# DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 448 UD 033 236

| | |
|---|---|
| AUTHOR | McGregor, Kemly A. |
| TITLE | Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School: Three Children. The Series on Cultural Interchange. |
| INSTITUTION | Columbia Univ., New York, NY. Teachers Coll. National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC. |
| PUB DATE | 1999-00-00 |
| NOTE | 61p. |
| CONTRACT | R306F60079 |
| AVAILABLE FROM | NCREST, Box 110, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 ($8). Tel: 212-678-3432; Fax: 212-678-4170; e-mail: ncrest@columbia.edu; Web site: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/~ncrest>. |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Descriptive (141) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC03 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Black Students; Case Studies; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Exchange; *Culturally Relevant Education; Diversity (Student); High School Students; High Schools; Hispanic Americans; *Interpersonal Relationship; Minority Group Children; Public Schools; Puerto Ricans; School Culture; Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship; Urban Schools |
| IDENTIFIERS | African Americans; Latinas; Latinos; *New York City Board of Education |


ABSTRACT

This publication describes a study of one small Bronx high school's attempt to create an intellectual culture that drew on and validated the realities of its diverse students. The study examined examples of teachers, students, and families drawing lessons from each other and using those lessons to improve and enrich the ways in which they approached the world. Researchers examined interchange in the classrooms and school communities, focusing on occasions when students brought their cultural perspectives into the collective discourse or teachers represented their own world views or the knowledge of institutional culture, their sense of school, to students or families. The publication presents three very different stories that focus on three students and their families: a 16-year-old African American boy of Caribbean descent, an 18-year-old Puerto Rican girl, and a 15-year-old Puerto Rican boy. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 437 448

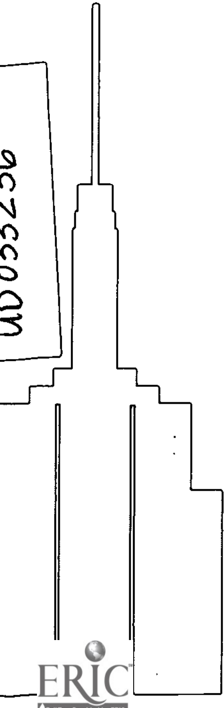
# Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School

## Three Children

**Kemly A. McGregor**

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE




*The Series on Cultural Interchange*

NCREST

## Titles in the Series on Cultural Interchange

**David Bensman**

***Building School-Family Partnerships in a South Bronx Classroom***

This study of a fifth grade classroom presents three children and their families and the relationships they developed with the teacher, the ethnographer, and the school community, ranging from intense and collaborative to distant and fearful. The study explores the process of cultural interchange between the school and the families.

**Kathe Jervis**

***Between Home and School: Cultural Interchange in an Elementary Classroom***

This study of a second/third grade classroom in a parent-founded school follows a child from a religious family who travels a long distance, both geographically and psychologically, from home to school. The study tries to understand the distances some children must travel between home and the classroom and the influences they encounter along the way.

**Kemly A. McGregor**

***Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School: Three Children***

This is a study of a small high school's attempt to create an intellectual culture that draws on and validates the realities of its students. While the school has been successful in reaching those children whose assumptions and values mirror its own, it still struggles to find a point of connection with those children who do not share those values.

**Jianzhong Xu**

***Reaching Out to Other People's Children in an Urban Middle School: The Families' Views***

This study documents four families' reactions to the experiences their children encounter at school, showing how the families' interpretations are shaped by their perceptions of the roles played by the school, the parents, and the children, and how these perceptions are further mediated by their racial consciousness, class, and the gender of their children.

The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) was created to document, support, connect, and make lasting the many restructuring efforts going on throughout the nation. NCREST's work builds concrete, detailed knowledge about the intense and difficult efforts undertaken in restructuring schools. This knowledge is used to help others in their attempts at change, to begin to build future education programs for school practitioners, and to promote the policy changes that will nurture and encourage needed structural reforms. The Center brings together many voices: those of practitioners and researchers, parents and students, policy makers and teacher educators.

NCREST is supported by a major grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. NCREST's work in New York City, through its center for School Reform, is supported by the Leon Lowenstein Foundation and the Aaron Diamond Foundation. Other funders have included the Carnegie Corporation, the Center for Collaborative Education, the Danforth Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Fund for New York City Public Education, Impact II, the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the Metropolitan Life Foundation, the National Center for Research on Vocational Education, the New York Community Trust, the New York State Department of Education, the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northwest and Islands, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Additional copies of this publication may be ordered for $8 each. All orders must be prepaid by check or money order payable to NCREST. Contact:

NCREST
Box 110, Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
Fax: (212) 678-4170
Email: ncrest@columbia.edu
Web site: www.tc.columbia.edu/~ncrest



ERIC

# Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School

## Three Children

**Kemly A. McGregor**

National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching
(NCREST)
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027

ERIC

# Contents

*Introduction* 1

*"It's the Company Why Crab Don't Have No Head" – Leo* 9

*"If I Don't Have God, I Don't Have Nothing in My Life" – Gisela* 16

*"I Wanna Have It All" – Benjamin* 26

*Leo, Gisela, Benjamin, and Their School* 44

*Bibliography* 50



ERIC Full Text Provided by ERIC

# Preface to the Series on Cultural Interchange

In 1996, our NCREST-based team, dismayed by the inadequate educational progress of too many children in our country's public schools, began the research project reported in this monograph series. Various theories purported to shed light on the American dilemma of how to educate children outside the mainstream; some of the theories we agreed with, others we didn't. One explanation, which intrigued us because it raised issues for which we had no answers, was that cultural barriers between home and school stood in the way of educational progress, especially for poor children and children of color (Comer, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Herbert Kohl in his book, *I Won't Learn From You!: The Role of Assent in Learning* (1991), put the matter most starkly when he said that some African-American and Latino children refused to learn in school because they believed that participating in the educational process meant accepting a cultural system that categorized them as inferior.

While there was something in this literature that rang true, we weren't sure how to connect it with our experience in public schools that were engaging poor and minority students in innovative learning communities (Bensman, 1994; Jervis, 1996; Snyder et al., 1992). In these schools, researchers saw evidence that most children acquired the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed in higher education, the world of work, and within their communities; they did not seem to choose between school and family. What made it possible for children in these schools to cross cultural boundaries? This question piqued our curiosity.

So we began our study.[1] Our four-person research team conceptualized the classroom as the most appropriate place to observe what we called "cultural interchange." We began by defining cultural interchange as the process by which members of groups with different traditions, values, beliefs, and experiences gained a greater degree of mutual understanding. We were looking for examples where teachers, students, and families drew lessons from each other and used those lessons to improve and enrich the ways they approached the world. We had our eyes open for instances

[1]This work is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-initiated grant #R306F60079. The perspectives represented here are our responsibility, not the granting agency.



ERIC

where study participants were willing to accept some measures of disequilibrium, to shift or expand their worldview a little, to occasionally have their assumptions upset, and to tolerate the uncertainty that accompanies encounters with strangers.

We did not mean culture to be a code word for race. In thinking about culture, elements of behavior and mind-set produced by ethnic identification most readily spring to mind, but we assumed ethnic identification was only one of many aspects of culture. Ideas of what is valuable, what is beautiful, or what is successful are defined not only by ethnicity but by other factors such as social class, age, religion, race, and geographic locale. Culture, as it plays out in classrooms and schools, is complex and multifaceted, and we expected the interchange of culture between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and students among themselves to draw on all of these elements—although not always, and not always at the same time.

We began by looking at interchange in classrooms and school communities—with all the power differentials that implies—to capture and render a concept whereby teachers, students, and families learned from each other and integrated elements of each other's mind-frames into their own views of the world. We each pursued the idea of cultural interchange in our own way, and each of our studies took a divergent route. We ultimately drew differing conclusions about the usefulness of cultural interchange as a concept.

Each researcher worked in a different school. Although we predicated our research design on each setting's uniqueness and only loosely coupled our work to each other, we recognized that learning to overcome our own biases and take off our own blinders was essential. Capitalizing on our various backgrounds (academic researchers and former teachers, men and women, American and foreign-born, Asian, European, and African-American), we planned strategies to make ourselves more open to the cultural repertoire of students, families, and school personnel. While we individually analyzed our own data and wrote our own drafts, we collectively developed questions and concepts from which we could all draw. We visited each others' schools, watched videotapes of team members' study sites, and jointly interviewed personnel from each of the sites. Over time, we grew increasingly impressed by how differently we perceived and understood student behavior and classroom practice.

We chose schools to encompass a spectrum of student ages and, we hoped, educational practices. Access to the schools was a crucial determinant for our selection. Our presence as ethnographers was bound to be intrusive, so we selected only schools where we were known by someone on the staff. Using various ethnographic methods, each of us spent the academic year with teachers who were ready to open themselves up to the scrutiny required by this research. After spending some time at our site, we asked several students and their parents to participate in our study. We paid teachers and families for cooperating. Soon we were accompanying students to after-school activities and into their homes, churches, and communities.

Our observations focused on occasions when students brought their cultural perspectives into the collective discourse, or teachers represented their own



ERIC

worldviews or the knowledge of institutional culture, their "sense of school," to students or families. Throughout, we observed the texture of human relations. The "we" here means the research team, but each of us perceived the world differently. We variously asked: Whose values were accorded respect? Whose values went unrecognized or were unconsciously ignored? Which students and families were included and participated? Which students and families were excluded or denied full participation? We attempted to understand underlying factors that shaped what we perceived as matches and mismatches among teachers, students, and their families. For this NCREST series on Cultural Interchange, we have produced four strikingly different case studies, each in a singular voice, each of which stands alone.

## Bibliography

Bensman, David (1994). *Lives of the Graduates of Central Park East Elementary School: Where Have They Gone? What Did They Really Learn?* New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Comer, James (1993). *School Power: Implications of an Intervention Project.* New York: The Free Press.

Delpit, Lisa (1995). *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom.* New York: The Free Press.

Fine, Michelle (1991). *Framing Dropouts.* Albany: SUNY Albany Press.

Jervis, Kathe (1996). "How Come There Are No Brothers on That List?" Hearing the Hard Questions *All* Children Ask. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 546–576.

Kohl, Herbert (1991). *I Won't Learn From You!: The Role of Assent in Learning.* Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria (1994). *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

National Coalition of Advocates for Students (1994). *Promising School-based Practices in Intergroup Relations.* Boston: Author.

Poplin, Mary & Joseph Weeres (1993). *Voices from the Inside: A Report on Schooling from Inside the Classroom.* Claremont, CA: Institute for Education in Transformation.

Snyder, Jon, Ann Lieberman, Maritza Macdonald, & Lin Goodwin (1992). *Makers of Meaning in a Learning-Centered School: A Case Study of Central Park East Elementary School.* New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Taylor, Denny & C. Dorsey-Gaines (1988). *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner-City Families.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



ERIC Full Text Provided by ERIC

# Acknowledgments

We want to thank our program monitor at the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Sandra Steed, and her colleague, Beth Fine, for their invaluable support, and our NCREST colleagues Jacqueline Ancess, Diane Brown, Linda Darling-Hammond, Gary Griffin, Suzette Hanser, Christine Kessler, Ann Lieberman, and Patrice Litman for encouraging us along the way. Susan Audap, Jon Snyder, Nigel Thompson, Lois Weiner, and Nancy Wilson read early drafts. Nancy Berliner, Bruce Gerig, and Susan Kelly edited the manuscript and managed the details of production. Our families deserve special mention for sustaining us through the three years of intense work on this project. Most of all, we would like to acknowledge the willingness of teachers, administrators, study families, and those in the wider school community—most of whom remain anonymous—to collaborate with us on this joint venture.

# Dedication

To my parents,
Harold and Dorothy McGregor

K. M.

# Introduction

The creation of a school's culture is a complex interlayering of the values and ideals of those within the school community: principal, teachers, students, and support personnel. That culture is shaped in part by people outside of its space: state school policymakers, school district administrators, community institutions, and parents (Sarason, 1982). To some degree, schools shape, and are shaped by, people both within them and outside them.

Cultural interchange is about the degree to which schools and their students shape each other. To what extent does a school leave an indelible imprint on a child's way of thinking and looking at the world? To what extent does a child leave the same imprint on the school? Does cultural interchange help children learn while also helping the school to adapt and shape its practice to meet the needs of the children it must serve?

