Title: High School in the Inner City and the Years Beyond

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Overview:
I’m not a good test taker and I’m afraid that I’m gonna try to get into college—I’m gonna get a basketball college [scholarship], but I’m afraid I ain’t gonna get into the kind of college... I’m afraid. (Ivory, 7/9/01)

I think I accomplished a lot from where I came from you know where like I grew up at. Like not too many people in my family, not too many of my friends make it to college an try to do something with their life. I feel as though I made a big accomplishment an a lot of people look up to me cuz of that. (Ivory, Spring 2006)

Evident in the first quote listed above, Ivory, one of the African American tenth grade youth involved in the critical ethnographic study informing this book, clearly revealed her pronounced fear of failing within the American education system. Ivory was worried that, even with her talents as a basketball player, she would not be able to access enough resources to allow her to attend a good college. She specifically feared that low test scores would pose a barrier to her advancement into college. However, illustrated in the second quote captured in an interview five years later, Ivory had managed to rise above her challenged circumstances and associated fears. In fact, after graduating from a segregated, neighborhood high school, she was able to enroll in a private college on a two-year basketball scholarship to study Animal Center Management. Ivory was proud of receiving a college education after graduating from high school, and enjoyed the admiration of her family and friends.

This book shares sociocultural interpretations of ten years of longitudinal data regarding Ivory as well as three additional African American high school students – May, Shakeem and Randy – who were considered by high school administrators to be “at risk” of failing to graduate from high school. This book seeks to document and share with readers the perspectives, thoughts, reflections and emotions that I have been privileged to witness over a ten year relationship with the four young adults who are the main characters in their own life stories. Specifically, these youth were selected at the end of their ninth grade school year to be involved in a study for three years. At that time, they were each positioned differently within their social space. Hence, they brought to the research setting rich perspectives, talents, and practices that revealed the structures influencing their lives; they provided helpful feedback, clear perceptions and emotionally intense opinions. Additional data were collected following their graduation from high school through interview questions designed to capture an understanding of the structures that shaped their college experiences, including their reflections back upon their high school years. Readers will leave this manuscript with new and nuanced understandings of what it means to live as a marginalized youngster attending comprehensive neighborhood high schools within our largest urban centers, and will better comprehend the role of education in assisting the teenagers to fight cycles of social reproduction as they become young adults.

Format
This is a single authored manuscript that will consist of sixteen chapters, and be approximately 180,000 words in length. The manuscript will be written in a fluid, reader friendly format, rich with theoretically analyzed video vignettes, black and white photographs, and interview data. Its narrative nature with embedded sociocultural theoretical perspectives will make it an attractive text for both students and instructors in educational foundations courses. The focus upon the urban inner city setting of a large northeastern city will provide useful and contextualized understandings of those essential aspects of teaching and learning in the most challenged settings in America. The manuscript will additionally allow readers to witness firsthand, through the eyes of the youth/young adults, what a high school education translates into while growing up in the inner city. Other anticipated audiences will be masters and doctoral level students in graduate urban education programs throughout the United States as well as in-service teachers who may be part of professional development programs. Moreover, I will use this manuscript as a text in my own teaching of education courses.
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Chapter One
High School Through their Eyes: Getting an Education in the Inner City

This chapter begins with an introduction of the Discovering Urban Science project and the four main students who were involved - Ivory, May, Shakeem and Randy. This is followed by thick descriptions of the large northeastern, inner city context where the youth lived and, finally, details of the comprehensive high school (City High School) that they attended for the majority of their high school career. That is, this chapter paints the landscape so that the reader can understand the research project context as well as the challenging circumstances and uncertain futures that Randy, May, Ivory and Shakeem faced growing up in poverty in the inner city. Moreover, utilizing four vignettes of high school experiences from their tenth grade chemistry classroom, in conjunction with statistics and findings from the literature regarding the education of marginalized youth in inner city school environments, I ask the reader to begin to consider whether a high school education can serve as a means for successfully warding off socially reproductive cycles for these four youth.
Chapter Two: Theoretical Tools for Making Meaning

