activity.

Identity refers us to the question of who is the agent in an activity system. From an activity-theoretic perspective, identity is a product and byproduct of activity. That is, through their agency, the people in an activity not only produce material outcomes, but also, in the process, produce and reproduce themselves and others qua participants in the relevant community (Engeström, 1987). Therefore, the identity of an individual is not something that can be taken for granted as an a priori constituent of activity, but it is something that is made and remade as activity is enacted and when individuals participate in multiple activity systems. This theoretical stance is supported by social theory that views culture as being enacted in fields defined by weak boundaries (Sewell, 1999). The culture associated with practices in a field can be enacted in other fields, thereby creating contradictions in those fields and contributing to thin coherence in the patterns of cultural enactment. Different fields are characterized by the culture associated with them and their spatial and temporal locations. In this study, Cristobal and Ya-Meer brought to the science classroom cultural resources that they had produced through their participation in a variety of fields throughout their lives. In praxis, cultural enactment has conscious and unconscious parts and produces intended and unintended actions and interactions. When the patterns of action are consistent with the thin coherence expected of a science classroom (i.e., they contribute to collective activity and align with the object of the activity system) then events unfold relatively smoothly. However, when contradictions occur due to the enactment of culture from another field, actions may be interpreted as resistive and struggles may occur within the community.

Because struggles are especially visible when individuals enter new fields, a science class being taught by a new teacher (such as Cristobal) provides opportunities to study identity-producing interactions between participants. For example, students did not automatically accept Cristobal as a teacher upon his arrival at City High School. In an activity system in which he was an agent and
the object is his identity as a teacher, he had to earn the respect that characterizes a teacher–student relationship. Cristobal had to create social capital through his persistence and the resolution of contradictions in and between the nodes of the primary activity system in which he participated. As we show in this article, the contradictions that commanded attention involved interactions between the nodes of the primary activity system and numerous other activity systems that extended spatially into the neighborhoods and homes of Cristobal and his students and temporally into their histories.

In our reading, many of the existing activity-theoretic studies pay insufficient attention to the fact that “the psychic reality that is revealed to us directly is the subjective world of consciousness” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 75). We say “insufficient attention” because if we human beings are enabled and constrained by what appears to us in our (subjective) consciousness, then we need to better understand these subjective realities to understand agency in activity systems (Holzkamp, 1983). To understand the subjective realities of the participants in schooling, we need to better understand how they understand themselves; that is, we need to understand their identities as lived by them. The subjective situation is therefore the experience of a given situation and simultaneously an experience of oneself in that situation. Individuals use the spatial and temporal location of a situation in biographical narratives that constitute a reflexive project of constructing identity (Nelson, 2000; Ricoeur, 1992). Frequently these narratives articulate the environment that they experience as objectively given and as enabling or constraining their individual agency. These narratives, which are used to sustain self-identity, are inherently fragile, for they have to be created and continually reordered against the backdrop of new and changing experiences of everyday life (such as the conflict in the opening vignette) and in a context of individuals participating in numerous fields, experiences that tend to fragment perceptions of the self (Giddens, 1991).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Site and Participants

This study is situated at City High School, an urban neighborhood school in Philadelphia. City High School is a comprehensive public high school of approximately 2,000 students, of which 82% are from low-income families and roughly 93% are African American. Although we generally refuse the construction of difference based on testing technology because it contributes to deficit views, we provide the following descriptive information so that readers can better situate this school with respect to other schools in Philadelphia. The average daily attendance rate is 72%. In the 1999–2000 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests, 84% of the 11th-grade students scored in the bottom quartile for math and 86% scored in the bottom quartile for reading. These figures for reading and math are higher than the statewide percentages of 25% and 24%, respectively. More interesting, percentages for bottom quartile scores in similar schools show 70% in reading and 73% in mathematics.

The school is divided into 10 SLCs, each of which focuses on a different theme. Science, Education, and Technology (SET), the SLC that is the site of this study, has science, education, and technology as its focus. There are seven teachers who work in SET, one of whom is coordinator of the SLC.
The authors of this study were located in different institutional relations within SET and the nearby university. Jen, a new teacher, was seeking certification to teach biology and general science. She was assigned to undertake a yearlong internship at City High School. Jen learned to teach at the elbow of a cooperating teacher, Cristobal, in an 11th-grade classroom. Cristobal is a teacher of Cuban-African origin, with 5 years of experience teaching science in urban schools in Miami, Florida. This study commenced in his 1st year of teaching at City High School, where he initially experienced significant difficulties despite his previous successful experience as a teacher and his cultural history that included living in large cities in the northeastern United States. Ya-Meer was a student in the chemistry class taught by Cristobal and Jen during the 1st year of this study; during the 2nd year, he was a student in the environmental science class taught by Cristobal and two different new teachers. Ya-Meer and Rowhea interacted extensively, as the former was a participant in the latter's doctoral dissertation research. Ken was Jen's supervising professor and regularly cotaught at City High School with new and cooperating teachers. Michael was a coresearcher at the school investigating the use of coteaching in Penn's teacher education program. Since 2000, Michael has repeatedly cotaught with Ken and new and resident teachers at City High School.

Method

In studying identity, we identify the resources people have to accomplish their goals, intentions, and projects and how they use these resources in their involvement with the ongoing activity (Harre & Gillet, 1994). We take into account three basic assumptions (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). First, we study identity in settings where the forming of identities is at stake in the course of the activity (see opening vignette). Second, we seek to identify cultural and historical resources because they are integral as empowering and constraining tools for identity formation. Finally, mediated action is employed as the basic unit in the analysis of identity.

For our work at City High School, we have evolved a praxis that simultaneously achieves teaching, learning to teach, researching, supervising, and evaluating (Roth & Tobin, 2002). Our goal is to participate in bringing about change in urban teaching and learning environments by involving as many stakeholders as possible in classroom processes. To learn from our collective experience and make decisions about subsequent actions, we videotape lessons, record debriefings, make videotapes of our analysis sessions, and collect reflections in journals and face-to-face and e-mail interactions; these data allow us to develop new understanding and local theory. All results of earlier analyses are incorporated as resources in subsequent analyses, or as objects of inquiry in their own right. In this way, our research results arise out of the recursive application of a reflexive hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Ricoeur, 1991). The goal of our analysis is to generate praxeology, that is, a locally grounded theory of praxis that provides new possibilities for action to the participants in the research and greater control over their lifeworlds. This form of research practice is therefore "authentic" in a catalytic sense (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in that our evolving understandings directly inform and transform our praxis of teaching.

