Through city students’ eyes: urban students’ beliefs about school’s purposes, supports and impediments

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Studying the ‘visible curriculum’ of city schools in the United States cannot begin with the assumption that students and teachers are, in fact, present in or graduating from these institutions. In the city setting in which this article’s photographic investigation took place high school dropout rates have remained at or above 50% for better than three decades. Rather than concentrating narrowly on the curriculum of what can be seen in school, the research on which this article reports began with a photographic inquiry into urban youths’ foundational perceptions of school itself, as well as the impediments and supports to school success of which these students are aware. This inquiry reveals some of the reasons behind the multi-generational community disengagement that have led to the strained relationship to schools represented by these graduation rate statistics. Grounded in critical pedagogy, ‘new literacy’ and visual sociology traditions, this study looked to visually based mechanisms for research tools with which city students are already proficient. The findings presented here suggest that not only can these tools provide previously inaccessible data on school detachment, they can also supply insights into what school means to these youth and what might support their re-engagement with these institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1 (‘Trying to be LeBron’) is a photograph of a youth who played basketball regularly at a recreation centre in the near west side city neighbourhood where Javon, a student who has participated in a photography and literacy project over the past three years, was then employed in one of his two part-time jobs. The boy

FIGURE 1. ‘Trying to be LeBron’. This picture shows that your education can take you further than a basketball. Every day I watch kids come to the recreation centre and pretend to be basketball players such as LeBron James, Carmelo Anthony and Kobe Bryant, thinking that this can be the way to riches and fame. I know, because I thought the same way. I tell them every day that school is more important than trying to be LeBron. I tell them to be yourself, and that education is the key to success instead of basketball. (Von)
pictured here was a sixth grader, and Javon – or Von as he was more commonly known – was a senior in high school who had moved past his own dreams of going straight from high school athletics to playing as a professional athlete in the National Basketball Association (NBA). In fact, Von had not played sports for his high school teams over the previous two years, due to a combination of academic, athletic and economic factors. His goals for himself and these youth now were different – things like graduating from high school, going to college, and working in one of the downtown high-rise business hubs that he could see across the industrial valley from his neighbourhood.

While Von worked and played regularly with the youth at the centre, he also tried to give them some perspective on the place of sports in their present and future lives. He did not challenge his charges’ idolization of athletic stars, but he urged them to consider the value of school and to pursue their academic responsibilities with the same verve that they were committing to hoops. But Von also had other concerns for his life and those of the young adults with whom he was then closest.

Photographed sitting at a desk in a high school classroom, Elton was, in Von’s words, one of his ‘only best friends’. The symbol he was ‘throwing’ with his hands was not, as many would suspect, a gang sign. Instead, it was a triangle, representing the trinity of himself, Von and a third friend, Marvin – who was another of the youth who had been involved with this photography/literacy project the previous several years. Von and Marvin were still in high school, still steadily pursuing that elusive diploma, and still more or less on track for entering college the next year. Von described the picture he had taken of Elton (‘Friendship’) with the following paragraph:

This is one of my only best friends besides Marvin. We always said that we were going to build a dynasty and nothing could break us up. And with the recent problems Elton is having, we try to be there for him and one another if we have a problem. So the symbol Elton is showing in this picture means a lot to us. We don’t want to lose another friend to death, streets, or jail.

Elton, on the other hand, had begun to make different choices. His attendance at school had grown erratic and he had become involved with ‘selling on Madison’ – the simple phrase these youth used to describe dealing drugs on a part-time basis, to earn a bit of extra cash, for new clothes, phones, a car, for something to do, or to help out financially at home. With good reason, Von was worried that Elton would become one of many of his friends and acquaintances whose unsanctioned ‘extracurricular’ activities would lead to his eventual dropping out of high school or, worse, to the juvenile justice system or physical harm.

Von’s images and words are examples of the types of photographs and reflections that resulted from the ‘Through Students’ Eyes’ project on which this article reports. In the pages that follow, the author details and analyzes what Von and other students – a small sample of one generation of city high school students in the United States – literally saw as school’s purposes, impediments and supports. These youths’ photographic and written responses provide insights into their relationships to school, and the findings shared here might influence city teachers’ and teacher educators’ practices, as well as policymakers’ and curriculum specialists’ thinking, as we collectively endeavour to make schools places that matter to future cycles of urban youth.