This chapter provides a foundational, contextualized discussion of the theoretical lenses utilized in making meaning of the data informing this book. Predominant frameworks include culture, structure-agency, identity, and solidarity. For example, school and neighborhood contexts are viewed as sociocultural contexts in which the systems of symbols and the practices arising therein are structures. As Sewell (1992) theorizes, such structures can be viewed as schemas and sets of resources that mutually sustain each other to either empower or constrain actions. Resources are both human and nonhuman, ranging from knowledge or physical strength to manufactured or naturally occurring objects. Accordingly, this chapter identifies schemas such as rules, and norms, as well as those human and material resources contributing to either the production or reproduction of social life for the four youth participants. When the structures of a specific culture, such as the school culture, marginalize others—in this case, African American inner city high school students—those structures can and should be transformed. Therefore, referring to the ability of an individual to exert direction over social actions and interactions, the concept of agency is introduced as crucial to a study concerned with interrupting the reproduction of social stratification.

Chapter Three: Critical Ethnography and New Kinds of Ethnographers

Even with the election of the first African American president, it cannot be dismissed that this country has historically failed to afford and/or recognize African American voices in society. In this chapter, I discuss the need for and benefits of conducting educational research with marginalized groups in the form of critical ethnography and the importance of establishing collaborative research models where the students take on co-researcher roles. I also describe the ways in which Shakeem, May, and Ivory were provided with opportunities to participate in a research process that encourages participatory critique, empowerment, transformation and social justice (Pizarro, 1998). I additionally discuss how their perspectives were central to the research process and served as a catalyst for their own growth and transformation.

Chapter Four: Becoming and Being the DUS Squad

This chapter describes, in detail, how Ivory, May, Shakeem and Randy became the “Discovering Urban Science” (DUS) squad and in that capacity, acted as learners, student-researchers, curriculum developers and teacher educators over three summers during their high school years. They were paid employees under a grant from the National Science Foundation, and this research was unique in that it took place within the setting of an Ivy League university rather than in their high school. The research/work environment included a wide range of tasks that were both “school” and “nonschool”-related. The artifacts produced by the students included a science movie, ethnographic projects in the form of PowerPoint, video footage and oral representations—in addition to journal entries, documents of analyzed data, transcriptions and audiotaped/video-taped interviews. The chapter also discusses how the student researcher roles evolved as the youth grew into young adults. I maintained documentation of their experiences from formal interviews (such as those occurring following a half-day research seminar two years after graduating from high school) as well as from informal phone and email communication.

Chapter Five: Hybrid Identities: Benefits and Drawbacks to being Students and Researchers

This chapter builds upon the previous two chapters by utilizing theory to understand how the youth’s involvement as researchers/ethnographers shaped their identities inside and outside of school. That is, the chapter illuminates their development of hybrid identities with a specific emphasis upon studying Ivory, May, Randy and Shakeem’s classroom interactions as students at CHS, following (and during) their work as researchers. For example, data indicates that Shakeem’s newly developing researcher identity evoked mixed school-related responses—ranging from teacher discomfort to peer respect/recognition. Examining the ways in which the youth’s identities formed and (re)formed as their roles and social networks expanded is essential for understanding their practices as they continued to navigate high school and consider college options.
Chapter Six:
Agents in the World: Making it Through to Graduation

Surmounting challenges of many kinds, Randy, Shakeem, Ivory and May all graduated from high school, and this chapter takes a closer look at the agency exerted by them in achieving that goal. In particular, the chapter addresses the following questions: 1) How did these four students act as agents? And 2) What new and existing schemas and resources did they access and appropriate towards graduation? Findings reveal that some of the youth came to understand how many existing schemas are hegemonic and oppressive, and they began to use resources in new or unique ways so that the original schemas that directed their use were not reinforced. Since it is through the transposition of schemas and remobilization of resources that old structures can be transformed and the process of reproduction can be hindered in its track, this chapter sets the tone for what might be expected for the youth following high school.

