Street Codes in High School: School as an Educational Deterrent

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Elsewhere we have documented how conflict between adolescents in the streets shapes conflict in the schools. Here we consider the impact of street codes on the culture and environment of the schools themselves, and the effect of this culture and on the students' commitment and determination to participate in their own education. We present the high school experiences of first-generation immigrants and African American students, distinguishing between belief in education and commitment to school. In an environment characterized by ineffective control and nonengaging classes, often students are not socialized around academic values and goals. Students need to develop strategies to remain committed to education while surviving day to day in an unsafe, academically limited school environment. These processes are sometimes seen as minority "resistance" to educational norms. Instead, our data suggest that the nature of the schools in which minority students find themselves has a greater influence on sustaining or dissuading students' commitment to education than do their immigration status or cultural backgrounds.

Measuring differences in academic performance among minority students, especially those between new immigrants and American-born, has become a prominent theme in the field of urban education over the last two decades. One goal implicit in such research is to distinguish between higher- and lower-performing minorities and to link poor performance with unfavorable student attitudes and behaviors in a seemingly causal model. In this study, we seek to "bring the school back in" by measuring how students perceive and experience their school environments. We explore how new immigrant and American-born minority students in one inner-city high school negotiate their commitment to education in a troubled school environment. Interview and observational data indicate that while the teens' social identities as students compete with the "street" identities of some, the school environment draws out the latter more effectively than the former.

We posit that what is often labeled as antisocial or undisciplined behavior, as a social problem that students bring into the school, is often a response to an unsafe, "disorganized" school environment (Gottfredson, 1989; Welsh, Greene, and Jenkins,

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1999) rather than a rejection of or disinterest in pursuit of a formal education. Similarly to Flores-Gonzalez (2002), we suggest that students rehearse their social roles, whether school- or street-oriented, and choose according to the responses they get from their environments. Such choices are highly constrained. For those who choose the street orientation, it becomes their master status and determines how they are perceived and treated. "Once they have adopted this identity, it is very difficult and very unlikely that they will or can become school kids" (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002, p. 12). For those who choose the school orientation, we find that maintaining it requires a struggle against the actions of other students, but not necessarily with the assistance or encouragement of the school.

We adopt the concept of the "code of street" developed by Elijah Anderson (1999) to link street orientations to school orientations. Anderson defines the code of the street as a set of informal rules governing public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe a proper way to "be respected" and a proper way to respond if challenged, often involving threats, violence, and intimidation. This concept helps to explain why certain misbehaviors are prevalent in schools like our study site, and why the majority of students are forced to develop mechanisms to cope with those unsafe behaviors and street values. Anderson (1990, 1994, p. 82, emphasis added) describes the conflict between two value orientations among the residents of the inner city:

> These two orientations—decent and street—socially organize the community, and their coexistence has important consequences for residents, particularly for children growing up in the inner city. Above all, this environment means that even youngsters whose lives reflect mainstream values—and the majority of homes in the community do—*must* be able to handle themselves in a street oriented environment.

In some schools the conditions of the street culture permeate the boundaries of the school (Mateu-Gelabert and Lune, 2003; Sullivan, 2002), compelling students to draw on their local knowledge to protect themselves and enhance their safety, regardless of their commitment to education. Students whose value orientations are more consistent with the nominal goals of the school must respond to the environment in which they find themselves.

An understanding of the presence of street codes in the school allows us to address the issues of misbehavior and low academic performance without recourse to "resistance" as a cultural trait of students in inner-city schools. By resistance, we refer to cultural models that define student misbehavior or conflict as an indicator that a student has rejected the norms and values underlying formal education. Such models suggest that students assert values that are in some manner associated with their class or ethnic backgrounds against the values of the school in order to disrupt the school's attempts to assimilate them. While not explicitly blaming the students, the assumption of an oppositional culture still supports the perception that some groups of students, having adopted an ideological opposition to the idea of school, are simply less teachable than others, and for reasons exogenous to the schools. In contrast, we view students' commitment to academic performance and behavioral decisions as significantly influenced by the schools they attend and the reinforcements that they perceive there. We therefore examine the culture of the school, as perceived and experienced by the students, to provide a different explanation for student "misbehavior" and poor academic performance.

TABLE 1. Plans after Graduation

	Old Castle	All High Schools
4-Year College	53.4%	53.0%
2-Year College	17%	23.5%
Trade/business school	5.1%	2.6%
Employment	4.5%	10.5%
Military services	3.4%	1.7%
Other/no response	16.5%	8.7%

Source: 1993–1994 Annual School Report, New York City Board of Education.

We do not seek to refute work on the cultural backgrounds of students but to contextualize it. Specifically, we reject the implied essentialism that explains away student difficulties by labeling their culture or identities as "different," or by attributing their difficulties to a dissimilar, hence confrontational, culture that they carry into the schools. For example, the high school in which this research was conducted had a dropout rate (often attributed to student "lack of interest" or disengagement with school) of 22 percent. However, it is striking that in this same high school, the percentage of students wanting to continue on to college was slightly higher than among students citywide (see Table 1). Our question is why do so many students, despite having trouble with their schools, remain committed to their education and continue pursuing their education despite very difficult conditions. What helps them to remain "school kids," and what pressures others to become "street kids?"