These are some of the questions examined during my observations at Central Bronx Academy (CBA),[1] a high school located in the Bronx, New York. During the year spent in pursuit of answers to these questions, I made numerous visits to CBA to observe classes, staff meetings, and school functions; I talked with teachers, students, and the principal. For the purpose of the case studies presented here, I specifically focused my observations on three children and their families. I had studied the school early in its existence for another project and assumed by now that I would find teachers and students learning from each other—part of CBA's commitment was centering its curriculum around the realities of its students—but I wanted to see the form that such learning assumed and the places and spaces where it occurred. I believed that these observations, as well as the study of these three children, would elucidate the "points of intersection," the places where CBA connected, or did not connect, with the children.

What I expected to find in the way of cultural interchange at CBA centered around the school's creation of an intellectual culture—that is, how it taught its stu-

[1]The name of the school and its director, teachers, and students, as well as most other identifying details, have been changed.



ERIC

dents the nature of learning, what learning looked like, and the ways it changed one's life, one's patterns of thinking. I wanted to see how building such a culture could affect students' attitudes about learning, about knowledge, and about themselves as participants in the world of knowledge. I also wanted to see if, in the process, what the school learned from its students could change the school itself.

## What Is an Intellectual Culture?

It is never acceptable, I have always believed, to leave a situation exactly as you entered it. Every experience is an opportunity to encounter disequilibrium, to "get knocked out of your space" in a way that helps you see the world as you have never before seen it. This, I feel, is just what schools should do to (and for) children. When I think about the work of schools, I find myself continually returning to such terms as *disequilibrium*, *shake up*, *make your brain hurt*,[2] and my favorite, *disturb*.[3] Schools should *disturb* children. Schools should never be content to tiptoe around children's assumptions and ideas. Schools should not be afraid to make children's brains "hurt."

What I am *not* speaking of is the form of cultural vandalism in which adults behave as if children, particularly those from "deprived backgrounds," bring little to school worth preserving; that what they enter with must be thrown aside in favor of something "better," much as one exchanges a filthy garment for a clean one. There is nothing in such an approach that whets a child's appetite to learn, to engage more deeply with her own ideas and the ideas of others. Such attitudes, more likely than not, foster resentment and a blanket rejection of anything the school might have to offer (Fine, 1991; Kohl, 1994; Fordham, 1996).

What I *am* speaking of is an atmosphere in which children and adults perpetually challenge each other to readjust the lenses that they hold up to view the world. An atmosphere in which disequilibrium is sought rather than avoided. An atmosphere in which questions are not *always* things to be answered as quickly and as painlessly as possible by the person who "knows the most," but, rather, are springboards into the unexplored terrain of unfamiliar ideas or points of reentry into familiar areas that bear fresh investigation. An atmosphere in which answers are not always hard-formed things, like cooled lava, but things that grow, change, and respond to new insight and

[2]I borrow this phrase from a student I observed in a particularly charged humanities class discussion one afternoon. Her persuasively argued points had been gently demolished by the questions the teacher posed in response. At the end of the class period, no arguments left, I heard her say, "My brain hurts."

[3]The definitions of *disturb* that most closely approximate my meaning are "to trouble or upset the tranquillity of" and "to disarrange" (from *Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

information. An atmosphere where teachers and students learn not to be afraid of encountering notions that may upend those they already have.

Ideally, schools are places where it is understood and accepted that growing and learning are things that not only students do, but they are the business of the entire school community. If learning is indeed what schools are all about, then a closely attendant duty of the school must be to forge an understanding of the nature of learning—to figure out, and to help children figure out, what learning looks like (or does not look like) and how one goes about it. Therefore, the school must continually seek opportunities to model the kind of learning that reflects that encountered outside of the controlled environment of the classroom. It is the presence of this type of learning that underlies what I call here a *culture of intellectualism*—that is, a school culture where ideas are things to play with and to be shared among teachers and students. A place where students are free to express their thinking around a subject and know that their peers will receive their views respectfully, even if they do not agree with them. A place where in each class, as math/science teacher Nick McFadden puts it, ideas get "the majority of the air time."

An important element of intellectualism is an appreciation for complexity and delayed closure. Important questions often fail to yield quick answers, no matter how diligently the questions are pursued. Solutions for the most enthralling dilemmas are often elusive, and tremendous patience and persistence may be needed to unearth anything resembling answers.

How do you teach children that answers to the most important questions they will deal with, both inside and outside of school, do not always duly appear as a timely reward for "trying your best"? Such answers will rarely yield themselves in the neat, predictable ways that they might within the domesticated atmosphere of the classroom. Real-life problem solving can be a messy, untamed, "one-step-forward-two-steps-backward" process that occasionally fails to surrender to logic or to the most Herculean efforts.

This is some of the thinking I entered CBA with that year as I tried to figure out what the school was attempting to teach its children about learning itself, if and how that knowledge changed the children, and how the things those children brought to the process changed the school itself. I could not assume that CBA shared my definition of an intellectual culture, or that creating such a thing was at the heart of the school's intent or even the intent of A House.[4] Yet the assumptions that each school holds (whether or not these assumptions are clearly spelled out) about learning and what defines an "educated" child are enacted through its practice. What did CBA understand about the nature of knowledge, of what learning looked like?

[4]CBA is divided into five "houses": A House is composed of ninth and tenth graders.

I chose this Bronx high school for my study because I believed it would be a "disturbing" place. I had met the director, Audrey Hogan, some years before when an influx of alternative schools was starting in New York City. In my role of documenting the birth of some of these schools, I encountered Ms. Hogan and the school she had founded, Central Bronx Academy. I now recalled the painstaking care with which she had assembled her staff. I remembered the kinds of questions she asked the teachers she interviewed. I remembered hearing her talk about the things she wanted to see those teachers bring to the children they would serve. I spent time in her school that first year sitting in on classes, meetings, and talking with teachers and students; I saw the things that Ms. Hogan and the teachers asked of their students. From what several of those students told me, CBA was a place where a lot of children's brains hurt.

## Central Bronx Academy

CBA is a relatively small high school (just under 400 students) located in a predominantly Latino section of the Bronx, New York. The staff, which was multiracial, consisted of about twenty, young teachers. CBA's student population is about two thirds Latino and one third children of African descent. There are no White students at CBA.

Ms. Hogan, a young African-American woman in her early thirties, has a clear, unequivocal vision of CBA's mission to its students and community. She began her teaching career as a science teacher in a large comprehensive high school—a place that showed her, as she related to me in so many words, what she did *not* want her school to be:

> It seemed as if people accepted the fact that kids were going to misbehave and didn't demand any better of them, which was frustrating. Not everybody, but there was a general tone that some inappropriate behavior was acceptable.... There was a bit of emphasis on sports. And I love sports, but one of the years I was there, the football team and the basketball team won their championships in their leagues, and every time I looked, the principal was over the intercom, announcing these kids' names. And I said, we have some kids here who are going to college and getting scholarships—you're not announcing *their* names over the intercom. Obviously, we're sending the wrong message... stressing football and basketball as the thing that's important seemed a little warped to me....
>
> I found myself blaming the kids. I'd go into the teachers' cafeteria, and everybody would be complaining about how horrible the kids were, and I'd be there with them. And finally I had to snap out of it and realize that was not the way to go. So I ended up eating in my

> room by myself, and trying to reassess what exactly the issues were, and realizing it wasn't the kids, it was me, it was the teachers, it was what we were demanding of them. But I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that this wasn't right. It just wasn't right.[5]

Ms. Hogan's burden, as assessed by the teachers I spoke with in my study, as well as her own admission, is rigorous academics. Children are required to assemble and defend portfolios. They are provided, in advance, with the guidelines against which their work, and their defense of it, will be measured. Classwork, projects, and portfolios generally draw on "Habits of Mind"—that is, guiding questions that help children analyze the issues and organize their own thinking. These issues are concerned with such things as *evidence* ("How do you know what you know?"); *perspective* ("What would happen if the situation or part of the situation were to change?"); and *initiative* ("What can I do with what I've learned?"). The Habits of Mind are prominently posted in many CBA classrooms and are frequently referred to by both teachers and students in their discussions of student work.

Every weekend there is Saturday School, which allows students to come to school to get extra help from teachers—an option that Ms. Hogan encourages the teachers to let students know is not really "optional." The distinct message that success in academics is what really matters at CBA is not lost on its students. Several times I have witnessed the "crush" to complete and prepare to defend portfolios at the end of each grading period; the tension is palpable. In the words of Leo, an eleventh grader:

> Once March comes, *boom*! Everbody's on their toes. Everybody's like, "Portfolios are coming, oh, I have to get this project done,"—after school, Saturday school—"basketball practice, whatever practice, I'm cutting it."... They do a lotta things like that. After school, Saturday school, they come over teachers' houses—they're constantly working; constant, constant. They know once that portfolio time comes, you just gotta be tight....
>
> Portfolios make my head hurt... when portfolio time comes, you can't be like, "Uhm... uhm"—you gotta know your stuff, you know?... They give you questions about your work—see if you really know, see if you were really paying attention. They like to hear details....
>
> At portfolio time, you can't get any computers. *Can't get any computers!* Saturday school is jam-packed like it's a regular day! People are typing in the office, ask people to type for you while you get up.

[5]Interview with Audrey Hogan, 1/23/95.

> Usually I could get up and leave my computer, walk around the room. You get up [people ask you], "You gonna use this, you gonna use this?" That's a stressful time. You see people throwing their papers, going wild; it's wild, all the time.

Getting students to the point where they viewed schoolwork as *real* work, where they took responsibility for what they produced, and where they knew that the adults around them would also hold them to account was an evident aim of CBA. When I mentioned to Ms. Hogan how some students had made reference to their heads "hurting," she responded:

> I think you're asking me what the purpose of school is.... And the reality of life is that it makes your head hurt. So we want to do things with kids to get them ready for that.

Ms. Hogan demonstrates a firm belief that the primary objective of high school should be to prepare youth to make intelligent choices and to equip them for real options in life. She does not believe that all high schools do this; she finds, in fact, that there are high schools, such as the one she began her career in several years before, that seem to be interested primarily in keeping children busy, entertained, and out of trouble. For CBA, this is hardly a worthy objective. Ms. Hogan has said that she sees the role of this school as helping make children "powerful"; "I want kids to be powerful," she once said. "In my mind, everything that we're trying to do here is helping them work towards that."

Ms. Hogan is fearless about placing high demands on her school and has few qualms about pushing students, as well as teachers, to attempt things they may assume impossible:

> The biggest thing I've learned from the kids is that the things I've believed intellectually—that all students can learn—I know is true, as opposed to just rhetoric. And I know that if we push them far enough, they can pretty much reach anything we want them to.

When I ask her what has shown her this, she says:

> Just the way they've been able to respond to a lot of what we've asked of them. We ask them basically to do things that many of them have never thought about doing before [such as] think about going to college. Think of themselves as intellectuals. Just opening themselves to different kinds of things that they may not want to do normally. Just imagine all kinds of new possibilities that they never imagined themselves.

From what I have seen, CBA's focus is, indeed, heavily oriented toward academics and very lightly toward "nonacademic" pursuits, such as sports.[6] This focus is not because Ms. Hogan and her staff deny the importance of sports to a well-rounded curriculum. Limited resources and the hard choices that necessarily attend such limitations have forced CBA to make certain compromises in its extracurricular offerings—and never at the expense of what it views as most important: rigorous academic demands for children who have rarely been subjected to them.

Yet there still is the dilemma that while they can sap resources needed to achieve the school's core goals, these "extras" may provide hooks for less academically engaged children. As one teacher put it:

> We should also provide a rich enough social and recreational atmosphere to kids that they want to be part of our school, even if their focus isn't immediately academic. And we don't do that. We're political captives on things like sports teams, and we're resource-poor. As a teacher, my mission should be the academic component. But our whole school should not be just about that. [Ms. Hogan] is a very academically minded person, but kids are not just academic beings, and the school should try to serve the whole kid. The center and the main thrust should be academics, and we should use this recreational/social life to hook them into doing some academics.— Mr. McFadden, math/science teacher

Although each school must deal with limitations of resources—money, time, staffing, for instance—it still makes its values clear by the way it chooses to allocate those resources. Ms. Hogan's former school revealed what it valued in what it chose to emphasize, tolerate, or reward. What values does CBA reflect in its choices? How do these values resonate with those of the students and their families? Most importantly, how do CBA's choices determine the ways its youth experience school?

## Three Children

For several months during the 1996-1997 school year, I observed classes in A House at CBA before approaching any particular children and their families about joining my study. I had watched the children in classes for some time before selecting them. I had also explained my mission to the teachers of A House, and had consulted with

[6]Currently CBA does have a basketball team and recently attempted to form a baseball team as well. In addition, there are some extracurricular activities pertaining to student governance and to AIDS awareness, as well as a club for Latino students. In the first year or two, however, no sports options had yet been created, something that a number of students complained about at the time.

them regarding which children might help to elucidate a few of the issues I wished to pursue. After teachers had suggested several names to me, I continued to observe classes, watching especially closely those children specifically mentioned by the teachers. In the end, I selected three youth on whom to focus my study: Leonard ("Leo") Sallinger, a sixteen-year-old African-American boy of Caribbean descent; Gisela Urbano, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican girl; and Benjamin Duarte, a fifteen-year-old Puerto Rican boy.



