The Myth of the Unteachable: Youth, Race and the Capacity of Alternative Pedagogy

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THE MYTH OF THE UNTEACHABLE:
YOUTH, RACE AND THE CAPACITY OF ALTERNATIVE PEDAGOGY

by

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Abstract

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Cathy R. Borck

Adviser: Professor Paul Attewell

My research consisted of three years of qualitative inquiry, including 62 interviews with

members of the Department of Education, school administrators, teachers and students, as well

as a yearlong ethnography at a transfer school that I chose because of its history of success with

the city's hardest- to-reach youth. To my knowledge, mine is the first formal study of New York

City transfer schools. "Transfer schools" are New York City's public alternative schools, which

serve "over-age, under- credited" high school students (i.e. students who are "behind" in school).

These students experience many challenges and interruptions to their education, including

homelessness, incarceration, immigration, financial hardship (that can require students to work

during school hours), being (teen) parents, drug addiction, and having to care for sick or dying

family members, to name a few.

There are presently 44 transfer schools in the city, and the overwhelming majority of

students who attend them are poor youth of color. I engage existing scholarship on education

policy, social reproduction, and critical race theory, and prioritize the voices of students and

teachers in my analysis.

In *The Myth of the Unteachable: Youth, Race and the Capacity of Alternative Pedagogy*, I make three main arguments. First, I describe how schools contribute to the reproduction of race and class inequalities. However, my data show that when economically disadvantaged students of color are instructed to locate their own academic "failures" in the historical context of an education system that has consistently produced unequal outcomes, those students can learn to see the difference between their personal failures, and the failures of the school system, and this helps them to regain the self-esteem necessary to make significant educational progress.

Second, I show how accountability-era (2001-present) education policies like the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTT) undermine public education and especially frustrate the work of transfer schools that serve "at-risk" youth. Contributing the case of transfer schools to extant scholarship on the more general harms of NCLB and RTT, I follow education policy from the national to the local level, describing how policies trickle down to affect individual transfer schools, teachers and students in damaging and destructive ways.

Lastly, using psychoanalytic theory, I apply the concept of "working alliance" to student-teacher relationships, articulating how these relationships affect student outcomes. In educational contexts, working alliance refers to generative and productive relationships between teachers and students. The development of a working alliance entails achieving consensus about what school is for, and how learning occurs. This requires agreement about goals and tasks, and is especially strengthened by the development of interpersonal bonds between students and teachers. I describe how working alliances can be achieved, and illustrate how the development of these

alliances increased student retention and achievement.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In a way this project started fifteen years ago. I was 16-years-old, had recently ended my relationship with my incredibly physically abusive father, I had stopped doing drugs, and I had just come out as queer in a suburban California community where I didn't know any gay people. I barely went to school. My GPA was 2.1; a solid D. I was an angry young person, emerging from an unhappy, traumatic childhood. I spent my days at a coffee shop, chain-smoking Marlboro Lights and reading books about the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Stonewall riots. Suffering was relatable.

The guidance counselor at my school had been trying to meet with me for weeks. I liked her. She didn't bat an eye when I talked about going to AA meetings with my girlfriend. When I met with her she told me about an alternative high school program housed at the local community college and urged me to apply.

In short, I did apply, I got in, and the experience changed my life. The teachers were interested in me, patient with me, and they cared about me. The other students had had similar experiences with violent homes and drug use. A lot of us were gay.

Attending that alternative high school remains one of the most transformative experiences that I have had. It led me to college, which led me to graduate school. I am a happy, productive adult, doing what I love. It sounds simple enough; but this life wasn't in the cards for kids like me.

When it came time to decide on a dissertation topic, I knew that I wanted to study a school like the one I went to. I wanted to find kids with difficult lives who found a transformational school. I started to research the different types of alternative schools that

there are in New York City and found that "transfer schools" were the kind of schools that I was looking for—schools that utilized alternative pedagogies and served students who had fallen behind. I found demographic data for the 44 transfer schools in New York City and printed it out one late night at the Graduate Center. The data that I printed out had a pie chart showing the race of the students enrolled in each of the schools. I was immediately struck by the fact that all of the pie charts were split down the middle—half Black, half Hispanic. There emerged my first research question: How is it the case that all of the "alternative" students in New York City are Black and Hispanic? Looking back, it was a naïve question, but it was a pivotal moment in my decision to study the New York City transfer schools.

I wanted to do a school ethnography and I knew that the IRB process would take a long time, so while I was waiting to get approval, I went around to the transfer schools and had exploratory conversations with the principals of the schools. When I told them what I was looking for, several different principals directed me to Brooklyn Common High School (BCHS), which would come to be my primary research site.

BCHS serves the "most at-risk of the at-risk" as one teacher put it—17-to-21 year olds who are "over-age and under-credited" in the language of the New York City Department of Education. All of the students are Black or Latino and living in poverty.

I wrote to the principal of BCHS asking if I could visit the school. To my delighted surprise, she set up a meeting for me with the two Deans of the school, and the School's Data Specialist—three people who became main informants and strong supporters of my research. During that first meeting, we sat in a classroom together, at school desks where the arm rest is attached to the chair. I told them a little bit about my personal history, my education in sociology, and my desire to do fieldwork in their school. They responded with an enthusiasm

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that surprised me. They felt strongly that the work that they were doing was important— revolutionary even. As I discussed the type of work that I wanted to do with the school and that my ultimate goal was to publish a book, they responded with palpable excitement. So easily, I was in. That meeting was in April of 2011. Over the summer I got IRB clearance to do fieldwork at the school, and in the fall of 2011 I began my research with BCHS.

Committed to an inductive research process, I decided that for the first half of the year I would observe everything and interview everyone and see what emerged. I paid close attention to what students and teachers talked about most. In interviews I started with the question: 'How did you end up at this school?' which allowed me to access students' (and teachers') educational histories. From there I probed.

Half-way through the school year, it was very clear to me that the top three things that students and teachers at BCHS talked most about were: a) caring relationships between teachers and students, and the larger caring culture of the school; b) culturally competent curriculum, or what the students called, "learning my history;" and c) the (seeming) impending closing of the school because of its "failing" scores according to metrics established by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT).

For the remainder of the year, I explicitly pursued these topics in interviews, and re-interviewed many people. I spent many hours in the school's data specialist's living room as he explained the complicated formulae that establish "school accountability" in the city and the state.

I conducted 68 interviews: 25 with teachers and staff, 27 with current BCHS students; 8 with former BCHS students, 4 with teachers at other transfer schools that I was put into contact with via snowballing, and 4 long-time employees of the New York City Department of

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Education (DOE) who shed light on the organization of alternative education in New York City over time.

BCHS is located in the heart of an economically depressed Brooklyn neighborhood whose residents are largely recent immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Consistent with the city's average, 32 percent of the population falls under the poverty line and only 40.3 percent of neighborhood students read at grade level. The neighborhood has a post-industrial feel: Its streets are lined with corner stores and churches, auto-repair shops and dollar stores, construction zones and apartment buildings.

BCHS serves 17-to-21 year old tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders who are at least one year behind in school. In New York State, residents are entitled to a high school education until the academic year that they turn 21 and "age out" of the system. About 300 students are enrolled at BCHS: 60 percent of whom are in attendance on any given day, or roughly 180. Sixty-five percent of students are Latino and 33 percent are Black. 100 percent qualify for free lunch. There are 24 teachers: 13 are Black, 8 are white, 2 are Latino, and 1 is Asian.

Between classes, the hallways bustle with students and teachers, loud with laughter, sass, and locker doors. One teacher in particular routinely encourages students to get to class on time by yelling: "HOLLER, SCHOLAR! MOVE IT!"

<div align="center">***</div>

A 21-year-old student described his experience at BCHS like this,

> *"I came to this school with only seven credits at 18 years of age. From the moment I went to orientation, this was like a home. This is not just a school; it is a home. This is a family. This is a place where no one ever wants to leave. This is a place where children rather stay than go home. We celebrate holidays. What*

school you know celebrate holidays? None! The staff here, they are fathers and mothers to us. I'm just telling you from the bottom of my heart, because I came here and it really changed me as a person. They don't just educate us, but they help us understand who we are, and who we can be."

A graduate described his experience at BCHS this way,

"I know it's sort of cliché to say that this school saved people's lives, but it actually does. It saved my life. I came into school 17 years old with only two credits. The staff here accepted me with open arms. I was a little rough around the edges, one of those little kids that ran the streets; was into gangs. Fast money; illegal stuff. I had previously gotten arrested for robbery and assault. [BCHS teachers] wrote me recommendation letters for the district attorney, let them know how I am in school and who I really am as a person. With those letters, I was able to get my case dropped with no probation, and that enabled me to get jobs. I worked for [the United Parcel Service]. I worked for the Sports Authority. Now I attend Borough of Manhattan Community College. So far I have 30 credits. I'm halfway towards my associate's for criminal justice."

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In Chapter Two—'Inside BCHS: A Day in the Field'—I describe the research site and participants.

In Chapter Three—'"That's the best place where you want to be if you ran out of chances." Care as Retention Strategy'—I ask: How did BCHS retain students that other schools had not? I use student narratives to answer this question, showing that students linked their own retention to the familial culture of the school and the genuine care of their teachers. I contrast

these narratives with their narratives about their former schools, which they described as uncaring places. I put students' narratives in conversation with the research literature on caring in schools. I argue that caring is cultural and structural as opposed to an innate characteristic that some teachers have and others don't. Ultimately, I (re)conceive of care as a policy issue.

In Chapter Four—"'Only a slave would allow their historical oppressor to take their children." Teachers' Perspectives on Race, Culture, Curriculum, and Pedagogy'—I show that curriculum is cultural, drawing on a large literature that makes this argument. I present teachers' narratives about the low expectations of poor students of color in many schools and how students internalize these low expectations. I show how teachers describe the process of "rehabilitating students back into the education system" as one described it—a process of rebuilding the fragile egos of students who identify as school failures. I show how teachers use culturally competent curriculum—that is, texts and lessons that reflect the identities and cultures of the students—to "rehabilitate" and engage students. I show how teachers help students to understand their "failure" in terms of structural racism, building students' "critical racial awareness." I close the chapter by discussing ways that white teachers at BCHS performed culturally responsive pedagogies.

Chapter Five—'The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions: Effects of Government Accountability Measures on Alternative Schools'—is a bottom-up look at federal educational policy. I trace the ideology of "accountability" through No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT), from their federal inception through state and local legislatures, and into the lives of schools, teachers and students. I use the case of BCHS to show how these policies and their implementation have crippled the work of transfer schools in New York City—part of the larger trend of their effects on public schools that serve poor youth of color.

In Chapter Six—The Conclusion, I provide a brief update on BCHS and some of its teachers, outline the main implications of my research, and offer policy recommendations.

From the beginning, this project has been inspired by my conviction that students make meaning out of their experiences in school and those experiences and meanings have important consequences for their future life chances. My personal educational experiences have shown me that schools can be places where young people are able to achieve a more livable orientation to themselves and the world around them. I know that there are countless children in this country who are being underserved by our nation's schools. This dissertation is about the histories that we must contend with as we imagine and practice alternative futures.

Chapter Two

Inside BCHS: A Day in the Field[1]

It is seven o'clock in the morning and I am riding the subway eastward from my apartment in central Brooklyn to the poorer, browner, more industrial neighborhood where BCHS is located. The subway train is not crowded; rush hour traffic is going the opposite direction, into Manhattan. All of the passengers are people of color; they are hospital workers wearing scrubs, riding home from the night shift; homeless people staying out of the elements; mothers running errands with their small children.

The floor of the subway car is littered with last night's trash—remnants of New York City nightlife. McDonald's wrappers; a lone Snapple bottle rolling around with the movements of the train; an empty pint bottle of Georgi vodka in a brown paper bag resting in the corner of the car. My newish clothes, semi-professional style, and white skin contrasts with my surroundings.

I get off the subway at a station crowded with strollers, panhandlers, and Caribbean women passing out Christian pamphlets. Groups of boisterous, rowdy, energetic students wearing sneakers and Jansport backpacks are entering the station, on their way to school.

When I emerge from the station, I am standing at a five-way intersection, where multiple main streets connect. Drivers honk their horns and blast their stereos. The noise is incessant. The main local businesses are clustered here—fast food restaurants; a Pay Less Shoe Source; corner stores selling lottery tickets, juice, cigarettes, and potato chips; discount stores selling blenders, bathing suits, and toys; several taco trucks that I frequent regularly over the course of the fieldwork; Dominican restaurants; and passing commuter buses.

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[1] This is a composite narrative pieced together from parts of many different days.

Every day for months on end a South Asian man stands near a dollar store holding a four-pack of Duracell double-A batteries over his head, yelling into the hurried crowd of passersby, *"BOT-REES! ONE DOLLAR! BOT-REES! ONE DOLLAR!"*

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One block outside of the central hub of the neighborhood, the streets turn residential. The sun reflects brightly against the cement sidewalk. Apartment buildings are small and run-down. Dogs guard them from behind iron fences. Large shirtless men smoke cigarettes on stoops. Many buildings are out of use—former churches, hair salons, and residences are boarded up and graffitied.

Several blocks are under construction. Developers building 15-story condos, hoping to kick-start a wave of gentrification in this economically depressed neighborhood. White construction workers with New Jersey accents and orange hard hats work behind plywood erected to divide the construction zone from the sidewalk. Cranes lift sheet rock towards the sky.

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BCHS shares a building with a middle school, and as I approach the building, I pass the middle school's outdoor basketball courts, which are surrounded by chain link fences. 10-, 11-, and 12-year-old Black and Latino kids play on the sidewalk outside the school. They run and laugh and tease each other. Rambunctious boys chase and play-fight while groups of girls stand off to the side and giggle. *"Hi, Miss"* they say to me as I pass by them.

The schools' three-story building occupies the majority of the block, along with the basketball courts and a church behind it. The brick building has a set of cement steps that lead to the entrance of the middle school. The middle school's name is brightly printed in yellow letters across a blue banner that hangs above the entranceway. Behind the double doors are

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conveyer belts for backpacks, and metal detectors for bodies. The children pass through these each day as they enter their school.

To enter BCHS, I walk around to the back of the building where there is a bright blue door with a small sign above it that reads, "Brooklyn Common Outreach" left over from almost a decade ago, when the space served as an outreach center before becoming a school (I describe the outreach-center-to-school transition in Chapter 4). BCHS students gather outside the blue door, finishing their cigarettes before entering the building.

I open the blue door and step into a stairwell. I walk up one flight, which is blocked off—the second floor houses the middle school. I walk up a second flight to BCHS. On the landing a large celebratory mural has been painted, depicting smiling young people of color wearing graduation gowns and caps, holding rolled up diplomas above their heads. Below the image is painted, "*ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE*"—BCHS's motto. A former student painted the mural.

I pull open the third story door and am greeted by the security guard—a middle-aged woman who looks perpetually bored and entertains herself (and others) by lovingly teasing the students as they enter. I show her my identification, which she feigns inspecting, and then I sign my name on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard.

The floor of the building that houses BCHS is organized in branches of hallways breaking off into administrative, social work, guidance-counseling, and teachers' offices, as well as classrooms. The walls are painted bright yellow and orange and are lined by lima bean green lockers and otherwise covered in students' work. A large poster-board lists the student-written rules:

- *ATTEND AND PARTICIPATE*

- *NO FIGHTING*

- *NO SMOKING*

- *NO WALKING IN LARGE GROUPS[2]*

- *NO FLAGS, BANDANAS, BEADS, OR HAND-SHAKES[3]*

- *PAY ATTENTION AND LISTEN*

- *NO CHILLIN'*

- *NO GANG-RELATED MATERIAL*

- *DON'T BECOME LATE*

- *DON'T DISRUPT*

- *APPLY YOURSELF*

- *FOCUS*

- *DON'T COME HIGH[4]*

- *ATTEND*

- *NO CONFLICTS*

- *ALLOW PHONES IN SCHOOL[5]*

- *NO PROFANITY*

The energy in the building is frenetic; it's the start of a school day. I stop by Tira's office to say good morning.

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[2] This rule is to prevent members of the same gangs from walking through school grouped according to gang affiliation.
[3] Indications of gang-affiliation.
[4] Don't come to school high on drugs.
[5] A sneaky counter to many schools' "no phones in school" rule.

Tira is the founding principal of BCHS and a Brooklyn native. She describes herself as mixed race—her father was white and her mother was black. She has big, dark hair that she wears natural or slicked back into a tight ponytail. She's a sturdy, professionally savvy woman with a big voice and a commanding presence. She's confident, opinionated, and talks loud and often. Not everyone likes Tira, but everyone respects her. She is deeply committed to the school, which manifests in what appears to be endless energy coupled with palpable stress. Tira is all business; her demeanor only softens when she is talking to students. She has an impressive ability to communicate effectively with a range of stakeholders: higher-ups in the DOE, teachers, students, and parents. With students she is her gentlest self, and she always makes time to talk to them. Students and their difficult life circumstances serve as the primary inspiration for Tira's tireless work.

Tira's family is originally from New Orleans, but her parents moved north because they didn't want to raise mixed-race children in the south. Describing her ancestry, Tira says:

"My great great grandmother was the oldest living slave and she died in new Orleans at 107, and so on my mom's side I have a very rich history of...well we just found out recently that her father was a tribal chief in Ethiopia and when he made the journey on the slave ship, he came with his wife and two kids, which consisted of my great great grandmother. The whole family survived the journey. She was born in 1845 in Ethiopia and made the journey with her father. She arrived when she was about 10 in 1855, so my mom: 8th grade—that was as far as her education [went], and my dad's education was 7th grade.

My father was a union shop steward and a welder by trade and he worked on the Queen Mary and many of the great ships that used to come into the Brooklyn navy

yard. My mother ran a thrift shop, was just one of those kinds of people that was a jack-of-all-trades. How they managed? I look back now, my dad's salary in 1974, my first year of college, was $7000 and so how they managed to purchase a home in the country, maintain a home here in Brooklyn, raise nine children, it still blows me away."

Tira was born in Brooklyn in 1956; she is 55 years old and the youngest of nine siblings. She grew up in Brooklyn until she was in the second grade, when her parents moved the family upstate to the Catskills, where she describes having a picturesque, idealistic upbringing. She attended primarily white schools, but never felt excluded, shunned or otherwise outcast on the basis of her race. She visited family members living in Brooklyn during the summers where Blacks lived in segregated, impoverished neighborhoods.

"Growing up as the only African American child in an all-white school, I never felt shunned, I never felt discriminated against. Sure there were subtle things that happened, but I never really felt those kinds of things, and so I kind of think I grew up in a rosy world, looking at [race relations] from a positive perspective."

Tira's mixed-race parents and the fact that she grew up part-time in Brooklyn and part-time in the Catskills gave her a DuBoisian double-consciousness that she describes as giving her a unique perspective that informed her desire to work with "at-risk" youth. She simultaneously experienced segregation and poverty in Brooklyn and inclusion and financial security in the Catskills. She identified with Blacks in Brooklyn, and wished they could experience the inclusive, safe schools and neighborhoods in the Catskills.

Tira's mother died when she was 15 years old, and her father died during her last year of college. Tira attended State University of New York (SUNY) at Oneonta, getting her Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education and Art. When she graduated from college "the big city was

calling my name." She moved to New York City and got her first job at age 21 as "rehabilitation therapist for the mentally retarded." She said that job taught her a lot about "human nature" and "compassion" and began her life-long career in "human services."

Before becoming the founding principal of BCHS, Tira worked within the Department of Education for a program to help struggling eighth graders who had failed the grade more than once, and she was recruited to become the principal of BCHS when it was transitioning from being an Outreach Center to a school in 2003.