STREET CODES

The concept of a code of the street does not imply that a majority of individuals are committed to the street culture. In fact, the majority of inner-city residents do not embrace the street codes, even on the streets (Anderson, 1999; Wilson, 1996). Yet, such descriptions are often used to characterize entire groups of students, particularly ethnic minorities, immigrants, and lower-class students (cf. Hamid, 1992). Nor did the majority of students observed in this study consistently draw on the norms of street behaviors in the school, if they had alternatives. However, they must govern their actions with an awareness of the codes that organize their physical environments (Mateu-Gelabert and Lune, 2003). That is, they embrace the same educational values that are typically attributed to middle class "white" culture, and they seek many of the same goals, but minority students in "inner city" neighborhoods must still accommodate the chaos and violence that define their time in school. For young students, still negotiating their value commitments, this dissonance between society's educational values and the unsettling environment in which they pursue those values may lead to apparently inconsistent or dysfunctional behaviors. In the worst cases, it may lead students to drop altogether whatever attachment to the educational process they once had. By implication, the social environment of the schools can play a considerable role in either drawing out or suppressing the students' sense of place and purpose in the educational realm.

We contrast the students' own experiences of their schooling with two approaches: Ogbu's Cultural Model and Resistance Theories (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983, 1988; McLaren, 1989; Willis, 1977). Both approaches explain the confrontational behavior that some

students exhibit toward their educational institutions as a cultural trait, reflecting differences between minority/working class student culture and the culture of the educational institutions that they attend. Although the assumptions and measures of the two cultural approaches differ on many fronts, each attempts to explain how students' responses to deficient social conditions outside the school affect behaviors and attitudes of students in the school, typically measured by poor school performance. By posing the question this way, each of the two approaches implies that the culture of the schools is a culture of learning, while certain students bring in conflicting cultural values.

CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

In his many books and articles, John Ogbu sought to explain why students of different ethnic backgrounds perform unequally in the same schools. Treating the school as a single institution that treats all groups equally, Ogbu looks for answers in the backgrounds of the students. Among his contributions to the field, Ogbu developed a Cultural Model that represents recent immigrants and native-born minorities as possessing separate cultural schema—their respective understandings of how society works and their place in that working order. This is what Ogbu calls a "folk theory of getting ahead" (Ogbu, 1992).

The new immigrant in this schema sees education as the main means of bettering oneself, of improving one's present situation. This concept has been used in support of the "model minority" thesis, often in forms intended to disparage the rest of the minorities (Tang, 1997). Castelike in comparison, longstanding minority groups develop their frame of reference in opposition to the majority group. (Ogbu dropped the term *caste* from his later work, but retained the notion that members of some minority groups perceive significant widespread barriers against their social and economic advancement. See Ogbu and Davis, 2003.) American-born minorities, according to Ogbu, often perceive themselves as victims of discrimination and as having fewer opportunities than members of the majority. Therefore, their folk theory of getting ahead does not include education as a viable alternative, since they do not expect the effort of pursuing an education to pay off. They see school as an institution serving the interests of the majority. In developing their oppositional cultural framework, they generate "alternative theories of getting ahead" in which formal education is not an element (Ogbu, 1992, 1993). Ogbu's point is not to deny that discrimination, past or present, is real, but to differentiate between groups that are more or less attitudinally prepared to overcome such problems. His insight is that the effects of both discrimination and attempts to overcome discrimination are mediated by the minorities' *expectations* of what they can realistically achieve through legitimate means.

This model has been criticized both theoretically and empirically. First, as Gould (1999) contends, while Ogbu's model presumes that African Americans possess the same natural abilities as Whites and others, it credits them little agency in finding ways to demonstrate their abilities or to avoid the cultural trap of hopelessness and helplessness. Yet, when it comes to rationally assessing their future chances and the probable returns on their invested efforts, African American students are presumed to rationally choose to achieve less. In this model, "It makes sense for them to simply 'make do' or drop out" (Gould, 1999, p. 176). The students who drop out are thus treated as representative of the mindset

of the group, while the students who succeed, or strive to succeed, are culturally deviant. All of the agency and, hence, all of the value enactment, is placed on the students who fail.

Like Ogbu's cultural model, both resistance theory and radical pedagogy theories examine the role of social and economic deprivation in the development of oppositional group norms (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1983, 1988; McLaren, 1989; Willis, 1977). Also consistent with Ogbu's work, these theories often conflate ethnic group identification, immigrant status, and working class status. Thus, working class membership entails a form of social learning to resist the dominant patterns of socialization that take place in schools. This line of reasoning is consistent with, or draws on, Bourgois' definition of street culture as "a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society" (Bourgois, 1995, p. 8). Oppositional cultural values include asserting one's identity in the face of authority, which is contrasted with the White, middle class normative values of seeking personal progress through discipline and hard work. Nonwhite students who share culturally normative values would then have to worry about being perceived as "giving in" to a dominant White culture (Fine, 1991; also McLaren, 1989).

All of these cultural models share the implicit assumption that working class and/or minority students—as a group norm—either do not accept or actively reject both schools and formal education. As Ogbu explains, students from the less normative groups primarily perceive educational opportunities in terms of dominance and opposition. "To further complicate these perceptions and interpretations, involuntary minorities . . . usually do not make a clear distinction between what they have to learn and do to enhance their school success (such as learning and using Standard English and adopting standard school behavior practices) and the cultural frame of reference of their 'oppressors,' that is, the White cultural frame of reference" (Ogbu 1990, p. 53).