**CONTEXTS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Von’s concerns about Elton’s rejection of school and prioritizing of other activities (e.g. sports or street trades) reflect a reality with which the majority of urban high school teachers in the United States are familiar. Many city educators have heard students’ laments about the irrelevance of the texts teachers use, the assignments they require, and the very nature of the institution by which they are employed. In some settings, these students’ complaints are merely bothersome or can be dismissed as this generation’s academic rite of passage: how many of us survived high school classes in spite of teachers’ quirky personalities, mind-numbing methods or apparent lack of concern about students’ engagement with, or mastery of, the lessons they were presenting?

But in the author’s city setting and in many others around the United States, where high school dropout rates persistently register at 50% and higher, these articulated grievances are the proverbial tips of an iceberg of a troubling, multi-generational lack of school engagement (Federation for Community Planning 2003; Greene and Winters 2006). Given the embedded community relationship to school that such statistics

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represent, the author chose not to focus this study’s primary inquiry on the ‘visible curriculum’ of evidence of how students and teachers are positioned during their school activities. This would have been assuming that these city youth and community members are actually present in these school sites and available for the data of their stances to be analyzed. Rather, the author (a former city high school teacher and current urban teacher educator) chose to concentrate this investigation on students’ implicit learning about the rejection of these formal education institutions. This study’s examination of the visible curriculum of school began with the foundational question of the role of school in these students’ lives (McClung 2002). This everyday curriculum is already a programme of endemic community-wide rebuffs where each succeeding generation of youth simultaneously sees and lives, and learns and teaches about, the irrelevance of ‘school’.

Schools may be the only institution in the United States to which it is assumed that every person will at one time have a significant and constructive relationship; compulsory schooling has existed in the United States for better than 100 years and even home-schooling introduces youth to formal processes of education (Reese 2005). It is the differentiated quality of this relationship and the grand assumptions about schooling’s importance across this nation’s diversity that suggest evidence of a troubling and willful ignorance of the realities of urban students’ associations with this institution. This research endeavours to understand the reasons behind these diverging relationships, which are perhaps best illustrated by an increasing disparity in educational achievement amongst this nation’s various demographics. While this ‘achievement gap’ is well documented and researched, this article concentrates on the cumulative ‘education debt’ in which such year-by-year disparities are grounded (Ladson-Billings 2006). Without research into these relationships and this ‘debt’, it is not inconceivable that urban schooling systems in the United States will continue to groom an undereducated underclass resembling a domestic Third World populace both in terms of civic engagement and economic well-being (Lubienski 2000; Bracey 2001; Hess 2002; Cornett and Gaudelli 2003; Franciosi 2004).

Of course, no individual’s relationship to school exists in a vacuum. Educational sociologists have detailed the complexity of these affiliations (Ayon 1997, 2005; Lareau, 2003), revealing that the networks of people who influence today’s urban youth are different than what one might expect and that the ways in which these generations of city dwellers impact each others’ perceptions of school are extremely complex (Orfield 2004). Very often products of multiple cycles of teen pregnancy, urban youth are typically less than half of a traditional generation’s length apart from their parents (Fine 1990; Croninger and Lee 2001; Young 2003; Greene and Winters 2006). These students and the adults in their lives are virtually of the same generation: imagine a new, almost nonsensical answer to the age-old ‘chicken and egg’ question. As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to determine or challenge the origins of our urban communities’ disengagement from school (Dorn 1996; Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani 2001; National Center for Education Statistics 2002). With this role intensification and obfuscation (i.e. adolescents responsible for babies, grandparents providing care for multiple generations of youth, and not even middle-aged parents in charge of households filled with four generations of family), parents’ rejections of school have become almost synonymous with youths’ rebuffs of formal education, and will still be developing when these young adults begin to share this perception with their own children as they start to dismiss school.

Because these generations of community members are now interwoven and informing each new student cohort’s rejection of school, the research on which this article reports utilized a critical pedagogy framework that attempted to explore, critique and challenge these realities (Burbules and Berk 1999; McLaren 2000, 2003). This study’s methods relied on the underpinning assumption that school practices should address how to construct institutional conditions in which the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority of students is a defining feature (Giroux and McLaren 1994). As critical pedagogues, the ‘Through Students’ Eyes’ directors (one of whom is this article’s author) attempted to help students to achieve ‘critical consciousness’ and to challenge their seemingly ‘free’ choices to position themselves as schooling outsiders (Shor 1992). This project and report are both attempts at sharing students’ perspectives on schooling with an eye towards transforming the oppressive nature of current schooling practices.