Consistent with the epistemology of coteaching as a context for teacher induction, we discarded the notion of "student teacher" in favor of "new teacher."
In this article, we deviate from using third-person narrative for representing our research for two primary reasons. First, traditional formats provide one (master) narrative and are therefore inconsistent with social-constructivist and postmodern epistemologies. Second, traditional formats truncate the agency of individuals in participatory research (Barton et al., 2002) and delete the voices of those at the center of the research (Roth & McGinn, 1998). In recent years, there have been repeated examples of how the representation format can be constructed to be an analogue of the object and process of research (e.g., Roth & McRobbie, 1999). In this article, we opted for a mix of first-person, third-person, and dialogical formats because they are reflexive of our research process.

BECOMING A RESPECTED URBAN SCIENCE TEACHER

Cristobal identifies himself as an "Anglo New Yorker" who had developed "amalgams of [him]self," the person he considers truly to be, and the Black, Hispanic teacher that he became while teaching in an urban school in Miami. Although he had initially experienced difficulties at City High School ("With the Black kids from the 'hood,' my Black man was a total fiasco"), Cristobal eventually learned ways of teaching and disciplining effectively. As Cristobal prepared to teach at City High, he considered himself ready for his new assignment. He did not anticipate the struggle that eventual success would entail.

Cristobal: When I met my Philadelphia students for the first time I was completely overwhelmed. I discovered that there was no area of my Black experience that prepared me for these kids. Although I had lived in the inner city as a kid, that was among very middle class Black people in another time. The kids at City High were so marginalized, unprepared, and hostile that I was totally lost. There was no way of being an affable, friendly person, nor could I fake the militant mean person that many of them were so accustomed to. In my first few weeks, I found that there was a gruff and heavily "mean" mode of speaking that most of these kids responded to, but there was no way that I could do that. I developed this "crazily angry persona" over the course of the first year. I did not have this tool when I first came to City High. They've seen me "lose it" on several occasions, and it's genuinely frightened them. The first time it happened, it frightened me too. But throughout this school year it has been part of my arsenal of characters.

I think that much of the difficulty I faced had to do with the quality of the ninth-graders of 2000. Many teachers throughout City High felt that the ninth-grade class of 2000 was one of the more difficult ones in years. Additionally, the union negotiations and on-again/off-again strike threats made an orderly beginning impossible.

What eventually worked was strict, unbending discipline. I found the hardest side of myself that I could and I used it ruthlessly. I exiled students regularly. I had several students expelled. One I had arrested. It was very difficult for me but it was the only way to survive. At the same time, I treated everyone with utmost respect, even when I was hard as nails with them. As the months passed, I softened and allowed some friendliness to creep into my relationships with them. I was more successful in my chemistry class because I knew the content well enough to structure teaching situations that allowed me to do many activities and labs. This was very difficult in the first half of the year, as there were absolutely no supplies, materials, science staff, science department, or a history of active science teaching in the school.
The presence of the two interns from the University of Pennsylvania saved me, as I had colleagues with whom I could co-teach. They gave me insight into the teaching, planning, and structuring of the classes. They gave me breathing space. With them teaching, I could look at the class and attempt to solve the discipline and teaching problems. I was able to forge relationships with the students during the class; I would take students aside and ask them why they were behaving in a given manner, or if they were learning. I was able to see the weaknesses in our approach and in our content. I would not have survived without the interns.

Whereas I was able to survive in the chemistry class, because of my familiarity with the content, I was not able to figure out the physical science class well enough to create interesting and engaging lessons. It was a fiasco.

Despite a successful history of teaching urban youth, Cristobal found himself unprepared to teach successfully at City High. Folk psychology presupposes that we have a core identity (Self), which we take around unchanged into the various settings and activities in which we are involved (Cristobal talked about the personae he took on rather than identity changes.) Most teacher education programs also presuppose that once we have learned to be good teachers, we are successful teachers in any context. Based on our collective experiences of having successfully participated (as teachers and students) in numerous schools, and particularly of having experience as teachers and learners at City High, we regard this presupposition as untenable. “Being a good teacher” is not an aspect of our identity that we carry around from one (school) context to another (e.g., Tobin, 2002); being a good teacher is an aspect of an identity that arises anew every day and for each class (activity system). Our subjectivities and identities as teachers are not stable characteristics that we carry around, but they are products of ongoing interactions that involve the different resources available to the participants in the activity (e.g., a lesson).

Cristobal’s narrative shows how his “identity” underwent a number of transformations and iterations. However, in looking back at his 1st year at City High, he recognized characteristics of his identity that were unchanged from his days of teaching in Miami. That is, although Cristobal could view himself in terms of different “teaching selves,” he could also identify a stable teaching identity that he regarded as a stable self. In so doing, Cristobal articulated a fundamental conundrum that is reflected in the scholarship on the issues of self, identity, and subjectivity. On one hand, we live our experience as individuals who move virtually unchanged from context to context. In addition, we each experience a core self that is unchanged throughout our lives. We attain this sense of stability by (re-)telling biographical narratives that create and sustain who we are.

From the students’ perspective, Cristobal had to earn their respect before he could teach and they would learn. Being a teacher, in contrast to being the principal, did not come with symbolic capital that, in this culture, would have automatically meant a form of respect. From a student perspective, institutional roles provide resources for acting in different ways:

Ya-Meer: If you got a principal right here, the principal Ms. Wilson, and you got a student, and you got a teacher. Out of all those three, the most respect I would give to the principal. I would know how to talk to her. Like the principal, I wouldn’t say, “Oh my god, man” and then turn my back. “See man this is why I don’t like y’all, I don’t like y’all teachers or y’all school,” I wouldn’t say that to the principal, but I might say that to a teacher. I would say, “I’m having a problem with these teachers in here.” I would get around it with that kind of respect. Talkin’ to the student, I’d tell
him to go blow something or go somewhere. I would give him not near as much respect as this person depending on the subject that we were talkin’ to.