Oppositional culture theories suggest first that many African Americans choose not to succeed academically, and second, that these students also harass successful Black peers for "acting White" (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). Both of these assumptions posit that students perceive education as a White cultural value. Ironically, it is oppositional culture theorists that define attitudes toward education as a racial trait while criticizing students for supposedly doing so. Although some students do use the phrase "acting White," a variety of recent studies, both quantitative (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook and Ludwig, 1997) and qualitative (Akom, 2003; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005), have raised questions concerning the underlying theoretical assumption that non-White students are thereby alienated from educational goals. Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga (2002), for example, portray competition between higher- and lower-achieving students as a racially based cultural trait. They critique the Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey study for relying on successful Black students' self-reports that they are popular, without giving equal weight to their greater likelihood than comparable White students to report being "put down" by other students. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005), however, find that all high-performing students suffer the "geek" stigma, but that the race factor tended to be exacerbated in cases where the Black students had only token representation in the advanced classes, or where the teachers and administrators themselves explicitly invoked the "acting White" hypothesis. That is, all successful students are labeled by their peers. The "comparable" White high-achievers, however, often form a larger block in a heterogeneous school than the relatively small group of Black students in the top classes. Because they stand out twice,

their achievements are given a racial interpretation. As Tyson et al. conclude, "It's not 'a black thing.'" In order to explain students' attitudes toward education, it is therefore necessary to investigate students' meaning systems in addition to their behaviors.

THE RESEARCH SITE

"This is Old Castle, Planet of no hope, disillusion and frustration"

Old Castle Guidance Counselor

This research was conducted in an inner-city school located in New York City. One of the study participants observed that the building reminded him of "an old haunted castle," hence the code name "Old Castle" High. This nearly 100 percent minority school, primarily African American (24.7 percent) and Latino (73 percent), was identified by members of the New York City Board of Education as among the 10 most difficult high schools in New York City. Collectively, these schools "had high dropout rates, they were located in poor neighborhoods and a majority of their student body led lives conditioned by poverty, joblessness, social neglect and hopelessness" (Board of Education, nd:1).

Old Castle represents the kind of underfunded, overcrowded schools to which many immigrants and many lower class minority students are relegated in the largest urban centers, referred to by Devine (1996) as "lower tier schools." Both Old Castle's dropout rate, at 22 percent, and the percentage of students who take more than 4 years to graduate, at 33 percent, are higher than average but similar to other lower-tier schools.

While Old Castle students have greater educational needs than those in other New York City high schools, they are taught by teachers who have lower-than-average educational backgrounds and experience (see Figure 1). The study site is one of the 10 most overcrowded high schools in New York City with a utilization rate of 157 percent (New York City Board of Education, 1993–1994). At the time of the research, Old Castle had 16 school safety officers on staff and 1 assistant principal whose full-time responsibility was security. The school, however, had only 10 guidance counselors and 2 librarians for 2,225 students (Old Castle High School, 1996–1997 enrollment).
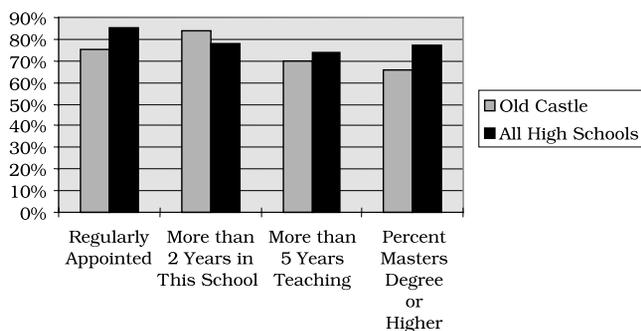

FIG. 1. Experience and educational background of Old Castle's teachers.

Source: 1993–1994 School Profile. New York City Board of Education.

DATA COLLECTION

From the fall of 1989 to the fall of 1994, the first author worked in Old Castle as tutor and research assistant in a partnership between a New York University and New York City public school system. This work was followed by a period of field observations in the school's classrooms, hallways, offices, and cafeteria throughout the spring of 1995. He observed classrooms, held informal interviews with teachers and students in both English and Spanish, and spoke with guidance counselors and other school staff. Insights gained from these observations were subsequently reflected in the formal interviews and focus groups. In this way, the students were able to not only tell their own stories but also to provide their interpretations of the fights and other conflict incidents that had occurred during the period of observations.

From a pool of students whom the author met during the first months of field-work, 12 students were selected for participation in the study: 6 new immigrants and 6 American-born. The criteria for inclusion reflected an effort to represent a wide array of variability within the groups in the sample. For the new immigrants, we included differ-ent geographic origin (Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico), different lengths of stay (recent arrivals, 3–4 years in the United States), and different English ability (fluent, very limited). For both American-born and new immigrants, we included those attending dif-ferent grades and variance in their academic ability and classroom and school attendance. The 12 students were interviewed in depth twice: once at the start of the research and once approximately a year and half later. Each of the principal students gave us further access to their own immediate social networks, though we did not formally interview the friends of the informants.