ERIC

# "It's the Company Why Crab Don't Have No Head" – Leo

It was the A House humanities teacher, Ms. Hoshi Sullivan, who suggested Leo as a subject for one of my case studies. Leo had been held over in tenth grade that year and was currently completing the work needed to advance to eleventh grade. It seemed he had finally gotten his "wake-up call," Ms. Sullivan told me; in fact, he had just received an award for "Most Improved Student" in A House. One of his research papers had been submitted to a teacher collecting samples of student work for a committee to devise new state standards. Ms. Sullivan related to me:

> I think he had his shock. I think holding him over was the best thing we've done for him. And now he will just fly.
>
> I don't know what he wants to do. When I first met him in ninth grade, he wanted to be a construction worker. Because he's still very much into the path of least resistance. But now he sees that that path is a little longer than he anticipated.
>
> I think he'll be fine. I talked to his mom on the phone and she says, "I'm so proud. He's really changed. I always talk to him every single day. . . ," and he said the same thing: "Every day, my mother says something to me about going to college. Every single day." She said to me, "Every day, I make sure I mention to him how his good work is going to pay off when he gets to college, and does he want to start looking at colleges, and what does he want to do. . . . " So unfortunately, he had to be motivated by a bad experience, but it has made a big difference for him.

## Visits with the Sallingers

From my notes:

> (5/6/97) 1:50 p.m.—Mr. McFadden (math/science teacher) asks Jason and Leo to circulate the room and help check the other kids' work; tells them to help those people who ask for help. Leo circu-



ERIC

> lates the room. Eldris asks him for help on one of her problems; he briefly explains the problem to her.

Such small incidents gradually drew me to notice Leo in the months before I invited him to join the study. I knew Mr. McFadden was quite particular about which students were permitted to check their peers' work and would only have given the role to someone in whose skill he had considerable faith. I had seen Leo from time to time during his freshman year (he was one of CBA's charter students) while I was working on another research project. He had left no particular impression on me at the time; I mainly recalled him as a student who was not very serious—more concerned with tossing off funny remarks for his classmates than anything else. He seemed to be somewhat of a joker then, always with something to say.

I had a memory of one occasion when some older students from a CBA sister school came to give a presentation on conflict resolution. Leo and several other ninth graders attended the session. The older students spoke with great seriousness about the importance of resolving conflict peaceably—for example, by walking away from a fight or by calling a third party to mediate. While most of his peers listened intently, Leo periodically interrupted to offer his own scornful opinions. He did not want to hear anything about conflict resolution. As far as he was concerned, this was not how conflict *really* got settled. All of this stuff was for people who could not deal with things the old-fashioned way—which, he made clear, he was more than capable of doing. For a while, the older students argued with him, told him that his was not the only way. It was only when one of the girls who was presenting told him very pointedly, "Look. I used to think just the way you did. But then I grew up." He then backed down a little, although he did not seem totally convinced.

I was curious, then, to see what could have transformed this boy into someone CBA would deem "most improved" in his house and asked him to join the study. He agreed.

I made my initial visit to Leo's home in late August, 1997. Leo, his mother, and his three brothers share a spotless, uncluttered apartment on the ninth floor of a well-kept, secure-looking apartment building about four blocks from the school. As Leo and I talked, his mother, Demetra Sallinger, listened quietly, only turning away from time to time to attend to Leo's baby brother, Cody, a boisterous and energetic little boy just shy of two.

Leo told me a little about his educational history, starting with some of his experiences in junior high school:

> I had a couple fights in there, because when I was there I used to be real quiet. I knew people, but I didn't go there and like, hang around... people thought I was a punk, 'cause I was just sittin' there, not saying nothing to nobody. And then 'till I started fight-

> ing, that's when people like started recognizing who I was. And I started getting in trouble constantly after that... constant fights, they called my house, I got suspended....
>
> People would mess with you. They'd come around, smack you in your head. If you had lunch, they'd throw bread at you. You'd be a punk from that day on, they'd keep messing with you, tease you, mess with you. So I didn't let it happen no more. This kid elbowed me in my nose, made my nose bleed one time I was going to lunch. I got suspended for that fight, 'cause when we was in the next class, I punched him in his face, and I hit him with the chair. I got suspended for that... but by the third month, and a little later on in the year, they started recognizing me like, "*Oh.*" They knew they don't mess with me. I still had fights after that, because people were still trying to test me. But like after that, a lot of people knew me.

Leo's junior high school experience taught him that a new student in a new school had to be on his guard. He knew he needed to create and maintain an image that let students know they couldn't "mess with you."

Once at CBA, Leo reassumed his "real quiet" demeanor. At first, he knew only one other student, a boy who had attended his junior high school. In time, however, he got to know more people and "everybody started knowing each other." Unlike at junior high school, there was less pressure to prove himself by fighting, something Leo attributed to the school's relatively small size:

> It was no problems when we got [to CBA]. We had a couple people that still wanted to throw [fight], everybody was new, you know, like, let's try to be friends, whatever. There's still some people that want to be hardheaded, just want to show they bad. But otherwise, there's no problems, I didn't have no problems. It was easier because it was a small group.

There was a time in tenth grade, however, when Leo was not doing very well at CBA. He did not like the school and found the whole portfolio concept strange. He also spent a lot of time "hanging out," as his mother later mentioned. At one point, Leo even tried to transfer to another high school but claimed that a mixup in the transfer of his records made transferring impossible. "I wanted to go to Coolidge High School, they had my name down," he related, "but Central Bronx didn't send my records, so I couldn't go, I had to stay there."

I pointed out to him that he could have taken his failure to secure a transfer as an excuse to just give up—to say, "I don't want to be here, but they won't let me leave, so I'm not going to do anything." Why, I asked him, hadn't he done that? He responded:

> College. That's on my mind. My mother be drilling me. "College, college, you going to college," you know? And I was like, I'll be here... I'm just gonna act like it never happened, like I never tried to leave. Just try to stay on the same track. I would just mess myself up if I'd done that, "uh, I ain't gonna do no work." That woulda hurt me a lot. So I thought—let me just keep doing what I was doing.... Try not to get into trouble, or anything like that.

Now in his third year at CBA, Leo seems to have settled into his niche, to have found a place among his peers where he is comfortable and has their respect. He enjoys writing stories and is curious about computers—he has asked a computer-manager friend to "show [him] the ropes." He likes math the most; at least it doesn't terrify him the way it does some of his classmates. "Math is just simple," he told me. "Like, once you get the main thing, that's it. It's all right." He isn't sure of the career he wants to pursue—accounting seems interesting, but he is also drawn to the idea of being a chef. He's considered the possibility of studying marketing in college, or maybe physical education.

However, Leo had one major portfolio project needed for promotion to eleventh grade that was unfinished. He thought for a while he might even get away with not doing it, since a number of his classmates had not done the project either. Over the summer, he attempted to complete the assignment, but gave up when he found that "summer school was not helping me." When he did not complete the project during the two-month grace period at the beginning of eleventh grade (Leo says he didn't know they were being given the grace period to complete the work until two weeks before it was up), he was "kicked back" to tenth grade.

What really galled him about the experience, he said later, was seeing students he felt to be even less deserving of promotion than he being sent on to eleventh grade without completing the project. Interestingly, he expressed no cynicism in recalling the experience, nor did he complain about wanting to give up in the face of what some children might consider blatant unfairness. Instead, he seemed to have intensified his efforts and only wanted to finish his work so he could graduate and move on to college.

During my visit with Leo's family, Leo and I conversed but his mother said little, allowing her son to do most of the talking. However, as the conversation progressed, she began to interject more freely. Demetra Sallinger is a shy, slender woman with a gentle Caribbean accent. She is from the island of St. Kitts and has lived in the United States since 1979. I chatted with her about the quality of food in America, and we swapped horror stories about the meat industry. Demetra remarked on how skinny she is, explaining that she does not eat much because she does not trust the food in this country. She rarely has meals outside of her home and hardly ever eats meat. Her mother, who has been in the United States for thirty years, has never dined in a restaurant.



ERIC

At one point, our discussion turned to a building that was being constructed a couple of blocks away. Demetra said that when she first saw all the construction, she thought it was a school—which surprised her somewhat because another school was already quite close by. She was disgusted to find that what was actually being built was a detention center. "They need more schools, not more detention centers," she told me emphatically. "I tell Leo, they're building it for Black boys. Watch out."

When I next visited the Sallinger home a few weeks later, Demetra spoke more about that detention center:

> They need to build schools, that's what they need, a lot of schools. And number one, building up [a detention center] here, beside a school, that ain't no good. 'Cause they're not gonna do it in a White neighborhood. So why should you do it in a Black neighborhood?... And then to see that they build these facilities right beside [a] school. Don't make any sense, you know what I mean. So I just tell my kids, "Listen. You gotta to keep out of trouble. Because when they build the jails and everything, they're building them for *Black children*. Keep yourself out of trouble, go to school, get your education, that's what you need, so you could get yourself a *good job*. Don't sit down say, oh, White man this, White man—ain't no White man, nothing. You make something of yourself."

For Demetra Sallinger, making something of yourself, both in and out of school, involves choosing your associates or "company" carefully and keeping them to a minimum, if possible. "Keeping company," in Mrs. Sallinger's way of thinking, is something that should be generally avoided, especially when the company you keep does not share your goals and ideals. Little good, she pointed out, can come from having lots of friends, since this only provides more opportunities to mess up. Demetra was wary of most of Leo's friends and frequently warned him against some of them. She told me that her own grandmother cautioned her against "keeping company" with the injunction, "*It's the company why crab don't have no head.*" Part of the reason Leo was kept in tenth grade, she said, was that he hung out with the wrong crowd.

It was clear that monitoring her children's associates is a high priority for Demetra. She lamented that "bad company" led her oldest son, Trent, astray. While she worked extended hours as a home attendant and supervised her children mostly by phone, Trent would tell his mother that he was going to school or doing homework, when he was really hanging out with friends:

> But people used to tell me, "You know, I see Trent in such and such a place. . . . " I say, "What? Trent should be in school." And they

> said, "No, I see Trent up White Plains Road hanging out, he and Kiki, and Damon, Ali"—a whole block of them. Then he used to hang out in this building [in an apartment], on the eighth floor. And the mother [of that apartment] runs—I call that a harboring house. And I used to tell Trent, "Better go to school," 'cause I was going to bring the cops right there. . . . And then he go to school for a day or two, 'cause he don't want me bring the cops there, because you know, I will do it.

When Trent ended up dropping out of school, Demetra was certain that it was largely due to the influence of his aimless friends:

> The boy is so smart. All his friends—all of them who he hang with—that's why you see them is the one who get him outta school. They weren't going to school 'cause they don't know nothing. And he was so smart. He's still smart. And they didn't like that.

She has watched Leo especially closely to be sure that he does not follow his older brother's example. When Leo was in tenth grade and stopped studying and just hung out with friends, Demetra placed him under house arrest. In Leo's words:

> I couldn't even go outside. I had to stay right at the kitchen table. Sit there. Homework, homework, homework, you know? For a while, I wanted to be outside. I'd just be in the house. People were surprised to see me come out. I'd come out probably weekends, Sunday, come out for like a hour or two. Right back upstairs. I had like, no freedom. So the only way I could get some freedom is if I was doing good, you know, start doing these things without her forcing me to do them. That's the only way.

Demetra has continued to impress on her son the importance of associating only with people who have the right goals—to go to college, to be gainfully employed. Choosing your associates carefully can mean the difference between success and failure in life:

> So I tell [Leo], company can make you do a lot of things. One thing, company—they know you gonna get through in life, they gonna try their best to keep you down. Don't let that ever happen.

In one respect, the significance of choosing the right associates had hit home with Leo. For him, a summer internship at Jackson-Whaley, a structural engineering firm in Manhattan, has provided a rich opportunity to establish the connections he needs to move to "the next level." He was proud that he seemed to have made a positive impression on one of the company executives: Leo was able to converse with him "for about an hour and a half" about Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor—sub-

jects that he had studied intensively in humanities the past year. Leo said, "I know he was surprised that I knew so much."

Leo hoped that his internship would provide some leverage for the future—a good work recommendation, offer of a scholarship, something favorable to add to his college application—and was very conscious of making a positive impression. He said that each morning he arrived at work about twenty minutes early and had no problem staying late, if necessary. He did his work quickly and offered to do other tasks if he finished early. "They see I'm a hard worker," he said. "They say to me I'm always on the move. Always on the move."