Chapter Seven:
Going to College – or not

This chapter provides detailed accounts of how, following graduation, Randy, Shakeem, Ivory and May followed pathways to higher education. It additionally sheds light onto their decision-making process, and it documents whether they were successful in completing programs of study/degrees. Furthermore, the chapter highlights aspects of their cultural, social and symbolic capital as resources that both assisted and hindered their ability to move forward. Importantly, in this chapter and throughout part II of the book, financial challenges are highlighted as barriers that impact the ease with which children from backgrounds of poverty (especially those who may not have been extremely successful in high school) can enter higher education scenarios.

Chapter Eight:
“Life’s Hard but I’m Gonna Stay out of Trouble” – Following Shakeem

This chapter focuses upon Shakeem at the time when he had nearly completed a two-year program in Massage Therapy. Although he had struggled immensely to finish high school (failing 10th grade twice), he was experiencing excellent grades and overall success in the Massage Therapy program. Unfortunately, however, Shakeem had taken a student loan, and his debt would be $8000 upon completing the program. This did not seem to intimidate Shakeem. He stated confidently, “I’m not going to let money hold me back – I could win the lottery – find a bag of money. You don’t know what the day holds for you.” These sentiments were reflective of Shakeem’s optimistic thinking. In reality, Shakeem was able to go to college through the support of his neighborhood ‘ole head’ – or an older adult friend in the community who looks out for the youth and helps provide guidance. Every month, Shakeem’s ole head set aside the money that Shakeem could use to pay for his education. Thus, in short, the chapter captures Shakeem’s strong commitment to getting a degree in spite of stark financial barriers, and describes how he accessed and appropriated structures to eventually succeed in a higher education scenario.

Chapter Nine:
“It’s Goin to be Hard, But It’s Nothing I Can Do About That” – Following May

The chapter specifically focuses upon May during the time after she withdrew from a two-year college program, and describes the events that led to her failed higher education experience. She completed one semester in Criminal Justice with the understanding that she had been approved for financial aid, which would cover her semester expenses. However, by the end of the semester, she was shocked to learn that her financial aid was not approved, and May then began receiving bills for tuition and book fees. Without resources to pay, May dropped out of the program, and eventually began receiving collection notices. Soon after, while contemplating the ways by which she could resolve the billing issue and go back to college, May found out that she was pregnant with her first child. She was elated yet recognized the challenges of trying to go back to college with a baby, saying, “It’s going to be hard but it’s nothing I can do about that. What’s done is done.” In short, the chapter provides interesting insights into how May negotiated the difficult intersections of education, family and financial strain.
Chapter Ten:  
“You Gotta Look Beyond That” – Following Ivory

This chapter simultaneously documents Ivory’s progress and the financial hurdles encountered in pursuing a degree that she envisioned would help to reach her career goals. Following high school, Ivory enrolled in a two-year program in Animal Center Management. Upon entering that private college, Ivory quickly realized that her public school education was “not good.” However, she felt strongly that “you gotta look beyond that.” She went on to explain, “You’re not always going to get the best, but you can still learn.” With that attitude, Ivory pressed on, and she completed her degree. Ivory received fifty percent coverage of her tuition expenses through a basketball scholarship, and she covered the other portion of fees through student loans. When her scholarship expired, Ivory worked as a Resident Assistant (RA). Building upon the themes arising in the previous two chapters, this chapter reinforces the notion that access to economic capital shapes the types of credentials that marginalized students can earn and the types of higher education institutions they will enter.