The student informants varied widely in their academic performance and their com-mitment to and perception of the high school. Among the new immigrants, three (Pablo, 12th grade, Anastasio, 12th grade, and Yanira, 10th grade) were from the Dominican Republic, as are the majority of immigrant families in the neighborhood. One (Alexis, 9th grade) was from Puerto Rico. Of the four American-born students, three (Sylvia, 12th grade, Anne, 11th grade, and Akin, 11th grade) were African American. Chanel, while born in the United States, was of Latin descent. Her parents were originally from Puerto Rico. Ten of those students (five U.S.-born, four recent immigrants, and one immigrant raised in the United States) agreed to participate in in-depth interviews, though two of them did not complete the data-collection process. Those students with the least commit-ment to school thereby also demonstrated the least commitment to research. Rather than drop them entirely, for failing to complete the second interview, we worked with them for as long as they remained in the study, providing field observations and some "con-versational" data. The other students who were not interviewed also provided occasional comments or explanations throughout the fieldwork. Our experiences with the students revealed issues in the students' lives and attitudes that would have been lost to a more strict definition of subject "participation."

Two focus groups were held: one with new immigrants and one with U.S.-born students. The focus groups were tape recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed for students' perceptions regarding safety issues and academics, and their reactions during violent events. The focus groups were designed to explore the meanings of the observed inter-actions from the students' perspectives. Students were asked about general conditions in the school, group dynamics among sets of students (or between students and faculty),

and their own experiences and goals. Students interpreted specific observed incidents for us, and described additional events in order to further educate the researchers on our topic.

Group discussions and interview data revealed a complex "reading" of the school environment by the students, and an ongoing adjustment on their educational commitment based on the school conditions, their experiences and expectations from school staff. The group discussions also provided us with the opportunity to evaluate the face validity of the various models. Notably, African American students reacted with visible surprise to the notion that school performance was equated with "acting White." Their reactions led to a number of interesting statements about the value of education, incorporated below.

Comparing responses between the two groups, we were struck by the similarities in their future aspirations, their experiences in Old Castle, and the changing attitudes and commitments toward education. Both groups of students often referred to the difficult circumstances they were facing in school as an explanation for changes in their own approaches to school. Driven by students' emphasis on the circumstances they face while attending Old Castle, we shifted our attention from cultural characteristics of "inner city students" to the students' perceptions and experiences of the school and its effect on their academic commitment.

CODE OF THE STREET IN THE SCHOOL

Student informants have suggested that there are social rules concerning violence and competition in the schools that remain outside the purview of the school's administration. One African American student, Daniel, introduced himself as a representative of the gang Zulu Nation. He explained the way he deals with the problems he and "his people" (friends and other gang members) face at Old Castle.

> The only way people understand in Old Castle is with the fist. If you don't get respect people will walk all over you, they will push you around . . . . You got to show that you are not weak.

> (Daniel, 11th grade)

Raul (10th grade, new immigrant) and Kevin (11th grade, American-born) offer no pretense of working within the rules of the school system. They know the rules but they do not take them seriously. During one day of observations, Kevin spent the first three periods running from floor to floor hiding from the security guards and entering the classrooms of his friends in order to socialize. Raul also spends much of his time in classes other than his own in order to visit friends. In one day, he disrupted three separate classes by entering and leaving as he wished. In all three cases, the teachers made initial attempts to stop him, but all of them then backed down.

Students are fearful of their safety and are subject to threats and constant intimidation. Fights are a daily event in Old Castle. They are regularly seen in the hallways. They become public events that appear to be almost a spectator sport. Students often engage in other disruptive behaviors that flout school rules, sometimes as a way to increase social interaction with their peers and sometimes as a way for those who have disengaged from the educational process to occupy themselves. Some students exhibit remarkable disdain

for the teachers and staff, ranging from simply ignoring what they are told to threatening or, in one case, punching school officials. Disruptive students are often allowed to remain in the classroom despite their total disregard for the academic process, or return to them after having been kicked out. These students frequently taunt their teachers throughout the classes, to the apparent annoyance of a majority of the class, but with occasional support from some of the others. The teachers lose their authority and their warnings of not giving a student a passing grade or issuing a "pink card," which presumes disciplinary action will be taken, are not considered serious threats. Three of our informants have been found carrying weapons or have described to us how they smuggle weapons past the metal detectors at the school entrances.

During the time of our fieldwork, Daniel demonstrated how gang rules can supercede classroom rules. Daniel and three of his friends entered a classroom while an English class was in session to get their friend Manuel. Disregarding the teacher's request not to disrupt the lesson, Daniel began to loudly explain in front of the class that somebody "had messed up" a girlfriend of one of their friends. Now Daniel and his friends were gathering during classroom time "to teach this student a lesson." Manuel left with them to retaliate. Other incidents reported to us by students and teachers included an attempted rape of one student and an assault against a teacher by another student.

The disruptive students' explanations and stories suggest that they have adjusted the degree of violence enacted in the schools as a negotiation between what they perceived was necessary and what they perceived was considered either normal or at least practicable. D described how he and his friends started "digging people's pockets."

> Like we would see a couple of kids against the wall, all right, and we would go up to him and we was like, 'yo what you have in your pockets?' And, you know, if he had money that we wanted, we would take it. And it started getting serious when, you know, the school didn't really, nobody really wanted to be like, 'well these guys did this, these guys did that, cause,' they know what happens. One evening, we approached a kid in the stairway and they threw like a hood over the kid's head and started taking his money out of his pockets. But this kid instead of, well he only had like two dollars, and instead of giving up the money easily, he decided that he wanted to fight and put up a struggle. So what my friend did, was just kick him down the steps. So after seeing that and the way that kid was, was, you know, hurt, it brought the whole digging pockets thing to a different level.