It was not that Cristobal was a bad or inefficient teacher in some ontological sense. He had changed activity systems, and in so doing he was situated with new students (whose increased understanding is the motive of the activity from a societal perspective), community, rules, and material resources. As the experiencing agent in this new activity system, his identity was a product of the activity system and was mediated in new ways by the other nodes in the activity system. As a result, he often emerged from a day of work feeling unsuccessful and frustrated. The outcome of his efforts simultaneously led to small successes in terms of student learning and produced his identity as a science teacher experiencing challenges that sometimes seemed insurmountable.

Now, in his 2nd year, students generally respect Cristobal and accept him as their teacher (“His teaching is great”; “He fun, he cool”; “He not mean”; “He very active”). To come to this point that he was well-liked by other teachers in the school, by new teachers, and by students and to tremendously increase his effectiveness as a teacher—to become such a different teacher (identity)—it was not sufficient that he change factors that pertain only to himself. As changes occurred in different aspects of the activity system, they mediated changes in Cristobal’s changing identity and the extent to which he could exercise agency drawing on an ever-increasing number of structural resources. We show in the following subsections that structural changes brought about changes in agency, and these were interpreted within the community as changes in Cristobal’s identity as a science teacher.

Accessing Resources and Creating Space

At City High School, as in many other urban high schools, there were limited material resources (equipment, chemicals, instruments) available for teaching science. SET, which is located in the basement of the school, does not have a special science room, so science is taught in a large room that was formerly used for teaching auto mechanics. Cristobal had difficulty in locating any equipment suitable for conducting the hands-on approach to teaching and learning that he preferred. Although the principal had initiated an order of science equipment and had refurbished previously closed labs on the third floor for biology, chemistry, and physics, Cristobal had little success in accessing these materials. Furthermore, although a lab technician had been hired, she provided little service to those science teachers who did not teach on the third floor. Although she was soon replaced, the new person had limited knowledge of science, which was somewhat compensated by her enthusiasm and willingness to prepare relevant equipment and materials. Cristobal’s own agency further changed the situation. He actively identified and secured those resources that he required for teaching in the way that was beneficial to his students. He gradually set up the room so that each of the sciences could be taught there while having access to water, adequate bench space, and networked computers that connected to the Internet. These resources structured the classroom environment in new ways and, consequently, allowed science lessons to emerge more effectively. Toward the end of the 1st year, Cristobal felt that he had sufficient material resources to enact the curriculum in the way he preferred. Any more laboratory equipment would just be “icing on the cake” without making a difference in students’ learning.
Division of Labor

Being able to spread the responsibility for preparing and teaching the lessons allowed Cristobal new ways of developing an identity as an urban teacher in Philadelphia. A variety of partnerships with the University of Pennsylvania brought different individuals into Cristobal’s classroom, which provided opportunities for addressing existing problems and contradictions collectively. Crucial to Cristobal’s developing identity as a well-liked and successful teacher was an institutional arrangement that assigned new science teachers to SET. During his 1st year, two new teachers (including Jen) cotaught with Cristobal. Collectively, the three teachers were able to address significant issues of management and control while focusing on the learning needs of students to a greater extent than would have been possible if only one or even two teachers had been available. Teaching together, they greatly expanded their collective room to maneuver at the same time that they increased their individual room to maneuver. The presence of coteachers provided Cristobal with new opportunities to learn and grow; working collectively, a zone of proximal development emerged. This zone is characterized by the difference between individual and collective agency (Engeström, 1987). For example, when a new teacher took the lead in a lesson, Cristobal was able to focus on a subset of students and, in the smaller groups, begin to establish rapport with individuals. New opportunities for acting became possible because graduate and undergraduate students from Penn agreed to teach small groups of high school students for one or more periods a week. By working directly with high school students, the University of Pennsylvania students became additional agents who mediated learning in Cristobal’s classes. Their presence provided time (a resource) for Cristobal and the two new teachers to step back and consider how to better meet the needs of students in circumstances they all found challenging.

Rules of Acting and Interacting

As a cultural field, the science classroom was characterized by weak boundaries, facilitating students to act as they do in other fields, such as the streets and their homes. That is, their street code, normally incompatible with the school code, nevertheless became the rules of interaction. Although Cristobal and his coteachers endeavored to regard the students’ culture as capital on which school learning could build, they readily observed how many of the strategies of the street were inappropriate for a science classroom and school. Accordingly, the coteachers began to disrupt inappropriate practices (e.g., shouting across the classroom, interfering with the learning of others, listening to CDs during a lecture) and to demarcate what could and could not happen in this science classroom. Simultaneously, Cristobal and his coteachers made salient those situations when students acted in appropriate ways and congratulated the class for making a positive contribution to classroom life. Over time, changes associated with the class were observable in myriad ways. Thus, during his first semester in SET, Cristobal found it virtually impossible to create an environment conducive to a lesson; consequently, he requested substantial numbers of students to leave class. In subsequent semesters, fewer students were asked to leave the room.

Personal Schema

Schema are experience-based patterns in our perceptions and plans for actions; they are person-based structures that enable and constrain agency (Sewell, 1992). The schema Cristobal
brought to his job at City High School turned out to be disadvantageous. He was raised in Boston and New York, and he taught in urban schools in Miami. Although he is Black, the students perceived him to be different from African Americans. The urban youth from Philadelphia were culturally distinctive, including considerable differences in their language compared to those languages with which Cristobal was already familiar. Cristobal realized that he would need to learn to speak as they spoke and learn to understand the meaning of their utterances. In the course of his 1st year, he developed a hybrid that blended formal science talk and the everyday language of the students. Although he now introduces science concept words not native to everyday street language, he provides associated explanation and elaboration that not only avoids “big words that nobody understands” but also explicitly draws on the expressive forms of student language or code. As exemplified in the classroom episode in Figure 1, Cristobal often switches the linguistic code from White middle class English of normal science classes to a linguistic code that is close to that of the students’ everyday lives, especially when trouble seemed to emerge. Cristobal now uses this approach in written and oral communication and thereby assists students to understand him and learn. In his teaching, he seeks ways that allow students to make connections between the new and what they already know, their interests and their ways of expression to the language of science. On a more abstract level, such code switching is a dynamic strategy that negotiates power for the speaker signaling his or her intention to change the social relationship with the addressee (Flowers,}