**LITERACY AND VISUALLY BASED RESEARCH METHODS**

Recent analyses of high school dropouts reveal how the cross-generational nature of school disengagement has promoted an exponential increase of both ‘unschooling’ stances and aliteracy (the choice by people who can read and write not to do so) amongst urban community
members (National Center for Education Statistics 2002; Alvermann 2004; Samuelson 2004). Scholars as diverse as literacy theorists and education historians have detailed how American economic, political and education systems have pushed urban students towards this schooling indifference (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey 1997; O’Brien, Springs, and Stith 2001; Pallas 2002). No study of the state of American schools can exclude a discussion of the role of literacy development in city students’ lives and decisions to stay in or drop out of school (Alvermann 2001). Current accounts affirm that limited middle grades literacy achievement (lowest amongst minority city youth) is a key predictor of these students’ later academic frustration as well as a primary indicator of these youths’ eventual determinations to drop out of high school (Children’s Defense Fund 2005). Contemporary studies have provided particular insights into how schools’ curricular, pedagogical and assessment responses to issues of multiplicity, and these diverse populations’ low traditional literacy rates, intersect and lead to overall school disengagement (Willis 1986; Kaufman, Kwon, and Klein 2000; Education Trust Inc. 2003; Federation for Community Planning 2003; Janisch and Johnson 2003; Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman 2004). These literacy rates and current concepts of literacy played an important role in the development of the methods used in this study.

‘New literacy’ theorists have re-defined the concept of ‘literacy’ over the past two decades, broadening it to include many ‘texts’ with which American urban students (but not many urban schools) are proficient, including visual, electronic and musical forms, and community and cultural dialects and media (Au 1993; Street 1995, 2003; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Begoray 2002; Gee 2002). While few paths in the primary economy and certainly no instances of standardized curricula or assessments appreciate this reality, such notions and examples do illustrate how city youth are not illiterate but merely aliterate (New London Group 1996; Luke and Elkins 1998). They are choosing to ‘read’ numerous unsanctioned texts, even during school, including hip-hop lyrics, text messages and constant evolutions of youth vernacular (Alvermann and Hagood 2000; Gallego and Hollingsworth 2000; Gee 2000; Hull and Schulz 2002; Newkirk 2002). Such insights into urban adolescents’ literacies evoked the curricular and research tools with which this study was conducted. In addition to these concepts of literacy, the author’s use of visual methods was also supported by critical pedagogy tenets, which encourage the development of research techniques, curricular practices, and new forms of knowledge through an emphasis on breaking down traditional disciplines (Kincheloe 2004).

The broad foundations of literacy described above suggest that city students’ proficiency with visual texts and, in particular, photographic images might provide insights into youths’ relationships to school, their competencies, and the foundations for curricula and pedagogies that can promote their appreciation for formal education and the texts upon which it relies (Kist 2002, 2005). Eminent educational thinkers – from Dewey (1980) to Gallas (1991) and from Egan (1992) to Eisner (1994) – have looked to a wide array of artistic approaches for tools to achieve these most foundational goals of public school engagement and achievement (Willis and Schubert 2000). As well, picturing and understanding city students’ perceptions of school might assist in the development of new generations of effective teachers who will eventually serve innumerable urban students (Ladson-Billings 1998; Weiner 1999; Lucas and Villegas 2003; Shakespeare, Beardley, and Newton 2003). Given our urban communities’ disengagement from their educational institutions, city youth and their family members are clearly in need of such opportunities for input into the nature and practices of school (Freire and Macedo 1987; Cavin 2000).

The findings of this study affirm that visually based methods provide data that are typically not accessible via traditional, language-focused techniques (Collier and Collier 1986; Walker 1993; Becker 2001; Pole 2004; Raggl and Schratz 2004). Such images and depictions promote what Elliot Eisner has described as ‘epistemic seeing’, or the process of gaining an awareness of the larger world through the study of photographs of particular individuals, groups and situations (Eisner 1991). Research using photographs as the primary data have proven to be useful tools in helping students to share their stories of learning, using their own voices (Francis 1991; Karlsson 2001; Margolis 2004). As well, what Schratz and Loffler-Anzbock call the ‘photo evaluation’ technique has been utilized as a basis for engaging teachers and students in the deconstruction of classroom and school realities (Schratz and Steiner-Loffler 1998; Orellana 1999; Macebeath, Meurent, and Scratz 2000; Schratz and Loffler-Anzbock 2004). The evidence of these previous photography-based studies and extensive literacy research reveal the extent to which urban students are insatiable, if not critical, consumers and producers of visual texts and reluctant, if not resistant, users of traditional language-focused forms. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the visual evidence
FIGURE 2. ‘Some Day’. The picture of the wedding represents someone with a good education and a nice job, and everything is going right in their lives. It’s a place where I would like to be some day in my life. It also represents happiness and joy – something that everyone wants to have some day. People also need happiness to keep healthy. (Dashaun)

FIGURE 3. ‘A Chance to Succeed’. Some people are born with natural talent. It might be athletic or academic ability. School gives them a chance to succeed. Combining athletics and school helps students who are not cut out for school. When athletes are given a certain standard, like a 2.0 grade point average or no Fs, then they go above that standard. It’s not that all athletes are terrible students, but for the ones who have trouble in school, it kind of hangs over their heads, and it motivates them to do well in school. If school was all about grades, attendance and work, then there would be no point. Athletics gives a kid with a 2.0 GPA a chance to get out of poverty and into college. Students who achieve, whether academically or athletically, are role models. (Marvin)
of this study provides insights that cannot be garnered through survey or interview methods.