Because he had fallen a full semester behind, Leo did not graduate with his cohorts in June, 1998. He has seen benefits to the delay, yet conceded that now he felt more than ready to move on. The Jackson-Whaley internship had opened his eyes to educational and career possibilities that he was eager to explore. Later that summer, he reflected:

> I'm not gonna lie. Seeing that everybody graduated, and that I'm supposed to graduate, I feel stupid. I'll be like "Dag, I should have been graduating this year." But, in a way, this setback helped me—helped me get this job. Now I have more time to think about colleges, I've been to college—I've been to college fairs.... Now I have a little better understanding. You know, I know what to look out for now. More people told me now I got a little better vision. But, at the same time—I'm ready to go. I'm ready to put my life in full motion. Full speed, but I can't do it, I'm still in school. It's holding me back. I wanna go to the next level now. You know, I'm tired of staying on the same level. I want the next level.

# "If I Don't Have God, I Don't Have Nothing in My Life" – Gisela

It is her demeanor, perhaps—reserved, ladylike, yet friendly—that is most striking about Gisela (jee-SEH-luh) Urbano, eighteen years old, and an eleventh-grader at CBA. A short, slender girl of delicate build with a wide, pretty face and perennially well-manicured hands, Gisela wears a serious expression, although she has a quick smile. She favors neutral colors—black, whites, browns, grays—and a style of dressing totally appropriate for a late nineties urban teen: close-fitting seventies-inspired tops and jumpers, flared hems, boots, or chunky sneakers.

And the skirts. Long, fluid affairs, always down to about the ankle. I have never seen Gisela in pants or in short skirts. At first, I assumed she was just following a fad—after all, rack upon rack of these long skirts cram stores all around the Bronx, and they are quite the rage among her classmates. It was only later that I learned that long skirts are part of the code of modesty within the religious faith so central to her life.

Gisela is Pentecostal. For some, such an identification might have only the most perfunctory significance—that is, that they are members of such-and-such Pentecostal church, that they attend services there every Sunday, that they support their church through tithes and offerings, or even that they officially subscribe to a certain set of beliefs. For Gisela, however, being a Pentecostal goes beyond her attendance at Casa de Dios Pentecostal Church in the Bronx, where she is a member; it is integral to the life she occupies in the interstices of classes and homework. She attends services at Casa de Dios at least twice a week, besides Sundays, and is a past president of her youth group there. On many days, she rushes home as soon as classes are over so that she can get ready for evening services.

One September day in 1997, when I stopped her after school to ask if she would like to join my study, she was, as usual, hurrying to leave; this time, a young boy in her congregation had died, and she and her mother were going to sit with the family. From my notes:

> (9/18/97) I meet with Gisela for a few minutes. She talks very fast. Her sister stands nearby, waiting for her—asks if she should go ahead, or maybe run to the store while Gisela is talking to me. Gisela tells



ERIC

> her to calm down, or something to that effect. Gisela gives me a copy of her class schedule; says she is really busy with her church—she is there all day Sunday, and also on Tuesday, and Thursday (actually, I think she names three weekdays beside Sunday). She tells me she has, as she likes to say, "a life." She tells me where her church is, and that she is very active there. A Pentecostal. She's involved in the youth group, but is not the "president." I tell her I think it's wonderful that she's so active in church, and that I'd love to visit there sometime; her face positively lights up, it seems to me. Tells me she was out of school for several days, and has catching up to do. I ask if she was sick. She says no, but she had "problems." I don't press. She tells me that her mom doesn't speak English, but she understands it. Her mom is taking college courses.

Initially, I had not intended to study Gisela and her family. As interesting as I thought Gisela would be, it had been her friend, Ramona, who first caught my attention. Ramona is a tall, somewhat aloof girl who wears her dark hair in a restrained bun at the back of her head; wire-rimmed glasses add a touch of severity to her face. Occasionally, I had seen her smile in class, comment expressively on something without being asked, or giggle with classmates—but not often. She was, I had been told, "very religious."

I was intrigued enough to consider inviting Ramona to join my study and spent some time asking A House teachers about her. She was, I learned, Pentecostal. All of the teachers, although concerned about her academics, thought highly of her and felt she would make an interesting subject of study. A few days after agreeing to participate, however, Ramona's mother changed her mind.

I should explain that I was personally intrigued by the question of religion and the role it played in the lives of students. Because of my own interest in understanding how I reconciled my religious beliefs with my professional life,[7] I wanted to talk with children who professed a strong religious faith, wanted to know how their beliefs permeated their lives and how they affected their school experience. Did these children bring their "faith life" to school, or did they leave it home? Was it possible that such a part of them *could* be left home? If they did bring this element of themselves to school, what form did it assume here? If they left it home, what

[7]Although I had attended a public high school, I received my undergraduate education at a university supported by my own religious affiliation (Seventh-Day Adventist). My first teaching job after college was at a Seventh-Day Adventist school. In my earliest adulthood, therefore, I had little need to think about juggling professional and religious responsibilities. However, since that time, working in a secular organization has forced me to think more about negotiating my obligations to my profession as well as to my religion.



ERIC Full Text Provided by ERIC

were the costs? In the creation of its culture, where were the spaces CBA created for students to bring in what Palmer (1998) refers to as their "true selves," or to answer their "big questions?" How did the school acknowledge that aspect of its students' diversity? Children enter school with a worldview that, in some way or another, offers them the means of tackling life-defining questions. While I am convinced that one of the important tasks of schools is to prod children to analyze and test the frameworks they bring to these questions, how do teachers permit space for something like faith, which so completely defies the underpinnings of something like knowledge?

These were some of the questions that my brief glimpse of Ramona had convinced me I should ask; questions I was only gradually coming to realize were okay to ask. I had hoped to find someone else to help me elucidate some of these issues when one of the teachers suggested I talk with Gisela, whom I had observed in classes for some time. Gisela, like Ramona, seemed quite reserved and private. Yet I felt she could help me explore some of the questions I had begun to formulate.

My first interview with Gisela took place in the office of the school counselor, Emilia, about a month after she agreed to be in the study. From my notes:

> (10/20/97) This interview takes place in Emilia's office. Gisela is dressed as she usually is—blouse and longish skirt, boots. She appears a little nervous, though she is trying to be collected. She tells me later that she was nervous at first, until she realized that my questions were ones she could answer.
>
> Everyone has positive things to say about Gisela—how together she is, determined, driven. I've observed that she gets flustered about stuff easily. And I don't know quite what to read into her absences—every so often, she's away from school for periods of time; usually personal issues, not clear to me. I think some of the reasons for her absences are the basis for her dealings with Emilia, though I can't say beyond the shadow of a doubt. Nonetheless, I think most people here would consider Gisela Urbano a CBA success story.

Gisela did not begin high school at CBA. She first attended Millard Fillmore High School[8] for about a year and a half before transferring to CBA. She had been held back her first year at Fillmore and was midway through a second attempt at ninth grade when she heard about CBA from Carlos, a boy from her church who was attending CBA.

[8]Not the school's real name.

Gisela lives with her mother and a younger sister and brother in an apartment a few blocks from the school. Her parents are separated. Some time ago, her youngest brother died in a tragic accident at the age of six months. Another sister, her father's daughter from a previous relationship, does not live with them. Since Gisela is the oldest child, her mother has given her a great deal of responsibility. Sometimes her mother leaves town for a few days to attend to family affairs, and it is Gisela who "holds down the fort," looking after 14-year-old Yvonne and eight-year-old Manuel:

> I know how to do things on my own. My father's been out of the house seven years. We started getting responsible since he left. I'm like the man of my house. With my mother, it's like she's the rule, and I take care of my brother and sister. I take care of her when she has a lotta things to do. Like, when my mother's not home, I'm home, 'cause I'm there. So I took a lotta responsibility, and I learned how to do things on my own—everything, everything. I know how to do everything on my own. I know how to pay bills, I know how to maintain house. Like if my mother leaves for weeks, like to go out, or is busy in a career or something, I stay at my house. And I maintain everything. 'Cause I cook, I clean, I take care of my brothers, I feed them, if I have to bathe them, I'll bathe them, 'cause they my brothers. But when my mother leaves, I stay there.

Gisela is obviously proud of the contribution she makes keeping their home together. The care of her household, as I found out, sometimes took precedence over school obligations. Although higher education and a career were important to her, it became clear that she did not allow the pursuit of these things to jeopardize her home and her family's welfare. I asked her how she had managed so far to juggle the demands of home, church, and school:

> I have a balanced schedule. I know what I'm gonna do. I have a life. I don't sit in front of the TV clicking channels and eating popcorn. No, I have a life. I come to school, I have to do homework, I have to type [papers]. . . .
>
> I have a schedule. Tomorrow I go to church. I go home 2:30–7:30; 7:30–10:00 I go to church, then home. In church we have services, pray, read the Bible, sing.

She also told me about her future, what she hoped to do after graduation from high school:

> I like helping people. Criminal justice is like you're doing justice out there; you're showing people that you're different, and that a

> Christian is different. That person's *not* guilty, that person's guilty—you're doing justice. And I always wanted to be a lawyer. It was like, interesting. It's like you learn, and you learn, and you learn. You never stop learning. And you learn about life. You learn what's out there, who you're dealing with, who's walking next to you, who's on the train with you. That's why I want to become a lawyer.

Being a lawyer, Gisela felt, helped you to understand people, to understand the "real" world. "Cause when you're a lawyer," she said to me, "you know what's up. You know what's going on out there." She would never, she said emphatically, defend someone she knew to be guilty. "No. Then I'll be part of that guilt. Then it'll be wrong. I know that lawyers out there defend people that are guilty. But in my case, no I won't. I won't. If you're a criminal, you're a criminal. You pay your consequences. You was man enough to do the crime, now be man enough to pay for the crime." I asked her if she believed it was possible that good kids are influenced to do bad things when they choose the wrong friends:

> My opinion is, OK, sometimes you do mistakes because your friends influence you. That's why my mother always tells me, "You have to watch who you hang out with, who you sleep next to, who you be with, who you eat with." Why? 'Cause the things that you just told me happen. Yes, I'll defend that kid. But he has to pay the consequences. It's always consequences. I'll defend you, but you have to pay the consequences. Next time you'll think about who you hang with. Because friends don't force you to do things that you don't wanna do. You do them 'cause you feel like doing them. Ain't nobody ignorant out there... nobody forces you to do nothing. You do things on your own.

As our conversation continued, it appeared that "paying the consequences" was something that Gisela had come to view as an inevitable aspect of life. She suggested that the "bad things" that have happened in her life—the desertion of her father, the death of her baby brother—were not God's doing but may have been merely "consequences you have to pay," the result of choices someone may have made in the past. This is something that she had learned not only from her home but has seen here at CBA as well. She claimed this reinforced lesson was one of the things she has learned from attending CBA:

> I was in Fillmore two, three years ago. That's a credit school. You take a test, and you just take it. But in this school, you have to write portfolios, and you have to write, give your perspective, and how this is, how this changes, things like that. It helps me a lot, 'cause when I came to this school, I learned *more* about—life. I learned that I have to pay consequences, and I have to go on with the life that I'm living. And this school helped me a lot, because I didn't

> know nothing—nothing that I learned now—in Fillmore. . . . If I wanted to go to classes over there, I went. If I didn't, if I wanna cut class, I'll leave. Not in this school. You can't cut class, 'cause you get in trouble. You can't leave, you can't come the hour that you feel like it; no. In a credit school, you could do whatever you want.
>
> And another thing is, here you show all your effort, all your work. You show all. At the end of the year, you be like, "I did this, I did that, I learned this." Over there, they don't care what you learned. It's like, you pass the test, fine. You pass the citywide test, you got a good grade. You pass to the next grade here, it's like you have to, you have to show your best, everything. You have to show *you* to the teachers here.

Gisela suggested that had she not transferred out of Fillmore, she might have stayed in school long enough to get a diploma, but the experience would have been devoid of much of the significance she had found in her school experience at CBA. If she had stayed at Fillmore, she said:

> I woulda been lost. . . not dropped out, but I woulda been totally lost. Like, going to school for no purpose. My life [wouldn't] make no sense if I stayed in that school. So that's why they took me out, and I came here.