Tira describes her job as the principal of BCHS as both challenging and rewarding:

"The highlight of my day, Cathy, is having a student appear at my door and say 'Miss Tira can I speak to you?' and the student is afraid and I say, 'Sure Honey, sit down.' And as soon as they sit down, a tear wells up in their eye and they say, 'I know I've been absent for the last three months, Miss Tira, but I'm coming to you because I hope that you hear my story and you understand.' And then the student bursts into tears and begins to tell me how dad has been abusing mom and they're the only one that's been taking care of their little sister and brother and there's no food to eat and they didn't have money for laundry and they don't have a job and you look at this kid, 18 years old, 17 years old, carrying the weight of the whole world and I look back at how perfect and idyllic my life was, riding horses on a hundred acres, picking berries, swimming on a lake, two loving parents, and I experienced none of [what these kids experience]…. and it's just amazing when I listen to the stories that my kids tell me, you know, like 18 [years old] and already five abortions or 18 and HIV positive or 19 with no parent or even a place to even live, and so sitting and talking with that kid from the heart, I can't walk in their shoes, I didn't live that life, and so I can't tell them I understand, but I can tell

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them that this too shall pass, that things get better, that it doesn't stay the same, and that

if you persevere and just keep moving forward, even if it's slow on some days, that you

will rise above all of this someday, and that it really is a test, and the only way to pass

this test is to pass it, because the only other option is to fail and failure will keep you in

this mess."

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After greeting Tira, I go into the conference room across the hallway. The conference room is a large, multi-purpose room. It has nine large round tables with blue plastic chairs around each one. There are posters of Barack Obama, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Junior. Along one wall is a bank of un-used lockers. The room is primarily used for counseling students one-on-one when things get out-of-hand in a classroom, which could mean a student puts her head down on the desk and begins crying uncontrollably, or alternately, gets angry and begins to yell or otherwise misbehave. There are no physical fights at BCHS. Teachers or staff interrupt conflicts at the verbal, yelling stage. BCHS has a strict rule that if you get into a physical fight, you get kicked out of school. No question. Tira tells me that there has only been one violent fight in the school in the nine years that it has been open.

Some of the teachers use the conference room during their lunch break. Over the course of the year, I used it as my home base. It is where I went to collect my thoughts, write notes, and conduct interviews.

It is eight a.m. and students are pouring in from outside and making their way to their classes. They are exclusively 17-21 year-old Black and Latino students who are living in poverty. The men wear baggy pants, over-sized t-shirts, hoodies, and jackets, and large gold or silver chains around their necks. Despite the 'No Hats' rule, many of the men enter with their

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crisp, flat-billed Yankees lids. I often hear Ellie—a small, feisty, strict white teacher—yelling at students about their hats, "*JUSTIN! HAT! NOW!*" meaning 'Justin, take off your hat right now' to which Justin—or any student subjected to Ellie's exasperated directives—will shyly take off his hat until he is out of Ellie's sight, when he will put it back on his head. Students don't take the hat rule seriously because the teachers don't take the hat rule seriously. The hat rule is New York City-wide, and teachers only care about it in the event that a representative of the DOE or New York State Education Department (NYSED) stops by the building to observe and interpret a lack of discipline in the building because young men are wearing hats. This occurred semi-regularly; the cultural expression of students was often interpreted as indications of their "rebelliousness," "carelessness," or "dangerousness." The girls wear skin-tight jeans and t-shirts and can often be found crammed into the small bathroom, jockeying for mirror space to adjust their lipstick, eyeliner, or hair.

Nemo walks into the conference room and sits down with me for an interview.

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Nemo is 18-years-old. He is tall, thin, and muscular from working as a carpenter. His skin is Argentinian brown, decorated with tattoos that each symbolizes something important to him. He wears his long hair in a French braid or in a bun on top of his head. He dresses in loose-fitting shorts that sag slightly, and tank tops, even in the winter. Nemo is a calm, mature young man with a gentle way about him. A large tattoo across his chest reads REVOLUTION. The letters are block-shaped and thick. The E, V, O, and L are red and reversed, reading LOVE backwards; the other letters are forward-facing and black. His 21-year-old brother—who also attends BCHS—has the same image tattooed on his arm. They got the matching tattoos together to symbolize their belief in the value of change, but through love. Explaining the design of the

tattoo Nemo says that he is inspired by Che Guevara and adds, "*I feel like if you want to do a positive change, you do it through love. There's always revolutions done negatively. You should be fighting for the love of your people and not for the hatred of others.*"

Nemo and I find common ground in our tattoos, both having many that represent different aspects of our personal commitments. He lifts up his shirt to show me the large tattoo of Argentina against his ribs and waist, and a tattoo of a tree on his other side. Nemo is inspired by many religions. A tattoo of a fish on his neck represents Christianity.

Nemo came to BCHS after leaving a selective public high school in Brooklyn that specializes in music education. Nemo knows how to play 16 instruments and prides himself on his ability to teach himself how to play a new instrument in "*two to three weeks.*" He also teaches music to his friends at school and to his carpentry co-workers. His musical talents got him into the selective music high school in Brooklyn.

Shortly after beginning high school, he developed a drug addiction to pills, "*mostly Vicodin and Morphine.*" When he began high school "*everyone was smoking weed.*" He started buying marijuana from a drug dealer "*who looked homeless*" in Union Square in Manhattan. The dealer also sold pills, which Nemo tried and then developed a dependency on. "*It was like I had to take two pills in the morning just to get through my day.*"

Nemo was hospitalized for an accidental Morphine overdose and missed some school because of it. He recalled going back to school and telling his music teacher about the overdose and the teacher said, "*I don't care. I don't want to hear about that.*" He was very struck by the teacher's reaction. "*I remember thinking, 'They really don't care about me! I could die and they wouldn't care!'*"

After the Morphine overdose and his main music teacher's disinterested and uncaring

response, Nemo stopped going to school. A short time later, his oldest brother committed suicide in their home. Nemo lives in a northern section of Brooklyn with his mother—a 36-year-old nanny, and his father—a boiler mechanic. His parents immigrated to New York City from Buenos Aires, Argentina *"back in the 1990's, you know, for the American Dream and all that."* Before the suicide he had two older brothers and one younger brother—a 13 year old. At the time of the suicide, his eldest brother had just began attending college and was studying philosophy,

> *"He was always asking questions. He got to this very dark place. Was always asking me questions. Like how things got to be the way they are. Then one day he hung himself in his bedroom when we were at home. The hardest part for my family was that we were at home, we could have done something. We could have stopped it."*

Nemo got up from the table where we were sitting together and walks over to the door, demonstrating how his brother hung himself. Nemo recalls the morning that it happened. It was a Sunday—Father's Day—and his family was up early, getting ready to go to church. At 7 a.m. a family member knocked on the eldest brother's door and there was no response. The family member tried to open the door, but it was locked, so they figured that he didn't want to go to church. After church, the family went to get ice cream together to celebrate Father's Day. When they got home and saw that the oldest brother's bedroom door was still closed, they became concerned. When his mother tried to open the door again, she realized that it was not locked; it was just difficult to open because the weight of his brother's body was hanging on the other side of the door. Nemo's brother had put the buckle of a belt in the top jam of the door, closed the door, and hung himself with the other side of the belt. When the autopsy came back, they said that he had died around 7 a.m., which was the same time that they had originally knocked on his door, trying to wake him to go to church. Because the suicide happened when the family was

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in the house, they harbor a lot of guilt for not noticing the belt buckle in the top of the door. I asked Nemo if he thought that there was any significance to his brother committing suicide on Father's Day and he said,

> *"I don't think so. He left a note. My family read it. I didn't read it. The therapists said it might make me feel better to read the letter. But I don't need to read it. I already know that my brother is dead."*

At the time of the suicide, Nemo had recently quit using drugs, but had a short relapse when his brother died. Ultimately, his brother's suicide served as a wake-up call for him, and he stopped doing drugs, and enrolled in BCHS. He knew about the school because his older brother—the one with the matching REVOLUTION tattoo—attends the school. Nemo takes his classes at BCHS during the day and works as a carpenter for four hours each afternoon. His greatest aspiration is to move back to Argentina to serve in the military there, "*I want to serve my people.*"

After my conversation with Nemo, I walk across the street from the school to a Chinese take-out restaurant where I order spring rolls and vegetable fried rice through bulletproof glass.

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After lunch I am collecting my notes in the conference room, when Ellie—the teacher who yells at the young men about their hats—brings Seidi in to meet me, saying, "*Seidi, this is Cathy. Cathy, this is Seidi. You two need to talk.*" Seidi introduces herself and tells me that she is a former student. Former BCHS students regularly stop by the school to visit—a testament to their attachment to the school and its teachers.

Seidi is a 25-year-old Dominican-American woman with long brown hair in curling-iron waves. She wears professional, form-fitting dresses, makeup that outlines her striking facial

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features, and she has a confident but warm demeanor. I told Seidi about my study and asked if I could interview her. She agreed readily.

Seidi grew up in Brooklyn with a very difficult home life, punctuated by addiction, incarceration, abuse, and loss. Her father passed away in prison when she was four years old. He had been an intravenous drug user and died from HIV complications. Seidi grew up living with her mother and her mother's second husband, who Seidi referred to as her stepfather. Seidi has two older siblings who struggled in many of the same ways that Seidi did, and attended BCHS before her. When I asked Seidi to describe her original high school experience she told me,

> *"I went to [a large comprehensive high school in Brooklyn that has since been closed]. I entered there in 1999. I stayed at that school for three years. The only year that I did anything positive was the first year. There were over 1,000 students, a huge building, and there wasn't anyone to connect to. So I kind of fell through the cracks and I started to do what everyone else was doing—hanging out in the hallways, just hangin' out, and going to the cafeteria and doing whatever. There wasn't anyone in the hallways saying, 'You shouldn't be here.' There wasn't anyone trying to stop you from doing whatever it is you wanted to do. So the last two years that I was there, 2000 - 2001, I just didn't go to class. I went to the school, but not to any of my classes."*

Seidi described her home life and how it affected her behavior at school:

> *"My mom was involved with a domestically abusive spouse who was also using drugs and had alcohol issues. My mom is a gambler so she would literally, you know, get money and gamble it away. So I came from a house that sometimes didn't have lights, sometimes didn't have food, you know, I just didn't know what to expect when I went home: Is there going to be an argument? Is there going to be a fight? There wasn't*

any type of love or support or anything. And I never wanted to be at home so I was always in the streets. And you become…you adopt that street mentality. In order to survive in the street, you can't have feelings; you have to be numb. You have to make sure that, you know, that you're the aggressor, 'cause if not, you're gonna fall victim. So I had that mentality; I had that attitude. My reputation was that I was like a pit bull in a skirt. They'd say, 'Don't talk to her; her bite is crazy.' So I used to fight and do whatever because that's what you have to do in order to survive in the street, and it's unfortunate. I do look back, and I am a different person now….My mom and I, we never had a relationship. I never had a mom and daughter relationship, and that's part of the reason why I acted out. I was very young and smoked weed and drank and just did whatever, and there was no discipline. There wasn't anyone there to say, 'What you are doing is incorrect. You need to change your way.' I had a lot of anger and a lot of that misconduct came from what was happening in the household, and it translated also to school. I was being abused and that's the reality of a lot of the kids that come [to BCHS], and reading a book or writing a paper is the last thing you're thinking about, so you end up not doing well [in school]."

Seidi's mother, stepfather, and younger brother left Brooklyn to live in Florida when Seidi was 17, about the same time that she entered BCHS,

"When they left, I think that really…I look back on it…you know, reflect back on it as being a good thing. At the time I didn't perceive it as a good thing, but it made me change what I was doing. I was really faced with the questions of: 'What is going to happen with your life? What are you going to do with it? Where do you want to go?' And the people I saw around me were people who were on welfare, people who had kids—

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single parents, and people who were doing the same thing I was doing at 17, but at a much older age. And I really looked at them and said, 'This is not where I want to be, and I have the opportunity right now to change that path if I take it.' I decided to say: 'Okay, I'm gonna go to school and I'm gonna attempt to do well.''

Seidi was enrolled in high school for a total of six years—three years at the large comprehensive high school and three years at BCHS. When she entered BCHS she had 13 credits. Students need 40 credits to graduate from high school in New York City, so she was technically a sophomore. The first time Seidi came to BCHS to enroll, she was still 16 years old and therefore not old enough to enroll. She was also escorted out of the building by security.

"I didn't meet the age requirement, and besides my attitude was completely horrendous. I mean the first day I got here, I got kicked out, and told by the guidance counselor here that this is not the place for me. I was just completely reckless, I was cursing everyone out. I had no respect for authority, no respect for anyone….Obviously I was given up on. I came from a broken home. I had no structure. No one could tell me what to do, how to be, and rules were completely meant to be broken for me. It was ridiculous….They told me that I was too young to enroll and to come back when I was 17. I was upset, I called my brother, and a guidance counselor came out and said, 'You can't use the cell phone in the building, but you can step out to use it.' I was like, 'Who the fuck are you? Who the fuck you think you talkin' to! I can do whatever the fuck I want! Go fuck off!' I just completely went ballistic on her and she was like, 'No, you have to go, and you're not gonna come back. You're not ready for this school.' and I just went even more crazy, and she was like, 'I'm going to get a security guard to escort you out.' So then I wasn't enrolled in any school.''

The next year, Seidi enrolled in BCHS. Having been starved for adult love, care, guidance, and support, she quickly became attached to the nurturing culture at BCHS and began to do well in her classes.

A couple of years into her BCHS experience, the guidance counselors invited college students from Hofstra University who were enrolled in a program for poor students of color, who had struggled in high school. They came to BCHS to describe the program to the students and to urge them to enroll.

"They had representatives come and talk about the school and the program and how it changed their life, and at that point I remember thinking, 'Wow, if these people could do it then I could do it, and that's the first time I ever thought about going to college."

I asked Seidi what it was about them that made her feel like she could go to college,

"They were like us! People who had a hard time; people who didn't necessarily have a lot, and they explained what the program provides for you. It provides housing, it provides support. It provides you with a way to college, so you can do something more with yourself. And they help you through that process. And you don't have to be the brightest person to be able to enter. They had Hofstra students who had been like us come and talk about their experience with the program and what it meant to them and how it changed their lives. Some of their life stories were very similar to the people I knew in my life. It was very relatable. It was tangible. Right then and there I decided I wanted to go to Hofstra University."

Seidi majored in Sociology at Hofstra University and is now thinking about her next steps in life. When I asked her what she wanted to do, she described wanting to do the kind of work where she would be able to help young people who had experiences like she had had less than a

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decade before:

> *"I was thinking of going back to get my masters in social work or in guidance [counseling] because I feel like that's where a lot of things change. I had [a guidance counselor at BCHS] who helped me to get through things when I didn't have anything. [Two BCHS guidance counselors] bought me all the supplies I needed to go to college, from shampoo to soap to a corkboard. Everything I needed to go to college or for my dorm room. My gradation dress [two staff members at BCHS] bought for me. [A teacher at BCHS] drove me to school on my first day [of college]. It's really real. These people made a real impact on my life. I'm always invited. I know their families. I know their kids. It's that important and involved and obviously they show that they cared enough to make sure that I had the things that I needed so that it wasn't an issue, it wasn't something I had to focus on, so I could focus on being a college student."*

I am still in regular contact with Seidi. She currently works for a non-profit organization in Brooklyn that helps "at-risk" youth and she has a two-year-old child. She still has a strained relationship with her mother, who works as a cook at a restaurant at Epcot Theme Park in Walt Disney World. Her stepfather died of a cocaine overdose at home in 2010.

<center>***</center>

After talking to Seidi, I swing by Brian's office to chat. Brian is a teacher who shares a small office with another teacher—Nekeeba. A bookshelf against the wall carries titles concerning radical pedagogy, Black power, and multicultural education. Brian's desk is covered in precariously arranged stacks of students' papers and assignments. His worn, black leather briefcase leans against the wall behind his chair. Nekeeba sits at her desk grading assignments with frenzied concentration.

Brian is a 42-year-old muscular Black man with long dreadlocks that he wears tied back. He dresses in loose jeans, dress shirts, ties, and sweaters. He is sturdy, strong, passionate, and deeply, infectiously gentle and kind. His dedication to his students inspired me on a daily basis. He seemed to have endless energy and patience. My conversations with Brian usually concerned structural racism and its effects on students of color. During these conversations he regularly became emotional, tearing up and wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

Brian runs a Saturday school for black children, speaks at public schools and universities around the country about culturally competent pedagogy, and is completely driven by racial and economic social justice. When I was teaching Sociology of Education at Hunter College, I invited Brian to come to my class to talk about cultural competence and my students (and I) learned a great deal from him.

Brian's wife is a lawyer and the author of a book about her personal journey to loving her (Black) hair, which she wears natural. They live in Brooklyn and have three beautiful children.

Brian and I have an easy rapport. We are both originally from California, are similar in age, and we share a deep commitment to racial, economic, and feminist social justice issues.

Brian described his journey to becoming a public school teacher as fundamentally driven by his commitment to racial social justice. Describing his own upbringing and his racial socialization he told me,

> *"I went to white schools; prep schools. We lived in a mixed neighborhood with a lot of Blacks. I've always been very conscious of race. I've always kind of been in an identity crisis. I'm from California so I've been skater, I've been a [gang member]. I went to high school as [a gang member] thinking that's what Black men were supposed to do and left with contacts in my eyes and wouldn't date Black girls, so I've been through a full*

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spectrum. And I was a football player, so I went from being a really good student when I was young, and loving school to about 5th or 6th grade and then quitting [caring about school] and became a 'dumb jock.' I was always in schools where people assumed I was a dumb jock. I rolled with it. I took my first class notes ever during my junior year of college. I went to college to play football, [majoring in Sociology]. I didn't pick sociology, it was picked for me, and I was kind of content, but when I started to learn my [African American] history…I started to take African and African-American Studies classes…"

Brian went on to tell me about taking Sociology and African-American Studies classes, and starting to learn about individual and structural racism, and to reflect on how it affected his life and his community,

"I always knew in my soul that I was smart, but I think like a lot of [Black] kids, you just realize that school is not a place to learn. …all the black athletes were special [athletic] admits, and it was a time when they were getting rid of affirmative action in the UC system, but we [Black athletes] were all there with like 2.0's. And [when I realized that everyone thought that I was stupid because I was a Black athlete,] that motivated me. That's when I started to be a good student. I knew I had to assimilate because I went to prep school, so all of a sudden I was the Black kid who stood out from the other Black kids because I was getting internships cuz I could go drink beer with white kids and wear polo shirts. So I was just real race-conscious, and when I went to graduate school…when I went to Penn State I immersed myself in researching African American academic, social, and professional underdevelopment. I just immersed myself and I realized that most kids went through what I went through—they went to schools that were

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culturally incompetent, that didn't really teach to who they were, didn't build their esteem, didn't show them themselves in the curriculum, and a lot of us [Black students] were detached. I had started to think about all the kids that I knew who could have been in graduate school but just didn't learn in school because they weren't bonded to it. There was a sociologist, I think he was a criminologist, Hirschi, and he had Social Bonding Theory and it talked about how people…when you're bonded to your block, you don't litter; when you're not bonded to it, you don't care. And it made me think about The Projects and it made me think about my white friends—how everybody mowed the lawn and took care of it….I really kind of immersed myself in doing research and understanding how racism impacted the academic, social, and professional development among African American students…so I really got heavy into thinking about that. There was a song by Dead Prez called They Schools and it kinda changed my life."

Lyrics: *They Schools,* by Dead Prez[6]

Why haven't you learned anything?

Man that school shit is a joke

The same people who control the school system control

The prison system, and the whole social system

Ever since slavery, nawsayin?