This project’s directors posited that through the use of photographic tools they might help this generation of city dwellers reveal what school means to them, and perhaps assist other community members in responding with discussions of school that would allow this institution to matter in more significant ways to this broader set of constituents (Prosser and Schwartz 1998; Mitchell, Weber, and O’Reilly-Scanlon 2005). This article reports on the results of the ‘Through Students’ Eyes’ (TSE) project begun in 2004 with approximately 30 high school and middle school students from this major Midwestern centre’s most ethnically, racially, linguistically and economically diverse neighbourhoods. The community’s primary high school serves a student population that speaks better than two dozen languages, represents almost 200 ethnicities, and houses all of the district’s ‘English as a Second Language’ programmes. Ninth graders at this city high school average below a fifth-grade reading level, and the dropout rate soars as high as 67% amongst Latina and Latino youths, the school’s largest demographic group.

Supported by several local foundation grants, the TSE project provided each participant with a 35mm ‘point and shoot’ camera and a supply of film. Following instruction in the basics of camera operation and an initial ‘photo walk’ into the school’s neighbourhood to model the ‘photo evaluation’ process, students took pictures for nearly a year (an average of eight rolls or 200 images per person) in response to the three project questions:

1) What are the purposes of school?
2) What helps you to succeed in school?
3) What gets in the way of your school success?

Students submitted their film and met every two weeks at a local photography gallery to view, discuss, select and write about their photographs. At these bi-weekly sessions, pictures were chosen by the students, by the project directors, and with the assistance of volunteer professional photographers. Pictures were identified on the basis of students’ and adults’ perceptions of the relevance of these photographs to the project questions, as well as assessments of the photographs’ quality and participants’ interests in the images. From the more than 3000 images that students shot over the project year, approximately 100 photographs were eventually selected as the best illustrations of students’ responses to the project’s guiding questions, then discussed in 1:1 and small group sessions with the project directors and other youth participants, and finally described by students in paragraph-length writings.

Relying on grounded theory analysis methods, each of the three project directors then separately content analyzed these nearly 100 photographs and writings for prevalent and outlying visual and descriptive topics and themes (Ball and Smith 1992; Silverman 1993; Walker 1993; Creswell 1998; Glaser 1998). While project participants were involved in the initial selection of these images and crafted the accompanying reflections with assistance from the project directors, students were not involved in this stage of analysis. These emergent topics and themes (and the photographs and writings related to them) were then re-considered by the directors through the lens of the project’s questions – schools’ purposes, impediments and supports – and potential implications for urban teachers’ practices. It should be noted that students’ images and writings often provide different, and occasionally even contradictory, insights; the author viewed such disparate themes as evidence of the complexity and potential of visually based methods and data. In this report, then, findings include illustrations of the most commonly appearing topics and themes. Both visual and descriptive data are used to illustrate these conclusions.

PURPOSES OF SCHOOL

In response to the first question of students’ perceptions of the purposes of school, several distinct themes emerged. As these themes reveal, participants interpreted this question both as ‘What should be the purposes of school?’ and ‘What are the purposes of school, as you are now experiencing it?’ Urban students believe that schools should enable them to live what they consider a ‘good’ life: as a result of school, they want to be successful, happy, healthy, and in meaningful relationships. Dashaun’s photograph and writing illustrate this idea (Figure 2).

As revealed in these images and texts, city youth also think that school should both prepare them for and help them attain interesting, consequential employment. Because they have seen plenty of tedium in their family members’ occupations, they do not want to be bored in their adult lives and they want to engage in jobs that are meaningful to them personally and to our larger world. Marita’s image of several women lounging, eating and smoking in an assembly plant breakroom was accompanied by her reflection:

‘Avoiding Factory Work’: I don’t want to work in a factory. I work here with my friend only
when they need help. It is a very boring job. I can’t see myself working here in the future. Watching these people get up every morning to go to work and come back from work so tired motivates me to get up every morning to go to school.