To get a better sense of the home life and "faith life" that she brought to her experience here, I asked her to talk a little about some of the things that were important to her:

> GU: I go to church. I'm Pentecostal. I believe in God; He done a lotta good things to me; praise God for that.
>
> KMG: Do you want to talk about that?
>
> GU: About God?
>
> KMG: Yes.
>
> GU: Well, He done a lotta good things to my life. He changed the way I was. And since this day, I don't have nothing to offer Him, 'cause He done so many good things to me that it's like, how could I pay Him back when He's done everything in my life? When my father left, and my brother died, and I thought there was no solution to my problem, I could bend my knees down, and pray to God, and He hears me. When you need a friend, you need someone to speak to, He's there. . . I been through a lotta problems. A lot. I had a lotta family relatives that died, and a lotta problems with my family. But I always count on God, 'cause He's always there, 24/7 [24 hours a day, 7 days a

> week]. And He's like a phone that I don't have to mark [dial] it; He's right there. And He's been good to my life.

Gisela told me that she has been a Christian for nine years and her mother for six. At first, her mother did not really attend church—she left the children there Sunday mornings and picked them up later. If their mother did not take them, the children's Aunt Sarita, Mrs. Urbano's sister-in-law, would do so. Although Sarita often urged Mrs. Urbano to go to church, it was only after the death of her son that she began to attend regularly:

> After my brother died—there's always something that happens that impacts your life, that you have to look to God. There's always an impact. God don't make these things to happen, it just happens, 'cause of life—because things that you done in your past, or consequences that you have to pay. . . . But after my brother died, that impacted her a lot—it was her son. But my mother went to church, and that's when she got motivated, and she started going to church.

I asked Gisela, "What gets you up in the morning? What motivates you?" She said:

> First, I give God thanks. Another one, my mother. She inspires me a lot, because her life wasn't easy. And until this day, it's not easy. And my family—my brother and sister. . . God and my mother—that's what motivates me every morning to wake up and see a new day.
>
> If I do something bad today, tomorrow I'll remember what I did, and I'll do it better. You make mistakes every day. If I fail a test today, and the teacher tells me you could retake it tomorrow, I'll study tonight; study, study, and I'll remember that tomorrow I have to take a test, and then I'll do *better*, I'll do my best there. And in my personal life, like if I had a argument with my sister today, tomorrow I'll tell her, oh, you know, "Let's not start, let's not fight, 'cause remember yesterday we had a fight." I'll always go back to my mistakes; I'm always like that. After I do things that I'm not supposed to do, I'll sit down and analyze what I did so in the future I won't do it over. That's the way my mother brought me up. You have to look back at your mistakes. If you don't look back at your mistakes, how could you get further on in the future, when your mistakes are the one that's gonna lift you up?

I could see how a school like CBA corroborated Gisela's belief in learning from her mistakes. The school's consistent emphasis that children rework, edit, and reflect on their work played very soundly into Gisela's idea that mistakes are "what lifts you up"; that mistakes provide opportunities to revisit old ways of doing things

and gain insight for new approaches. CBA's curriculum made it difficult for children to "abandon" their work; assignments were saved for further reworking, and they formed the basis of the portfolios and projects that students were required to defend each semester. That you could not just get rid of your work, that it followed you for so long, had been a complaint of more than one student. For Gisela, however, the ideas that underlie these practices resonate with her understanding of life.

While the concepts she had learned through her home and her faith were a salient part of how she experienced school life, Gisela told me that she was not particularly aggressive about her beliefs among her classmates, although there was little misunderstanding of who she was and what she stood for. She did not "force" her beliefs on others, but felt that her life quietly testified to her faith:

> I have a lot of friends outside in the world, from other religions. I socialize with them. When it comes to the point, it's like, I'm not gonna come to you and be like, "Oh, Kemly, you need God, oh, you need this, you need that." No! You know what you have in life. You know what you need, and what you don't need. This is not a forced religion. Like, people ask me, "Why you wear skirts?" To identify who I am. A skirt is not gonna save you, and it's not gonna send you to hell. A skirt's gonna identify you. The way you put it on, and the way you talk to people, and the way your personality is, you identify yourself. If I wear a long skirt, I still could be the baddest person on earth. And still go to church like nothing's going on. No, a skirt don't save you, and it don't send you to hell. It's your personal life with God, you're willing to serve Him each day that you wake up. *That's* what saves you. That's why the salvation is number one in my life.
>
> God gives you a time to spread the news. If the time comes that you need someone to talk to, I'll give you God, and He'll be your friend. If someone wants to hang out with me, I'm not going to tell them "Let's talk about God." But if the opportunity comes, and the issue is brought up—amen, I'll tell you. I'm quiet, I have a strong attitude, but I'll talk to you about God if the occasion comes. But I don't argue and I don't debate about religion. It's like, I respect yours. You don't have to respect mine, but in front of me, respect it. 'Cause if I'm respecting yours, you respect mine.

In fact, other than to Sophia—her "only close friend in this school"—and to the other Pentecostal students there, Gisela did not talk much about religion at school. Sophia and Gisela had discussed Catholicism, and Sophia had even visited her church. (Sophia is a Catholic; Gisela and her family, before they "accepted God," were Catholics, too, but mostly perfunctory ones, not particularly devout.) Gisela explained:

> I talk to Sophia about [my faith]. She'll talk to me about Catholic[ism]. I know all about that; I came from there. But she respects me.

"Everybody in school respects me," she said. "I wear my skirts. And this is the way I am." Neither, she added, does she reject those classmates who do not share her beliefs—although she has acknowledged there is somewhat of a distance. This distance was probably not entirely due to their difference in beliefs, however, since Gisela did not claim to have many close friends inside or outside of school and considered her mother, brother, and sister her main sources of support:

> 'Cause I don't have close friends. I could socialize with you, but don't consider you as a close friend. I keep my distance from a lot of people, 'cause a lot of things that happened to me in my life.

Gisela did not talk much about those things that had happened in her life that made her keep to herself. No doubt her father's leaving had been one of the things that forced her to turn increasingly to her home and faith for emotional support:

> It was crazy when my father left; it was like, Wow, now how are we gonna survive? How are we gonna live this life? But give God thanks, and give my mother thanks that He gave us strength, and now we're fine. My mother has a beautiful house. We dress fine, we eat, everything is cool... everything is back to normal. It's a little bit more extra help, more that we need help, whatever, but we're getting it. We're getting it.

It appears that, at least for Gisela, religious beliefs did not have to be left behind, but they were an integral part of who she was in school as well as outside of it. To bring her faith life into a secular setting did not mean making her beliefs a perpetual object of discussion or using them as a way of sifting out who was worth associating with and who was not. They were an integral part of her identity, the "me" that people had to accept if they wished to deal with her. She does not hide who she is, nor does she ask that others be like her. CBA has created an atmosphere in which children are taught that respect for each other's views is a baseline expectation (I have observed many classroom discussions at CBA over the years, and almost never have I heard children openly scoffing at each other's viewpoints). In the process, CBA, a thoroughly secular school, had left space for people like Gisela to feel that their beliefs were as welcome here as anywhere else—so much so, in

[9]Gisela's friend, Carlos, was given responsibility for getting this club established; at last notice, however, he had not followed through with the plan.

fact, that Gisela and a few other Pentecostal students at the school approached a teacher to ask if they could form a Bible study club for interested students.[9]

After we had discussed school, her hoped-for career, and her family, I asked Gisela what she considered to be the most important thing in her life. It was clear that for her, as for any student, balancing her life demands continual choices—choices about what stays, what goes, what gets sacrificed in a pinch, what slides for a bit while other things get attended to. The success-through-education orientation that drive us (her teachers, and certainly me) makes it difficult to understand some of the sacrifices Gisela has made—days out of school, missed assignments, the inevitable confusion and desperation that resulted from skipped classes—to ensure that things got taken care of at home, that a family member in crisis was attended to (occasionally, Gisela accompanies her mother on trips to Philadelphia to deal with family issues among relatives there). What, I wondered, didn't get sacrificed? What took precedence? Gisela answered:

> My salvation. My salvation means a lot to me. To serve God means a lot to me... if I don't have God, I don't have nothing in my life. 'Cause with God, you're something in life. But without Him, you're nothing. So I think that's the most important thing in my life, my salvation.

# "I Wanna Have It All" – Benjamin

I was a few months into my observations at CBA before I asked any children to be in my study. Benjamin was the first child I asked.

A not particularly tall, although well-built Puerto Rican boy with a gaze that alternated between a mischievous squint and an inscrutable stare, Benjamin came to my attention a week or so after I began my visits. I am not certain precisely what it was about him that struck me. It may have been the eyebrows: he had shaved stylish little notches—one, two—in each eyebrow, as many of the young boys were doing at the time. Or that he came to class in an undershirt, which struck me as incredibly nervy. Or that even seated, he was constantly in motion—miming, gagging, singing. At the time, I was still trying to familiarize myself with the new children as well as to refamiliarize myself with the ones I had met in the school's first year. (My notes from the earliest months are peppered with such jottings as *"Eldris: curly hair, wore black shirt, jeans; peeked over my shoulder at my computer screen."*)

After class, I asked the humanities teacher, Hoshi Sullivan, about Benjamin. Ms. Sullivan filled me in on a number of children who had caught my eye. At that time, I was not necessarily thinking of making them part of my study; I just wanted to know who they all were. Of Benjamin, I jotted down from my discussion with Ms. Sullivan and my own observations:

> (11/7/96) Benjamin: Shaved eyebrows; was wearing undershirt in class. 18 years old; has been in school no more than 12–15 days all year, Ms. Sullivan tells me. Today is his second time in Ms. S's class. May need to be placed into a GED program. No learning difficulties apparent, but has little interest in school.

Benjamin did not appear in class often that first year; even less the second. When he was there, however, his behavior provided a curious antiphony to that of the other children. I noticed how events of the class seemed to course around him, how he never seemed an integral part of what was going on. Even early on, his often curious behavior (breaking into song while students were working silently; making faces; imitating the noise of a machine gun) hardly interrupted the flow of the class. For the most part, it seemed as if the other children had already taken his measure

and had deemed him not worth following. Benjamin was not one who could bring down a class:

> When he was in my class, he was not a problem. If anything, he let what needed to happen happen. . . . Benjamin didn't mess with other kids, he didn't mess with me. Sometimes he would break out in song, and I would have to remind him. But that wasn't *too* much of a distraction. That didn't bother me. And also, he didn't really demand tons of my attention, either.—Mr. McFadden, math/science teacher

Indeed, from what I observed in Mr. McFadden's class, Benjamin's usual place there was on the periphery:

> At Mr. McF's desk, Benjamin is seated quietly, staring off. Kids who come up to, pass by the desk, do not speak to him, he does not speak to them. Mr. McF circulates around the room checking on other kids' work. Benjamin takes out a folded sheet of looseleaf paper from his pocket, reads it.
>
> He sits with chin down on his folded arms; seems tired, out of it. (I notice that he seems to function during the Do Now,[10] but when the class gets into the deep work, he slides off to the side; does not have anything to contribute. He has no bridge that he's working on, as far as I can see [class has been working in small groups to build miniature bridges in their study of force, tension, compression, and other physical concepts]. At one point, he leans back in his seat, pseudo-screams, "I hate myself!" (although from the way he does it, I get the impression he is imitating a sound clip from some song). Continues to fiddle, tapping his ruler on the desk, playing with the slip of paper that he has taken out of his pocket.

The other children seemed to find him mildly amusing, but they had little intention of allowing him to distract them from what they had to do. He got the most attention from those who relished distractions of any kind.

Early that year, I observed Benjamin in a humanities class. One of the themes for Division I was the U.S. Constitution and its creation. As part of this unit, the children were reviewing U.S. geography—an area in which, as Ms. Sullivan explained to me, they were somewhat weak. They had been assigned to color a map of the United States and were working in small groups, as they usually did:

[10] "Do Now" is a 10- to 15-minute period at the beginning of the class where teachers ask students to engage in a short problem or question as a warm-up to the main activities of the day.

(11/18/96) 1:30 p.m.—Benjamin is here again today; he seems to be working, and is ready to use the coloring pencils. Joins Boyce and Levina at their table.

1:39 p.m.—"California, the city of . . . ," Benjamin sings aloud; seatmates hiss for him to be quiet. He stops singing, but keeps up a running commentary as he works. Sophia, Levina are coloring, but Benjamin seems to focus most of his effort on entertaining them with his comments. He relates a story of when he was "locked up." Sophia asks him why he was locked up. "Armed robbery," he answers briefly before continuing his comments, which shortly trail off, about someone he knew in jail. Ms Sullivan mentions that they will be giving oral presentations on December 2, and that they need to start practicing for that. It seems that Benjamin doesn't have what he needs to complete this assignment though he's been coming every day, he says. Ms. S reminds him that he only started coming "every day" last week. She sends him to another humanities teacher to get an outline for the assignment. He returns some minutes later without the outline. "She won't listen to me, yo!" he complains; mutters something about punching her in the head. Ms. S assures him she'll get the paperwork for him.