I went to school with some redneck crackers

Right around the time 3rd Bass dropped the cactus album

But I was readin Malcolm

I changed my name in '89 cleaning parts of my brain

Like a baby nine

I took a history class serious

Front row, every day of the week, 3rd period

Fuckin with the teachers head, callin em racist

I tried to show them crackers some light, they couldn't face it

I got my diploma from a school called Rickers[7]

Full of, teenage mothers, and drug dealin niggas

In the hallways, the popo was always present

Searchin through niggas possessions

Lookin for, dope and weapons, get your lessons

That's why my moms kept stressin

I tried to pay attention but they classes wasn't interestin

They seemed to only glorify the Europeans

Claimin Africans were only three-fifths a human being

They schools can't teach us shit

My people need freedom, we tryin to get all we can get

All my high school teachers can suck my dick

Tellin me white man lies straight bullshit

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[7] Rikers Island, New York City's main jail

They schools ain't teachin us, what we need to know to survive

(Say what, say what)

They schools don't educate, all they teach the people is lies

You see dog, you see how quick these motherfuckers be to like

Be tellin niggas get a diploma so you can get a job

Knowwhatimsayin but they don't never tell you how the job

Gonna exploit you every time knowwhatimsayin that's why I be like

Fuck they schools!

School is like a 12 step brainwash camp

They make you think if you drop out you ain't got a chance

To advance in life, they try to make you pull your pants up

Students fight the teachers and get took away in handcuffs

And if that wasn't enough, then they expel y'all

Your peoples understand it but to them, you a failure

Observation and participation, my favorite teachers

When they beat us in the head with them books, it don't reach us

Whether you breakdance or rock suede Addidas

Or be in the bathroom with your clique, smokin reefer

Then you know they math class aint important 'less you addin up cash

In multiples, unemployment aint rewardin

They may as well teach us extortion

You either get paid or locked up, the pricipal is like a warden

In a four year sentence, mad niggas never finish

But that doesn't mean I couldn't be a doctor or a dentist

Cuz for real, a mind is a terrible thing to waste

And all y'all high class niggas with y'all nose up

Cuz we droppin this shit on this joint, fuck y'all

We gon speak for ourselves

Knowhatimsayin? Cuz see the schools aint teachin us nothin

They aint teachin us nothin but how to be slaves and hardworkers

For white people to build up they shit

Make they businesses successful while it's exploitin us

Knowhatimsayin? And they aint teachin us nothin related to

Solvin our own problems, knowhatimsayin?

Aint teachin us how to get crack out the ghetto

They aint teachin us how to stop the police from murdering us

And brutalizing us, they aint teachin us how to get our rent paid

Knowhatimsayin? They aint teachin our families how to interact

Better with each other, knowhatimsayin? They just teachin us

How to build they shit up, knowhatimsayin? That's why my niggas

Got a problem with this shit, that's why niggas be droppin out that

Shit cuz it don't relate, you go to school the fuckin police

Searchin you you walkin in your shit like this a military compound

Knowhatimsayin? So school don't even relate to us

Until we have some shit where we control the fuckin school system

Where we reflect how we gon solve our own problems

Them niggas aint gon relate to school, shit that just how it is

Knowhatimsayin? And I love education, knowhatimsayin?

But if education aint elevatin me, then you knowhatimsayin it aint

Takin me where I need to go on some bullshit, then fuck education

Knowhatimsayin? At least they shit, matter of fact my nigga

this whole school system can suck my dick, BEEYOTCH!!

Brian continues,

"There are all these divisions that we have in the Black community. You know they say Black people are like crabs in a bucket, one tries to come up, the other one tears him down, but what I began to learn intensely is that a lot of our divisions are scripted, and they were tied to the plantation, not being able to have mechanisms like the Jewish community [have], that teach you about collective economics, not havin' institutions. We all work for white people.

"[Learning about the historical oppression of Black people in the United States of America, and the role of the schools within that oppression] really planted a seed for me about the need for educational institutions that teach us [Black people] how to solve our own problems, and that teach us how to understand the mess that we've inherited as the decendents of slaves. Then I went through a huge depression. I grew my [dread] locks. I was homeless for a little while."

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Brian worked for a number of programs that served poor, inner city black youth in Philadelphia and moved to New York City when his wife began law school at New York University.

"So I applied for the [New York City Teaching] Fellows [Program] really just thinking I needed two years to [do something in New York City], but I didn't really think I was going to be able to teach in the public schools because of my resume. But I got an interview and I told my wife, 'I'm gonna go in there and I'm gonna be real,' kind of with an attitude. I didn't think it was gonna work, and I came here [to BCHS] and they asked me, 'If you had the ideal school, what would it look like?' Tira [the principal] was new, there was this woman named with spikey hair and a 'Down with Capitalism' button. I walked in and there was a spirit, and half way through the meeting, like, I hired myself!....So I got another masters, delved deeper in the culturally relevant pedagogy materials, and really immersed myself in that whole framework, and this school let me teach a class called Slavery. They let me incorporate what I had learned in my non-profit work. [BCHS] already had a focus that dealt with teaching kids about their culture, addressing racism to some extent, so I've been here doing that….I learned a lot here because these kids are kind of the most at-risk of the at-risk in New York City, but, you know, we've had one [physical] fight in nine years, which is unheard of, but I've learned that knowledge itself is violence prevention."

Brian began to talk about how some of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT) sanctions have interrupted the cultural work that they do at BCHS (detailed at length in Chapters 2 and 4) and says,

"So I don't want to work in the public schools [anymore]. My dream is to create something very similar to what the Jews have with Hebrew schools, but for African

students, because I run an African Center Saturday school for kids in homeless shelters—

middle school kids.

"[I read about] this research that looks at Pima Indian culture, and they found that by the time the kids were like in fifth grade, they felt like they had to choose between their home culture and the school culture, and the school culture is typically European. [Learning about Pima students] really resonated with me because I remember in high school we used to have these culture days, and it was an all-white prep school, but we had Greek culture day, and all the Greek kids would bring food from their families, and we'd have Italian day…and then there was another black kid in my class—this brother Chris, and he said one day, 'Mr. Cassopolis (who was an old Greek dude), when are we gonna have an African culture day?' And Mr. Cassopolis said, 'It's too hard to kill a rhino." and the whole class fell out laughing, and I mean, I didn't have words then like I do now, [or else] I would have been like, 'You're culturally disrespectful…' blah blah blah blah, and I didn't have a mom who could advocate for me. So I remember the whole class lookin' at me, and I remember I said, 'I'm not comin' to this class no more.' So I stopped going, I didn't pass, I was ineligible for my last football game and I was labeled troublemaker, and at the time that's just what it was. There was a rumor I was a drug dealer. Any Tabari [a Black, veteran BCHS teacher who strongly believes in the potential and abilities of all students] would have been able to see me and see that I was a good kid."

Due to the NCLB and RTT sanctions placed on the school—requiring them to forego teaching courses on Slavery and related topics in favor of test-preparation and traditional curriculum (Chapter Five)—Brian has decided that after nine years, this will be his last year teaching at

BCHS.

"I would have stayed here indefinitely, but I don't need to be teaching kids verbs. I mean, I know my purpose, and I know my gift, and I know the shortage of me's in these public schools, and I'm not able to shine my light the way I want to. [BCHS] is on the verge of becoming a regular school, so I gotta get out of here. They [economically and socially powerful, white-dominated institutions] take our most talented [Black people] and they train them, you know....If you wake up in my neighborhood...I live in Bed-Stuy....All of the [Black] professionals—we have lawyers, doctors, everything, I love my neighborhood....but you see the Black doctors, lawyers, teachers, professionals are getting on the train to go to the white community. First- and second-generation immigrants are opening up all the businesses that sustain our community.

"My Asian friends and my Jewish friends, they come to mainstream schools, and they know what to do, even if it's not culturally relevant, but they're tied to institutions that are teaching them what to do with it, so I feel like we [in the Black community] could do a lot more. Like my Saturday school—I feel like we can really get them to love learning if we can show them themselves. A lot of our kids think that reading is white, acting white, because they haven't been exposed to the legacy of literature [among Africans and African-Americans] and my main goal is...even if we go to these mainstream institutions...to really prepare people, like, go get what you gotta get, but be grounded and know who you are. One of my heroes Marcus Garvey had a quote, he said, 'A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.'... and I'm speakin'...you can see my work is very African-American and African-diaspora focused, but it's translatable [to other marginalized groups, mainly

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the Latino students at BCHS]… There's a new book out, this woman named Michelle Alexander, called The New Jim Crow*, it says there are more Black men in the criminal justice system, on parole, on probation, right now, then there were Black male slaves in 1850, and that's deep! You know, one of the assignments that I give to my kids is, I ask them: Would you rather be a slave on a plantation, or have life in prison right now? And it's like, deep, because it's like a split [half the students would be a slave; half would be in prison for life], because if you're slave, you might still be able to have a wife, you still got some possibilities of being free. So the fact that it becomes a debate, and students aren't sure which is better, is really indicative of like….What the fuck?! How are we in 2012 and wondering if we were better off in slavery?! You were more likely to have two parents if you were an African-American child [as a slave]….So my goal is very political. Very political. Paulo Freire says education is political; It's to liberate or to enslave.*

"A lot of these kids are one relationship-, one network-, one class- away from seeing the whole world differently. A lot of people don't think it's possible [to educate over-age, under-credited, poor Black and Latino youth]. [People think] 'Niggas just crazy!' But if [educators and policy-makers] were intentional about creating space that is really for teaching [this population of students] there are so many possibilities. Every term, it's a new group of kids coming out of Rikers; everybody's got their tough face on,

"When I see my students in the 'hood, and they see me talking and dressed like I am here [professionally], and there's cats on the block, and I'm laughing them up, and I'm still the same person, they love that. Like, when they see me and Tabari [another Black teacher] talking [about racism], that's the first time they've ever seen Black people speaking unapologetically about racism, and still [able to be] cool with white people.

And they've never seen that, and it's attractive. They say. 'Wow! This dude [my teacher Brian] could be in my neighborhood, and have a little bit of respect in the dominant culture, and I can be me and keep it real, but still use big words…I didn't know that was possible!' I used to be in the white world and be one way, and then be in the Black world and be another way, and nobody ever sat me down and taught me about the legacy [of African American history], how [Blacks] had to do that on the plantation. There's a whole body of literature that deals with that…Fredrick Douglas…Somebody could have broke that down to me in sixth grade, and it would have just saved me so much… …you know, it would have just saved me. There shouldn't have been a contradiction between being an intellectual and being Black because I've always been smart, and all these kids are smart! …So I don't even know if I answered your question…It's not designed for us [i.e. The school system is not designed for Black students]. It's a natural instinct for me [as a Black person] to reject my high school, the same way that a Jew learning from a Nazi would—there's something in him or her that just rejects it. Just like it's natural for an indigenous child being taught by the people who conquered his legacy, it's natural for you to reject it, it's natural, so most of the people who reject it, our strongest kings and soldiers at Rikers, it's natural. My white friends couldn't understand why I didn't like Obama, but I said, 'Well, if the Taliban took over right now, and everything was Taliban, and everything was Islam-ruled, and this was no longer America, and it was a Taliban state, and 80 years down the line a white person was the first white person to finally be the president of the Taliban, every white person that remembered major league baseball and John Wayne, would know that wouldn't be a victory, that would be sick. Like, Jews don't want to be the leaders of the Nazi party. We come from a culture that hung us

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from trees and made us believe that we were niggers and three-fifths human—made us

believe that to the extent that our five-year-old kids, when they look at the Doll Test are

already clear [Blacks are] inferior, less intelligent. It's natural to reject that, so these

schools are toxic….but I'm very optimistic because I know that if we create the right

mechanisms, we can get our kids; they're very getable, I've seen it on a micro level—

from the most thugged-out to the most white-washed and assimilated, every [person of

color] is one network or one conversation away from having to wrestle with it [the

meaning of race in the U.S.] and see it from a different perspective.

I asked Brian how he stays optimistic.

"Well I'm optimistic because I know my history. I know that as bad as things are, that 20

million of my ancestors didn't even make it here [in the transatlantic slave trade]. Nat

Turner, Marcus Garvey and them…what they had to go through…I know I have so much

more to work with than they did! So if I didn't know that, I'd be like, 'Fuck.' But because

I know….Imagine if Harriet [Tubman] had the Internet and a master's degree and the

ability to get funding for programs!

"This place [BCHS] has taught me that all our kids are getable, so I am

optimistic….I tell my students, 'Just remember, you're a descendent of those who went

through a lot worse.' …So in a nutshell, a lot of this stuff [reaching the BCHS student

population] is not rocket science….So I don't know man, this is depressing. I have to see

positive shit or else I'd be ready to put a bullet in my head….I don't want to be a part of

creating Condoleezza Rices. I just don't."

<div align="center">***</div>

My conversation with Brian lasted several hours, past the end of the school day when most of

the students and teachers had left the building. I returned to the conference room to gather up my notebooks and backpack and head out the building. On my walk back to the subway station, I pass the man selling batteries, and I think about how lucky I am to be doing this work.

Chapter Three

"That's the best place where you want to be if you ran out of chances."

Care as Retention Strategy

All of the students had left other high schools before coming to BCHS and most had left several high schools, so a natural research question was: How did BCHS retain students that other schools had not? What narratives did students provide when asked why they stayed at BCHS? The most pervasive reason that students gave for staying at BCHS was that they felt that their teachers cared for them as whole people, genuinely wanted them to be academically successful, and believed in their ability to do so. Students' narratives also demonstrated the significant extent to which students internalized the narratives that their past and present teachers provided about their failure or success. In their former schools, students had received negative messages about their value and potential as students, and had internalized those messages, believing themselves to be 'bad students,' or 'stupid.' BCHS students simultaneously believed that they would probably continue to fail in school, but continued to hope that they could become successful. BCHS teachers' belief in their ability to succeed allowed students to internalize a new narrative about their scholastic abilities and begin to (re)build their academic self-esteem. Seidi described various messages that she received as a student and how they impacted her:

> Seidi*: "But even at my old school, even at my junior high school I had to go through metal detectors, like at the airport. Did you have to go through metal detectors when you went to school?"*

> CRB*: "No."*

> Seidi*: "Exactly. So [when you have to go through metal detectors] you're automatically trained to do what? To be a prisoner. To be an inmate. That's what*

they teach you and train you to do in this neighborhood, and it's unfortunate because

when you are treated like an inmate, you tend to act like one. When you're treated like an

adult, you tend to act like one. When you are shown respect, you tend to give it. That's

something I didn't experience [until I came to BCHS]."

As students talked about the culture of caring at BCHS, I asked them to make comparisons to

their former schools. By and large, students described their former schools as uncaring places,

and often described particular instances in which former teachers had communicated their low-

expectations by being explicitly discouraging and often insulting. In this chapter I juxtapose

students' descriptions of their former schools with their descriptions of BCHS, specifically in

terms of care, but first I frame my discussion in terms of previous research.

In the Literature: Teacher Caring and Culturally, Economically Marginalized Students

Research findings attest to the positive effect of genuine teacher caring on student achievement.

(Gay, 2010, p. 48)

It is the daily doses of authentic caring and mutual respect that facilitate learning and

empowerment.

(Morrell, et al., 2013, p. 167)

The student population at BCHS was similar in many respects to Anyon's (1997) ethnographic

participants; all of the students were Black and/or Latino and were living in poverty; many were

homeless; and many experienced neglect, abuse, emotional stress, anxiety, and anger (Anyon,

1997, p. 15). BCHS students' descriptions of their former schools and teachers were similar to

Anyon's ethnographic observations of student-teacher interactions at her research site, Marcy

School. Anyon wrote, "Teachers face an extremely difficult pedagogical situation at Marcy School….[they] confront roomfuls of students whose home circumstances are often extremely stressful. Their desperate lives make many of them restless and confrontational; they can be difficult to teach, *and to love*" (p. 28, italics mine). She goes on to list some of the comments that teachers made to students at Marcy School:

- Teacher to a class of first graders: "You're disgusting; you remind me of children I would see in a jail or something."

- Teacher to fourth-grade girl whose mother is a prostitute: "Your mother's pussy smells like fish. *That's* what stinks around here."

- Fifth grade teacher to students: If I had a gun I'd kill you. You're all hoodlums.

    White teacher to Black boy: Why are you so stupid! I'm going to throw you in the garbage.

(Anyon, 1997, p. 29-30)

In the sociology of education literature, we just do not get this kind of data coming out of schools that serve white middle-class children.

One of the most seminal texts on the consequences of lack of teacher caring for culturally and economically diverse student populations is Venezuela's (1999) *Subtractive Schooling*. For Valenzuela, "subtractive" schooling consists of any pedagogical practices that divest Mexican-American students (in her case) of their cultural traits. She argues that the concept and analysis of "subtractive schooling" extends to any marginalized student population. The goal of subtractive schooling is to shed students of any cultural traits that are not desirable to—and rewarded by—the dominant (read: white, middle-class) culture. Subtractive schooling is assimilationist, and Valenzuela convincingly argues that it is also detrimental to the academic

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experiences and outcomes of marginalized students. In contrast, "additive schooling" would affirm the cultural traits of students while "enhancing the labor market status of U.S.-Mexicans (and all other youth) in an increasingly global economy" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 270).

Valenzuela's text is an ethnographic account of what I would term an 'uncaring' school. She describes a fundamental cultural difference in the ways that teachers and students understand and desire care from one another. Drawing on Noddings (1984), Valenzuela differentiates between "aesthetic caring" and "authentic caring." She argues that schooling is structured around aesthetic caring (See also: Gilligan 1982; Prillaman et al. 1994; Courtney and Noblit 1994; Eaker-Rich and Van Galen 1996). Aesthetic caring is the abstract caring that teachers want students to have toward school: "…teachers expect students to demonstrate caring about school with an abstract commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement" (1999, p. 261). "Rather than centering students' learning around a moral ethic of caring that nurtures and values relationships, schools pursue a narrow, instrumentalist logic" (p. 22). Valenzuela observed that teachers used students' cultural self-expression as 'proof' of their lack of care about school. Examples that she gives are of students slouching, sagging their pants, or wearing baseball caps: "At Seguin, [teachers] tend to over-interpret urban youths' attire and off-putting behavior as evidence of a rebelliousness that signifies that these students 'don't care' about school" (p. 22). "From these adults' perspective, the way youth dress, talk and generally deport themselves 'proves' that they do not care about school" (61). Brooks (2012) had a similar finding in his ethnography of DuBois High School—a predominantly Black school in the southeast. Brooks found that teachers interpreted the cultural expressions—in terms of speech, gestures, and dress—of black students as indicative of their dislike and disrespect for school (p. 91-92). Further, he found that similar student expressions and behaviors were interpreted differently

by teachers based on a student's race. White teachers would "correct" black students' cultural and individual expression (e.g. "Sit up straight!"), but would not correct the same expressions or behaviors in white students. Valenzuela argues that "aesthetic caring is not only superficial, it also obliges youth to participate in a power-evasive, culturally chauvinistic framework that individualizes students' difficulties with schooling while larger structural issues like the school's subtractive curriculum go unnoticed" (p. 263).

In contrast to aesthetic (or instrumentalist) caring, Valenzuela's Mexican-American student participants valued what Valenzuela and others have termed "authentic caring"—that is, genuine, humane, reciprocal caring between people. Valenzuela frames the difference between aesthetic caring and authentic caring as a fundamentally cultural one. She describes a tension between teachers' expectation that students display an aesthetic caring for school and students desire for teachers to display authentic caring for them, and she argues that "the difference in the way students and teachers perceive school-based relationships can bear directly on students' potential to achieve" (p. 61-62).

> "To make schools truly caring institutions for members of historically oppressed subordinate groups…authentic caring, as currently described in the literature, is necessary but not sufficient. Students' cultural world and their structural position must also be fully apprehended, with school-based adults deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus….A more profound and involved understanding of the socioeconomic, linguistic, sociocultural, and structural barriers that obstruct the immobility of [disadvantaged] youth needs to inform all caring relationships (Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, 1991; Phelan et al., 1993; Stanton-Salazar, 1996). Authentic caring cannot exist unless it is imbued with and motivated by such political clarity

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(Bartolome, 1994)" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 109).