Students’ photographs and writings also depicted that they believe that school should be a place where they are honoured for who they are and what they know, rather than dismissed or pigeonholed on the basis of their previous academic records, races, classes, abilities and genders. They want their interests to be appreciated by teachers and even used to make their classes relevant to them. Marvin’s image and description exemplified this theme (Figure 3).

Numerous pictures and writings illustrated that students supposed that city schools should be the great equalizer in society and should give every youth a fair chance to explore any option. In their eyes, schools should open students up to alternatives, rather than mandate that they choose a particular option, or, worse, give students little sense of the specific choices that they believe should be available to everyone. Coupled with an image of a
Latino adolescent holding a bookbag and sitting on a bicycle on a neighbourhood sidewalk, Tabitha’s reflection spoke to this analysis theme:

‘There Are Possibilities’: This young man is an artist in the community. He is living proof that not everything is bad in our society. He is an inspiration, not only to me, but to the younger kids. He shows us that there are possibilities out there.

Edward’s photograph and description (Figure 4) suggested how city youth recognize that school is both a mechanism to attain success in their present and future lives, as well as the primary institutional support for ensuring that they stay open to any potential constructive pursuit through which they might attain this success.

IMPEDIMENTS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS

In addressing the second of the project questions, students’ photographs and reflections revealed a similarly broad range of theses. Students are painfully aware that the ubiquitous violence in their communities and lives impedes their abilities to get to, to concentrate on, and to value school. Adam’s picture of a young African American boy attempting a gang sign that’s being modelled by a partially obscured adult family member was accompanied by his explanation:

‘Family Signs’: This is a picture of my cousin, D’Angelo. He’s 11 years old and he’s in the fourth grade. He is throwing up the ‘King-Kennedy’ sign because he represents King-Kennedy. People join gangs because they want to get back at other people who jumped their friends. His mother was born at King-Kennedy. My mother was born at King-Kennedy, too. My little brother goes to school right near the King-Kennedy projects. I don’t want to join a gang because when gangs start fighting and then you have to represent your hood, then people start shooting, and then you’ll feel stupid, and then you’ll get shot, and you’ll think, ‘I shouldn’t have joined that gang.’

As Edward’s image and reflection reveal (Figure 5), these youth recognize the distractions involved in the appeal, pressure, and necessity of trying to make money, via both the primary economy (mostly franchise service jobs or the occasional family-owned business) and the street.
Via both photographs and texts, these urban students consistently identified family connections (what many of us would consider our primary set of relationships) as a void into which their needs for guidance, financial and emotional support, and basic, constructive social interactions are drawn. While they appreciate the supportive social networks that groups of friends and even gangs provide – frequently without an option to choose otherwise – they see that these associations often come with a price. They view themselves and their peers as caught in isolation, particularly at key moments of their lives (e.g. the birth of a child) when much of the rest of the world teaches them that they should have a partner in these times. As evidenced by Tabitha’s picture of a young Latina mother resting in a hospital bed with her newborn son, these young adults may not yet know how to forge such life collaborations, but they can identify the necessity and value of such relationships. She explained the significance of this image in the following paragraph:

‘Not What It Appears to Be’: Although the young lady in the picture appears to be happy, in reality she is not. What is supposed to be the happiest day of her life, the day her son was born, is probably the worst. Her mother, her father, and even the father of her baby were not there for the birth. She has no one. She’s only 19 and now has two children and can barely take care of herself. If you don’t have anybody to help you and you have to raise two children, then it will be difficult to accomplish your goals. That’s what gets in the way of education.

Their photographs and accompanying written depictions illustrated how these city students often seek to follow the models of success with which they are distantly familiar (e.g. sports stars and business leaders), refusing to accept that these paths of accomplishment are unlikely or inaccessible. Absent these models in their immediate families, they look to their everyday contemporaries and associates, who are themselves searching for and too often incapable of providing the positive mentors they both desire. In these peers and parents, family and friends, they see both the attraction and the danger of short-term opportunities (for example, working more, on the street or the local outlet.
of a discount department store) to earn a bit more cash, focusing on videogames, sports, or relationships, to the exclusion of homework or simply showing up for school. But they also can distinguish the frequently murky long-term realities in which such choices result. Again, they are anxious for guides who can show them how to make healthier, more constructive long-term decisions.

These students’ visual and descriptive data divulge how perhaps the simplest but most compelling of the impediments to their school success are the tremendous quantity and range of activities, responsibilities, and options they confront, even on a daily basis. The sheer number of duties, people, stimuli, and choices youth encounter – work, family, love, friendships, sports – reveals how many of them simply do not have much mental, physical or emotional space to care about or engage with school in a constructive way. Or, as the author has witnessed in his work in city schools, to participate in a productive way in anything greater than fits and starts. Marvin’s photograph of a teenage couple at a school dance was complemented by his reflection (Figure 6).