1:58 p.m.—Benjamin seems done with whatever work he's doing for the day. He is singing "Happy Birthday" in a sultry voice; ends with "Happy Birthday, Mr. Kennedy. I'm Marilyn Monroe." Class giggles. Ms. S tells them to put their work away, take out some paper for notes.

For some minutes, Benjamin has been bent over behind his desk in concentration; when he sits up, he has pierced the skin between some of his fingers with colored thumbtacks; flashes his hands to the class. "Allow me to demonstrate the skill of the Shaolin," he says. Ms. S tells Benjamin to put the tacks back in her desk.

Most of my classroom observations of Benjamin are somewhat like this early observation. From the expectant glances he shot around the room during his "performances," it was clear how much he wanted to be seen. It occurred to me that there was some particular way he wanted his classmates to perceive him, and although he did "clownish" things, I did not get the feeling that he wanted to be taken for the class clown. He wanted to be looked up to, I guessed, to be viewed by his peers as "hard," worldly—although there was something vulnerable about him that belied the tough front he presented. (More than one of his teachers, interestingly enough, described him as "sweet.") He lied about his age—told everyone he was eighteen years old when he was really fifteen, something it took even the administration a little time to catch onto. In spite of all his efforts, it always seemed to me that Benjamin reckoned only marginally in his peers' consciousness—that the space they took up in his head considerably exceeded what he took up in theirs.

For me, there was a very small, but particularly telling, incident that illuminated the gulf that existed between how Benjamin seemed to want to be seen and how he may actually have been seen. It involved another boy, Julius, who in the eyes of many CBA teens, was someone to look up to. Julius, a tall, heavyset African-Latino youth with a cool, rather remote demeanor and an authoritative swagger, was a leader. His speech, whether in the classroom or in the cafeteria, was often surrounded by a respectful silence. His voice was not loud, and he actually seemed rather quiet. What struck me most about Julius, I think, was how effortlessly he exuded the "cool" Benjamin worked so hard to acquire. Unlike Benjamin, Julius rarely seemed concerned about his classmates' reactions to what he said or did; at times he seemed hardly to see them at all.

Early during the first year, I observed this short exchange between the two boys:

> Benjamin is seated at a desk near the center of the room, working quietly. Julius enters, walks over to Benjamin, and without warning, snatches the hat off Benjamin's head. Tells Benjamin, without rancor, just matter-of-factly, that the hat is his; proceeds to his locker at the back of the room. Benjamin looks stunned, a little alarmed, like he's afraid he won't get his hat back. For a moment he does nothing; it looks as if he's trying to gauge whether or not Julius is joking. Julius, as always, seems not particularly perturbed. (From his worried reaction, my guess is that the hat is Benjamin's.) Benjamin follows Julius to his locker at the back of the room, asks Julius to look at the broken part in the back of the hat that marks it as his. After a minute or so, Julius relents, lets him have the hat. Moments later, Julius unearths his own hat from his locker, squashes it over his Afro, apologizes to Benjamin in that curt, abbreviated style of hip young males ("My bad, man," or something to that effect), and strolls back out the room. Benjamin is clearly relieved—grateful, almost.

I often thought about this little scene when I struggled to understand the image Benjamin was attempting to craft for himself. What struck me most about it was that Benjamin, for all his bravado, was actually *afraid*. Something told me that he had no intention of going up against Julius for any reason and was hoping, more than anything, that he could persuade Julius to surrender the hat of his own accord. I do not think that Benjamin feared for his physical safety necessarily, but feared that against Julius' insistence he did not stand a chance; feared that although he, Benjamin, was right, and the hat *was* his, this meant little in the face of Julius' superior authority. It was authority like that, I thought, that Benjamin craved.

About the end of April that first year, I invited Benjamin to be in my study. He seemed surprised that I asked him, but readily agreed. He gave me his home phone number and added that it might be good for him to have somebody "watching" him. Even as I asked him, I was not sure what Benjamin was going to teach me about CBA, let alone its attempt to craft an academically oriented, intellectual cul-

ture—particularly since it was already clear that he spent more time out of class than in—but I suspected that looking at the school through the lens of such a child would tell me a great deal about what CBA was struggling to be, or struggling not to be.

Listening to teachers describe him, I hoped, would offer clues about where the school saw itself, about what "page" it was on. Even before I'd decided to study Benjamin, I would say to teachers, "Tell me about Benjamin." Scarce as he had made himself, they all seemed to know something about him. One teacher said that she could tell, even from his odd bursts of singing in class, that he actually sang quite well and perhaps the school could better engage him if it had an outlet for his singing talent. Another teacher mused:

> The funny thing is about Benjamin, I find him very endearing, even in the middle of his most inappropriate behaviors. There's something there... I can't explain. But there's something there that I feel needs and wants nurturing. Because when I just sit with him in a one-on-one situation, we have had some very interesting discussions. And he has knowledge that I really did not think he had.
>
> Sometimes the behavior seems just so inappropriate to the time and so—*spontaneous*, that I don't even know if he's aware of what he's doing. Like leaping up and making believe he has a gun in his hand, you know. Why? What is this connected with?... It's like he sits there perfectly calmly, and then just gets up and starts shooting people with this make-believe Uzi.

I, too, saw a slightly different side of Benjamin when he worked with a teacher one-on-one. It was almost as if once he realized he did not have to "perform" and all that mattered were his ideas, not his image, he could allow those ideas to take center stage. Once I watched him in a class with Jacqueline Keye, a resource room teacher as well as his advisor.[11] After seeing that the six or more other children in the classroom were settled down to some independent assignment, she sat down with him to review a humanities lesson he needed to complete:

> (1/9/97) 9:54 a.m.—Ms. Keye turns to Benjamin, gently reminds him that he has been out for a long time, and that he has no notebook, no supplies to work with. Tells him they will begin with study of the Black Panthers. Gets some supplies for him to work with from her desk.
>
> JK: What do you know about the Black Panthers?

[11]Benjamin was not classified as a resource room student. There were a few occasions, however, when he would be put out of class for some reason or he would ask to leave. Sometimes he joined his advisor, Ms. Keye, in the resource room, where she would help him with his work.

BD: They wanted their freedom. They killed cops.

JK: (saying she will write all this down) Why did they kill cops?

BD says they should kill more of them.

JK tells him they want to have an intelligent discussion, and he will have to use his mind.

JK: Anything else?

BD: They locked up Huey; he was the leader. And they did something to Washington.

JK: What do you call when people get together to express their ideas?

BD: Boycott?

JK: Could be. They carry signs, saying they want equality.

BD: (can't think of the word) Damn.

JK: Have you ever heard of the word "protest"?

BD: Yeah. Like, don't kill animals. Fur.

JK: What was it like for Black people before the Black Panther party?

BD: Real bad. They had segregated schools. They couldn't eat in the same place. (He thinks) It was bad. The Ku Klux Klan was there.

JK: What does the KKK do?

BD: They wear white masks. They carry forks(?) sometimes. They tie people by ropes. They burn crosses. They carve signs on them with blades.

JK: It's true, they do all those things.

BD: Skinheads, too.

JK: All those White supremacist groups have things in common. You're right, they burned and hung people.

BD: Did they use guillotines?

JK: (explains what the guillotine was) Why do you think the Panthers got together to write this program?

BD: To see if the Blacks could be more equal with the Whites?

JK compliments his answer. He asks to go to the bathroom. She gives him a yellow Post-it note as a pass. He leaves.

When Benjamin comes back, he reads through the Panthers selection. Nydia enters, pats him on the face in greeting; he tells her to get away. Another boy

drifts in wearing a hooded sweatshirt. JK gets rid of him; closes the door. Goes to Benjamin, who tells her he is ready for her to see his work. He explains that Blacks were beaten by police, disrespected. JK asks him a few questions to elicit his understanding of "racism."

> JK: Because of this, the Blacks decided to—
>
> BD: —to stop all that. I forgot about that lady, Rosa Parks, that was in the bus—
>
> JK: That was a little bit before that.
>
> Further discussion on issues Panthers fought against.
>
> JK interrupts herself to get a kid settled, to tell Brenna where to find construction paper. While JK attends to other students, other issues, it seems Benjamin is in constant motion. He pretends to be a baseball pitcher, winding up, making a pitch. Pretends he is driving a vehicle, really slowly, until the girls near him start tittering.
>
> When JK rejoins him, they discuss juries. She asks if he were being tried for a crime, who would he want on his jury–Blacks, Whites, or Latinos? Benjamin says, "My family," then concedes that he would like "a mixture." JK says that one issue is that Blacks wanted more Black people in the juries. They talk further about issues of race in law enforcement. Benjamin takes advantage of some turn in the conversation to demonstrate how cops in Puerto Rico treat kids that are out after curfew, which sets the girls laughing again.

The Benjamin I saw there—still "on stage" yet willing to engage in talk around his work, was one who did not appear often. There was something about him that resisted getting too close, that shied away from putting forth himself and his thoughts as if they were serious things worthy of being dealt with. The Benjamin I saw tended to strain more and more toward the periphery, adamant about not becoming part of anything the school valued most. He worked hard to maintain an image ("fronting," as one teacher called the kinds of things he did), but never got too close. Benjamin was not what you would call popular—children knew who he was and greeted him when they saw him. His "hang buddies," however, were mostly students from another school. As far as I could recognize and from what he told me, only one other boy among his crew on the corner was from CBA.

The corner, in fact, was the one place I could usually count on seeing Benjamin. I was not seeing him in classes much, but failing to catch him there, I was sure to run into him on the corner eventually.

The corners he picked to stand on were telling. Either he stood on the one right where the school building sat, positioning himself a few yards away from the

school fence in fact—where he might not be very visible to teachers or the principal unless they happened to step outside either the front or side doors. However, his preferred spot, it seemed, was the stoop of a building directly across the street from the school. Later, as the weather grew colder, he donned a distinctive black and yellow jacket—the yellow, a noisy, irrepressible shade that made him impossible to miss if anyone looked from the windows of at least three different CBA classrooms. It was clear that Benjamin was not trying to hide. He felt comfortable on that corner. When I asked him if the owners of the house minded that teenagers were congregating on the front step during school hours, he told me in the vague way I had come to recognize, that they didn't mind; they were his "friends."

The first time I saw Benjamin on the corner it surprised me. It surprised me that someone who was supposed to be inside a building not ten yards away was so boldly flaunting his noncompliance. Why dared he stand so near the school? Wasn't the whole point not to be seen? I knew how CBA traditionally dealt with truants and cutters. In the school's earliest days, I had seen how office personnel would religiously phone parents any time their children failed to show up for school. For a moment I was afraid for him, afraid of the kind of trouble he would be in if the teachers caught him.

That first time I saw him, I asked what he was doing there. He offered a somewhat foggy story of having a problem the day before with a student from one of the other schools in the building and said that for now, he did not want to go back in the building because if he saw the boy, he would have to fight him. He said he would go in tomorrow, after things had cooled down. I told him that tomorrow it would be too tempting to put off coming back for "just one more day." He said no, no, really, tomorrow he would be there.

This conversation, it turned out, was much like others we would have in the future: I urging him to go back into the school, he insisting that no, he couldn't handle it right now ("It's boring up there; I'm going crazy"), but he'd be there tomorrow, without fail. As I saw him there on the corner, over and over again, it became clear that I was not the only one who saw him and that his presence on that corner was no secret.

## The Duartes

> When I was in school, really, it was much better than now. Because before we had more respect for parents. We went to school to learn. Not like now, these kids. They go to school, but they don't go to learn. We went to learn. And this thing about cutting classes, you didn't see that as much then, either. Although you didn't have many opportunities to go to school, you know... we walked to get to school. Sometimes there were kids who didn't have shoes. They came to school with holes in their clothes. We went because we knew there was a future for us.