Ladson-Billings (2009) delineates the difference between "culturally relevant" and "assimilationist" classroom social relations:

Culturally Relevant	Assimilationist
• Teacher-student relationship is fluid, humanely equitable, extends to interactions beyond the classroom and into the community	• Teacher-students relationship is fixed, tends to be hierarchical and limited to formal classroom roles.
• Teacher demonstrates a connectedness with all students	• Teacher demonstrates connections with individual students.
• Teacher encourages 'a community of learners.'	• Teacher encourages competitive achievement.
• Teacher encourages students to learn collaboratively. Students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other.	• Teacher encourages students to learn individually, in isolation.

Like Valenzuela and Ladson-Billings, Gay (2010) frames care in decidedly cultural terms. Gay's primary concern is with cultural responsiveness at every level of pedagogical practice. For Gay, culturally responsive caring is "manifested in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities" (p. 48). For Gay, caring is grounded in attitudes but exemplified in actions: "all attributes of

caring must be translated into actions for them to be of much value in improving the achievement of culturally diverse students" (p. 53-54).

Zane (1994) and Powell (1994) offer two examples of putting care into practice in schools, and discuss some of the positive effects of doing so. Zane describes improving student-teacher relationships as a strategy for dealing with disciplinary problems inside schools. My data also show that positive, caring student-teacher relationships, and teachers having positive regard for students, created a climate in which there were very few major disciplinary problems. Powell describes the implementation of "Family Group" in schools as a way to strengthen the relationships between teachers and students and found that Family Group had positive effects on students learning outcomes.

Zane (1994) found that schools that claimed to have a lot of disciplinary problems also had teachers who held an "us versus them" orientation to students. In conversations with teachers, Zane found that "A 'good' class had less to do with the enthusiasm that students demonstrated toward the curriculum and more to do with the small number of 'problem students' in the room" (p. 123). A good student was a cooperative student. Teachers viewed discipline problems as the result of the actions of individual students and failed to see the impact of school organizational structure on student behavior (p. 124). "Despite the fact that many theorists understand students' behavior to be rooted at the intersection of individual, relational, and structural problems, the prescription for [disciplinary problems in schools] rarely transcends the focus on controlling and changing individual students' behavior" (p. 124). Zane argues that school officials need to reconceptualize discipline as *relational* and of teacher-student relationships as educational partnerships (p. 129). She found that disciplinary problems in schools were drastically reduced by teachers forming meaningful relationships with students:

"the fetish with disciplinary concerns diminishes as schools (and the administrators, teachers, and students inside them) become more relationally oriented and more democratic" (p.123).

Powell (1994) organized "Family Group" inside urban schools to find out what would happen if *relationships* were developed and valued as a crucial vehicle for *learning*. Family Group was a radical restructuring of adult-student relationships within schools, where every adult in the school met regularly with a group of students. Family Group was a safe space where student voices and perspectives were valued and encouraged. Each student stayed in their family group for the duration of their time in high school. Powell found that family group helped students to develop the ability to speak clearly, become assertive, and think critically about their own experience, thereby equipping them to successfully navigate and negotiate interactions with administrators, teachers, other adults, and each other. (p. 113-120)

Race, Class, Culture and Care

It would be easy to frame the data that I present in this chapter as evidence of "good teachers" and "bad teachers," but this is not my intention. In American cultural discourse, "caring" tends to be cast and interpreted as an individual trait that some have and others do not. My perspective on caring is structural; some institutional arrangements promote, foster, and develop a culture of caring (e.g. pre-school, therapy, or nursing), and other institutional arrangements foreclose or interrupt care (e.g. factory work, prison). I did not collect the same kind of data at an "uncaring" school as I did at "caring" BCHS, however the literature demonstrates that a central reason that students in public high schools in New York City (and in other schools that primarily serve poor students of color) feel that their teachers do not care about, believe in, or like them has to do with cultural differences between teachers and students.

In New York State, 76.3 percent of teachers are white, 9.8 percent are Hispanic, 8.6 percent are Black, and 3.4 percent are Asian (National Institute for Education Statistics, 2014). By and large, teachers who are teaching in schools that serve poor youth of color have in most cases never been poor youth of color themselves, and they have not attended schools like the schools that they are now teaching in. This is in contrast to schools where middle class white teachers teach middle class white youth. In the first instance, teachers and students are coming together with wildly different cultural biographies and histories, whereas in the second instance, teachers and students share many cultural similarities, biographies and histories. In her study, Valenzuela (1999) claims,

> "The view that students do not care about school stems from several sources, including social and cultural distance in student-adult relationships and the school culture itself. Most of the school's staff neither live nor participate in students' predominantly Mexican community. (p. 63)

Picower (2009) found that white teachers held "hegemonic understandings about race and difference" (p. 203). Certainly programs like Teach For America contribute to this problem by recruiting very young middle class white people to become teachers in "high need schools" (read: schools that serve poor youth of color), while providing them with very little training especially regarding race, class or culture (Ravitch, 2010, p. 189). Valenzuela documented "fly-by" teachers at Sequin: "Seguin's high attrition rate—particularly among newer staff—further exacerbates social distance and increases the difficulty of developing an explicit ethnic of caring" (p. 63). These arrangements are not immutable; education departments and teacher training programs could more aggressively recruit teachers of color and they could provide more training on cultural sensitivity and building cross-cultural relationships.

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Students' Narratives of School 'Failure'

When I sat down to interview students individually, I always started by saying: 'So tell me how you ended up coming to BCHS.' This prompt allowed me to access the ways that students narrated their own educational trajectories and the circumstances that brought them to BCHS. Midway through the interview I would follow up with a question about their post-high school plans, which allowed me to access their aspirations. Usually they wanted to go to college, but sometimes they hoped to find full-time work where they could earn a living wage.

Nearly all of the students I interviewed loved BCHS. While I find BCHS to be an impressive school, it is not an educational panacea. There is a selection bias at work here. Categorically, transfer school students are not a population of students who have historically continued to attend schools that they found no value in. As Fine (1991) points out, some of a school's best critics are former students who have "dropped out." I was not interviewing student enrollees who did not attend; students who were at BCHS liked it enough to show up. Further, students who agreed to be interviewed were students who had strong feelings about the school and wanted to express them. Additionally, my race, class, and gender presentation—in contrast to that of students—made me resemble school officials. 30 year old white ladies who were at BCHS were teachers, or me. This evolved over the course of the year as students got to know me, and was mediated by my tattoos, which lent me a modicum of subcultural, working class, street credibility. Still, I don't think that students who disliked the school or their teachers would have sat down and told me about it—I too closely resembled school officials, perhaps the least trusted of them. I was friendly with teachers, and the students observed that. Even still, only a handful of students declined to be interviewed.

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Students' narratives about how they got to BCHS had four main stages: They experienced an event/events that interrupted their high school education, which led them to fall behind in school, resulting in their leaving school, eventually enrolling in BCHS.

There were a range of events that interrupted students' schooling. Among these were: moving between cities, states, or countries; pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting; violence or injury; drug use; incarceration; working during school hours and other demands of work; and/or major life trauma such as death of a relative or close friend. Some students didn't have such a specific event that interrupted their schooling; these students described "getting lost in the shuffle," "falling through the cracks," or "not feeling safe at school."

Regardless of how students began to fall behind in school, noticeably lacking from all of their narratives were mentors to help them stay on track or get back on track. This is distinct from saying that parents were uninvolved or absent, although there were those too. Whether they were involved or uninvolved in their children's lives—engaged or disengaged—parents of BCHS students lacked the cultural, educational, and linguistic capital necessary to help their children navigate high school. All of the students' parents were poor, most of them were immigrants, some of them were absent, and none of them had experienced higher education, if even high school in the United States. Involved parents tended to care a lot about aspects of schooling that they could understand. For example, one parent cared a lot about the students' handwriting. The parent—a mother from St. Lucia who worked as a home health aide—did not understand the substance of homework assignments, but could tell whether or not the writing was neat.

'Kicked Out,' 'Dropped Out' or 'Pushed Out': Framing Narratives of Leaving School

In Chapter Four I argue that federal "accountability" policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race To The Top (RTT) inadvertently incentivize schools to push out students who have fallen behind. These policies punish schools with a certain percentage of students who have fallen behind, by pulling funding, or mandating (often ill-fitting) interventions in the school. If a school wants to avoid the punitive NCLB/RTT sanctions, it benefits them to get students who have fallen behind "off their books," i.e. no longer part of the evaluative accountability measurements of the school. My data indicates that students are indeed being pushed out of regular New York City high schools. Tuck (2012) argues that this push out process is a huge part of the explanation of why students who have fallen behind are leaving school. Importantly for the purposes of the present chapter, the structural analysis of the largely academic push-out narrative is not one that students had access to. For the most part—like most people—BCHS students did not have access to a critical structural analysis of their circumstances, opportunities and life chances. They had personal agency narratives about how they ended up at BCHS. For the most part, they credited their own personal deficiencies for all of their struggles with school.

It is important to consider students' access to narratives about what happens to them over their life course. The narratives that students had access to came from their parents, teachers, peers, the observation of everyday life in their communities, and popular culture. Each of these narrative sources seemed to corroborate the idea that these students were 'bad at school' because they 'cut class,' or some similar formulation. Thus, officials at their previous schools frequently recommended to students that they transfer to another school, get a GED, or drop out altogether.

The reasons that students gave to the question of how and why they left their former schools were varied, but when asked about why they stayed at BCHS, nearly all of the students talked about the care of their teachers. While a lack of care was not usually given as the

reason for leaving their former schools, they did say that care was the *reason* that they stayed at BCHS and when they talked about care at BCHS, they drew comparisons to their former schools, describing them as comparatively uncaring places.

All of the students narrated the experience of leaving their former schools in terms of having been "kicked out" or as having "dropped out." These phrases are loaded with disparate agential sources. Students who described being "kicked out" had a different affect than those who described "dropping out." "Kicked out" students felt intentionally cast away against their will by their former schools, guidance counselors or teachers. Students who described "dropping out" felt personally responsible for their "decision" to leave school. Within structural determinants there is agency, but BCHS students were dealing with so many structural circumstances that were averse to educational opportunity that the 'agency' they possessed to 'drop out' of school was being exercised in a system that was stacked against them from the start.

Students often said that they had been "kicked out" of their former schools. According to New York State law, one cannot be "kicked out" of school without first going through an involved bureaucratic process involving extensive meetings and documentation, although no student that I met was aware of this or had experienced it. When I asked participants to describe the process of being "kicked out," they would recall a teacher, social worker, college advisor, or guidance counselor suggesting that they leave school to get a GED, and a classic case of labeling would unfold. It was striking to me how deeply any discouragement (or encouragement) on the part of school officials had been internalized by students.

Students' narratives of being "kicked out"—i.e. actively discouraged from continuing to attend school—draw attention to the lack of adult support and advocacy that students had

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access to. They did not have care takers or mentors who were savvy in navigating the dominant culture and educational structure. There was no one to provide a counter-narrative to the narrative of their personal failure. On the contrary, they had parents or guardians who were either absent, poor, and/or first-generation immigrants who accepted the authority of evaluations of school officials without question.

Critical education scholars have used the phrase "push out" to refer to various processes that function to coerce young people to prematurely stop their education (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Fine, 1991; Orfield, 2006; Tuck, 2012). There are numerous factors that contribute to the push out phenomena including low expectations of students or the expectation that certain "types" of students won't finish school, namely students who don't fit the normative cultural imaginary of what a student is: white, middle class, financially secure, with stable, supportive guardians. Other factors that contribute to the push-out problem are overcrowding in schools, over-reliance on punitive measures; the ceding of disciplinary authority to law enforcement, for example metal detectors; over-emphasis on high-stakes testing; little or no mentoring or support for students; and systematic racism and inequality (Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2012).

Former Schools as Uncaring Places

Racial biases, ethnic stereotyping, cultural ethnocentrism, and personal rejections cause teachers who don't care to devalue, demean, and even fear some African American, Latino American, Native American, and Asian American students in their classrooms. These devaluations are accompanied by low or negative expectations about their intellectual abilities which have deleterious effects on student achievement.[…]

While most teachers are not blatant racists, many probably are cultural hegemonists.

When students talked about their experience of their former schools as uncaring places, they described this in five main ways: 1) Being discouraged from continuing to attend the school by a school official or school officials; 2) Teachers not caring whether or not they learned or did their work; 3) Unhelpfulness, or teachers being unwilling or unable to help them with their school work; 4) Direct, personal hostility; and 5) Teachers being too overworked and overwhelmed to care about and help students.

Several students described being discouraged from continuing high school by their guidance counselors,

> Millie*: "I was kicked out [of my former school]."*
>
> CRB*: "For what reason?"*
>
> Millie*: "I was just not doing much. The advice that I was given by my counselor is that girls like me should just drop out, because girls like me ended up having babies and being mothers."*

Another student described a guidance counselor telling her that she would be better off getting a GED:

> Seidi*: "[At my former schools] I met up with my guidance counselor a few times. He was an older gentleman. He saw that I was completely failing and basically told me that I should get a GED, that I should start looking into a GED program because it wasn't really possible for me to really graduate high school."*

Other students described teachers who did not care about their learning or whether or not they completed their work, and that it was hard for them to care about schooling when they felt like their teachers did not care about their schooling.

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Samantha*:   "The school I went to, teachers are like, 'You could sit there in my classroom all day and do whatever you want. I'm still gonna get my paycheck."*

Jeffery*:   "I thought: they don't care about me, so why should I care about my work?"*

Seidi*: "[At my former school] there wasn't anyone to connect to. So you kinda fell through the cracks, and you start to do what everyone else does, hang out in the hallways. Just hangin' out and you go to the cafeteria and do whatever, and there wasn't really anyone in the hallways telling students, 'You shouldn't be here.' There wasn't anyone really trying to stop you from whatever it is you wanted to do."*

Mandii*:   "They like to fight a lot [at my former school]. [The students] were disrespectful towards the teachers and some teachers were disrespectful towards [the students]. The teachers really weren't helping us like they should, like, guiding us. They would just give up easily, they wouldn't care, they would just say, 'I could just sit here and get paid; I don't have to teach you guys.'"*

By definition, BCHS students have struggled substantially in school but still want to earn a high school diploma. Especially when they first arrive to BCHS, they identify as "bad students" in need of a lot of help. Several students described not being able to get the help that they needed at their former schools:

Daryl*: "[At my former school] you feel more tense. [Teachers] just know that you're their student and they have to grade you and that's it. In those schools I don't feel like they're really there to help you; they're just there to do their job and that's it. There's no personal relationship."*

Tobius*:   "There wasn't really no one to help me self-discipline myself."*

Drew is currently a guidance counselor at BCHS, but he also attended BCHS as a high school student,

>Drew*: "There was no question that I was failing in school. There was no question about that. The part that I feel was unfair, was that nobody was willing to look through my tough experience, nobody was willing to go 'You can do this. You can walk away from all this [distractions from school]. You can change your life, you know?' I think that time frame--[ages] 14, 16, 17 is really rough, and there's no question that I created this image of myself [as tough and uninterested in school], but no one was willing to break through that."*

Students also described hostile teachers. A young mother described this interaction with a former teacher:

>Anelyl*: "My [former school] teachers didn't care. Most teachers were very spiteful. I remember I had an art teacher and she said to me once, 'I'm not the one who ruined your life, you are!' She was talking about my son. It really hurt my feelings."*

>Millie*: "You know, the way they spoke to us, the way they treated you, you know, it was very disrespectful."*

Other students described teachers who were overworked and overwhelmed, therefore unable to adequately attend to students' needs:

>Paul*: [At my old school] I needed help. But there were too many students for one or two teachers to help one class."*

>Walter*: "My other school was very crowded. It was hard to get help. Teachers were so overwhelmed with everybody, they didn't care."*

BCHS: A Culture of Caring

In contrast to the characterization of their former schools as uncaring places, students' characterizations of BCHS centered on the school's culture of caring. They described teachers as attentive, present, concerned, available, receptive, helpful, and demonstrative—qualities that most of the students had not found in other teachers, if other adults. They described the school environment as being one where you could ask questions and not be afraid of being made fun of. They described teachers and fellow students as family members, and wanted to do well in school because of the relationships that they developed with teachers and how much they valued those relationships; they didn't want to disappoint their teachers.

Many of the students talked about teachers' relentlessness and persistence in 'reaching' them. I observed this relentlessness and persistence on a daily basis. Not a day went by where some student somewhere in the school wasn't having a hard time. A large part of the culture at BCHS is noticing each other's suffering. A student could not put her head down on her desk, cry, slouch, refuse to do work, yell, or cut class without a teacher—or some other school official—stopping, noticing, and addressing the situation. If a teacher was facilitating a class and a student needed extra support, the teacher would find another teacher, a social worker, or the principal to talk one-on-one with the student right away. Teachers would listen to students and help them problem-solve. I got to observe a lot of these one-on-one meetings because they usually happened in the conference room at the school, which was also the room where I went to think, write field notes, and interview students. Students described this attention and care as *the reason* that they came to school. Teachers' care was emotionally reparative and supportive, but it was also instructive. Teachers described this in terms of students learning resiliency skills, new ways of thinking about things, and new coping strategies. Watching teachers interact with students

often reminded me of Maslow's (2013) hierarchy of needs, and provided evidence for his claim that feelings of safety and belonging must precede the ability to problem-solve and achieve.

Carina transferred to BCHS when she moved to New York City from a town in upstate New York where she was one of the only students of color in her classes. She described feeling alienated because of the racial and cultural difference she felt between herself and the school community. She told me that her former teachers had not bothered to learn her name, they just called her "The girl with short hair." When I asked her how the teachers at BCHS were different from her former teachers and she said, "Knowing who the person is; who the student is. They know me. They call me by my name. They don't say, 'Oh, the girl with short hair."

Students described feeling like teachers were paying attention to them as whole people and were genuinely concerned with their overall well-being.

Takira*: "I couldn't brush them off. When I walk in the door, there's security, administration, social workers. Everybody would be like, 'Takira, what's wrong? Are you okay?' If I wasn't okay, I couldn't make it to class without being stopped by several people. It's group therapy is what it is [laughs]."*

Along similar lines, another student described being paid attention to and concerned for:

Toya*: "Everybody did everything to make sure I would graduate. I couldn't go through my day with an attitude. Somebody would make me feel better."*

Students described being listened to by their teachers:

Maria*: "[The teachers at BCHS] are going to listen to you."*

Danielle*: "[The teachers at BCHS and I] speak a lot when I have a problem. Tabari [a teacher]—I could speak to him about anything—like how my day is. I could never be mad at him."*

Students also described teachers as explicitly helpful:

> Darrel*: "In a regular high school, it's just like, you're on your own. [At BCHS] they help you a lot more. You can talk to any of the teachers, and you feel like any of those teachers will actually care for you. They're going to help you out."*

> Drew*: "You know Tabari and Ellie [teachers and school deans] sort of instilled in me that...they helped me realize that I should go to college; I deserve the right to go to college. I didn't get that anywhere else, no one has said to me, 'You know, you deserve the right to go to college; you deserve a better life.' Everyone pretty much said to me, 'Dude, you really don't deserve much.' Like [the message was], 'You're a piece of crap and that's what you're going to be.'"*

Anelyl—the student who had described the art teacher at her former school that had characterized her decision to have a baby as "ruining her life"—described BCHS in this way:

> *"At BCHS they help a lot. Teachers aren't disrespectful like at my old school. They call me [on the phone to check up on me], I feel comfortable here, students are more mature, it's safe. Teachers are the main difference. Their attitude towards teaching."*

Many of the students at BCHS were parents. At BCHS, students were not shamed for being young parents and their children were framed as a motivational force instead of at odds with one's educational goals. In contrast to the 'you've ruined your life' framing, BCHS teachers used students' parent status to increase their buy in to school, by saying things like, "You have to graduate for your child." or "You want to set a good example for your child." When I interviewed students who were parents, they often spoke of their children as being a motivating force in their lives. They wanted to finish high school to set an example for their children, to be able to help their children academically in the future, to go to college for their children, and

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to secure a better job for their children.