With so many responsibilities, too often these city youth simply cannot attend or attend to school for more than a couple of days per week. They may be present, but they are not there. While they are already too engaged with the rest of their lives to be able to pay attention to school in the way they might hope, they recognize that they need more teachers and other adults who can provide them with affirmative choices. While their lives are already beyond full, they would like to have safer options to fill their days.

**SUPPORTS FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS**

In their photographs and texts, many of this project’s participants identified the complicated and even paradoxical nature of the aids and obstructions to their school accomplishments. Many of the impediments to their school success can also serve as supports for this achievement. This duality should be interpreted as a suggestion not that youth and their families are primarily responsible for counteracting these structures, but that urban students can be motivated by factors in their lives that an outside observer might consider overwhelming. While they are conscious of the negative

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**FIGURE 7. ‘Teachers Who Trust You’. This is Juan. He breaks with friends of mine, as much as a couple of times a week in the summer. I go hang out with them sometimes. My friend Antonio, who goes to our school, breaks with them. He’s very good and he’s very into it. He is also in drama club at school. The drama teacher lets him do his breakdancing and plan all the dancing in school plays, even in the Christmas Carol play. Some teachers may not trust you enough to do that. That’s what keeps guys like him in school. (Kevin)**
consequences of choices made by their family members and peers, this awareness can support them in making different, more beneficial decisions. Edward explained his photograph of his young niece in the following way:

‘My Niece’: This is a picture of my niece who is a year old and is living with me. Her father is incarcerated so she doesn’t have a father. She motivates me every day to do anything I do because I don’t want her to grow up like her father did. I love her and I’d do whatever it takes to take care of her.

Perhaps the primary support for school success that participants in this study identified was, in fact, their teachers. They appreciated those teachers who engaged with them as people, who actively and explicitly cared about them as something more than one of the likely hundred-plus youth they encountered in a day. They yearn to have longer term relationships with teachers and to be given opportunities to prove themselves as capable young adults, who are trusted to make positive choices and serve as models for their peers. Our students repeatedly revealed that the relationships teachers form with them can be the most significant factor in their school success. Kevin articulated the impact of these relationships in his photograph and text (Figure 7).

While images and writings from numerous students documented the importance of these relationships, others illustrated how such sustained and more ‘real world’ connections with teachers are not enough to make school achievement and engagement a new norm for these youth. They also crave authentic activities with explicit relevance and with meaning for settings beyond the school walls. They believe that they are – or are capable of being – responsible young adults and they want to be honoured in such roles by classroom pursuits that allow them to practice these positions. By extension, they want teachers to provide formal opportunities for them to serve as role models for younger students; not only is this a genuine function for adolescents, but it’s a responsibility that they take on often in their families and communities and one for which they would like recognition and support in school.

The evidence of this study discloses the extent to which participants appreciated the teachers and other adults in their lives who spoke to them and with them about the value of school. While many of us in our teaching roles might not feel as if the message is getting through when we profess the importance of education, our youth are listening. Feeling listened to was, in fact, another key element in these students’ school success. Their lives are filled with realities with which many of us were not familiar as high school students, and they need caring adults who will listen to them, without judgment, when they are willing to share what they are thinking, planning, doing, believing, and failing to understand. Melinda’s photograph of her grandmother, who owns the lunch counter where Melinda worked one of her three part-time jobs, was complemented by text (Figure 8).

Finally, the visual and text data of this project illustrate that these students were longing for some streamlining in their lives: they recognized that one thing that sustains their school success is the ability to engage in both constructive recreational activities and in nothing at all. They are aware of the extent to which their lives – in and out of school – are filled with activities, pressures, responsibilities, and expectations, and they simply want more space to make sense of this ‘clutter’ and more time to appreciate what they sense really matters. Tabitha’s picture of her softball team celebrating a win at a local pizza shop illustrated this longing and was explained in the following paragraph:

‘It’s About Passion’: Team sports help you succeed and to accomplish your goals. If I didn’t have softball, there would be something missing. Every day before I go to school, even out of season, I am thinking about softball. I am thinking about plays, about my coach, and about how to help another player when they are having a bad day. Softball is such a big part of my life and if I didn’t have it, every day at school would be gray. Some of my teammates might even drop out of school without it. Softball is about passion; it gives you drive and the desire to succeed. You rely on one another for support. If you don’t have those things in school, then you will not succeed.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CITY TEACHERS AND CURRICULA**

The ‘Through Students’ Eyes’ project did not begin as one meant to inform the author’s work as a city teacher educator who remains engaged with urban schools. It started as a straightforward inquiry into the points of view of a generation of urban youth for whom school (this institution, its classes and its curricula) appear to hold little value. These students, though, have revealed much about what they believe about the general pedagogical practices that are the central intrigues of the author’s life. Their insights affirm what many other researchers and educators have been trying to teach us.
That city teachers might engage our students’ existing literacies and use texts with which they are proficient as bridges to traditional texts and to a stronger, more constructive relationship to school itself. Many examples of such curricular links exist, in the work of literacy educators including Elizabeth Moje (2000), Jabari Mahiri (2004), Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2004) and William Kist (2005).