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<tr>
<th>CLASSROOM INTERACTION</th>
<th>ANALYSIS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cristobal: So now I got water, I got evaporation, and I got this- you know what it is</td>
<td>Middle class register,</td>
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<td>is called when you go back from steam to water? ((gesture eliciting student input))</td>
<td>Request for “big” science word</td>
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<td>Student 1: Che-</td>
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<td>Student 2: Change</td>
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<td>Cristobal: ((Conda-</td>
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<td>Student 1: Change</td>
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<td>Student 3: (Change)</td>
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<td>Student 4: (Condensation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cristobal: Condensation, right, it is condensation, right? ((Restlessness, several</td>
<td>“Big” science word</td>
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<td>students talk across the room.))</td>
<td>Sign of trouble</td>
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<td>Cristobal: Okay, let’s go. I got a coupl’a very brief notes for you. And I’m gonna</td>
<td>Code switch</td>
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<td>come back to you, cos’ame, you just explained to me wat you saw, but ain’t no-one</td>
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<td>explained to me why it’s happened. I wanna know why it happened. You just told me</td>
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<td>you seen. H-two-O (writes “H₂O —”) when heated disappears, what is it called when</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it disappears?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student: Evaporated</td>
<td>Student offers science word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristobal: Evaporated, right! ((E)- (va)- po- rates ( ((scriptwriter writes the</td>
<td>Code switch to middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word</td>
<td>class, science register</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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FIGURE 1 Transcript and analysis of a classroom episode that show how Cristobal switches codes to facilitate students’ meaning-making processes.
2000) and to affirm the cultural identity of students (Weisman, 2001). The switch makes it possible for students to produce culture (i.e., learn science) while connecting to the language with which they have the most comfort.

**MOVING UP: FROM PLAYING GAMES TO GETTING A’S**

Ya-Meer’s identity as a student has undergone visible shifts during the years in which he has been in school. In the following sections, we explore the emergence of Ya-Meer’s identity as he participated in different school-related activity systems and those associated with the home and neighborhood. The voice in these sections is Ya-Meer’s. Michael and Ken selected segments that were relevant to Ya-Meer’s identity as a student from transcribed tape recordings of discussions with Jen. Ya-Meer then read and edited the written texts.

Ya-Meer: My parents encourage me to do better. My dad went to the army and he was in Vietnam. He had a high school diploma. My dad, the only thing he ever ask me about were my classes. The main thing is Cisco classes. He says the Cisco class give me a big future. A lot of colleges would want me if I do that type of stuff.

My step mom, I don’t think she went to college. My mom went to college. My brother’s in the 12th grade. He’s about to graduate this year. My sister is in the 9th grade. My stepsister is doin’ real good. She’s goin’ to middle school and is goin’ to Paris on Friday. She in a lot of college programs where she go to different colleges and stuff.

I used to get in trouble. I was the biggest problem. I was the teachers’ nightmare. Like when it came down to it, I did do the work, but I had a temper and a behavior problem. This was in elementary school. Me and my friend called Sabee used to beat people up. We used to roll on people. Then when me and my bull [friend] separated from beating people up, I retired.

When I moved to New Jersey I was what they wanted. They wanted to get me mad. I was in a school with all Caucasians and there was prejudice. I was a fool cause I was like playin’ they game. I would feel like I was getting mistreated different from another student and instead of going to the teacher and talkin’ to ‘em I would just get mad and throw stuff which mean I’d get suspended and I’d get pink slips and all that. I don’t know why I got back to Philly. I was like that and then I just changed soon as I got to seventh grade. I just changed. I started getting good grades. I was on honor roll and stuff and it just went from there ever since.

Now I think school is important because without school there’s no jobs. Everyone that have a job had to go to school. In the world today, you have to have an education in order to get a good job. So I go to school to get an education. I’m supposed to learn and I want to learn so I go to school so I can be smart and expand my horizons to different things. I like to learn different things. I like to do different things. My horizon’s headed towards success up at the top. So I’m right here up here and I’m headin’ up. I’m movin’ up.

I believe every high school diploma gonna give you success. No matter who you are. If you have a high school diploma then you gonna see success. If it took you like 6 years to get a high school diploma then I don’t think so. But if you flew right past and got good grades and your high

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4Ya-Meer plans to study computer science and had enrolled in “Cisco,” a computer and information systems course.
school diploma and you got a good lookin’ resume and good reference then, yeah, you have equal opportunity anything after high school.

Sometimes you got people holdin’ you down. But it won’t matter ‘cause I’m still gonna go, even when I get screwed. Different ways I always get screwed by the teachers. Every single teacher I had done found a way to do it. But it doesn’t matter because I still end up with good grades. I will end up with student of the month.

Sometimes when a student is failin’, the student will go to the teacher and say “Why did you give me this grade” or “I don’t want this grade, won’t you fix it?” or “Why did you fail me?” Well, really they failed they self because they will blame the teacher for their mistakes when the teacher is actually given them more opportunities. All right, you my teacher. If I would miss 10 assignments and you would come up to me, like all right, sit down and talk to me. Okay you’re in danger of failin’ and I don’t want that. I want you to do this and that. Do this and that assignment and I’ll see what I can do.

I don’t think it’s fair when a student who is failing and don’t do the work gets a passing grade. But it depends. If I needed desperate help and I’m tryin’ my best to do work. Payin’ attention all day and I just can’t do it. And I have like a 45. A teacher will say, all right, I’m gonna help you out. Since you’ve tried your best and I seen you workin’ everyday. You’re not foolin’ around and you’re not a problem child. I’m gonna help you out and give you a 64. So maybe that will help me out with my next report. And I have a higher grade instead of a lower grade. It’s breakin’ the rules but in my mind it’s fair.