Many students described teachers *showing* them that they cared:

Danielle*: "They show you they care even when you think you're at the lowest. They always give you something so positive."*

Denise*: "Teachers at BCHS actually show us that they care about our education."*

Rasheen*: "They showed me that they cared. They always called my house if I didn't come to school. They emailed me if I didn't finish my homework."*

Jeffery*: "[The BCHS teachers] showed that they wanted me to graduate. They wanted me to become somebody in the future. They taught me a lot.*

Walter*: "It's love. Love keeps you coming back. I haven't felt love at my other schools. A lot of people care. They want to see you succeed and are willing to work with you, help you."*

Students had experienced falling behind in school a source of shame and so the safe culture of BCHS helped them feel like they could ask for what they needed:

Denise*: "You could speak your mind without being scared. You could ask questions. [BCHS is] a place where you want to learn. [BCHS] treats everyone with respect; opposite of my old school."*

Drucilla*: "I feel like people [at BCHS] are more mature and the teachers here are more understanding. I feel very comfortable raising my hand in class. If there is something I don't understand, I raise my hand and tell them I don't understand. Unlike other schools where you are embarrassed to raise your hand because kids make jokes. And teachers won't help you, they just ignore your questions."*

Other students described the closeness they felt with their teachers as being 'like family.'

Jeffery*: [At BCHS the teachers] were more serious and more caring about students. You know how usually you call teachers by their last name? At BCHS you call teachers by their first name. They are your brothers and sisters, you feel like you've known them for a very long time."*

Ronnie*: "My teachers [at BCHS] were a big influence on me because they did not only have a teacher-student relationship [with me], but we also had an older relative and a child [type of relationship]. And they helped me. Like, they helped building me to up to be the best person that I can be. The relationships were completely different [at my former school]. It's just something about this school. It's not a transfer school; it's pretty much a school for transformation. You come in one way, and you meet these people, and they completely change your life."*

Danielle*: "They welcomed us as brothers and sisters; I felt so much unity."*

Regina*: "I absolutely love BCHS. That's my family."*

Teachers' care worked as a kind of relational strategy for getting kids to buy in to the school. Students did not want to disappoint their teachers, because they cared about what their teachers thought of them, in contrast to feeling that their teachers didn't care one way or the other like at their previous schools:

Seidi*: "[At BCHS] people set standards for you that you wouldn't set for yourself, and they expect you to live up to those standards, and I think that's really important. And they treat you like a person, they treat you like an adult, and with that you want to make sure you don't disappoint anyone."*

Denise*: "Teachers [at BCHS] care more. It makes you concentrate more*

because you feel if someone...How can I explain this?...It's like a trainer...like, you go to the gym because you want to lose weight or whatever, you have a trainer that's helping you—there to make you get fit. It motivates me to want to finish, and want to go [to school], not wanting to cut."

Michelle*: "[The teachers at BCHS] keep us very interested. They go in deeper details of everything you could think of—keeps us wanting to know more."*

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Drew is a guidance counselor at BCHS. He grew up near BCHS and originally attended the area's large, comprehensive high school. He struggled there and transferred to BCHS when BCHS was still an outreach center called Brooklyn Common Outreach (BCOC). Attending BCOC was a transformative experience for Drew, inspiring him to become a guidance counselor. Drew met his wife Millie while they both attended BCHS as high school students. They both went on to college and graduate school, earning Master's degrees in School Counseling and coming back to BCHS to be the school's two current guidance counselors, working alongside some of their former teachers. For Drew and Millie, BCHS saved their lives and they credit their experience at BCHS with making their college and graduate school opportunities possible. They both have very close, familial relationships with some of the long-term teachers at the school. Tabari [a BCHS teacher] gave Millie away at her and Drew's wedding. Millie and Drew were both so transformed by BCHS that they now work very hard to help kids who are struggling like they did as teenagers and young adults. Millie and Drew are a huge source of hope and inspiration for students because they are a living example of people who came from the neighborhood, were poor students of color, struggled in school, came to BCHS, and went on to go to college and graduate school, and are now working in a profession that they truly love.

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So many students at BCHS see the example of Millie and Drew as evidence that they too can graduate from high school, go on to college, and realize a career goal that is guided by their values and beliefs—an education- and career-path that is rarely lived out in the families, neighborhoods, and communities that BCHS students live in.

One of Drew's main missions as BCHS's guidance counselor is to get students to begin to identify as the type of people who will go to college. As part of this effort he had t-shirts made for the entire student body that said, "COLLEGE MATERIAL" across the front. It was powerful to see poor Black and Latino young people walking around with t-shirts that said "COLLEGE MATERIAL" across the front.

Teachers often used an "I've been where you are and look where I am now" type of narrative to reach students and to convince students that they were capable of achieving and progressing in school. This often fell along cultural (and racial) lines. Teachers of color grew up in varying degrees of privilege, but they would access whatever aspect of their own histories that students could relate to. They would relate to students' experiences of living in impoverished communities, having trouble at home, or being profiled by police, but then they would describe to students exactly how they went from being a poor kid living in the ghetto to a high school teacher with a respectable job and salary. The students listened. When students could relate to teachers, the lessons were not hypothetical, they were real, and they were inspiring. As student Juca said,

> *"They showed that they care about me finishing school. Especially for example Millie and Drew went [to BCHS] and graduated. They got their master's [degrees] and are doing good. They started where I started. Why can't I end up where they ended up?"*

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Ellie had been teaching at BCHS/BCOC[8] for 28 years; since 1986. Before coming to BCHS, she taught at the nearby large comprehensive school, which has since been broken up into four smaller schools. Ellie is a white woman from the Midwest. She was radicalized on issues of race, poverty, and social inequality while she attended college in the late 1960's. Since that time, she has been an activist and describes her entry into teaching as a logical next step in her anti-racist organizing. In the following quote, Ellie describes students' transition from uncaring schools to BCHS:

> Ellie*: "A lot of people—the kids—they come here and they're looking for something. You know what I mean? They have all this baggage. They have a lot of issues that they're coming with. We're not even talking about skills; we're just talking about social-emotional, like the issues at home. A lot of kids are in gangs. A lot of kids have been incarcerated. They've been turned away from school. We have kids that are push-outs because they're over-age and under-credited they're pushed out to other schools. But then unfortunately there are also transfer schools that are not taking them because they have mixed pasts. If a 17 year old doesn't have any credits, that's a risk. Is it a risk that we want to take? Yes. But they're coming here already having been turned away from other transfer schools. So our kids are unique in the sense that we take the kids nobody else will take.*

> *"We don't expect them to change overnight. There's a transition. The first year is usually the hardest for the lower-credit kids because they are kind of figuring out their role. You know, how to function in this school, because this school is really different.*

There are a lot of things to adjust to: the discipline, the instruction that we have designed, the way teachers teach the classes. They are not used to it. They are used to being devalued, they are used to cutting class, they are used to arguing and fighting.

"We take kids nobody wants and we turn them into kids going to college. The education system in this country is unfair, unequal, and debilitating. And the kids get punished for that. I have always been aware of that. I came from [teaching in] one of those schools. I feel really proud that I--and other [teachers]--make connections with kids who felt disconnected and disenfranchised. I love that. I feel really proud when I see kids transform right before our eyes. I feel really proud when even against all odds in this building; we see love between staff and students. I just feel really proud that we've created a school where kids feel safe and comfortable, and can learn and transform."

<div align="center">***</div>

As I was working on this chapter, I shared my thoughts about caring in schools with some of my colleagues, and again and again I received comments along the lines of, "But you can't make teachers care." or, "We already ask teachers to do so much, now you want them to do care work too!" or "Sure, caring teachers are ideal, but there's no way to implement that." I am sure there is truth in all of these comments, but I am also struck by how often care is conceived of as a spontaneous, individualized emotion. Certainly care can and does take this form, even in schools. "Caring is one of those things that most educators agree is important in working effectively with students, but they are hard-pressed to characterize it in actual practice, or to put a functional face on it that goes beyond feelings of empathy and emotional attachment" (Gay, 2010, p. 48). When Powell (1994) implemented Family Groups in schools, she described teacher resistance to the idea; they were afraid that students' life issues would come up and they would not know how

to deal with them.

The literature and data in this chapter show that it is possible to institutionalize care. Care is a policy issue. There are organizational structures, training materials, teacher mentorship, professional development, group facilitation styles, student-teacher ratios, ideologies, and disciplinary protocol that facilitate, develop, and support care in schools.

> "Caring…is too pivotal in shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of ethnically different students to be taken for granted or left to chance. Nor should it be assumed that constructive caring for and pedagogical responsiveness to cultural diversity will emerge naturally from the professional ethics or personal altruism of teachers. Instead, it must be deliberately cultivated. Cultural responsive caring is launched through teachers acquiring more knowledge about ethnic and cultural diversity, becoming more conscious of themselves as cultural beings and cultural actors in the process of teaching, and engaging in courageous conversations about issues fundamental to social justice in society and educational equity for ethnically diverse students. (Gay, 2010, p. 69)

Gay (2010) provides some suggestions for building caring environments:

- Provide spaces and relationships where ethnically diverse students feel recognized, respected, valued, seen and heard;

- Foster warmth, intimacy, unity, continuity, safety, and security;

- Know culturally diverse students thoroughly personally and academically;

- Cultivate a sense of kindredness and reciprocal responsibility among culturally diverse students;

- Respond to the needs of diverse students for friendship, self-esteem, autonomy, self-knowledge, social competence, personal identity, intellectual growth, and academic

achievement;

- Be academic, social, and personal confidantes, advocates, resources, and facilitators for culturally diverse students;

- Acquire knowledge of and accept responsibility for culturally diverse students that goes beyond the school day and its organizational parameters;

- Help students of color develop a critical consciousness of who they are, their values and beliefs, and what they are capable of becoming;

- Enable ethnically and culturally diverse students to be open and flexible in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and be receptive to new ideas and information;

- Build confidence, courage, courtesy, compassion, and competence among students from different ethnicities and cultural communities;

- Be academically demanding but personally supportive and encouraging;

- Allow for the active assertion of student interest and curiosity;

- Create habits of inquiry, a sense of criticalness, and a moral edit among students to care for self and others;

- Treating everyone with equal *human* worth;

- Acknowledge social, cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and individual differences among students without pejorative judgments;

- Promote cultural, communal, and political integrity and solidarity among different ethnic and cultural groups;

- Deal directly and bluntly with the vicissitudes of racism, and the unequal distribution of power and privilege among diverse groups;

- Prepare students to understand and deal realistically with social realities (what is),

along with possibilities for transformation (what can be);

- Teach ethnic, racial, and cultural knowledge, identity, and pride;

- Provide intellectually challenging and personally relevant learning experiences for socially, ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse students. (p. 51-52)

Chapter Four

"Only a slave would allow their historical oppressor to take their children."

Teachers' Perspectives on Race, Culture, Curriculum and Pedagogy

Students arrive at BCHS having internalized low academic expectations and need to be—as one teacher put it—"*rehabilitated to the education system*," in order to stay enrolled, engage with curriculum, and ultimately acquire the credits needed to graduate. At BCHS, two distinct but related parts of this "*rehabilitation*" process were a) developing what teachers called a "critical racial awareness" in students, and b) the use of culturally responsive pedagogy.

For teachers at BCHS, developing a "*critical racial awareness*" is what happens when students are able to reframe their personal academic failures as determinants of a racist, classist society. When I asked teachers *how* they accomplish this critical racial awareness, they talked about several strategies:

- choosing curriculum that explicitly addresses some of the social inequalities that the students experience, such as poverty, racial profiling, or low academic expectations
- choosing curriculum that demonstrates the academic and cultural contributions of people of color, especially Black and/or Latino people
- reframing students experiences of school failure (as well as struggle in other areas of their lives) as failures of the social systems rather than as personal failures

Teachers said that by the time students arrived at BCHS they had deeply internalized the message that they were bad at school. For them, the first step was to reframe students' previous "failures" as failures of the school system rather than failures of the students. This is not to suggest that teachers didn't also emphasize and demand personal responsibility. Rather, they

used their understandings of the impact of social inequalities on students lives to mobilize and direct students' personal responsibility.

Students frequently had experiences that impacted or interrupted their schooling and teachers used these as instructional moments. As Aaron said, "*It's not like you have to look far for examples of how these kids are the victims of gross social biases and inequalities.*" As an example, he told me about a series of racial profiling cases involving students and teachers at BCHS. In 2007—several years before I did my fieldwork at BCHS—an 18-year-old man was fatally shot by a 16-year-old man in the neighborhood where BCHS is located. Neither of these young men attended BCHS, but many of the students who attended BCHS were friends with the young man who had died from the shooting.

The wake for the man who died was held during school hours, but BCHS staff decided to allow students to attend the wake. On the day of the wake, 32 young people—including many students from BCHS—were walking from school to the subway station on their way to the wake. An undercover police officer spotted the group and—assuming they were gang members—called in several other officers. The police searched the students' backpacks and found no drugs or weapons, but did find letters that the students were carrying from both their parents and from BCHS, saying that the group of students had permission to attend the wake. The police let those who were under 16-years-old or women go, and rounded up the remaining over-age-16 young men, taking them in paddy wagons to the precinct and holding them there for 36 hours.

The incident was heavily discussed at the school in the following days and weeks because many BCHS students had been involved in the incident. On the day of the court proceedings, several BCHS teachers went to court to support their students. One of the defense attorneys told a security guard that she didn't like the way "the black guy with the dreads" (Brian) had

talked to her, telling the security guard to remove him from the court room. Brian—a BCHS teacher—is a black guy with dreads but wasn't "the black guy with dreads" that the defense attorney was talking about, but the security guard saw Brian and assumed he was the person that the defense attorney was talking about, and began to escort him out of the courtroom. As Brian was being escorted out, he remarked that he was currently being racially profiled while he was attending a court proceeding for a group of his students who had been racially profiled. Police then beat and arrested Brian.

Needless to say, these incidents had a huge impact on the teachers and students at BCHS. In the wake of these incidents, many BCHS teachers incorporated readings and discussion about racial profiling into their curriculum and classes. Aaron told me this story as a way to tell me that it's not always the case that they consciously create culturally responsive curriculum that will allow students to achieve a critical racial awareness (although they do that too), but often there are incidents that happen in the lives of students that teachers then use as an opportunity to educate students about structural inequality and the myriad ways that it affects students' lives.

Many teachers talked to me about racial profiling, saying that because it is such a permanent fixture in students' everyday lives, they come to expect it. Often it isn't until coming to BCHS that they receive a critical education about the history of institutional processes like racial profiling and develop a critical perspective. Teachers also use moments like these to teach students how to deal with police harassment in ways that will keep them most safe when these interactions do occur. As teachers exposed students to the histories of social inequality— including the persistent "achievement gap" and the socially reproductive function of schooling— I saw students' self-concept, self-esteem, and motivation transform.

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge,

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prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (pp. 31). Teachers at BCHS chose materials that students would be able to relate to. For example, in English class, students were assigned texts by Black and/Latino writers, often containing stories about teens or young adults in New York City. History classes included African and Latin history. Social Studies included learning about poverty, ghettoization, and gentrification. Teachers connected the macro-level structural critiques present in the curriculum for these courses to students actual lives, experiences, and educational trajectories. For example, Ellie—a 55-year-old White teacher with tiny stature, boundless energy, and a palpable commitment to social justice—taught a class called Race, Class and Poverty that included a unit on the history of red-lining in the neighborhood of BCHS. She required students to do projects that helped them develop a critical consciousness about how policies like red-lining affect students' personal histories and present lives. A few years back, one of Ellie's classes made a documentary by traveling around the school's neighborhood with a video camera and interviewing residents about their experiences of poverty, red-lining, and gentrification. When Ellie told me about the documentary she exclaimed, "It's so good! You have to see it! I am so proud of those students!" then she rushed me to her office where she played the VHS tape for me to watch.

Culturally relevant, socially critical curriculum was one of the ways that teachers attuned students to histories of oppression and the institutional racism and classism of schooling. In conversations with me, teachers were explicit about their goals with the curriculum: In the process of educating students and providing them with the skills that they needed to accumulate credits, pass standardized exams, and graduate high school, teachers wanted to provide students with a counter-narrative to their internalized belief that they had struggled in school because

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of trenchant personal failures, i.e. a critical racial awareness. Providing curriculum that simultaneously showed histories of educational inequalities as well as models of academically successful people of color played a central role in the teachers' theory and practice of re-engagement and retention.

"The Doormats of Capitalism": Expectations and their Effects

Brian is a Black, 42-year-old Special Education teacher who wears sweaters and khakis, with his long dreadlocks tied back. In addition to being a teacher, Brian founded a non-profit organization that hosts a Saturday School for Black children of all ages. The organization also provides training for educators, in culturally responsive pedagogies.

One afternoon, Brian and I sat in an office he shares with a colleague. The office is small: sitting in chairs facing each other, our knees almost touched. His desk was covered in stacks of papers, and students periodically cracked open the door to say, *"'Sup, Brian!"* or to reach their arm through the doorway for a fist bump. I asked Brian how he became interested in culturally responsive teaching, and he began to reflect on his own educational experiences.

Brian grew up in a white, middle-class neighborhood and went to predominantly white schools. He recalls feeling—as a young person from a black family—a tension between being black and being a student. His home culture was different from his school culture. Furthermore, he recalled teachers' perceptions of him as having an impact on his academic self-conception, self-esteem, and motivation.

> *"I went to UC Davis to play football, and I remember my first semester I was motivated and I was doing my best because I had this teacher who made me feel like I was smart. I took all of my finals and had a chance to get all B's and I ended up getting all C's,*

and I remember I was really upset, and I went into my coach's office, and all the coaches were sitting at the table, and as soon as I walked in they all gave me a standing ovation because they were happy I got all C's. And then it hit me: They think I'm stupid! I remember thinking, 'Something is being kept from [Black students]. Our potential isn't being tapped.'"

Brian's experience as a Black (former) student, of mentors' academic expectations—as linked to both motivation, as well as to low expectations, based on race or ethnicity—is echoed in the research literature. A long-standing literature on the relationship between teacher expectations and student academic performance has consistently found that high teacher expectations are correlated with positive student outcomes, and that low teacher expectations are correlated with academic difficulty (Goldenberg, 1992; Merton, 1948; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Tyler & Boelter, 2008). Further, teachers' expectations vary by students' race (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Baron, Tom, & Cooper, 1985; Dusek & Joseph, 1985; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). In her ethnographic research, Signithia Fordham found that Black students experienced prejudice on the part of their classroom instructors (1996, pp. 354). John Ogbu argues that (Black) students internalize the beliefs of their (white) mentors, about students' intelligence and ability (2003, pp. 77).

In his book, *The Trouble with Black Boys: ...And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, Pedro Noguera claims,

"The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are assumed to be at risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, and too focused on sports. Such assumptions and projections have the effect of fostering the very behaviors and attitudes we find problematic and objectionable. The trouble

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with Black boys is that most never have a chance to be thought of as potentially smart and talented or to demonstrate talents in science, music, or literature. The trouble with Black boys is that too often they are placed in schools where their needs for nurturing, support, and loving discipline are not met. Instead, they are labeled, shunned, and treated in ways that create and reinforce an inevitable cycle of failure." (2008, pp. xxi)

Brian continues, telling a story about a former BCHS student,

"One day I was driving to school and I recognized one of our students on his way to school, so I picked him up and gave him a ride. We were chatting—I don't know what we were talking about—but I guess at one point I said, 'You a smart brother!' and I don't even remember much of this, but a couple of years later he graduated, and at graduation he got up to the mic and he retold this story, saying that I was the first person who ever told him that he was smart."