> I tell Benjamin, you know, put a lot in your head—study, study. Don't hang out with your friends and cut classes. But *mi hija*, I don't know. I don't understand, I don't understand.—Mrs. Duarte, Benjamin's mother

I first met Benjamin's mother on a Sunday afternoon in mid-May, 1997, shortly after Benjamin had agreed to be part of my study. My notes from that visit:

> (5/15/97) As I approach 3A, two little girls are seated on the top step—one about 10 or so, the other one about six, maybe. I look around for a second, and they ask me in very polite voices if they can help me. I ask them if they know the Duartes. The older girl says yes, and points me to a door. I ask her if she knows Benjamin. She grins; yes, she does. The smaller girl pipes up that she's Benjamin's niece. I ring the bell. Mrs. Duarte asks who it is, and I identify myself. She opens the door, asks me to wait a moment while she sequesters the dog. After locking the dog in a room to the side, Mrs. D escorts me to the living room. Her daughter, Alicia Elena, Benjamin's little sister, is with her. A smiling, pleasant faced girl of about 11 or 12. It turns out she is in 6th grade "going on 7th." Alicia Elena informs me that Benjamin's 16th birthday is coming up soon. She also tells me that she has narrowed down her career choices—now she only has to decide among fashion designer, model, singer, and vet. And nurse, she adds later.
>
> Mrs. Duarte wonders if Benjamin has ADD [attention deficit disorder]. She had read about it somewhere, and it sounds exactly like his condition. No matter what he sits down to do, in a few moments he's up doing something else. I tell her it's hard to tell, and that when a kid gets a label, sometimes it's hard to live above it. I tell her that I've noticed too that he jumps from activity to activity.
>
> Benjamin is the apple of his father's eye, from Mrs. Duarte's description. She wonders if her husband spoils him. She says he gives him anything he wants. Alicia Elena says that her father makes her earn what she gets. Mrs. Duarte says that a kid should earn what he gets, not just get it for free. She wonders if that is why Benjamin is like he is.
>
> Mrs. Duarte says that she doesn't like CBA as much as Pride Academy, Benjamin's previous school.[12] At PA she said she got a call every time he was missing from school, but not so here. Benjamin was kicked out of PA for carrying a pocket knife (a "little knife" Mrs. Duarte calls it, holding out her hand to show the size. I gather it's about the size of a pocket knife.). She says Benjamin hates

school. He feels he doesn't learn anything there. She is not certain what he wants to be when he grows up. She hears him talk about baseball a lot, and he only goes to school because she makes him.

Mrs. Duarte says several times that she told Mr. Duarte to be there, but he did not get home. She tells me he's still in Manhattan.

Mrs. Duarte says she hopes the study helps Benjamin, she doesn't know what to do with him. Right now he's hanging out someplace. A few minutes before I came she had seen him outside. He's supposed to be in at 9:00, 9:30, but he comes in very late (I don't ask her how late she means). I say it must be hard to get up in the morning if he goes to bed late, and she agrees. He hangs out after school.

I met Mr. Duarte when I visited the house again in early June. I got the impression, although I am not sure quite how, that I had caught him there purely by accident, that he had not planned to be there when I arrived although I had specifically arranged to meet with both parents. As the three of us talked, however, Mr. Duarte warmed to the conversation and spoke with eloquence and passion about himself and his son:

The difference before, when we went to school, from the teacher, from the assistant principal, and the principal, and the counselors, they care. They care. And they don't hesitate, you know, to call your father. Now it's different... I have worked with different schools. But it's not the same. They don't focus on the students the way they did when we were in school. So what happens? If they don't focus on them, they get more freedom than they're supposed to get.

I ask Mr. Duarte if he feels that CBA, where Benjamin is now, is one of those schools that cares about students:

He got his advisor, she's a good teacher, she speaks with us. Sometimes I tell her about problems with Benjie, and she says, "I'm going to speak with my superior to see if they can give him an evaluation, or something." Sometimes I think that he got problems; I don't know, *yo no se.* But then she says, "I'm going to call you," but she doesn't. If he cuts class, he's absent, they don't call here. If I call, I know. But if you didn't call, you wouldn't know. They don't send a paper, they don't say nothing.

[12]Benjamin had been expelled from another alternative school, Pride Academy (PA), on a weapons charge. He came to CBA about January, 1996.

At other times, Mr. Duarte expressed the view that the kind of education offered to children like Benjamin was not really intended to advance the interests of a young, non-White male from the Bronx; that schools were more intent on containing children of color than empowering them. He felt that the schools offered a whitewashed view of America that someone like Benjamin could not connect with. For instance, Mr. Duarte talked to me about what he had learned about George Washington from reading and from watching the History Channel—things, he felt, most schools were afraid to teach:

> Because it's another thing, in the schools. They only teach the positive things of the American. See, you don't know that, that he [George Washington] was in the English army, and he turned against them. They only teach in school the positive. . . . They're gonna say in the school about George Washington that he got more than 1,000 slaves, *tu entiendes*?[13]

More than once, I asked Mr. Duarte if his remarks applied specifically to CBA, or was he speaking of American high schools in general. His responses stopped short of indicting CBA along with all the other schools. (Maybe he feared offending me, perhaps thinking me more closely affiliated with the school than I actually was. Or is it possible that he did not fully trust the neutral stance I tried so hard to maintain?) Yet it was clear that he thought CBA less than up to the task of engaging the mind of his son who, in his opinion, had "the capacity to teach in a school":

> Mr. Duarte: I am talking with my heart. White teacher come all the way from, let's say, Yonkers, to teach—she don't care! She doesn't know our son. He wanna learn, learn. And believe it, that's the truth. . . . So, it's different that [Puerto Rico]—our country, the teachers were the same race we were. And they focused on teaching.

[13]That Mr. Duarte held this opinion was especially interesting to me. I thought particularly of the numerous classes I had observed of two of Benjamin's teachers: humanities teacher Hoshi Sullivan, a young African-American woman in her late twenties, who describes herself as a "nationalist"; and resource room teacher Jacqueline Keye, a white Jewish woman in her late forties, who openly embraces her working class, socialist background. That their black and Latino students get to hear "the other side," the side that often went unheard, had always seemed to me to be a driving objective behind the things these teachers chose to teach. As Ms. Sullivan once remarked, "I don't have any problem calling out the Framers [of the U.S. Constitution] for who they were, and what they really were about. . . . Not to bear disrespect, but to be clear about what's happening. . . [high school] kids are at an age where I can tell them the truth, and they can determine for themselves what that means to their personal life." (Interview, 8/14/97). I did not know if Mr. Duarte had observed what I had observed, or on what, specifically, his opinion was based.

KMG: What you're saying definitely is true in a lot of schools. Do you think it's true in this school, too, in Benjamin's school?

Mr. Duarte: I don't know in this school, but like she [Mrs. Duarte] said, we're trying to make Benjamin have an evaluation for a long time, and they say yes, yes, but they never do.

The Duartes clearly believed that CBA had fallen short of its obligation to Benjamin—by not regularly informing them of his absences, by not having him tested (although Mrs. Duarte herself acknowledged the dilemma of saddling Benjamin with a label), and finally, by not teaching in a way that made sense to him—that is, like a "regular" high school, a "credit school." They had considered acceding to his demands to transfer to such a school:

Mrs. Duarte: He always says he likes a school that has credits. "That school where I am, they don't give credits." I don't know.

Mr. Duarte: That's another thing. He loves, let's say, talking about social studies—

Mrs. Duarte: Like a regular school, you know, a regular high school—

Mr. Duarte: —you know, English language, classes. [At CBA] it's different.... We do what he wants, because it's not what we want. He's the one who [says], "I don't want to go to that school, because I don't want to do nothing." He's speaking with the truth. And he's being realistic, he knows that he don't wanna do nothing.... He told us many times that he wants to be in a school where credits are given. Like let's say they have Spanish, English, they have social studies, they got science, they got geometry, or they got biology—that's what he wants.

But maybe because his records are, you know, not good?... Maybe he's afraid that they're gonna say no in another school. But maybe if we tried, we can get another school for him. Because that's what he wants. Because it's not what we want, it's his life, his learning, and his future.

Mr. Duarte tells me that Benjamin was not always the kind of student he is now. At one time he liked school, he says, and was a good student:

I remember when he was in 5th grade, I worked in the school [that Benjamin attended at the time]. He wrote biographies for social studies. He was number one, believe me, he was number one. Focused. He wanted me to buy him magazines, you know. Now, he's only girls, girls, girls.

Girls, Mrs. Duarte adds, and *hangiando*.

## A Talk with Benjamin

About two more weeks passed before I managed to sit down with Benjamin himself for an interview. He had promised on at least one occasion before to be at the house when I came by, but by the time I arrived, he had disappeared.

Once, I actually managed to track him down in the neighborhood. That meeting occurred about ten days after my initial visit with his family—a visit from which he had been absent. On that particular day, I stopped at the house to retrieve the appointment book I had forgotten there:

> Noela [the translator who has accompanied me from a home visit earlier that evening] and I call Mrs. Duarte from the pay phone outside of the apartment building. She says she can let the book down to me in a bag. I wait under the window until it opens, and she lets down a plastic shopping bag tied to a really long length of plastic cord. My book is inside. I thank her, ask her for Benjamin; I haven't seen him. She tells me he was in school. He probably wasn't; Ms. Sullivan told me today [Thursday] that she hasn't seen him since the beginning of the week. He had come in then, "acting like he was going to do work"—asking her about things he'd missed, as if he seriously wanted to get them done. She hasn't seen him since. (And, of course, last week with him hanging outside of the building and not going in because he was avoiding some kid who had been bothering him.) I don't push it any further—a situation, I guess, where she sent him and he never got there.
>
> I ask Mrs. Duarte if she's seen Benjamin recently; she points off to her right, in the general direction of Longfellow Avenue. Since it's almost dark already, I decide not to pursue the matter, and Noela and I start back to the train station. On the corner, though, I see a young boy and I ask if he knows Benjamin. "He's Spanish?" the boy asks me. Yes, and has a little sister. "How many brothers? Two?" I think so, I tell him. The boy seems to know who I'm speaking of. "That's his brother right there." He points to some young men sitting around in a vacant lot. The brother's name is Stefán, the child says. I call through the gate to Stefán; he approaches me. I tell him who I am, that I'm doing a study with Benjamin, but I can't find him. Has he seen him? He tells me that Benjamin often hangs out on Longfellow; I could check there. I shake his hand through the fence, thank him. We head toward Longfellow, which is a short block away. At the corner I see a young Latina woman, ask her if she knows Benjamin Duarte. She says she doesn't know his last name, but she knows someone named Benjamin; he's right there. Points to a young man seated on the front step of a house across the street. He is alone, just staring down, seems to be napping.



ERIC

It's Benjamin. I'm unaccountably glad to see him—I say hi, introduce him to Noela, ask him why I haven't seen him in school. He tells me it's boring there. I ask him about the boy he was avoiding at school—a "punk-ass" from Franklin HS (another school located in the same building as CBA). I ask him how he handled it—did he speak to one of the boy's teachers? (Though I know he would never do a thing like that.) He says no, "I keep it to myself." I ask him what he is going to do. He says he's going to get a job. The last job he had was passing out flyers—he got fired when they caught him sending his cousin in his place. I tell him we're headed to the train station; would he mind walking us up there? (I don't think we need the escort, but it's a good excuse to chat with him a little). He agrees.

Along the way, he greets several people, and we talk. I ask him what other ideas he has for a job. He tells me he likes cars—anything having to do with cars. Tells me he can put anything on, take anything off, can fix anything that's wrong with it. Says he likes painting cars, but that the paint "gets me mad high," though this seems more amusing than disturbing to him. Notes that the money is good, too. When I ask him what school Stefán goes to, he tells me that Stefán is 25. At some point, I ask him if he has a car. He says no, but he drives one. Stupidly, it doesn't occur to me to ask him whose car it is that he drives.

I remind Benjamin that portfolio time is coming up; what's he going to do? He tells me that he doesn't even have anything to put in his portfolio; about two pieces of work, maybe. If he gets left back, he says, he's dropping out for good. Maybe get a GED. I point out to him that a GED is for people who basically know the work, but for various reasons can't make it to school. If you don't even know the work, you can't pass the test. He smiles silently at this, doesn't answer.

I press him harder about what he's going to do. He doesn't know—he says he'll find work with something he's good at. I tell him that it has to be not only something he's good at, but also something someone will pay him to do. He mentions he might go back to "PR" [Puerto Rico]. His parents are thinking of sending him in July or August. Benjamin says it's better there. A few moments later he says it's "bad" there—though I get the impression he means "bad" in a way that's OK with him. He says that people there will hurt you if you look at them funny. Tells me that he has a cousin there who's one of the most infamous "killers" on the island—Mario Orejas. Tells me MO was wanted for murder, they hunted him for a long time. Finally caught him and locked him up. MO tried to break out, killed three guards in the process. They caught him again, and he's doing life.

What fascinates me most is Benjamin's demeanor as he relays this information—excited, awed. "That's my *blood*," he says proudly at one point. Tells me his whole family in PR is "crazy" (points at his head).

Before we part, he tells me he'll come back into school some time next week. I tell him that I'll be there on Tuesday. Can he be there then? He says he will. He'll just tell Mr. McFadden that he was in the hospital. I ask him if he really believes that Mr. McF will buy this. No answer to that; that smile again.

I did not manage to connect with Benjamin the following Tuesday and was unable to meet with him until nine days after that. This time I scheduled the appointment with him at the school, during his math/science class (with Mr. McFadden's permission).