But let me use one of your students as an example. Rodney does nothing all day but laugh and talk. He copies off people’s work and he don’t have a clue what’s goin’ on. If that same teacher comes up to him and says, “You are doin’ absolutely nothin’. You’re pathetic. Look at your grades. Look at your folders. You have one paper in your folder. Everyone else has 20, 45 papers. Awh forget it. I’m gonna give you a 65.” That’s totally unfair.

It’s fun to be smart. I didn’t have this attitude last year. I never thought about straight A’s. I never had the attitude where I want to get straight A’s, until this year. For some reason, I don’t know why, it’s just like a snap. “Arright, you’re getting’ straight A’s.” Everybody is waiting for me to get all A’s. They’re not expectin’, they waitin’ for me. My brother in the navy, he said, when I get straight A’s, he gonna get me a hundred dollars cash. I see getting good grades as getting what I want so I keep getting ‘em.

I enjoy being smarter than everybody I am around. I enjoy being on honor roll, student of the month, getting awards and love from my teachers. I am all about success. No matter what I get, it’s always the highest grade. It makes me feel good. I am more active in participating than anyone else in the class. When I know the answers I holler out or raise my hand. But a lot of times the teacher knows that I know the answer so he or she won’t call on me. That is not fair. If I know the answers then I should be able to showcase my intelligence. I feel I am the smartest my classes has to offer. I believe that learning now is good for my future.

I like to learn more so that if another student needs help then I could help them. But then sometimes there’s like a line that some people just pass. Like, during the regular class, I don’t mind if they come and ask me for help but then like during a test or something they ask me what this answer. Then, that’s why I always ask the teachers, “Can I do the work out in the hallway?” Sometimes it’s hard. It’s easier to tell them no but then they think differently about you if you do.

Ms. Smith, she got me in this program so I can take a college class this school year. A lot of people can’t do that. I don’t know why. She got me in cause she know what I’m about and she know
what I'm capable of because she there. I had her when I first came to the school in ninth grade and it's that all the school years she just watched me. You know how teachers talk and they talk about me, like, I know how I got to be student of the month. The teachers all get together and they talk and they vote on the students. It's just like that. She just know what I'm about and what I'm capable of. Just like you (Jen). When we first started doing the interviewing you first started telling me how you could get me to work for the summer. It all starts out like that. It all starts out with a little friendship then it starts with getting to know you. If you gonna recruit somebody you gotta get to know them first.

Ya-Meer has grown up in a household that values education and what it can accomplish. His biography shows that he neither viewed himself nor was seen as an A student. Mediated by his peers (community), his actions got him into trouble and frequently got him suspended from attending schools. However, in the past year, and in the context of high achievements that were used by teachers to designate him as the "student of the month," Ya-Meer has used his agency to take advantage of learning opportunities and especially to endeavor to graduate from high school with high grades. During the summer in which Ya-Meer participated as a coresearcher on a funded project, he showed a clear achievement orientation, even if he was not always enthusiastic about what he had to learn. Ya-Meer was not content to sit back and assume a relatively passive role as a learner if he had questions in his mind. For example, during a presentation at the Penn library, Ya-Meer described his role during a lecture:

Ya-Meer: She ran right through it. She didn't ask no questions. And if I didn't ask questions, she wasn't gonna cover what I wanted to know. Arright, when she was going along, I had some questions in my head, and if I wasn't gonna ask 'em, she wouldn't a said it. And there was a lot of information that she wasn't telling us that made me ask questions. So I basically got more information than what she was gonna give. 'Cause I knew she wasn't gonna give it.

Ya-Meer was not always an enthusiastic learner, but when he got involved, he took pride in his work. For example, he was less than thrilled when Rowhea asked him as part of his summer work to create a PowerPoint™ slide show presentation about himself featuring his identity at home, in his neighborhood, and at school. However, by the end of 2 weeks, Ya-Meer had developed a presentation of creative slides, some of which were designed with colorful pictures downloaded from the Internet and others that were simple outlines of bulleted information. Each slide moved smoothly into the next and was custom-animated; words whipped onto the screen with appropriately chosen sound effects. Ya-Meer devoted the first six slides of his presentation to individuals or groups whom he highly valued—ranging from rappers like Eminem and Thugs N' Bones to wrestlers like Stone Cold Steve Austin. From Ya-Meer's presentation (as in many conversations with Rowhea), it was apparent that he values people who are the best at what they do. Thus, if a particular favorite of his begins to "mess up" (gets into drugs or other problems), he will still like the individual but will select a different person as the "best of all times."

Respect, viewed by Anderson (1999) as the critical currency of the streets, is highly regarded by Ya-Meer and his peers. Ya-Meer feels that he does not turn his back on anyone and shows a willingness to help out peers whom he regards as needing his help. He is respectable and is given respect by the other students in the group. Respect is a frequent concept in his conversations and when others address him. For example, when Ya-Meer was presenting his slide show, one of his
peers interrupted to ask him to quicken the pace. The request was initiated with the clear statement that “I don’t mean no disrespect, but could you speed it up just a little bit.”

For Ya-Meer, the achievement ideology is mediated by other beliefs, most of them connected to his quest for respect. He has experienced prejudice, especially at a school in which there was a majority of Whites, and he has experienced practices that he regards as screwing him and unfair to those who try hard and seek to achieve at a high level. His sense of what is fair is at stake in events associated with assessment. He likes to be number one and strives to be the best. He regards himself as smart, and as part of his quest for respect, he wants others to recognize his status as number one. The brief spat with Cristobal is evidence of this. He felt that Charles could not have earned a higher grade than he did and that the high grade was due to cheating. There were at least two parts to the scenario. The first is that he did not respect Charles as a scholar and had experienced him as stupid and inclined to lie and cheat. Second, he had experienced teachers giving students grades in a seemingly arbitrary way and he knew that such practices diminished the value of his own academic record. Finally, although Charles’s grade was inflated, his own grade was undervalued and counted as evidence of him being screwed once again by teachers.