A heavy moment hung between us. Brian's eyes filled with tears as he exclaimed, "How does a smart young man get to be 18 years old and no one's ever even told him?!" He wiped the tears from his face with the sleeve of his sweater saying, "I'm sorry; I get emotional."

Unfortunately many teachers have low expectations of Black and Latino students (Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera, 2011), and students internalize those low expectations (Cooper, 2000). The dominant cultural imaginary sustains a mutual exclusivity between the identities of poor Black and Latino youth, and normative visions of what a student is. When schools are not pushing these young people out (Losen, 2006; Orfield, 2006), they operate as acculturating institutions (Spring, 1997). Joel Spring (1997) shows that following desegregation, Blacks were subjected to the acculturating logic that schools had acquired throughout the waves of European immigration in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This logic requires rejecting one's home

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culture and mimicking the cultural beliefs and practices of the dominant white, middle-class (Spring, 1997).

Down the hall from Brian's office is Dave's classroom. Dave is an English teacher who comes across as a very average American white guy. In his early '40s, he's average height, has short brown hair, and wears polo shirts with blue jeans. He has boundless energy and talks a lot, and fast. Students often lovingly made fun of him by imitating his face-paced, white-accented, neurotic speech cadence. On the topic of Black and Latino students' internalization of low expectations, Dave said,

> *"So many students get taught that they're not college material, but we need to go hard to make them believe that they are college material. We have to counteract the negative messages they've gotten—implicitly or explicitly, from most people in their lives—from parents or friends or teachers. We have to create a counter-weight."*

Dave provides an example of creating a counter-weight,

> *"I do this exercise with my students at the beginning of the year. I ask them, 'What are Dominicans known for?' and they come back with all the standard stereotypes—it's always baseball or cooking. Then I say, 'No way! Dominicans are really good at writing novels! Everyone knows that!' and inevitably a Dominican kid is like, 'I have been in a Dominican family my whole life and no one has ever said that!' And then I tell them about Juno Diaz and I tell them that Juno Diaz is the best writer in America and he's Dominican and you can see their minds start to change, they start to be able to think about how people like them do things like write books. My goal is to help them find themselves in the book and the book in themselves."*

Students come to BCHS having been labeled academic failures, necessitating what Dave

called a *counter-weight*. Dave helps students to reflect on the stereotypes that they have internalized about their racial/ethnic group, and then he provides an alternative narrative about those groups, that reframes its members as readers, thinkers, writers, and producers of knowledge. Through this process, students are able to retain their racial/ethnic/cultural identities, while integrating academic components of those identities. It is well documented (Delpit, 2006; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) that curriculum in U.S. schools is Eurocentric, and that this can have an alienating effect on non-white students.

> *"Historically, people of African descent living in America have been acculturated to believe in a Eurocentric version of world events. The common thread of Eurocentrism leads one to believe that Africans were savages who had to be enslaved to be civilized. The horrors of chattel slavery are normally glossed over as if it was a time in history that did not mean too much." (Moore, 2005, pp. 757)*

During a conversation about Eurocentric curriculum, Lester—a tall, thin Black math teacher with cornrows, who wears Dockers and polo shirts said,

> *"You have students not knowing they have their own history, but knowing other peoples' history. That is very, very devastating to any human being."*

Like whites, Black and Latino students benefit when their teachers affirm rather than stigmatize their racial/ethnic/cultural identities, and when their identities are viewed as assets in learning situations (Hanley & Noblit, 2009, pp. 8).

Brian uses Black history as a way to reengage and empower students. Through his lessons, he shows students that Black people in the United States have historically been incredibly smart and have made important contributions to thought, culture and history. Sitting in his office he says to me,

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"We have so much resilience in our history. If we understood the foot of piss and shit and throw-up we were in on the three-month voyage coming here, and having to be chained to people who were dead. If we understood that 20 million didn't make it. If we understood what we've been through and how strong we've had to be. You know, Frederick Douglass has that quote—'The fact that we've endured wrongs and hardships that would have destroyed any other race, [...] ought to strengthen our faith in ourselves and our future.'[9]

"I feel like if we can let our kids know that, than we can do anything, because now the glass is half full. Kids can start to say, 'Yeah, my situation is fucked up, but shit, I got more than Denmark Vesey had, I got more than Harriet Jacobs had.'

"Malcolm didn't learn the dictionary so that he could get an A—he saw power connected to it. Fredrick Douglas didn't learn to read so that he could get an A, he saw they were trying to keep it from him. Harriet Jacobs didn't learn to read and write so that she could get an A—she needed to forge letters for freedom. We need to make education and literacy practical so that our students can say, 'Hey! This can benefit my life!'"

The schools that Brian attended reflected and rewarded white cultural traits. He described his experience in college as an experience in metaphorically losing his blackness,

"By my junior year the school had civilized me; they had successfully done what they had hoped to do. A few of my [Black] friends had been arrested and were gone and [white students and teachers in the University community] had pretty much convinced me that my home community and culture was shit; that if I could assimilate, I'd be successful, and you know, the world got better. All of a sudden I'm in Tahoe with white kids and a

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[9] Douglass, 2008, pp. 569

keg of beer. All of a sudden I'm going home and looking at my grandma with her hot

combs and I'm looking down on her: the same stuff a lot of black kids go through."

W.E.B. DuBois, used the term "double consciousness" to refer to the experience of being black in a white supremacist society; being simultaneously American and non-American (Dickson, D. & Bruce, 1992; DuBois, 1903, pp. 5). In a Fanonian reading of DuBois's "double consciousness" concept, T. Owens Moore applies the concept to Blacks in schools,

> "For both African American youth and their parents, the lack of interest in higher education may be due to both mental and cultural conflict. Mental conflict can psychologically detach the African from his or her heritage and cultural conflict can cause one to adopt the culture of the dominant society" (2005, pp. 759).

For Brian and for Moore, blackness and education become culturally coded as mutually exclusive, and this can be academically detrimental for Blacks. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (1990) argues that "lack of cultural synchronization" between white teachers and Black students results in teachers' lowering their expectations of Black students. Inversely, when students adopt school (read: white) norms, their educational attainment increases.

Brian's own educational experiences inspired him to become a teacher in a school that serves "at-risk" poor youth of color, so that he could be a model for students, of a positive relationship between blackness and intellect. During our conversation in his office, Brian said, *"There should not be a contradiction between being an intellectual and being black."* Brian views the culture of American schools and white culture as largely synonymous, and as a major determinant of low achievement outcomes for Black and Hispanic youth, affecting their future life chances and ability to experience social or economic mobility. For Brian, the (white) culture of schools is directly linked to persistent poverty in Black and Latino communities,

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"Here we are from Philly, Pittsburg, all these depressed communities, but nobody's teaching us how to solve our problems, so you could be in a Business Program getting an MBA, but nobody's teaching you how to use economics to build North Philly. You could be in a Political Science class, but nobody's teaching you how Marcus Garvey made billions of dollars in the '20s. Education is more about teaching us how to adjust to the system as opposed to changing it.

"These schools are toxic. These schools are destroying my community because even when they work, they don't work. Right now we have a black president, we have more [Black] PhD's and Master's degrees, but 99 percent of the people who graduate from these institutions go work for corporations that continues to perpetuate the status quo. So Condoleezza Rice got a 4.0 and went to Stanford, but that's no use to my community. I have [Black] friends that work for Goldman Sachs and spend their day burying my community. The Black middle class can leave and escape our issues. What if we owned the bodega instead of standing outside of it selling weed! Why can't we own the laundromat? We could be creating jobs for all these hustlers! I go home to my neighborhood in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, to all these Black men who are my age, who are good guys, but they're selling dope—not because they want to be thugs, but because they need to eat, and that 17 percent unemployment that Obama's saying it is, is bullshit. That's people who are on *unemployment, but people who aren't on the books in our communities—it's more like 60 or 70 percent. So my goal is to create educational institutions that teach us how to solve our problems. I don't want to be a part of creating Condoleezza Rices.*

"I think there's a reason why the one group of people who didn't come here

by choice, who don't know their names, who've had their culture stolen—there's no coincidence that they are the doormats of capitalism."

This Is What Cultural Responsiveness Looks Like

One morning at the beginning of the school year, BCHS was holding its orientation for incoming students. About 80 young people sat in desks that were strewn around the room in no particular order. Backpacks and hoodies abound. As a group, the new students presented themselves as dissenters being forced to sit in a disciplinary space. Their body language— slouching, heavy sighs, eyes rolling—communicated that they did not want to be there, but behind their front, they also maintained a kind of nervous attention and curiosity. Such is the dramaturgy of high school.

I sat at a teacher's desk in the back of the room, taking notes on a legal pad resting on my lap. One by one, teachers stood at the front of the room, presenting rules, regulations, and resources; such as how to get a free Metro Card, who to talk to about scheduling, and rules about lateness, leaving the building during school hours, and peer conflict. The school has a no-exceptions No Fighting rule. This means that if students get into a physical confrontation in school, or if they are reported and found to have been involved in a physical confrontation outside of the school, they are immediately expelled, no matter what. Because of this rule, which is elucidated and emphasized often, there are no fights. This is noteworthy, as every high school teacher in Brooklyn will say that physical fights are part and parcel of daily life. Veteran teachers often boast that there has only ever been one fight in the school; it is rated as one of the safest schools in the city. My observations lead me to suspect that this hard-and-fast No Fighting rule has resulted in increased uses of verbal communication among students. There are plenty of

daily peer conflicts at the school—many of them quite heated, loudly projected with profanities—but students refrain from physical violence.

I was struck as Reginald—a 41-year-old Black teacher—explained why students are not allowed to display gang regalia while at school:

"The reason that you are not allowed to flash colors or wear beads is because at this school we have mad respect for all gang affiliations. We don't want you representing while you're in school. It might make the other gangs feel left out! And that would be in opposition to our school's culture and values. …You wanna rep something in this building? Rep excellence."

The students (and I) laughed in disbelief. There was a certain tongue-in-cheekiness to Reginald's delivery, but it got the rule across, while acknowledging, even respecting, that some students are indeed in gangs. The teacher spoke in such a calm, unintimidated manner that seemed to have the effect of symbolically disempowering the subversiveness of gang membership. Teachers at BCHS understand that students join gangs as means to acceptance, power, community, and protection. Of course they don't *want* their students to be in gangs, but they view it as a reality, produced by *structural* circumstances, that must be acknowledged and dealt with. They hope that over time, the school can, at least in part, replace some of students' natural developmental need for acceptance, power, community, and protection.

Tabari introduced himself last. Tabari is a tall, 52-year-old black man, with shoulder-length dreadlocks. He wore dress shirts with ties tucked inside sweater-vests, with baggy jeans, and loafers. In conversation, he was likely to cite Paulo Freire, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and/or Amos Wilson. A Weberian charismatic authority, Tabari possessed a commanding and inspiring presence. He had seniority at the school, having taught there for

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over 27 years. He was the Dean of the school and taught History and Social Studies courses, including classes on African American History and Latin American History. After school one afternoon, I asked Tabari to describe his upbringing,

> *"I grew up in [a predominantly Black neighborhood in] Queens. My family was predominantly poor working class. For the most part my mom was a single parent and my dad was in and out, even though he wasn't working a lot. So my mom kinda did most of the work raising the three of us. I'm the baby. I had an acute distaste for school my entire life. Hated it. Was bad at it. I told my mother at one point when I was young that I refused to go to the next grade level. I was just bad; suspensions, fights, alcohol, weed, selling weed, acting stupid, you name it."*

When I asked Tabari how his relationship to schooling changed, he told me a story about attending his older sister's college graduation. At the graduation, Tabari was introduced to a Black, male professor who—as Tabari describes it—saw that Tabari was on the wrong path, and took Tabari under his wing. The Professor began to send Tabari books by Black scholars, such as W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Tabari began to view learning as something that could be revolutionary.

> *"[The professor and I] developed this long relationship and I kind of fell in love with the idea of knowledge, but knowledge has a revolutionary act, not just how to go make money and stuff like that. But how, you know, information can be used to free people."*

At orientation, Tabari stood up in front of the room, took a yard-length ruler that was resting in the chalk trough at the bottom of the blackboard behind him, and paced back and forth in front of the room, holding one end of the ruler in his right hand, tapping the other end in his left palm. He let a long moment of silence fill the room. After a noticeable crescendo of quiet, Tabari

boomed,

"I want everyone to close their eyes! I'm serious! Everyone! Close your eyes! I'm going

to say something and I want you to close your eyes and picture what I am saying to you!"

He waited as students looked around at each other, finally acquiescing to close their eyes. Tabari

let a few more moments pass, and then yelled,

"NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA!!!

NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA! NIGGA!!! Now,

Open your eyes!

What did you see?

Did you see a doctor?

Did you see a lawyer?

Did you see your mother?

You might'a seen your father.

And this is why we don't say nigga in this school!"

Tabari went on to deliver a brilliant, moving lesson about the common use of "nigga" to address

peers in communities of color. Tabari's take-home was this: You might think that saying "nigga"

is harmless. You might use it to refer to your friends. Your friends might use it to refer to you.

One might identify their self and their friends as "niggas," but as illustrated by the initial

exercise, when asked to picture a "nigga," one does not typically picture an educated or

respected person. "*I am asking you to respect each other,*" Tabari said, "*and that is why at this*

school, we call each other brothers and we call each other sisters." Brian chimed in saying,

"If you speak in those terms, you live in those terms. If I call you brother or sister, it

means something. It's easy for a nigga to kill a nigga, but it's hard for a brother to

kill a brother.”

Tabari explained to the students that language has an unconscious; that there are messages about what we think about ourselves and each other contained within the language we use to refer to each other. He told the students that when communities of color refer to each other as "niggas," it is because they have internalized the views of their oppressors.

His exercise and subsequent lecture acknowledged the way students speak to each other. By saying "Nigga" himself, he normalized and disarmed the word. Tabari was not only saying, "Don't say 'Nigga.'" He was also saying, "Refer to each other as brothers and sisters." This is noteworthy because it acknowledges the need for a racially-specific mode of reference to self and other. Race matters. Tabari acknowledged that uses of "Nigga," while (as argued by Tabari) the result of the internalization of one's own oppression, also serves to signify reference to a specific community—poor people of color. By providing the "Brother" and "Sister" alternatives, he draws on older tradition of reference to self and other in the Black community, offering a more constructive (in his view) race-and-class specific referent to self and other.[10]

At the end of orientation, Ellie said to the new students,

"At this school, we are going to argue with you because we love you. You have been a victim of racist schools where people did not want to teach you or struggle with you. Here you're going to get a lot of love, respect, and responsibility. We're gonna keep you here 'til you decide you wanna be here."

I use these vignettes from student orientation as examples of cultural responsiveness. For BCHS teachers, cultural responsiveness means knowing students, respecting students, and

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[10] In this paragraph I explicitly emphasize that Tabari's position is his own, because as a white person, I do not feel comfortable making claims about what speakers mean or don't mean when they say "nigga."

acknowledging the realities of students' lives. Cultural responsiveness was central to the school's ability to retain, instruct, and graduate students. Students come to BCHS having experienced many adverse life circumstances. They are poor, Black and/or Latino, and have experienced tremendous personal, familial, and economic struggle. Additionally, they have experienced a lot of "failure" in school. By and large, the messages they have received about their academic failure—from family members, school officials, and peers—do not draw connections between their poverty and marginalization, and their performance in school; rather the opposite. Students have learned that they lack the personal strength, initiative, discipline, common sense, and self-respect necessary to do well in school. They have internalized their academic failures as personal failures. Even as they project an outward confidence about their own emotional toughness, indifference to authority, and physical strength (usually young men) or attractiveness (usually young women), they view their current academic situations (which are rightly tied in their minds to their future economic prospects and security) as the result of a long series of personal mistakes. Despite their tough exteriors, they are remarkably vulnerable young people who have so much to gain from even the smallest amounts of respect, kindness, care, and guidance.

Reginald's statement about gang regalia and Tabari's "nigga" lesson are meaningful and effective because they demonstrate that the teachers understand the students in a real way: They know what students' lives are like, and they are neither afraid of them, disgusted by them, or in denial about them. From a place of acknowledgement, acceptance, and respect, Reginald tells students that the school has a rule about gang regalia but it is not because gangs are bad and scary, or that students are bad and scary for being in gangs, but rather because displaying gang regalia undermines the school's commitment to building an inclusive community.

Tabari's pedagogy is tied to his personal experiences of having been a young Black

man in New York City and having a college professor take him under his wing. Tabari's heteronormative Black masculinity allows him to perform the "nigga" exercise. From his social standpoint, he's able to provide an incredibly provocative critique of students' uses of "nigga," while exposing them to the concept of internalized racism.

A Note on White Teachers

In addition to being a white researcher, I am also a white teacher, and I teach at a public university that serves many economically disadvantaged students of color—not unlike the students at BCHS. Even as I saw white teachers—like Dave or Aaron—successfully implement culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies, I watched in awe as Black teachers—like Brian, Tabari, Reginald, and Lester—interacted with students in ways that I never could. This concerned me because after all, the population of minority students in the United States is growing, even as the majority of teachers are white. One afternoon I shared my thought process with Brian and he looked at me in disbelief, saying in an exasperated tone,

> *"Cultural responsiveness is a skill set. It's not rocket science. McDonald's is culturally competent. Nike is culturally competent. But the education system can't do it? They could get our kids to write, but they don't want to."*

Brian explains that corporations have expertly made their products relevant to poor people of color, and that schools could take a similar approach to generate student interest in school. He argued that schooling and curriculum remain willfully ignorant about how to teach poor youth of color and that this willful ignorance reproduces the achievement gap. Then he took me to his office and gave me a book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools* by Gary R. Howard (2006). In *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, Howard—

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who is white—argues that white educators must confront their own internalized dominance, if they are ever to be of use in dismantling white dominance, which for him, is synonymous with closing the achievement gap.

Aaron is a 36-year-old white Science teacher who taught a class called Science as Cultural Action. In the course, he taught students about the Tuskegee experiments and about the history of genetic theories that used attributes like skull size and facial features to legitimate racial bias. I noticed that whenever Aaron talked about race with his students he would preface his statements by saying, "*I might demonstrate some ignorance right now.*" Aaron told me that it was important for him to acknowledge his own whiteness as a possible source of ignorance. When I asked Aaron to reflect on what it means for white teachers to be culturally responsive and he described destabilizing *white authority* while building *relational authority*,

> "*You need to have relationships with students to be effective. You also need to exert power within those relationships. I need to hold down a classroom of 25 students and do it in a way that's going to make sure that everybody can learn and do what they need to do, and I need to keep people on task. But a white man in front of 25 youth of color has built-in dynamics that we don't want, but that are given to us by our society. That's where a lot of white teachers get tripped up and that's where I've had to develop as a person and a teacher. So when I think about my relationships with my students, I think about how I can communicate to every individual, 'I see you. I know you. I care about you. I got your back. And I've got your back to the extent that I'm gonna jump in your face when I see you screwing up.' And they need to know that that's coming from me, Aaron, not me White Man. They need to think, 'This is Aaron. Aaron knows me. Aaron's watching out for me. Aaron cares about me. So when Aaron says 'Shut the hell up*

and work on this' it's because I need to do it.'"