(D, 12th grade)

In this incident, the students seemed almost surprised by the amount of violence they were able to enact, and more so by the relative lack of consequences for their actions. Such incidents feed into some of the students' reading of the school as an extension of street and their role in "ruling it." D further described an event in which he and other friends, while roaming the hallways, had a violent encounter with a student. This student had closed his classroom door in D's face because the class was in session while D was trying to check if a friend was inside. D felt disrespected and called this student outside the classroom. D and his friends beat him so badly that he needed hospitalization. D's description gives the event an air of inevitability, as though he and his friends had no

choice but to assault the other student because the student had failed to give the "respect" that D and his friends would command in the street.

> So I tell him this [that they have to fight] and he looks at me and by the time he knew it, he was just catching lumps. By the time he knew it, I hit him. He fell and then when he got back up and we started fighting, somebody grabbed him from the back, slammed him into the wall. Then, you know, he caught some timberlands in his face and, . . . by the time we all got off of him, . . . it was sad. I feel sorry now that I had to do it, but you know. By the time we got off of him, his mouth was busted, his nose was busted.

> (D, 12th grade)

This ecological limbo where it is not clear whether or not the institution is in control of its own environment creates the sense that there is no authority in the school. This allows some of the students to think that "they are running the place," as some students expressed it. In D's descriptions of the beatings in the stairs and outside a classroom, for example, the issue of teacher authority was not even mentioned as a concern.

In the same fashion that the public space of the neighborhood has been taken over by street ethos, the school has increasingly lost control of its environment to those same street forms of behavior. This has forced *all* of the students to adapt and deal with the "street environment" in Old Castle while they pursue their educational careers. New immigrants and American-born students all made reference to their need to know and understand the street codes of behavior for safety purposes.

ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION VERSUS ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

American-born students from minority ethnic groups in our sample did not perceive education to be a tool of White domination. Nor did they associate educational success with commitment to White majority culture or denial of their own. Many new immigrants do operate under a dual frame of reference (Ogbu, 1993). They generally consider themselves better off in their adopted country, and often believe that any obstacles or hardships they face in the United States can be overcome. But other elements of the cultural models fail to describe these students' lives or their expectations. The American-born students, for example, are more critical of their high school experiences than are new immigrants. Contrary to what would be expected using cultural explanations, most of the American-born students in our study embrace education as a necessary and, for some, the only tool available to provide possible upward mobility. Part of the resentment or hostility that some of them expressed for the school derived from their perception that the school was not interested in educating them, that many teachers are there "just to get their pay check." The students had expected more.

While the new immigrant students tended to explain the shortcomings of Old Castle as the result of "bad students," the American-born students held the institution responsible for not responding to their needs. One student, Kevin, showed visible anger at the thought that he was being denied the opportunity to get an education because the expectations of the school were so low. "People don't care, they don't care about teaching. [Old Castle] is a fucking bootleg, bottom gray high school. They want to close it." Yet many students still

seek to participate in the culture that the school supposedly represents. For example, Akin embraced education as a means of upward mobility and was encouraged by his mother to do so.

> [My mother] says "get that high school diploma. You can't get no where without it," and I see a lot of people that couldn't go nowhere without it.

> Akin (11th grade)

In a similar vein, Anne's family felt education was important. Her oldest sister had graduated from high school, setting an example that Anne tried to follow. Her mother encouraged her to remain in school, emphasizing the importance of education as the primary determinant of future upward mobility.

> She [my mother] just tells us the same things the other parents say. Stay in school. You know you have to stay, 'cause you can't get anywhere without an education. And not just a high school education, because that is settling for less. If you want more out of life, you have to go high. You can't get afraid. Just go for the gold.

Both Chanel and Sylvia reported disillusionment with schooling while in Old Castle. Chanel's attendance had become sporadic and her grades had suffered. She considered dropping out. She was transferred to an alternative school because of poor attendance. Once in her new school, Chanel reported a renewed enthusiasm for learning and resumed her plans to attend college. Sylvia, on the other hand, had entered Old Castle excited about the prospects for her education. She remained in Old Castle until graduation, although by that time she had lost interest in further studies. Both students were leaning toward the academic path but were discouraged by their experiences in Old Castle. Chanel was able to regain her original interest in academic work only after attending the slightly more supportive environment of an alternative high school with smaller classrooms and more experienced and committed teachers in a supportive and safer environment. Sylvia, lacking these opportunities, merely passed through the system with little attachment to school, deriving little from the experience.

Both groups, immigrant and American-born, had similar "folk theories of getting ahead." Students from both backgrounds expressed a desire to attend college. Furthermore, both groups had similar academic performance measured by their GPAs (Board of Education, 1994).

All students in the sample reported having difficulties keeping their focus on education, and many related these difficulties directly to various aspects of the school itself, including the actions of faculty, administration, and other students. Both new immigrants and American-born students viewed their school environment as an impediment to their learning. The students' descriptions of their time in school indicated that most students, who were both working class and minority group members, resented the fact that educational attainment was so elusive in Old Castle. They reported a desire for more structure, greater discipline for disruptive students, and higher academic quality in their classes.