CONTINUING CHANGE

Etymologically, identity derives from the Latin root idem, the same. Our case studies of Cristobal and Ya-Meer show that far from staying the same, our social and personal identities are continuously produced and reproduced in activity. Who we are in relation to others and as we experience ourselves change as part of continued participation within and across activity systems. Our opening vignette shows that even “minor” instances may threaten our social and personal identities, which therefore have to be routinely sustained in the ongoing reflexive activities of each individual (Giddens, 1991). Theorizing identity in terms of continuously produced and reproduced outcomes of activity not only emphasizes its precarious nature but also makes positive change and development plausible. Society has conferred to schools the responsibility for promoting and supervising the development of students. Whereas this responsibility is often conceived only in cognitive terms (teaching content matter), our case studies imply that schools also have ethical and moral responsibilities for fostering the continued development of identity. In our change-related work in urban schools, we have evolved cogenitive dialoguing as a praxis that allows students and teachers to bring about change in a collaborative manner (Roth & Tobin, 2002). Students, new teachers, regular teachers, coordinators, university supervisors, and researchers all participate in an open dialogue to make sense of and theorize classroom events for the purpose of designing change that is practically possible for these individuals in this classroom that they call theirs. Such changes also occurred in the present context involving Ya-Meer, Cristobal, and the other authors through their continued interactions. To illustrate, we use excerpts from the final cogenitive dialogue session concerning this article and involving the authors. Ken and Michael had organized this session to discuss an earlier version of this article. Our discussion focused on the role of respect and achievement in the continued making and remaking of identities.⁴

⁴Most of the dialogue involved Cristobal and Ya-Meer discussing issues of salience to their identities as teacher and student respectively. We decided to honor their voices by excluding the dialogue of others and focusing on those issues that shed most light on the vignette that we used to commence this article.
Respect and the Classroom

Cristobal: I realized when we had that conversation that I said to you, “What is it about that I did?” and you said that I wasn’t clear about the grade. And part of me thought, “you know,” and then I realized if that’s where a little bit of disrespect happens because when you first asked me about the grade and I say 60, 50, or 81, I didn’t really care, because to me, numbers don’t mean anything. And the grades can be changed to anything. But what was a disrespect of you was not realizing how important numbers are to you as a student. And just because it’s an 83 or 40-something to the teacher, who can change to whatever he wants, but some teachers don’t do that. So I didn’t take into account the fact that you might have been shocked by the 65 and I should have been more careful. “Because,” I thought, “no matter what happens, I can make it all okay. Because I have all this power I can make it all okay.” And so the fact that you are trying to remake yourself as something, as a student, and you are looking at the grades...I don’t care about grades, but that is where the disrespect comes in. Because you don’t realize how important things are to other people. So that is one thing that I realized, I need to respect people and find out what their terms are very clearly. Because I think that even if I disrespect someone I can then go back and say, “I am so sorry I didn’t mean to do that.” You can’t risk disrespect at all.

Ya-Meer: From my end of the situation...like the only reason why, I just got mad because it wasn’t my paper that you read off your sheet. But then when you told me that I had the 65. The reason why it made me mad is this is my last year; I want to get straight A’s. And the 65 won’t help me out at all. So I was mad more with myself than with you.

And my first reaction was, “How do I get a 65?” I was still mad and wasn’t really hearing you. I wasn’t listening to you while you was talkin’. But I was listening to you a little bit, like when you say, let’s go over it, you started to read the question, where I had the most points off. And I answered the question the way you wanted it but it wasn’t good enough. And that’s why I left the classroom. Because I could have done more than leave the classroom but that was the best thing I did. Because I could throw a desk, just because I was mad at you. I could have done something. And I leave the classroom. But then I started to know I was right. When I leave the classroom, I walked around, just to cool off a little bit, and I stay in the hallways. And then I realized that maybe the class was not that important. And that is when I asked Miss Smith if I can switch out of the class.

Then I started thinking, “I’m not gonna switch out. I am gonna keep going.” Then I started to think. It was the next day when you and Miss Smith called me into the office. I was still mad. And then when we was talking, then, I wasn’t listening to you. And then I was, “All right, I mean they are trying to show me respect. And so I got to show them respect.” And that is what I got after that conversation ’cause I actually went to Miss Smith and this one led to the second conversation. I went to Miss Smith and I told her that I was wrong for the whole, that I was dising you all like that. So I say, “I am done with it. I apologize.” I was thinking, “This is not helping me at all. Me getting mad in the classroom, this is not helping me to do what I want to do.”

Cristobal: Between people nothing happens that is not two ways. So in our circumstance initially when it all happened, I said, you know, “He’s crazy. He’s crazy. What’s wrong with him? What’s wrong with him?” And I needed just a minute and listen to the other person. “What did I do?” Because I always do this, and you are right, I looked at Meagan’s paper first. People hate to have themselves confused with someone else. That’s the worst you can do when you are a teacher. You want to make sure you know people’s names. During the first couple of months, you make a
couple of mistakes. But after that, “You don’t know my name? How can you be grading me when you don’t know my name?” So I looked at Meagan and I said, “You get 83” and then, actually you were the one who said to me, “I am not Meagan.” The damage was done.

Ya-Meer: Respect is the most important aspect in what happens here at school. Students would disrespect teachers because they don’t know much about what happened. A lot of times, teachers don’t care about students, they can do one thing that teachers don’t care about. If Carambo didn’t care about wearing hats in a room, everybody wore hats they would just ride in. Certain kind of disrespect, people think differently. Like somebody would think like they show disrespect and others would be laughing about it. So I kind of wanna know what kind of disrespect you don’t wanna hear. But it is probably that they had a bad day that they just show it off the teacher or maybe they just don’t feel like it. And a lot of time students have problem, they are just having problems that they can’t express to teachers that they don’t feel right showing to teachers. And a lot of time, they got to handle so many students at one time. And like one person got a problem at home. And that is stressing that person out. And the teacher don’t know that that problem present a problem like that. And that person would think that the teacher are just botherin’ them. Like if I got a problem at home and I put my head down and you come over to me and tell to put my head up. I would think that you botherin’ me. And I would just start flippin’. Just because of my situation at home. So people bring situations outside a school to school and they just offend the teachers.