Looking Ahead

While teachers at BCHS understand the need for students' 'critical racial awareness'—that is, students' ability to see the education system as producing uneven outcomes and the roles that the history of institutional racism and persistent poverty have played in reproducing those uneven outcomes—they also express frustration at the fact that the larger structures in which they work don't understand the *educational* utility of developing a critical racial awareness in students. Aaron reflected on this point,

> *"I can't think of anyone at the DOE who would understand the need for developing students' critical racial awareness as a foundation for their eventual academic success. I think they would think that's a lot of hippie liberal bullshit, so anything that we as a school are doing in that direction is labeled as wasteful and extraneous and distractions because they don't put any value on any of it."*

Similarly, Brian said,

> *"People don't realize that the things that are valued in the classroom by the DOE will get you killed outside. If I'm walking around crying and sharing and if I've got a book in my hand and I'm speaking with big words and I have to go outside into a world of poverty— that's not going to go well for me. As an educator I've got to teach my students how to negotiate that."*

As the non-white student population continues to grow in the United States, white teachers and education policy-makers have much to learn from BCHS. Teachers' expectations are informed by racial bias, and they exact determinant effects on student outcomes. The United States

currently has an education system that effectively reproduces race and class inequalities, year after year. Schools alone cannot redress this inequality, but the case of BCHS shows that ways of conceptualizing race, talking about race, relating to students, and reimagining curriculum play a central, positive role in retaining New York City's hardest-to-reach students—poor Black and Latino youth who have experienced persistent school "failure." These students have a right to an education: Federal, state, and local education policy, as well as individual schools and teachers, must learn how to teach them.

Chapter Five

The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions:

Effects of Government Accountability Measures on Alternative Schools

Bureaucratic systems have rules, and successful ones have ways of dealing with exceptions to rules. One would think that if special schools are set up to address the particular needs of students who have fallen off track, these schools would be evaluated using different measures than the ones used to evaluate traditional schools, where students tend to make normative progress. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. One-size-fits-all accountability metrics have been applied to our nation's schools, despite their diversity and that of their students. These metrics rely on standardized test scores in determining the success of schools, teachers and students. In addition to test scores, student academic success is measured by how quickly and efficiently students complete each grade and graduate.

In New York State, the typical pace for a high school student is, at age 15, they have finished ninth grade, earned 11 credits, and passed one Regents exam (New York State standardized examination); at age 16 they have finished 10th grade with 22 credits and passed three Regents exams; by age 17, they have finished 11th grade with 33 credits and five Regents exams; and by age 18 they have finished 12th grade with 44 credits, five Regents, and graduated. While that is the typical pace through a traditional New York high school—hard and fast "accountability" policies are based on how many students complete all graduation requirements by the end of their fourth year of high school. This is referred to as the "four year cohort." When a large proportion of a school's students fail to meet the graduation requirements by the end of their fourth year, that school becomes targeted for interventions aimed at improving the outcomes of students attending the school.

At the same time, there are alternative schools (sometimes called "continuation" or "transfer" schools) that are established to serve students that cannot or do not meet traditional progress benchmarks through school. Inevitably, if and when the normative measures for how a traditional student should progress through school, are applied to alternative school students, the data inevitably show that these students are not meeting the benchmarks.

This paper tells the story of how one alternative school in Brooklyn, New York was evaluated using measures designed for traditional schools, thus targeted for ill-fitting government sanctioned interventions, with disastrous consequences.

Alternative Schools in New York City

Alternative schools are designed to re-engage students who have fallen behind in school. There are many reasons why some students make slower-than-typical academic progress, or have dropped out of school. Some students do not respond well to traditional pedagogical methods, or rebel against authority figures. Others experience traumatic life circumstances that impact their emotional preparedness for or reactions to schooling. Still others are simply poor. Poverty is a steady predictor of academic "failure" (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Noguera, 2008; Orfield, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Ravitch 2013; Swanson, 2006).

According to the Citizens' Committee for Children of New York, in New York City one in three children lives below the poverty line. "Poverty matters. Poverty affects children's health and well-being. It affects their emotional lives and their attention spans, their attendance and their academic performance. Poverty affects their motivation and their ability to concentrate on anything other than day-to-day survival" (Ravitch, 2013, p. 93-94). In a city where at least a third of residents are poor, it is no wonder that many students fall behind in school.

Alternative schools provide second chances for students who have fallen off track. Typically these schools are small, offer flexible or extra school hours, utilize alternative pedagogical methods, and cultivate a caring, supportive school culture. According to the National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research (2011), in New York City, the 44 schools that do this work are called "transfer schools" and the 106,000 students that attend them are termed the "over-age, under-credited" population.

Becoming A School

The mission of BCHS is for students to become empowered for positive social transformation and liberation. We educate and inspire our students to positively transform themselves, their local communities and their world at large. Graduates of our school will be critical, analytical and independent thinkers. They will become lifelong learners who have an awareness of, as well as a dedication to their own cultures and the cultures of others.

-BCHS Mission Statement

Before there were transfer schools, there were outreach centers. BCHS was formerly an outreach center. Outreach centers operated similarly to the way transfer schools operate now, but they were not diploma-granting schools. Over-age, under-credited students, former dropouts, and students who were otherwise struggling in traditional high schools could attend an outreach center where they took classes and earned credits, but ultimately their diploma would be awarded by their original high school. There were only six outreach centers—one in each borough except for Brooklyn, which had two—a small number compared to the 44 transfer schools that have opened since. At the end of the 2002-2003 school year, city officials closed the outreach

centers, but gave them the opportunity to apply to become diploma-granting schools. Brooklyn Common Outreach[11] (the outreach center that became BCHS at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year), had a record of doing great work with former dropouts, so several dedicated members of the staff joined together to write a proposal to reopen the next year as a diploma-granting school. At the time of my data collection, nine of the 24 teachers at BCHS had been at the school during the Outreach-to-High-School transition. Several of these teachers have now been teaching at the school for as many as 27 years.

Becoming "Persistently Low Achieving"

In 2009, the newly appointed U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan kicked off his $4 billion Race to the Top competition, requiring states to identify the bottom five percent of Title 1 schools, to be designated "Persistently Low Achieving," qualifying them to receive School Improvement Grants (SIGs) to be used to implement federal interventions intended to promote achievement among the country's poorest students. In New York State, the "bottom" was calculated using Regents exam scores and graduation rates.

On December 9, 2010—just as I was beginning my fieldwork at BCHS—the New York State Education Department (NYSED) identified 67 schools as "persistently low achieving." 33 of these "persistently low achieving" schools were in New York City, and BCHS was one of them.

These newly identified "persistently low achieving" schools were awarded School Improvement Grants (SIGs) by the U.S. Department of Education, with funds allocated under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). School Improvement Grants were to be spent on the implementation of one of four federal school improvement models:

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[11] Pseudonym

- The "Turnaround" model required replacing the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff, and implementing new or revised instructional models.

- The "Restart" model required closing the school and restarting it under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization (CMO), or an educational management organization (EMO). The new school must admit any former student who wishes to attend.

- The "Close or Consolidate" model requires closing the school and enrolling the students who attended the school in other, higher-performing schools in the district.

- The "Transformation" model requires developing teacher and leader effectiveness; comprehensive instructional programs using student achievement data; extended learning time and the creation of community-oriented schools that provide operating flexibility and intensive support.

(U.S. Department of Education)

In identifying "persistently low achieving" schools, the New York State Department of Education calculated Regents exam scores and graduation rates using formulas that measure the progress of a four-year cohort, consistent with the expectation that four years after entering high school a student should have met all Regents requirements and graduated.

Clearly, accountability targets based on four-year cohort measurements are not consistent with the work of transfer schools. According to the BCHS data specialist[12], during the 2009-2010 school year, on average, the BCHS students counted by the New York State Education Department had come to BCHS with only 1.4 years remaining until the end of their fourth year

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[12] In New York City, every public school has a data specialist whose job it is to maintain records of the school's data; to understand various local, state and federal data reports; and to answer questions from teachers about school data.

of high school. However, these students arrived at BCHS needing on average close to three years' worth of high school credits in order to graduate. Once a student has fallen as substantially behind as many BCHS students have, it is mathematically *impossible* for any school to legitimately increase those students' achievement fast enough for them to graduate by the end of the fourth year since they began high school.

In an informational report prepared by the BCHS data specialist, he described the student population, and outlined several key reasons that using traditional accountability measures is problematic:

- Students come to BCHS with a history of failing 82 percent of the Regents exams they took at other schools, and over 60 percent of admits have not yet passed a single Regents exam.

- Once at BCHS, students pass Regents exams at triple the rate of their prior high schools.

- Students counted in BCHS's four-year cohort for Regents exam performance only attended BCHS for 35 percent of their high school experience, but BCHS is held 100 percent accountable for their exam performance.

- Applying four-year cohort measures to transfer schools holds them mathematically accountable for the academic failures of other high schools—the very failures that transfer schools are set up to address.

- Not adjusting accountability formulas for transfer schools institutes mathematically unattainable targets that set up transfer schools for inaccurate yet inevitable accountability penalties, which disrupt their efforts and disincentivize the admission of struggling students.

- Measuring student progress more accurately in ways that are aligned with the design

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of transfer schools demonstrates academic performance at transfer schools that is much higher than seen with the four-year cohort measures and *not* in the range of the State Department of Education's criteria for "persistently low achieving" identification.

When students' scores were adjusted to be more reflective of their time at BCHS (rather than the time they spent at other schools), they exceeded "Adequate Yearly Progress," (i.e. their exam scores in Math and ELA (English Language Arts) exceeded the benchmarks established by No Child Left Behind). In fact, BCHS had the fourth highest Math scores of any high school in the city.

It is impossible for transfer schools to produce target outcomes when using four-year cohort measurements, as those "outcomes" are only statistical representations of the fact that transfer schools enroll students who have fallen behind at other schools. The accountability formulas transfer the responsibility for their failure away from its actual source in the students' original high schools and turn it against the transfer schools that are set up to help. The data specialist often used an analogy when explaining the illogicality of using the four-year cohort accountability metrics to evaluate transfer schools: "It's as illogical as holding hospitals accountable for a food poisoning outbreak because that is where the victims are."

Despite the fact that BCHS should have never been designated "persistently low achieving," in December of 2010, it was. This designation set off a cascade of interventions that were based on the four federal models prescribed for "persistently low achieving" schools, with dire consequences, including frustration and demoralization among the staff, outsourcing of the management of the school, and a mid-year announcement by Mayor Michael Bloomberg that he was going to close all 33 of the city's "persistently low achieving" schools, including BCHS.

One Step Forward

During the writing of this manuscript in early 2012, the New York State Department of Education submitted a "Flexibility Request" to the U.S. Department of Education that if granted, would allow states to make changes to the ways they were implementing the federal requirements under the current manifestation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (i.e. No Child Left Behind). Staff at BCHS had been working directly with members of the State Department of Education to obtain provisions that would apply directly to transfer schools. BCHS staff—in collaboration with New York City's teacher's union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT)—began a dialogue with the New York State Board of Regents and the Assistant Commissioner for Accountability at the State Department of Education. The Assistant Commissioner produced New York State's Flexibility Request and presented their case about the mis-application of the accountability measures for traditional schools to transfer schools, offering some suggestions for alternative measures. When the first draft of the Flexibility Request came out, a meeting was organized that included members of the Regents Board, members of the New York City Department of Education, and BCHS staff. During this meeting, they discussed possible metrics that could more responsibly assess transfer schools. BCHS's data specialist worked with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to issue a public comment about how to revise the Flexibility Request. He also issued his own public comment. In it, he pointed out that the current accountability system contains loopholes that allow the original sources of students' lack of academic progress to go undetected and unaddressed. This is particularly meaningful for transfer schools that are successful with

over-age, under-credited youth, because they get held accountable for the previous failures of other schools. Meanwhile, those other schools have transferred their over-age, under-credited students out, which remove those students from that school's accountability reports, rendering their own failures invisible.

The data specialist noted that the current accountability system creates disincentives for transfer schools enrolling students who are behind, likely contributing to the push-out problem where over-age, under-credited youth may be being turned away from schools that do not want to enroll them because of how the student will affect the school's data: "The design of the current accountability metrics provides inaccurate feedback and brings inapt interventions to transfer schools because it makes no distinction between student performance at the transfer school versus prior schools."

The Flexibility Request was finalized by February of 2012 and took effect over the summer, just before the 2012-2013 school year. Presently, transfer schools can no longer be targeted for interventions without individual consideration. However at the time that I was conducting my research, this was not yet the case. Additionally, Mayor Bloomberg announced plans to close all "persistently low achieving" schools—plans that are explained in more detail below.

Two Steps Back: Interventions for a "Persistently Low Achieving" School

The Race to the Top contest required states to identify its "persistently low achieving" schools. Once identified, states had to decide which of the four federal model(s) they were going to implement at their schools (Turnaround, Restart, Close/Consolidate, or Transformation). Originally, New York State decided to implement the Transformation strategy (to develop

teacher and leader effectiveness and comprehensive instructional programs using student achievement data; extend learning time and create community-oriented schools; provide operating flexibility and intensive support) and the Turnaround strategy (replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff; implement new or revised instructional model). The State Department of Education informed the failing New York City schools that they must write proposals outlining how they would spend a School Improvement Grant (funded by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) monies) over three years in implementing one of the four models. The School Improvement Grant for BCHS was two million dollars. Some schools reported receiving larger grants; some smaller.

Outsourcing School Leadership: The 'Turpo' Story

The Department of Education (DOE) quickly realized that it could not implement the Transformation or Turnaround models because of certain provisions in their contract with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), principally around the hiring and firing of teachers. As a workaround strategy, the DOE chose implement the Restart model instead (close the school and restart it under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization (CMO), or an educational management organization (EMO); must admit any former student who wishes to attend.) The DOE's interpretation of Restart required each Restart school to partner with an Education Partnership Organization (EPO)—an outside organization that would take over the management of the school from the districts, without the closing-and-reopening step. The DOE put out a call to city organizations asking for applications for the new Education Partnership Organization (EPO) role. A number of organizations applied to become EPOs. One

of those organizations was Turpo[13]. Turpo is a non-profit organization that has been working with New York City schools since 1989 and has worked with BCHS in various capacities throughout the duration of its tenure as a school.

BCHS and Turpo: a brief history.

In 2004, when Brooklyn Common Outreach was transitioning to BCHS, part of the DOE's requirements for applying to become a school was that the Outreach Centers had to partner with an organization that would help them write the proposal to open as a school. The school and the outside organization had to agree to partner for four years—the application year followed by the new school's first three years. This process was funded by Gates Foundation monies for the opening of small schools that provided between 80 and 100 thousand dollars each year for four years:

> "In 2005, Bill Gates told the nation's governors that the nation's high schools were 'obsolete' and 'broken.' At that time, he wanted to redesign the American high school by making schools smaller, with the goal that every student would be prepared to enter college. Three years later, his foundation abandoned its small-school initiative, having spent $2 billion to persuade districts to replace their comprehensive high schools with schools too small to offer a balanced curriculum." (Ravitch, 2013, pp. 39-40)

At the time, Turpo helped BCHS write the proposal to open as a school and provided school support. According to veteran teachers, during these earlier years the relationship between Turpo and BCHS was a positive one.

In 2007, the New York City Schools Chancellor, Joel Klein, restructured the way that

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[13] Pseudonym

school support worked. Schools had been organized into ten regions that facilitated school support. Klein thought this organizational structure was not working and decided that schools should have Partnership Support Organizations (PSOs)—some of these organizations were DOE-centralized and some of them were non-profit organizations outside the DOE. In the restructuring, Turpo became BCHS's Partnership Support Organization, which gave them some control over the school. Teachers at BCHS described policy changes where aspects of school leadership and management get outsourced to outside organizations, as a turn toward the privatization of public education.

In 2010, after BCHS was designated "persistently low achieving," Turpo became BCHS's Partnership Support Organization *and* its Education Partnership Organization, meaning that the organization was given almost complete managerial control over the school. Suddenly, Turpo had the power to make decisions about staffing, scheduling, curriculum and pedagogy. This change in the locus of power led to a number of ill-fitting interventions that generated much disorganization and mutual resentment between Turpo and the staff at BCHS.

A bad fit: Turpo's 'School Improvement Facilitator.'

Turpo designated a "School Improvement Facilitator" who worked most closely and directly with the school. This Facilitator was an elderly white woman, and had very authoritarian, traditional ideas about schooling. Her only teaching experience was with elementary students and she did not have an education in alternative pedagogy or experience with the over-age, under-credited, and Black and Latino student populations. It is hard to imagine a person more different from the staff and students at BCHS. One teacher described her as "*straight out of 1950.*"

The pedagogical approach of the School Improvement Facilitator was in stark contrast to the approach of the principal, teachers, and staff at BCHS, who adhere to the tenets of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP): "Culturally responsive pedagogy simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; community building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring" (Gay, p. 45). Its fundamental aim is to empower ethnically and racially diverse students through academic success, cultural affiliation, and personal efficacy (Gay, p. 127). Teachers at BCHS believe that ideal pedagogy ties racial awareness and empowerment to the ability to be academically successful.

The BCHS mascot is a black panther, several of the teachers identify as Black Panthers, and the curriculum has a heavy cultural component focusing on race and class inequality, using it as a starting point for student empowerment. For example, in English class, only books by Black and Latino authors are used. The school has historically offered classes in African American History, Latin American History, Slavery, and Race, Class and Poverty.

In addition to cultivating race and class consciousness among students, the school prides itself on being a very familial place. Teachers forge caring relationships with students and believe these relationships to be the foundation upon which students are able to (re)engage with school. Teachers and students most often cited "school culture" when asked why they thought the school was successful. When interviewees talked about culture they were always simultaneously referring to the culturally competent curriculum, which strove to be relevant to poor and working class Black and Latino students, as well as to the familial atmosphere of the school.

The School Improvement Facilitator came to the school a couple times per week. She

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and BCHS staff had similar goals; to increase attendance, raise Regents exam pass rates, and increase graduation rates. However, they had very divergent views on how to accomplish these goals. When I asked a teacher to describe the School Improvement Facilitator, he described her as "petty and power trippy," as unfamiliar with transfer schools, and as having a very traditional approach to education:

> *"I'm sure to her, what looks like some kind of informal, touchy-feely conversation between teachers and students, is wholly inappropriate at worst, and at best a distraction from instruction, not at all recognizing how that is relationship-building for setting the foundation for what needs to happen in transfer schools. Priority one for us with incoming students is to reengage, and you don't reengage through a great test, you reengage through relationships."*

Turpo removes 'bad' teachers.

When Turpo took over management of the school, one of the most disruptive things they did was remove the incoming assistant principal—I'll call him Troy[14]—who had been a teacher at the school for 11 years and had rapport with students, and respect, regard, and authority with staff.

The principal at BCHS was the founding principal, having provided leadership for the school for nine years. The acting assistant principal had been at the school for five years and was well respected, but was leaving to open a new school. There was widespread consensus among staff that Troy would take over the role of Assistant Principal the same year that Turpo took over management of the school (and I began my ethnographic research). As the school's Partnership Support Organization and Education Partnership Organization, Turpo was simultaneously unfamiliar with the day-to-day life and culture of the school *and* in charge of the school,

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[14] Pseudonym

exemplifying trending ideas in education reform that suggest that when a school's students are struggling, "experts" from outside the school community should sweep in to fix its problems. According to BCHS staff, Turpo did not communicate their reasons for removing Troy from the Assistant Principal position, but seemed to have someone else in mind for it. If that were the case, the plan fell through because the school year proceeded without any assistant principal at all. Troy left the school out of frustration and eventually became assistant principal at another school. A BCHS teacher described the situation like this,

"[Troy] was one of the best instructional leaders in the city, but on paper it looks like the DOE has removed another ineffective teacher. On paper it looks like they're taking out bad teachers and putting in good teachers, but they're not. They're driving effective teachers out of the building as fast as they can, but the thing is that they don't care, and I mean that, because they don't understand what's happening in the school, they don't understand what difference it makes, how invested the teachers are in the school. They don't understand the spirit of volunteerism that drives the camaraderie at the school. They see teachers as workmen working in their shop with steel and if you're good you can build a thousand cars in a minute and if you're not as good you can only build a hundred cars, and we're all dealing with the exact same raw materials and we're all working independently and therefore we can all be measured independently. It's impossible."