Yet, the evidence of this article suggests that such links should be incorporated into the work of all city teachers, rather than just English teachers or those who are operating within a ‘new literacy’ framework. All high school classes might incorporate the no longer radical practice of utilizing ‘multiliteracies’ as foundations for curricula and for revealing the relevance of school and its texts. These classes might look to social activities, community networks and peer mentoring as core elements of every lesson. As substantiated by students’ responses to this project’s guiding questions, a vast number of ‘literacies’ (knowledge and capacities that youth possess that are often unrecognized and unappreciated by teachers’ strategies, curricula, and assessments) are embedded in these young adults’ photographs and frequently identified in their writings. While many of these will not be foreign to this article’s readers, students’ awareness of these suggests that they should play a more significant role in city teachers’ pedagogical practices. Urban youth are proficient with social networks, relationships, cultures, differences and biases. They know about families and the roles within them, about friends and neighbourhoods and gangs. They are literate in formal groups such as teams and more fluid associations such as communities. These considerable literacies suggest that one of the primary impediments to urban students’ success is our schools’ insistence that life and learning must take place within the four walls of our school buildings. If we cannot bring these literacies into our classrooms, then perhaps schools and teachers will need to venture out to the homes of these aptitudes.

City students know about choices, pressures and opportunities, particularly when it comes to the in- and out-of school social networks in which they engage, and to the pursuits to which they have access. These city students appreciate the nuances of abilities, disabilities, talents and effort. They are literate in discipline and

FIGURE 8. ‘The Glue in My Life’. Without my grandma I would not be a senior in high school. I would not be at school every day trying to complete all of my assignments. I wouldn’t be filling for financial aid or even scouting for colleges. My grandma is the glue in my life. If it was not for her I wouldn’t be as together as I am. I would just be another teenager who is going nowhere. She has pushed me to succeed in life. She tells me that I should just suck it up and go on even if sometimes I think I can’t and I will come out on top. She is the best support system you could ever have. (Melinda)
barriers, and they know about goals and expectations. Finally, they are proficient with the universal themes of beauty, meaning, death, inspiration and defiance. They are silent, hopeful, frustrated, resilient, passionate, observant and candid. They long to be known, even when their school and out-of-school experiences have suggested to them that being so is neither safe nor supported.

City students understand and ‘speak’ numerous languages, and they are capable of – and live and sometimes die by – frequently switching ‘codes’. They know their roles, and others’ roles, and they know – if they do not always appreciate – many sets of rules. They are literate in modeling and mentoring, in serving as and being served by adults, teachers, peers and even younger siblings as guides. They grasp the constructive, innocuous and destructive qualities their mentors present to them. Urban youths’ proficiency with these languages and models suggest that our schools and communities are extraordinarily successful at training students to live within the strict limits we present them; they have learned not to expect to be challenged in our classrooms and they have been conditioned to mimic behaviours that do not lead to school success. It is imperative that schools allow them to live (if only during school hours) with adults who defy these limited expectations; these behaviours are observable and assessable and our training and assessments of city teachers should incorporate such dispositions and performances. Current narrow evaluations of teachers promoted by the ‘No Child Left Behind’ legislation might be expanded to include this conduct and these qualities.

In addition to considering and incorporating these literacies into their teaching practices, urban teachers’ pedagogies might include more active mentoring and formal recognition by the greatest range of adults in students’ lives. Even adults who have not have experienced school or literacy success in their own formal education can play such supportive, counseling roles with city youth. Teachers might compromise some academic content in order to provide richer, more ‘real world’ contexts for students’ learning, in the shape of regular involvement with these mentors.

Urban adolescents need to hear these statements of the value of education across their school, home and community lives. Even more importantly, they need to be asked to articulate this value for themselves and asked for input into how to enact this value in their classes and how to make this value more evident. Rather than traditional pedagogical methods that rely on teachers’ evaluations of students’ learning, teachers’ practices might incorporate regular (even class-by-class) student self-assessments and descriptions of the value of the academic content they are encountering. Again, such a technique would reduce teachers’ abilities to concentrate on subject matter, but would ensure that students were perceiving the value of the content they were addressing. Given the central importance of literacy skills in students’ persistence in school and as predictors of their academic success, such expressions (which involve core literacy competencies such as writing, speaking and listening) have tremendous value.