Cristobal: That is true. Especially in our community where kids have such terrible times without us realizing it. And sometimes, a teacher is worried about the lesson, the objective, and the test. And the students have lives. And a lot of times kids flip on me, especially in the morning. A lot of times it is in the morning when they tell me, “Get the f*** out of here.” And all you did was to say, “Put your coat away.” That response comes from something that they had coming out of their lives. And a lot of times those teachers don’t have the time, or just don’t care, to take that little step to find out what is going on with kids. “Oh, yeah. Let’s go. You are out of here!” It creates an aura in the class that these folks don’t care, and the kid next to him sees that. And the next time they have a problem, they just flip right away, because these people, they don’t care. They don’t care about me. Don’t bother me.

Ya-Meer: I think a lot of time it is also what other students see them as. Like somebody might flip on a teacher and they want to up the people in the classroom and they go, “He is big, he is flippin’ on the teacher.” Don’t listen to him. Or, Craig, he talks about the teacher and he is saying something about the teacher just because he wants other people to laugh. A lot of time, they want people to see them as, like, “Oh, you cool. Do it again, make me laugh, I wanna laugh right now.” Especially in my classes, a lot of people just wanna be clowns.

Achievement Ideology

Ya-Meer: When I was student of the month, I was walking with my hands over my head, “I am student of the month.” They don’ like it, ’cause I was student of the month. And a couple of people say, they Gary and James, “Hey good stuff,” because good stuff happen to me. I don’t have to do anythin’, and it happen, and is a good feeling. I don’t even know why it did.

Cristobal: I was surprised, we had this meeting talking about student of the month and it was me or someone else, but and then everyone, and it was quick, and everyone said, yeah, that is a
good choice. And then we all felt very positive about it. And every teacher said it like that. And it was just like that.

Ya-Meer: So the grade on the test was a surprise. I know what Charles is capable of. And the 93 wasn’t it. ’Cause he, Charles, I don’t know what he do, but he is always by himself. I don’t say he cheats all the time. I am gonna tell you, he all by himself and everybody was calling that can’t be. The thing about it is when he already had a 93 and I asked him a question and see, he couldn’t answer. So I go, “How do you get a 93 if you can’t answer that question you must have cheated?” Charles, he not above me educationally. I mean, at educational level, he not above me. So I am thinking, like “Charles got 93 I must got a 150.” So when I had under Charles, I think, something must be wrong. ’Cause, if we did a question face-to-face with Mr. Carambo, just one page on a sheet of paper, I don’t think he would’a got a 93. So I knew he could not answer a question that I asked after the test. And that’s what got me mad. So when I heard he got a 93 and I got a 65, and I’m like, “How he got 93, he can’t answer the question.”

Cristobal: Today, we had a test and I was right in front of Charles, and you know, Charles did well on today’s test. He actually answered what was asked well. But to tell you the truth, I was watching him like a hog because I had the same question. The only thing that makes it difficult to think that he cheated on the first test was that there were five open-ended essay questions. There was nothing objective in the test. The only thing that he had that was exactly verbatim was the “tragedy of the commons” he had the exact quote from the book. He and James had the same exact quote because they memorized it from the book. So I took him at his word that he hadn’t cheated. But I did suspect that he had cheated. I just couldn’t figure out how. What he wrote was just the way he talks; you know how Charles talks. He went on and on and on. How could he have cheated?

Ya-Meer: I know most of the people reaction was “How did I get a 65 and Charles get a 93?” That was everybody reaction. Because everybody know that Charles is not a 93 student. I mean, just the way I look at everybody, all at a level, I mean there can’t be somebody that shoots from this level to this [very high] level. ’Cause when I walked away, I didn’t know he cheated, I just say, “You probably cheated.” That hurt. They didn’t look at me differently. They should look at the situation. Charles got a 93; I got a 65.

Cristobal: We know looking at your test that the first three questions that you got all, most of the points. Where you lost the points was the Questions 4 and 5 where you simply put down one or two lines. If I look at your test out of 75 points you got 65 points. And I am saying, “If I don’t count the last question, which is like 25 points.” Right? The first four questions are worth 75 points. Out of those 75 points you got 65. This is a high 89, 90. It was just that at the last question, something happened. You ran out of time or whatever. You didn’t answer that and that was a 23 pointer. So then, what happened? So now if I scale it a 65 out of 75, which is what you got, then that’s a very high grade.

In this situation, we came together in a seminar room away from the school to talk about our collaborative research. We recognized the differences between us—social locations, interests, reasons, and subjective possibilities—but nevertheless with due respect for the other and with the will to open dialogue. We not only produced conversation about identity formation and transformation in the everyday life of schools, but we continued to produce and reproduce our very identities. Particularly, Cristobal and Ya-Meer took their dialogue further, from what had been on the surface a struggle over a grade but, more deeply, was a struggle over their respective identities.
They came to better understand the type and levels of respect to be enacted toward and with the other and the effect a grade had on the self-understanding of a student. For both, it was an instance of flexible and changing engagement with the other, which, by definition, constitutes situated learning and evolving identity (Lave, 1993).

**EPILOGUE**

In our studies of the identities of both Cristobal and Ya-Meer, we are struck by the pivotal role of respect, the main currency of the street (Anderson, 1999), as a form of social capital. Respect is so important because it mediates the interactions not only in urban streets but also, and more importantly, to education and the interactions in urban schools. Thus, when Cristobal arrived at City High, students showed him little respect. Cristobal also lacked other forms of capital that would have increased his social capital, including symbolic capital (which comes, for example, with being a principal) or the cultural capital required for communicating with urban African American learners. Social capital is the central currency of urban schooling, an activity system characterized as others by its modes of production, consumption, exchange, and distribution (Engeström, 1987).

In our activity system, teacher–student and student–student interactions produce social capital, which is exchanged and consumed within this community, where it is also unequally distributed across individuals. This social capital is a central aspect of who someone is in the context of a community. Cristobal had not yet earned respect and therefore the right to be these students’ teacher. At the heart of the challenges Cristobal had to overcome was the challenge of earning their respect. The African American youth at City High experience the street as a cultural field where respect is of paramount importance. Those who are not respected will be disrespected and it is possible to earn the respect of others by showing disrespect to (“dissing”) others, particularly if they lay claim to authority.