The concerns expressed by the students were not that educational attainment in general would not pay off in life, but that the education that *they* got was not worth the effort. The students wanted to participate in the normal, mainstream processes of going to school and getting an education. But they felt frustrated in their efforts. For example, Sylvia

complained that Old Castle "did not academically prepare you for anything, except for a couple of teachers who try." Sylvia, like many other students, talked about the need for stricter teachers to control the disruptive students. She wanted to see more structure and a stronger presence of authority in the school.

> They had a problem controlling kids. And you know Catholic schools run so well, 'cause they have rules. And you know the teachers are strict. Security is strict there, I guess. In Old Castle, the guards, if you get cool with them, you can basically do what you want.

> Sylvia (12th grade)

Students in the sample made a clear distinction between those who are in school for a reason and those who only disrupt. They criticized the disruptive students, describing their comportment as "it's like they're in the streets." Some students actively requested better behavior from those who disrupted the classes. Anne would often take a stance in front of her peers, asking those who were misbehaving to stop. She described her experience in an English class:

> Yeah, when I first came in to the class . . . my teacher used to put "Aim" on the board and they used to throw papers at him, things like that . . . . But the students stopped that because a lot a people would get upset with them like myself and we would tell them that it was wrong . . . . And they would get upset, but they stopped doing things like that. But they still talk in class, or scream out, or curse at the teacher. But he's a nice teacher.

New immigrants especially expressed shock at the misbehavior of some fellow students. They expressed a desire for teachers and administrators to control the disruptive behaviors. Yanira, who was born in the Dominican Republic and migrated to New York 2 years earlier, expressed her dismay about what she found while attending her new American high school in the following terms:

> One of the things that I found most difficult to deal with was that some [students] don't give education the importance it deserves. Some cut [classes], others are only concerned about their boyfriends or girlfriends. Also, some teachers don't care about education they only care about how much they're going to be paid . . . . I knew this existed but I never thought it would be with such carelessness.

What was most surprising to students in the immigrant group was the apparent capitulation of school officials to students' bad behavior, rule breaking, and disrespect toward school staff. Students could get away with behaviors that would have met with immediate repercussions in their home countries. New immigrants almost unanimously desired more severe discipline for disruptive students.

> They [teachers] should talk to the student who doesn't care about his/her education and give him/her two or three opportunities. After those opportunities if they still don't like education they should be expelled. Because all they do is waste government money, waste their time and make us ["good" students] feel bad, calling us names and bothering the teachers.

> (Immigrant student focus group)

The students complained that teachers spent so much time trying to quiet down unruly students that they did not have time to teach class. Students felt that student misbehavior is a loss for them "because they don't let you study, behaving noisily and disorderly, then those who want to learn cannot learn."

THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CODE OF THE STREET: CONTAINMENT

Teachers are not trained or supported to respond to student disruptions. One newly hired science teacher, Mr. A, learned about street codes in the school through his confrontation with Monk, a third-year Old Castle student. Monk had been arrested and placed on probation for shooting someone who had threatened his cousin. On one occasion, Monk threw Mr. A's papers and briefcase off of his desk and onto the floor and ran from the classroom. Mr. A called a security guard who wrapped his arm around Monk's back and walked him to the end of the hallway. There he let Monk walk away to cool off. ("You don't want to be on this guy's bad side," the guard explained.) Five minutes later Monk was back knocking at the classroom door. When Mr. A opened the door, Monk walked away, ignoring Mr. A and came to speak to the field researcher. He complained of his arrest, explaining that the teen whom he had shot was after his cousin for getting a girl pregnant. Asked why he was in school, Monk said, "It is part of my probation requirements."

Mr. A did not understand why Monk, who had been escorted from his class by a security guard, was back at the door disrupting his teaching. He looked to see if anyone was nearby who could help and support him, but there was no one. Mr. A expressed his outrage about what had just happened to a science teacher who passed by. The teacher replied, "You will soon get used to it," and continued on his way.

Such events are common in classrooms throughout Old Castle. Students cause commotion and leave classrooms, then return and continue harassing teachers. More often, students causing difficulties do not leave. While some teachers are better equipped to handle this type of situation, many, including new teachers, are not prepared for the disrespect and abuse they face from some students. With each incident, a room full of students misses one day's course work. With each unresolved confrontation, or each encounter in which the school's rules give way to the street behavior, the teachers and the students become accustomed to such events as part of their school routine. Faculty withdrawal from this losing battle contributes to the resocialization of future students, who are amazed at what the school expects of them as a group. Thus, the serious unaddressed disruptions of a few students reshape the educational process of the whole student body.

Teachers suffer as much as anyone from the failure of academics in the schools, and the best teachers, with seniority and options, avoid working there. For those who remain, the inability to complete a lesson, or to present it without undue interruption, means that they cannot expect even the most committed students to learn what they are teaching. This lowers the requirements for passing, increases the boredom and futility of the classroom environment, and exacerbates the dominance of the street codes. Students who try to remain engaged perceive the lessons as meaningless drills, and the class content as "too easy." When students are unable to remain interested in their work, they find other things to do, which increases the level of disruption. Even for those who do their work and avoid violence and confrontation, they can roam the halls or cut class at will and still pass. In the end, the teachers can barely teach in Old Castle, and the students can barely learn.

Lacking other resources to maintain order, teachers rely on the security guards and weapon searches to at least contain the violence. Yet none of the students indicated any sense of being on the same side as the guards or administrators against those who caused trouble. Instead, much as you find in a prison, students described the security and administrative systems as an attempt to control the students in a general sense.

STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE CODE OF THE STREET: SITUATIONAL CODE SWITCHING

Informants reported having once assumed that the school environment would be substantially different from the street, or even that the school would be a protective space off of the street. However, the failure of that assumption led them to reconsider their priorities. The impact that street codes have had on their learning environment is so substantial that they recognized the need to adjust their expectations of school in order to cope with it. Sylvia described how her experiences in school had altered her expectations about her own education and her behaviors regarding her commitment to schoolwork. She found Old Castle in such disarray that she felt the need to become "street smart."

> I was going to go to college, to be smart, like on TV. Like they move away from their parent's home, go live in a dorm, and go meet a bunch of friends, go through problems, struggle through college, and then get a good job. I thought that was going to happen. Like I said I used to live TV so, if it didn't happen on TV . . . . I was very confused. I thought it wasn't supposed to go like this, what am I supposed to do now. I wasn't street smart. I didn't know the real world.

> Sylvia (African American, 12th grade)

Attending Old Castle required that the students defend themselves using the same forms of behavior engendered by street codes. Some students talk about needing to "act bad" so that they are not constantly bothered and picked on. Pablo, who indicated that he was aware that some students steal in the school but that he would not be easily robbed, provided one example.

> It's difficult to be a good student in high school. At times the good students get in trouble because they are quiet. At times one has to act bad to gain respect, from himself and from others. Because if you don't respect yourself, they [other students] are going to play with you. You have to teach them. Here, in this high school, it's very difficult. For me, it's hard to study because most students who come here, they come to bother.

> Pablo (new immigrant, 12th grade)

The students' versatility and ability to switch from street codes to school codes is also evident in Anastasio's conscious effort to distance himself while in school from his closest friends who are more street oriented. He does so to remain fully committed to his academic work.

> It was a positive change [being more committed to his academic work]. Something that many people should do. I had friends and I told them, "We can be friends but after school . . ." This is what I do now. If in the school my friends approach me and

say "Come with us . . . just for an hour . . . let's have fun," I tell them that "I'll be right there" but I don't go. I go fast, directly to my classroom. It's a matter of keeping myself a little distant.

Anastasio (new immigrant, 12 grade)

This distancing did not prevent Anastasio from doing what he considered necessary to prevent his reputation from being damaged. On one occasion, he was attacked outside the school. In response, he and his friends picked up some baseball bats and went to look for the attackers. Asked why he did not run, he answered, "And my reputation? One's reputation is the most important thing." This engagement in street behavior did not impede him from making a clear distinction between what was happening in the street while asserting his commitment to education as a pathway to his future goal. In his schema, education is the pathway to a positive future, to becoming a professional, and the street codes represents the danger of becoming a "nobody."

If I study I am a professional. When I go to my country I will be very happy knowing that they know I am a professional here. My career is useful here [US] and there [Dominican Republic]. . . . If I put myself on a corner selling drugs . . . I am nobody.

Students came to school with a set of expectations (learning in an academic environment without having to be concerned for their safety). Yet, many found, they needed to first deal with the street behavior they found in school. Contrary to theory, these students are not dismissive of formal education. Rather, their investment and commitment is greater since school requires both academics and learning how to navigate the code of the street to remain safe while there. Given the environment in which they found themselves, the ecology of conflict in the school, students must make rational "presentation of self" decisions. Forming protective alliances with other students, standing up to threats, and even pretending not to study are all forms of behavior that can help them to stay in school, attend class, and do their work.

CONCLUSION: THE SCHOOL AS A DETERRENT TO EDUCATION

Why do so many students enter secondary schools with a belief in education and a commitment to schooling, and leave without it? One can read in the work of John Ogbu and other cultural approaches the suggestion that minority students come to recognize or expect that their achievements in school will be devalued outside of school, and so they lower their expectations. If this is at all true then we still need to ask where and how students learn this image of what the world expects of them. In many cases, it is the students' experiences in the schools that teach them that different "norms" are applied to them. Students know the school codes—the norms and values they wish the school was run by—as well as the street codes. They recognize which sets of codes are in effect in their interactions with teachers and administrators as well as with other students. Many students hope that educational attainment will free them from the poverty and codes of conduct regulated by violence that they commonly refer to as "the street." Once in school, however, they find that the school is not only ill-equipped to control the presence of street codes, but that it often does not even provide an alternative model of values or behavior.

In the students' perceptions, the school does not see them as allies in education or as victims of the disruptive environment. Instead, they are frequently treated as the source of the problem, as hopeless cases against whom the school struggles. This condition actually follows not from Ogbu's explanatory framework, but from the widespread acceptance of it. Ogbu has argued that African American students reject school because it is not part of their folk theory of success and because applying oneself in school is equivalent to acting White. A logical corollary to this argument is that few, if any, educational reforms would be successful since ultimately education would still be perceived as serving the interests of the majority group. This is a very complacent argument for those who are reticent to support an improvement of those schools that serve minority students on the grounds that "they don't care about school anyway."

There is a circular logic underlying such arguments, in which the lower achievements of some groups of students becomes evidence of their own lack of interest in education. The present study questions Ogbu's and the social resistance theorists' assumption that working class students do not welcome, and oftentimes actively reject, education. Instead, we have found that students' commitment to education changes during their school years. There are times when one is fully committed and engaged in the educational process and other times when a student shifts his or her priorities to include other interests and/or meet other needs. Students respond to the ways in which they are treated by the educational institutions they attend. This simple observation calls for the use of more fluid categories in research in this field when looking at student performance and behavior.