Chapter Eleven:  
Structures and Agency Collide

“Yeah, 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.” (Kareem, 3/7/01)

Evident in the above quote expressed by one of the students who was tangential to the main study informing this book, the achievement ideology is a dominant schema of mainstream American culture (MacLeod, 2009). Ingrained within the political, social, economical and educational structures of this nation, the achievement ideology proclaims that individual merit is what makes the difference. Translated into school cultures, marginalized students are expected to behave, work hard and get a high school diploma. The ultimate reward is maybe college or a job and eventually, financial success. In the long run, an individual operating under the achievement ideology can only blame him/herself for an unsuccessful career resulting in a life of poverty. Marginalized students often blame themselves. Failure becomes a personal issue and students start to accept the very norms and standards that contribute to their class positions. In this chapter, I provide a comprehensive synthesis of analyses across the higher education experiences of these young adults. In particular, I highlight those acts of agency that propelled Ivory and Shakeem to complete degree programs and the agency evident in the decisions of Randy and May not to complete programs of study. I argue that there is not one specific route to success and that in all cases, the financial hardships that the youth face are critical in their decisions.

Chapter Twelve  
Job Prospects

There is a shortage of employment options available in poor inner city neighborhoods with predominantly African American populations. While poverty does affect White families, data reveal that under-represented groups are spatially disadvantaged in the labor market and this is particularly more pronounced in families run by single mothers receiving public assistance. Whites continue to concentrate in suburbs where the job availability is much higher, and public transportation to these outlying areas from most of the urban centers is virtually nonexistent. This chapter focuses upon providing narratives regarding Shakeem, May, Ivory and Randy’s employment history over the years, leading up to their current employment status. The chapter further discusses how this history has been shaped by schooling opportunities, especially their education in the sciences.
Chapter Thirteen
Family, Solidarity and Communal Bonds

Communal and family ties are essential within contexts where economic hardship exists. Collective needs often transcend those of the individual and this became apparent in following Ivory, Randy, May, and Shakeem over the years. That is, this chapter discusses the social bonds that have been and are currently central to the four young adults in navigating their lifeworlds, from high school to young adulthood. I provide specific insights into how social capital translates into individual and collective forms of agency in pursuing education, career and family-related goals. For example, networks are discussed in relation to single mother challenges, the role of ‘ole heads’ in providing guidance and support to youth, and peer mentoring systems.

Chapter Fourteen
Reflections through the Looking Glass

In this chapter, Ivory, Randy, Shakeem and May share their reflections of where they are now in comparison to where they were one decade ago. They discuss goals and objectives that they had and how those have been met and/or changed over the years. They speak out regarding the educational resources that they felt were accessible to their use as well as those that were lacking. Specific topics addressed are their experiences with: 1) being tracked into small learning communities (SLCs) in high school, 2) science teaching and learning, 3) interactions with teachers, 3) meaningful curriculum, and 4) the meaning of respect in school. The young adults also provide perspectives and visions about what should be transformed in high schools for the next generation so as to best support students’ abilities to break free of cycles of social reproduction.

Chapter Fifteen
Breaking the Chains within Socially Reproductive Cycles

This chapter focuses upon socially reproductive cycles. The stories of Ivory, May, Randy and Shakeem demonstrate that the types of challenges faced by urban youth from economically disadvantaged circumstances are multifold, and it is clear that, to varying extents and in different ways, these young adults found ways to empower themselves. They agentically access monetary and social resources (e.g., networks of support or mentors) and utilize these resources in productive manners in the pursuit of education – with hopes that college degrees lead to employment opportunities. Therefore this chapter suggests that, even as severe poverty persists among African American families in large urban centers, it is plausible that social class mobility will improve if teaching and learning are understood as phenomena that both produce and reproduce culture.

Chapter Sixteen
Conclusions: Rethinking the purpose of education

This chapter will take the format of a metalogue conversation between the author, the four youth and two additional adults who were part of the grant which funded the initial NSF study. Embracing and centralizing their voices, we will discuss what Shakeem, May, Randy and Ivory believe to be the purpose(s) of: 1) education in general, 2) high school diplomas and 3) college attendance. In addition, through their eyes, we will consider the connections between education and social mobility. The book will conclude with recommendations for policy makers, school administrators, teachers, care givers and, most importantly, with suggestions for inner city youth who are fighting economic and cultural marginalization on a daily basis.