Cristobal’s participation in coteaching provided him with opportunities to build social capital. In one-on-one meetings, he could show to many students that he cared. Not only is Cristobal a friendly person who easily smiles, but he also is a listener with a great deal of empathy for his students. He helps in almost every way imaginable, and he is in the school building consistently before, during, and after school. In this way the students can rely on his presence, and if they have a problem, they seem aware that he will listen and help if he can. Showing his care in a consistent way sets the stage for building trust and rapport—essential components of the social capital that is requisite to becoming a teacher in a school like City High.

Ya-Meer also had to forge new relationships in building his identity as an A student. An important underpinning seems to be his acceptance of the object of learning. He buys into the significance of education as a way to improve his social and economic life. Wanting to achieve, he was aware of the need to respect teachers and build different relationships among his peers, doing what he must do to retain their respect while communicating that he values learning and sees himself as an A student. Late last year, the faculty from SET voted Ya-Meer as student of the month. Just how significant that vote was to Ya-Meer’s identity will never be known for sure, but we regard it as central. Such a recommendation was possible only because Ya-Meer had built relationships with each of the faculty and this led to them seeing him in their classes and recognizing his efforts as a learner. At some moment during that year, Ya-Meer completed a transition from “being crazy” in the classroom to being respectful and focused on learning. He also made a decision to
show respect for teachers and developed strategies to walk away when street behaviors emerged that could harm future success. Walking away from the altercation over grades allowed him to retain the social capital previously earned. Ya-Meer recognized his own responsibility and approached the SLC coordinator to resolve the problems associated with his dispute with Cristobal. He was able to repair relationships in part because of the social capital he had built with the coordinator, the faculty of SET, and even the school principal.

This study shows that identity can be changed dramatically by removing contradictions from the primary activity system. Cristobal had a sense of the game that led him to simultaneously change the object, tools, rules, community, and division of labor. In so doing, his identity as a teacher visibly changed. However, there are clear limits in the extent to which individuals can change an activity and their identity in a field. The dialectical relationship between agency and structure will rein in any individual’s efforts to attain particular objects. For example, Cristobal might embrace an achievement ideology and enact a curriculum intended to promote learning. Ya-Meer, who acknowledges the value of success at school, would no doubt align his actions with Cristobal’s efforts to teach him. However, there is more to the activity than Cristobal and Ya-Meer, and their aligned actions might be frustrated by the actions of others in the class who do not share the achievement ideology and disrupt efforts to engage in collective actions that accord with the achievement ideology.

The experience of participation in other fields is salient to participation in a primary activity. Ya-Meer chose to leave the class when he became upset and enacted strategies of action that were street like. He knew from his experience in the past that if he remained in the classroom, the unfolding events would only elicit even more strategies from the street. He was concerned that he might become physically violent and begin to hurl the furniture, for example. In effect, he had developed strategies to breach strategies of action that were potentially dysfunctional and destructive. These became rules for Ya-Meer’s conduct in fields like those associated with his school. Interestingly, Cristobal invoked a similar rule when he walked out of the second meeting that had been requested by Ya-Meer to resolve the problem of his grade being lower than he deserved. Although there are many ways in which actions like walking away can be interpreted, one that we find compelling is that it was a way to avoid conflict that might otherwise escalate into violence. Ya-Meer was explicit: He wanted to avoid his own tendencies to resolve differences he had with others by means of violence. He then described how he isolated himself and walked around the building as he searched for ways to resolve his problem. The solution he decided on finally involved his use of social capital and resources within the SLC.

Agency and the structure of a field (e.g., individual schemas, objects, and tools) stand in a dialectical, mutually constitutive relation (Sewell, 1992). However, schemas developed in one field are often inappropriate resources for acting in another field. Cristobal and Ya-Meer repeatedly enacted strategies that were created and maintained in other fields. Consistent with fields being defined by weak cultural boundaries, they enacted culture (embodied in the schemas) that strengthened the patterns of coherence that came to define those fields.

Cultural boundaries are not hard and set but allow patterns of actions to move into new contexts, even in those where they might be judged to be inappropriate such as when students enact street code in schools with a different, middle class rule set. This weakness of cultural boundaries is not inherently a deficit; rather, it creates potential for action, such as engaging in cogenerative dialogue (such as that between Cristobal and Ya-Meer) that allows differently located participants in the same situation to arrive at structural explanations for their different understandings (Roth &
Tobin, 2002). Cogenerative dialogue can bring to the table for discussion issues identified as salient by members of a community and these will likely involve contradictions extant in an activity system. As we witnessed in this study, if respect is maintained between the members of a community, then strident differences in perspective can be resolved, and students like Ya-Meer can assume roles that may not have been imagined in the absence of cogenerative discussion. For example, who would have imagined an urban youth such as Ya-Meer respectfully advising Cristobal on ways to improve the quality of his teaching? During our most recent dialogue about this study, Ya-Meer declared that urban youth were the most appropriate educators for new teachers. His declaration was not empty rhetoric but was grounded in the practice of having done this continually throughout the past year and a half during which his knowledge as a motivated urban learner with experience of many urban teachers was eagerly sought by new and experienced teachers and teacher educators.

As the identities of urban youth change through the adoption of new roles, the potential for education to be transformative is much more evident. Yet there is subtlety in Ya-Meer adopting new roles. It takes more than Ya-Meer declaring his agency to educate others in his community. Just as Cristobal could not teach without the active support of others in the community, added tools, an appropriate division of labor, a new rule structure, and a willingness to continually refine the objects of the curriculum, so, too, is it impossible for Ya-Meer to adopt new roles and identities without similar levels of support.

Our sociocultural and cultural historical framework highlights the distributed and situated nature of identity and the necessity to look beyond a classical psychological approach when the identities of teachers and learners are at issue. We need to remember that the culture available to an actor reflects participation in multiple fields distributed spatially and temporally, and the structure of the primary field in which activity occurs will mediate the actions of participants. Identity is much more than embodied thoughts, actions, and histories, although dispositions to be a particular way are an important part of self. To understand identity, we must consider the tools, object, community, rules, and division of labor associated with the primary activity system. We also must consider other activity systems the individual is and has been involved in and take into account those activity systems (distributed over space and time) in which others from the primary activity system are involved.

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REFERENCES


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