Educational outcomes are clearly a product of the interaction between students and school officials, incorporating the assumptions that each hold about the other. In this study we have shown that students in the most troubled schools who face consistent negative expectations do not receive much of either education or encouragement to learn. It is important to determine whether this exists in most inner-city schools. Qualifying when and how working class and minority students engage in or reject school, and determining the effect that the school environment has on a student's educational commitment, would help us to better understand the educational process in the inner city.

Despite the gloomy picture in Old Castle, there were many instances in which both teachers and students made a great deal of effort to move forward as though they were in a "normal" classroom environment. Anne liked and felt challenged by some of her classes, but referred to others as "a circus." Anastasio hardly knew how to add or subtract when he entered Old Castle, but acquired basic algebra skills by his fourth year. The school ethos is visible in many of the classrooms. But it is fragile. Under conditions where some students carry and use weapons, where classroom disruption is the norm, where threats and violence are common, the authority of teachers at times simply does not carry weight. The school's response, moving resources from education to security, may serve some purposes, but it exacerbates the sense of violence and confirms the worldview of the street gangs rather than that of the students. For those students actively engaged in street type of behavior, defeating the security guards and metal detectors becomes the only challenge they actually face in school. For the rest, being perceived and treated as threats rather than as students conveys an important lesson about survival in the "real" world.

There is evidence that, in response to these challenges, it is the school system rather than its student body that has adopted a different set of cultural values. Having grown accustomed to the idea that inner-city minority students from "socially disorganized"

neighborhoods are unteachable, and that education is an unrealistic goal for the school to set for students, the school system and many teachers have altered their goals and norms. In many cases, teachers have requested that students at least keep their notebooks open so that it might *seem* as though they were working. This adaptation was institutionalized at the start of the 1995–1996 academic year when the administration announced that there would be notebook checks at the door to ensure that all students bring pens and notebooks to school. While possibly providing the school with a way of identifying those students who were only there to cause trouble, to students, the announcement codified the idea that the school would accept a reasonable pretense of academic interest.

In such an environment, it is not primarily the lack of long-term prospects for employment and cultural integration that turns students away from education; it is the conditions of the school. There is little the school can do to retain those who have already determined not to follow the path of education, but, by crowding dozens of such students into schools working at overcapacity with relatively few teachers, little academic support or career guidance, and no clear sense of purpose, the school system in schools like Old Castle is surrendering its obligations to the majority of the students who actually want an education. Where educational outcomes differ by ethnicity in higher-performing schools, we would like to know more about the cultures and expectations of those schools.

Street behavior is not the prevailing cultural model, but it has a powerful presence that disturbs the possibility of academic work. The data presented here show that many students only enact street codes when compelled to do so as a form of protection; they also show that even those students who were not versed in street behavior were forced to learn it in Old Castle. This indicates a wide scope of situation-specific variation that is different from what would be expected if the behaviors derived from homogenous cultural traits. Misbehavior in school has many practical purposes, many of which function as a byproduct of the street codes in the school. "Resistance" to cultural dominance does not appear to be one of them. When researchers categorize destructive street codes as resistance practices, we risk romanticizing pernicious behaviors that contribute to community disorganization. Research that focuses on the students' "cultural assumptions" translates the social, economic, and political conditions that constrain their lives and their schools into artifacts of their own perceptions and "folk theories." Their problems suddenly have little or nothing to do with education policies or public priorities.

While this research leads us to suspect that differential institutional expectations in less-crowded, better-funded schools must partially explain differences in educational attainment by race there, we have not yet tested this idea. Some of the research that we critique centered on questions of test score differences by ethnicity within individual schools, which we also do not address here. Furthermore, the school in which this research took place is on the extreme low end of the spectrum of greater to lesser effectiveness, and our sample of key informants is too small even to fully represent that one school. Nonetheless, it is clear that the consistently poor performance of students in this school can be explained and predicted almost without reference to the students themselves. The environment of such schools simply does not promote, or sometimes even allow, learning. As Noguera has argued, "Cultural theories that attempt to explain the link between race and academic performance generally locate the cause of the problem within students (i.e., lack of motivation, devaluing academic pursuits, etc.) and in so doing, effectively absolve educational institutions of responsibility for finding solutions" (2001:19).

The adoption of street codes explains the presence of disruptive behavior in school without defining it as a byproduct of inner-city students' ethnicity or class. Although we found some students who fit elements of the cultural models, our data indicate that most of the students did not perceive education as being in opposition to their own beliefs and goals. Far from it. For the students in this study, behaving "street" rarely qualifies as an opportunity for personal dignity. It has little to do with resistance against racism and economic marginalization, and far more to do with navigating the web of violence that surrounds them and delimits their opportunities. Our research clearly indicates that those most harmed by the presence of the "code of the street" in school are the students themselves, a fact of which the students are well aware.

The presence of students engaging in street behavior, compounded with the administrators' inability to respond, has forced all students to adapt and deal with the "street environment" in Old Castle. New immigrants and American-born students all made reference to their need to learn and understand the street codes of behavior for safety purposes. This indicates that instead of coming to school with an opposing set of beliefs, students learn how to respond to street codes while in school. They would prefer to receive an education, but in doing so they must learn how to remain safe.

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