Turpo removes 'bad' curriculum.

Turpo also made significant changes to the curriculum, removing classes on Slavery, African American History, and Latin American History. The School Improvement Facilitator said

that those classes were extraneous and that the class schedule needed to allow more time for Regents test preparation. BCHS teachers viewed this change in the curriculum as intentional whitewashing. An English teacher described it this way,

"[Turpo] got rid of a lot of our classes, specifically Slavery, specifically social science - African History, Latin American History. They got rid of all of them. They haven't quite gotten rid of the books I teach [all by Black or Latino authors] because in English it is a little easier to hide [culturally relevant curriculum]. Just so you know, I teach short stories, poems, plays, a novel, novella, non-fiction narratives, and memoirs and the comment that I got was, 'You need to have a little bit more balance in your curriculum.' I know exactly what they meant: They meant, 'You need to teach books by white people.'"

Another teacher said,

"I can't think of anyone at Turpo who would understand the need for developing students' critical racial awareness as a foundation for their eventual academic success. I think they think it's a lot of hippie liberal bullshit. So anything that we as a school are doing in that direction is labeled as wasteful and extraneous and distractions because they don't put any value on it."

Mayor Bloomberg Threatens to Close the School

This type of neo-liberal accountability mindset has somehow become the "progressive" way to think about education amongst those who know nothing about education.

-BCHS teacher

Amidst all of this drama with Turpo, mid-way through the school year, Mayor Bloomberg announced in his State of the City address on January 12, 2012 that he planned to effectively

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close the city's 33 "persistently low achieving" schools, BCHS among them.

The federal requirements for schools undergoing Transformation and Restart necessitated that the city and the teachers' union agree on a new policy for evaluating teachers. A statewide law passed in 2010 requiring all school districts to negotiate and implement new teacher evaluation systems. Federal-level education reformers put enormous pressure on states to evaluate teachers primarily with student test scores. Evaluating teachers on the basis of student test scores has been critiqued for a number of reasons, and was one of the central issues in the Chicago teachers' strike of September 2012 (which took place only eight months after Mayor Bloomberg's announcement). Education researchers have argued that students' test scores are correlated with a number of factors that have a greater impact on student achievement than a single teacher, for example: socioeconomic status and parents' education level (Ravitch b., p. 263), student health (Symons, Cinelli, James & Groff, 2009), class size (Odden, 1990), curricular materials (Schmidt et. al., 2001), the availability of specialists and tutors (Boylan, Bliss & Bonham, 1997), resources like computers and books (Attewell & Battle, 2006), home and community support (Sheldon, 2003), peer culture and sense of school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 2010), prior experience of school and teachers (Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992), and the list goes on. Diane Ravitch (2010) argues that the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration influenced federal education policy to focus on measurable results, a trend cemented with No Child Left Behind, which fueled a growing demand for test-based accountability systems and a booming testing industry. (p. 149; p. 162)

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) argued that basing teacher evaluations on student test scores would incentivize teachers to "teach to the test," cheapening curriculum and pedagogy, and would do little to help teachers improve. They also argued that any teacher

evaluations should be based upon multiple measures because more measures and more evidence produce more robust and accurate evaluations. And they requested a meaningful and substantive appeals process for educators facing negative ratings, a provision the DOE initially refused to negotiate. School Improvement Grant (SIG) monies flow from the federal government, under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), and states distribute those funds. The New York State Education Commissioner decided that the state would suspend SIG monies if the city and the union did not reach a teacher evaluation agreement by January 1, 2012. They had not yet reached an agreement eleven days later, when Mayor Bloomberg made his address.

There is one federal model—Turnaround—that does not require a teacher evaluation agreement between the city and the union. Under the Turnaround model, the school would close at the end of the school year and reopen the next day with a new name and a new mission. The state would replace the principal and 50 percent of the staff. Inherent in this model is the idea that student test scores are the result of the managerial and leadership practices of principals as well as the pedagogical and curricular practices of teachers, and thus replacing principals and teachers will improve student test scores. Instituting Turnaround would ensure that the city continued to receive the School Improvement Grants (SIGs), increasing its overall revenue.

Because Mayor Bloomberg wanted the SIG funds to continue to flow, and because the city and the UFT had not reached an agreement about teacher evaluations by the January first deadline, Mayor Bloomberg announced that he was going to apply the Turnaround model to the city's 33 "persistently low achieving" schools. Bloomberg's decision shocked and outraged educators across the city and caused pandemonium in the "persistently low achieving" schools. Principals, teachers, and staff were incensed by a policy decision that had virtually no educational motivation.

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Under this new mandate, BCHS would be closed, the founding principal would be removed, as well as half the staff. The day this announcement was made was an unusually solemn day at BCHS. Students were confused and teachers were depressed, enraged, and demoralized. After fighting to be taken off the "persistently low achieving" list and having to implement the erroneous, ill fitting, wrong-minded Turpo interventions, the school now faced closure.

Six days after Bloomberg's decision to "Turnaround" the city's 33 "persistently low achieving" schools, the staff at BCHS drafted an open letter to the Mayor. In it, they explained that BCHS's placement on the "persistently low achieving" list was oxymoronic and had interrupted the educations of some of the city's most at-risk youth. They explained,

> "BCHS is a transfer school, a second-chance high school serving students 17-21 years-old coming from unsuccessful experiences at other high schools in the city. BCHS is not a 'failing school' but one where students achieve significant academic growth. Moreover, our school succeeds with some of the most challenging students: students who have previously dropped out of high school, students who have failed all their classes for years, students with learning disabilities, students who are parents, students who have been incarcerated, students who are involved with gangs, students without parents or guardians."

They explained the flaws in the accountability measures applied to BCHS, namely that they measure the progress of a conventional four-year cohort, rendering student progress that occurs after their fourth year invisible in the eyes of the data. BCHS had Regents pass rates in math and ELA that consistently put them in the top of their peer group as measured by the NYC Progress Report. They quoted one of the DOE's *own* reports that characterized BCHS as "proficient

overall" with many "well-developed" areas. A quote from the report stated,

> "[BCHS] embraces some of the city's most over-aged and under-credited students reflecting their philosophy that all students deserve a second chance. To this end, all stakeholders are highly effective in collectively supporting the specific needs of each individual student in a safe, secure environment that students love to come to."

Further, the letter stated,

> "BCHS's placement on the ["persistently low achieving"] list is the illogical conclusion of a crude, one-size-fits all accountability system. As a transfer school, BCHS is designed to be part of the solution for struggling students in the city, but the current accountability metrics punish us for working with our students while allowing the source of their failures to go undetected. For BCHS to be gutted [in the interest of] political brinksmanship would be a tragic consequence of an accountability process gone awry."

BCHS staff described the consequences of removing the principal and half the staff as "devastating," arguing that BCHS has "a strong team of talented, highly motivated teachers." The letter also pointed out the irony of laying off half of the staff. Half of the staff of the 33 "persistently low achieving" schools would be placed into the city's reserve of teachers, the very pool of teachers that would be used in recruiting "new" teachers to the "new" schools; essentially a game of musical chairs meant to create the illusion that the city was somehow removing "bad" teachers and replacing them with "good" teachers. "Is this really your solution?" the letter asked:

> "[Mayor Bloomberg's plan to "Turnaround" the city's "persistently low achieving schools"] is a cynical blame game that will remove many good teachers, extinguish collaborative efforts and relationships among the faculty, fill the school with a bunch of new teachers, and demoralize those who remain. How is that a winning scenario for

our students?"

The letter closed with a plea for more meaningful action,

> "We acknowledge the [New York City] school system faces enormous challenges, but sacrificing teachers as simple scapegoats is not a solution. The path you are pushing our schools down will only result in more children left behind. Let's end the political games and work together on collaborative, comprehensive strategies that can truly improve the complex issues of our school system."

Mayor Bloomberg had made his announcement about the switch to Turnaround in January 2012 and The Panel for Education Policy (PEP) was to vote on these school closures three months later, in April.

Checks and balances or rubber stamp? The Panel for Education Policy.

The Panel for Education Policy (PEP) is supposed to function as a check against Mayoral power. Under the mayoral control system, the Panel replaced the old Board of Education.

> "[The Panel's] official duties, according to §2590-g of the Education Law, are to 'advise the chancellor on matters of policy affecting the welfare of the city school district and its pupils' by 'approv[ing] standards, policies, objectives and regulations proposed by the chancellor directly related to educational achievement and student performance.'"

However, eight of the 13 members of the Panel plus the Chancellor are chosen by the Mayor and can have their appointments terminated at any time (Ofer, U., Miller, J. & Cummings, M., n.d.). The remaining five members are appointed by each of the Borough Presidents.

Diane Ravitch (2010) has described the Panel as an advisory board whose advice is never sought (pp. 78). Only on one occasion did the Panel presume to disagree with the Mayor,

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over the issue of social promotion; the practice of promoting children to the next grade even if they have not mastered the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the next grade. In March 2004, when the Mayor wanted to end social promotion, some members of the Panel expressed their concern about the hasty adoption of this policy and the lack of planning to help children who were retained. On the day of the vote, the mayor fired two of his appointees and engineered the dismissal of a third, guaranteeing passage of his proposal. New York City media named that evening the "Monday Night Massacre" (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 78). *The New York Times* called his actions "an extraordinary display of unvarnished mayoral power" (quoted by Ofer, U. et al. n.d.). After the meeting, Bloomberg defended his actions, saying "Mayoral control means mayoral control, thank you very much. They are my representatives, and they are going to vote for things that I believe in" (quoted in Ravitch, 2010, pp. 78). Members of the Panel have never again voted against the Mayor (Ravitch, 2010, pp. 78). So while there was to be a "vote" by the Panel for Educational Policy on Bloomberg's "proposal" to "Turnaround" the "persistently low achieving" schools, no one expected the Panel to vote to keep the schools open.

In the following months there were a series of public hearings at each of the "persistently low achieving" schools, where members of the DOE came to the schools and listened to students, teachers, parents, and community members' thoughts and feelings on the closures, in highly energetic, emotional displays that lasted about three hours each. Teachers at BCHS thought of these public hearings as a strategy for "cooling the mark out." The hearings allowed teachers, students, parents, and community members to vent their frustration, which created the feeling of democratic participation, while having no real consequence or meaning. Meanwhile, the UFT organized demonstrations against the closures and a number of local politicians wrote letters on behalf of transfer schools, including BCHS, urging the Mayor not to close schools

based on erroneous information

BCHS speaks out against closure.

The public hearing at BCHS was held in a large auditorium. Approximately 200 teachers, students, former students, parents, and community members attended. Ellie stood up to the microphone and said,

"I've been a teacher since 1986 in [Brooklyn Common] Outreach Center, and [Brooklyn Common] High School. That's 26 years. You want data? I've got data. Nobody has asked me for our data. Nobody has talked to us. I can put a spin on some of your data. Our graduation rate is lower than you would want it because the kids who graduated after their fourth year are not counted as graduates in our school. That's number one. Number two: The way I view our graduation rate is that those are hundreds—literally hundreds of students who never would have graduated in New York City. That is our legacy. You want data? We hold two orientations per year. Every year, each student writes about experiences at their old high schools; experiences of their educational system. We have [a lot of] data as to why those schools did not work, and we have data about how unfair and unjust the educational system is in New York. You want data? We have data. Everybody in this room knows you are measuring us incorrectly."

Students spoke at the public hearing too. They talked about the positive impact BCHS had on their lives. They told stories about quitting drugs and leaving gangs. They described how caring the teachers were. Several students said they had "never been loved" before coming to BCHS. They talked about the violence in their previous schools. One student described a stabbing he witnessed in a locker room. Another student talked about being shot seven times and how his

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BCHS teachers and peers came to visit him in the hospital. Another student said that his male mentors at the school had helped him to become a better father. Another student said he read his first book at BCHS. Towards the end of the night, one student got up to the microphone and pressed his index finger against the brown skin of his cheek and said,

> *"I want you to look at this face. Because this face is the face of Bushwick. This is the face of Brownsville. This is the face of East New York. This is the face of Canarsie. We all look the same, and you don't like us because of that."*

The day of the Panel for Education Policy vote on Turnaround—April 26, 2012—BCHS got taken off the closure list at the 11th hour, under pressure from city council members, state officials, and local media. Following the powerful public hearing, the *New York Times* ran an article arguing that the school "saves lives" and that rigid accountability metrics were incapable of measuring the quality of teaching and learning at the school. City officials said they had determined after listening to public comment and reviewing performance data that BCHS and one other school did not need major changes after all (Cramer, 2012).

However, the Panel vote did move forward, bringing dozens of protesting teachers and students to the meeting, carrying signs and chanting "Shame on you!" (Cramer, 2012). After five hours of testimony and discussion, the Panel voted 8 to 4 to close 24 schools.

However, over the summer, the city and the union went to court over the closures and the state Supreme Court judge denied the Mayor's request to move forward. An arbitrator ruled in June that the city's hiring and firing decisions at the schools—key aspects of the DOE's Turnaround plan—violated the city's contract with the UFT (Cramer & Cromidas, 2012).

Conclusion

On November 13, 2013 when the most recent New York City Progress Reports came out, a former BCHS teacher who taught at the school while I was conducting my research there, wrote to me, pointing out that the historical arc of the BCHS Progress Report data illustrate a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy of education policy. In his message, he listed each year's Progress Report Grade, annotated by reminders of what policies were being implemented at different times:

> 2008-09—Progress Report Grade: B; Score: 59.7
>
> 2009-10—Progress Report Grade: B; Score: 56.3
>
> 2010-11 (BCHS put on "Persistently Low Achieving" list)—Progress Report Grade: C; Score: 55.6
>
> 2011-12 ([Turpo] and Mayor go ape shit)—Progress Report Grade: C; Score: 51.7
>
> 2012-13 (BCHS is a shell of itself after "Persistently Low Achieving" debacle)—Progress Report Grade: F; Score: 32.3[15]

He ended his message, "*Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies. Gee whiz, thanks a bundle education reformers.*"

At the end of the day, BCHS stayed open, but the Turpo interventions and the Mayor's closure threat nevertheless had a major impact on the staff, and on the ability of the school to function, creating substantial stress for students and teachers. Many BCHS staff are/were incredibly dedicated to their work, and to have that work undermined on a daily basis was demoralizing, to say the least. Teacher turnover that year was higher than average, and included several long-time staff members (including the founding principal) who found positions at other schools when closure seemed imminent. Studies have shown that teacher turnover harms student

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[15] I have slightly altered the numbers here to obscure the identity of the school.

performance, with stronger effects in schools with low-performing Black students (Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J., 2012).

Several transfer school principals told me that because of the Race to the Top mandate to identify "persistently low achieving" schools and the metrics the state used to identify them, transfer schools were forced to change their admissions policies, only accepting students they knew could graduate before the end of the fourth year since they began ninth grade. Schools could not risk admitting students that would make their accountability statistics look bad. The schools admitting the riskiest students then, were the ones targeted for closure.

BCHS's story is illustrative of the unintended consequences that federal, "data-driven," accountability policies can have on schools, particularly in large urban areas that serve poor, minority communities and over-age, under-credited students. As stated, all bureaucratic systems have rules, standard operating procedures, and routines that make their activities consistent and dependable. Yet successful systems understand that there need to be exceptions to the rules and procedures in order to deal with unique circumstances. This is the case of transfer schools. The raison d'etre for transfer schools is to have exceptional institutions for students who have manifestly failed under the expectations and routines of traditional schools.

Surely in attempting school reform, we can be intelligent enough to broaden our understandings of what accountability is and how it can be achieved, allowing for more robust data to be used in evaluating students and schools.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

As I sit down to write the conclusion to this dissertation, it is two years past when I formally completed my ethnographic fieldwork at BCHS. At the end of that school year, many teachers left the school, including Tabari, Dave, and Aaron. They had found new jobs when they thought that the closure of BCHS was imminent. Tabari joined a team of educators who were planning to open a charter school focused on educating young, poor black men, especially those coming out of Riker's. Dave went to work at another transfer school where Neil was the assistant principal. (Neil was the teacher who had been slotted to serve as BCHS's assistant principal before Turpo removed him from the position, discussed in Chapter 4). Aaron began to work freelance as a data consultant to transfer schools around the city. At BCHS he had become a specialist in understanding how federal and state accountabilities affected transfer schools specifically and he currently works advising transfer schools on how to negotiate that.

Tabari tried to recruit me to teach at the charter school that he is opening up this fall, The Nelson Mandela School for Social Justice. I did some preliminary curriculum planning with the school, but ultimately decided that I want to stay working as an academic sociologist and college professor. Tabari did successfully recruit several BCHS teachers to move to Nelson Mandela School, including Brian and Ellie.

As BCHS underwent the transformation to a more "normal" school and as Turpo stepped in to remove some of the most radical curricular, pedagogical and cultural aspects of the school, its long time central faculty left to find what they consider to be more meaningful work elsewhere. They are a dedicated network of radical teachers working in New York City and a real model of the capacity of alternative pedagogy.

I titled this dissertation *The Myth of the Unteachable* because my fieldwork has taught me that even as some policy makers, administrators and teachers continue to believe and act as though some kids just won't learn, the vast majority of those students—given the proper institutional and pedagogical supports—can and will learn and achieve. As Brain said, *"These kids are one conversation away from being gotten."* BCHS teachers talked about "getting" students, which meant getting students to buy into the culture and goals of the school and to begin to believe in themselves and the system enough to put the work in to earn credits, graduate, and go on to college and/or work.

What struck me in my interviews with these students was how they were to *not* "being gotten." When they told me the stories of their young lives, it seemed like a miracle that they ended up in a place like BCHS. They came from families where their relatives were either formally educated in countries outside of the U.S., in the global south, or were not formally educated at all. In all cases, these family members believed in the goodness of schooling, but didn't know how to help their children navigate school. Going to school requires logistical savviness, especially in New York City. It requires knowing where the best schools are and how to get your kids into them, it often involves long and complicated public transportation commutes. It involves buying supplies, remembering your schedule, writing down assignments, being able to advocate for yourself with administrators, and having enough economic and emotional security to put school first, most of the time. Strange as it seems to me, these basic academic skills are not actually taught in schools that serve economically deprived, marginalized urban youth.

I don't intend to undermine the countless schools and teachers that are doing this

work, but as Brian pointed out, at a macro, federal and state level, there is a lack of intentionality about serving this population, or rather, the intentionality is severely misguided. Educational policy is rarely based on research and often based on politicians jockeying for votes and using education to play to their constituency's ideologies in order to lock in votes. This undermines public education and ensures the social reproduction of gross racial and economic inequalities.

There is a dominant American notion that if poor people (including students) would just put their shoulder to the wheel, they could follow the rules and pull themselves out of their circumstances. Hand in hand with this ideology is the idea that poor people (and especially poor students) are just lazy. Having spent my entire life in educational institutions, and the past eight years studying them, I can say that both the teachers and the students at BCHS were some of the hardest working, most tireless individuals that I have ever met in my life, especially the students. These young people were holding down jobs, supporting multiple family members, raising children (in the case of the women), and getting their school work done. Contrary to what the neoliberalist "accountability" ideology suggests, I think it's a miracle that the students were only a couple of years behind! But this is self-selection bias, too. The fact is that most kids don't find their way to places like BCHS—there are not enough of them, and the forces of living everyday life in urban poverty are too great. We must change our cultural and pedagogical orientation to the practice of education, on a national level.

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