Finally, as described above, the standards by which urban teachers are judged and the qualities that they are expected to possess might include notions of flexibility and resistance, a greater dependence on our abilities to build professional and personal relationships with our students, and a proficiency with what the author has come to call ‘daily forgiveness’ and ‘blind faith’: the capacity for returning to our young adults and our schools day after day, sometimes even minute by minute, with an unflagging hope for these youth and their abilities to achieve. In addition to – or even rather than – existing teacher quality standards and assessments promoted by federal policy or organizations like the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), teacher training programmes and formal evaluations should consider the criteria these students have suggested.

CONCLUSION

As a result of this study, the author hoped to examine the visible curriculum of schools’ purposes in a way that would provide roles for urban students in the development of these objectives and ideals. By supplying this project’s participants and its audiences with a means to see and interrogate the goals of city schools, the project directors anticipated that both the development and the content of these goals would become more germane to these city students’ lives and their communities. As well, they hoped that the publication and exhibitions of this project’s photographs might result in a deeper understanding by a more expansive range of schools’ constituents about the relevance of school. While the focus of this project was one group of city high school students, the larger audience of this project might help to make schools’ core purposes ones that are pertinent to the curricula and teaching practices of classrooms in their communities. While many of the findings of this study are consistent with those of other
researchers using traditional language-focused research methods, the insights provided by this study suggest a complexity in these issues, a unique set of methods for exploring these themes, and illustrative evidence that extends the conversation about city students’ relationships to school.

In city schools in the United States, where far too many students fail to engage with their academic opportunities, educators might consider any means through which they can increase our students’ participation in traditional educational activities. City teachers and community members faced with endemic academic disengagement cannot hope to challenge students’ learned detachment with a saviour mentality or ‘lesson of the year’ performances. And they cannot begin to engage students with school until teachers see and have a legitimate understanding of the conditions of these students’ lives, how these relate to formal education, and students’ perspectives on school and its purposes.

This research has revealed the extent to which this project’s hopes for engaging city youth with school are, in fact, generational concerns, in terms of both time and responsibility. City youths’ perceptions of the irrelevance of school did not develop and will not evolve in the schooling lifespan of a single cohort of students. This project makes explicit that every teacher’s challenge is to engage even a single generation of students so that one day more youth and their communities will be able to appreciate school and recognize their success in it. As well, this ideal of school engagement and achievement will only emerge when these students’ home and school interactions, and all of the adults who facilitate them, consistently communicate to these youth that school actually matters.

In closing, the author cannot report that the ‘Through Students’ Project’ had a significant and positive impact on the school engagement and achievement of the approximately thirty students involved in it. Since the summer in which most were expected to graduate, it’s been difficult to keep track of these youths’ choices and paths. As well, it would be unreasonable to suggest that this one activity could counter relationships to school these youth had developed across even their brief lifetimes. A bit of hope can be found in Von and the

FIGURE 9. ‘Another Great Teacher’. When I look at this picture I see two different lives: I see a happy security guard, Kelly, and I see Mrs. Williams, a teacher who looks unhappy to be there. For people who know Mrs. Williams, this is not the teacher we’ve seen over the years at our school. She’s usually happy all the time. Students who have graduated still come back to get advice from her. I don’t know if she’s unhappy because of the recent layoffs or the sudden change in the school with the new staff. It would be a shame to see a good teacher like Mrs. Williams all of a sudden quit. I feel this can affect students because that’ll be another great teacher we would have lost along with her support, honesty and friendship. (Von)
realities that he introduced at the beginning of this report. Von did not earn a high school diploma at the end of what was his senior year. The vagaries of course credits, the impact of a reduction in school counselors, and the appeal of a third-shift job and an apartment with his older girlfriend meant that he started the summer unsure of how to finish the requirements for a diploma; he resorted, as he had described earlier, to 'selling' or small-time drug dealing. It took six months, but he finally earned his General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and started taking classes at the downtown campus of the county community college. More importantly, it took the continued investment of his mother and the more than occasional communication with at least one of the 'Through Students’ Eyes’ project directors for him to take the small steps towards finishing one school and starting another, towards working in one of those high-rise buildings across the valley. Through this project, we (the project’s directors) listened to him and eventually he listened to us; through pictures, words, and actions (Figure 9).

NOTE

[1] All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


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