After several minutes of waiting around the empty classroom, it was obvious that Benjamin was not coming. I knew that he had been in school that day; I had seen him in humanities class that morning. My notes:

(5/29/97) I make an inquiry or two—no one has seen Benjamin. I go over to the other side of the building to check the gym, see if he's still playing there. The gym is locked. I go back to the school's main office, ask if anyone there has seen him. Ms. Hadley [an office assistant] says she saw him outside around 11:00. I tell her I'll check if he's still there, and if he's not, I'm calling his mother.

From a window, I can see a group of kids clustered on the corner across from the school and surmise that he may be among them. I realize that I'll have to sneak up on him, not give him any time to run off. The usual door I come through is no good; he would see me walking up the block. I ask the security guard if I can get through another door, and I do.

He is among the group of kids on the corner. His back is to me; the other kids in the group are facing me. They are sitting on the stoop of a house directly in front the school, near the corner. Benjamin appears to be entertaining them with a story—he is jumping around, prancing, gesticulating. I call to him a couple times before he hears me. I ask him if he remembered our appointment. An exaggerated "Oh, NO!" type of reaction, covers his mouth, looks shocked. He tells me he had to leave for a lunch break; he was hungry (lunch was from 12:15 to 12:45; it is now well after 1 p.m.). He is eating a sandwich; says he was going to come back after he'd finished it. He says he doesn't want to go into the building, doesn't want Mr. McFadden to see him. I tell him that Mr. McF is in the computer lab, not the

classroom. Says he will come in, but that he can't stay. He's afraid that if the teachers see him, they will force him to stay.

I manage to coax him into the building under great duress. When he sits down with me and the tape recorder, he is very fidgety, moves around a lot, looks at the two or three kids (they express shock at seeing him) who have stayed behind in the classroom. He explains to them that I have hired him to work with me. Looks around often, seems very conscious of the others in the room. Talks a little loud, and I get the impression that some of his more bombastic comments and gestures are as much for their benefit as mine. Benjamin slouches in his chair, looks away often. Maintains a good deal of bravado, but I can tell he's not totally comfortable, a little wary. He seems unable to stay focused—he is most tuned into the conversation when it turns to the coins and baseball cards that he collects fanatically.

During the course of this interview, Benjamin told me that the only reason he was in school that day was because it was "boring" at home. He added that he had been in school the day before, but had left to join some girls who were waiting for him outside. He found it hard to stay in Mr. McFadden's class, he said, because Mr. McFadden was "always messin' with me, he always start with me."

KMG: What do you mean by "starting with" you?

BD: He pick on me. He always pick on me.

KMG: He asks you things, or—

BD: Nah, he's always talking—nonsense.

KMG: Like what? Tell me.

BD: "Oh, why you don't do your work?" I be trying, I tell you, I'm trying... he's still, "*Aarrgh*, gotta do it, do it."

KMG: So that's picking on you?

BD: Yes.

KMG: Doesn't your mother do the same thing?

BD: My mother doesn't scream at me.

KMG: She doesn't scream at you?

BD: Oh, yeah, yeah—but I expect it from her, but not from him.

KMG: Why don't you expect it from him?

BD: 'Cause I don't like people that's not from my family to start talking loud to me.



ERIC

KMG: Oh, he was talking loud?

BD: Yeah.

KMG: So what, is it because he raises his voice at you, or because he asks you how come you're not here, how come you're not working—

BD: I don't know—this class, it gets on my nerves. I dunno why, I'm just retarded, I dunno. . . .

Although I did not say so to Benjamin, I recalled that I had seen Mr. McFadden "having a talk" with him on one or two occasions. I was unable to hear what either of them said, yet I imagined, knowing Mr. McFadden, that these were intense, unequivocal communications that left Benjamin little room to hide behind the empty promises he made to himself and to others. Mr. McFadden was always, if nothing else, clear. Benjamin, I was beginning to realize, treasured a vision of himself and his future that had little relation to his current reality. I suspected that Benjamin resented Mr. McFadden's irritating demands for accountability, resented how they forced him to confront the insubstantiality of that vision.

What also occurred to me then is that it was Mr. McFadden's "nagging" that had earned him the respect of so many of CBA's students—his insistence that students treat schoolwork as *their* work, as seriously as they would a job; how adamant he was about "ideas getting the majority of the air time," as he put it, in the classroom. A number of students liked that he pushed them, that he expected a lot of them. In their view, it showed that he respected them. Benjamin did not seem to see it this way.

Although I had a number of impromptu encounters with Benjamin in the ensuing months, I did not sit down with him again for a formal taped interview until early the following school year, a little over two months after school had started. He had not, after all, transferred out of CBA—although he had tried and had given up in face of the effort it would take. He said, however, that he was a bit more optimistic about succeeding at CBA, now that they might be offering more of the things that he liked:

> . . . they puttin' us through more things; they giving us more programs, and stuff. . . . Not like last year. Last year we hardly ever got gym. And I heard this year they gonna open up the pool. They gonna do mad stuff—teams and junk. 'Cause I wanna be in the baseball team. I want a handball team.

This year, Benjamin told me, would be different:

> . . . now I'm going to class. . . you could ask the teachers. They saw me every day. They were surprised. They were like, "What you doin' here?" I was like, "Stayin' in school."

A little later I asked him, "If I come back two weeks from now, what will you tell me about school?"

> Think I'm gonna tell you I been there every day, and was doing all my work. I'm not gonna get influenced by nobody else no more... I'm not gonna let nobody influence me on cutting. Like, that's why I leave, people be like, "C'mon, let's be out." So I be like (mimes following them). But now, I'm stickin' onto my chair. Gotta do something.

I asked him to explain to me how he would manage to do this, especially since what he had just said regarding his classes:

> I be *bored* up in there. It's them classes, them classes got me dying already. They're too long. Mad long. Two hours, two-and-a-half—oh my God, the same class?

He assured me, however, that he could make the turnaround; that, indeed, he'd done it before and was certain he could do it again:

> I could do it. I did it in 9th grade. Ninth grade I was, *ptth!* Forget it. Once it hit like February, when the new marking period started, every day, *brrr!* (mimes intense activity), started getting higher grades than everybody in class.

When I asked Benjamin what he planned to do after graduation, he said:

> First thing is get a job. Temple University sent me a thing to join their college. 'Cause I went out there, to Pennsylvania, with my counselor; he used to take us on college tours. And they sent me a booklet with the application, and they wrote, "We look forward to having you here, Benjamin." It's a good school.... It's buttah![14] That's where I want to go. I don't wanna stay in New York. I wanna go far. Pennsylvania ain't that far, but at least it's not in New York. Get out of New York, another state.

Get a new life? I asked him:

> Yeah, get a new life for four years, then come back. Have my money, have my phat[15] car... I wanna have it all.

[14] Meaning "*very* good."

[15] See footnote 14.

# Leo, Gisela, Benjamin, and Their School

Leo, Gisela, and Benjamin each bring unique attitudes and expectations to school. Ostensibly, at least, they are all in pursuit of the same thing—a diploma—but each holds differing beliefs regarding the value of that goal and what it should cost them to attain it. For a great number of its students, Central Bronx Academy is a *re*-education in what constitutes real intellectual work, a reexamination of what it means to be "educated" and what it means to learn.

For CBA, this is the arena in which cultural interchange occurs: the place where school and student have the potential to shape each other, to leave an imprint on the way each thinks of and looks at the world. Once again, in what ways have the school and these three children changed each other? How has working together to create CBA's intellectual culture jolted their assumptions? How, if at all, have they been disturbed?

The stories of Leo, Gisela, and Benjamin may suggest that in spite of their willingness to learn new perspectives, to experience disequilibrium, or to be "shaken up," both schools and students enter the experience with fundamental core values and assumptions that determine the extent to which the lessons they draw from each other will effect baseline change in their worldviews. In other words, although these students and this school have undoubtedly learned a great deal from each other, there remains much in their way of thinking that has not been touched. In some instances, this may be for the better; in others, for the worse.

For example, Leo and Gisela speak extensively about what CBA has taught them about hard work and the "real world." And, it is unlikely that Benjamin, even as he resists the school's way of doing things, could return to the "credit school" system with a view of learning identical to the one with which he left that system years before. In defense of CBA, my discussions with and observations of teachers and administrators reveal that the school makes a serious effort to reflect on its experiences with children in a way that helps it to understand who it is as a school and what messages it communicates to its students, both overtly and subtly.

This does not mean, however, that CBA and *all* of its students will be able to forge a set of agreements, or to find a common space where they can together

create a learning experience that is acceptable to both school and student. How is it that the learning space CBA provides can be so stimulating to students like Leo and Gisela, while at the same time leave students like Benjamin cold?

Although there are undoubtedly a number of reasons why CBA works for some students and not others, the stories of these three adolescents suggest one possible reason: whether an adolescent chooses to engage with school and pursue the things the school considers important depends largely on whether that child shares the school's core premises or understandings. Put simply, a school that affirms a young person's worldview and corroborates his notion of "how things ought to be" is a school where he is more likely to succeed than a school that contradicts or assaults that view. In such a setting, teachers and students form tacit agreements to act as "partners" in the students' education. If teachers agree to teach, and students agree to learn, both can work together to prepare students for the "real world." Since students accept the presupposition that the demands made of them are preparation for success in the world beyond school, they will seek to comply with those demands.

The stories of Leo, Gisela, and Benjamin illustrate how congruence between the student's worldview and that of the school can contribute to the student's willingness to comply with the school. Leo and his mother, for instance, shared with the school basic notions about what it takes to be successful: hard work, ambition, choosing the right friends, getting a good education. No less than Leo's mother herself, Ms. Hogan is deeply committed to making college an option for her students, many of whom are only beginning to believe higher education is something to which they can aspire. "When I talk to kids here," she said once, "it never even occurred to them to go to college. Not that they're saying that they don't want to go. But it never even occurred to them to go as an option." Leo's math/science teacher, Mr. McFadden, has also made his expectations clear to his students. In Leo's words:

> For instance, Mr. McFadden—his expectations is off the hook. He talks a lot about Harding,[16] and how many people graduated. Like, that gets him mad. 'Cause he's like, "There's a lot of smart students, [who aren't] goin' nowhere," he's like "Harding, 10, 15 percent go to college." That's nothing! [CBA] want[s] like 80, 90 percent to go to college out of this school. So their expectation's real high.

The messages about success that Leo receives from his school are in harmony with those received at home, and his experiences at Jackson-Whaley also reaffirm them. Although his actions in school do not always exemplify this ethic—teachers have told me that at times he still slacks off badly—it is clear that Leo

[16] Warren G. Harding is the high school replaced by CBA and three other schools.

believes that if he does the "right" things, the things his school and his home encourage him to do, success is within his reach.

In Gisela's case, Fillmore's ethos and atmosphere had left her grievously alienated—it had clashed with her notions of what the "real" world was like and what was needed to succeed there. In her view, the fundamental values learned at home and at church were largely irrelevant there. In a manner of speaking, CBA provided a more comfortable ideological "home" for Gisela; it was a place that affirmed, rather than offended, her view of the world: the world as a place where the work you do is not separate from the person you are; where the work you do must draw on, and reflect, your self. A place where you have to take responsibility. A place where you have to pay consequences. Indeed, it was not so much that the school had made room for her values, but that her belief system accommodated the values of the school.

Benjamin, however, has failed to acknowledge the extent of the mismatch between his own aims and those of CBA. His statements suggest that he believes there is some halfway point, some meeting place in the middle where he and the school can negotiate an agreement that makes sense to both of them. To me, at least, Benjamin has said little to imply that he rejects the *concept* of school, that he challenges the right of adults to demand six or more hours of his time every day both in and out of class. Even if he wanted to become "a Tony Montana," he conceded that what school offered could be useful:

> KMG: You don't have to go to school [to become like Tony Montana].
>
> BD: Yeah, but I gotta learn how to—mess with money a lot, you know?
>
> KMG: You don't have to go to school for that, either.
>
> BD: Yeah, but I wanna—I wanna be smart, so like, when I'm doing a buy, or something, they won't jerk me—tell me a million, and let's say they got $199,990 [sic]. Ten dollars is a lot of money.
>
> KMG: But you just have to count for that. All you've got to know how to do is count. You know how to count already, yeah?
>
> RG: Yeah.
>
> KMG: So what do you need—
>
> RG: I don't know. I'm just buggin', I don't know. . . .

Benjamin appeared to view school somewhat as a rite of passage, one of the hoops that grownups made you jump through before they let you become one of them. What he didn't like, however, was that CBA made the hoop just a little higher and a little narrower than it absolutely had to be. A credit school, he felt, would offer the same credentials as CBA, while making far fewer demands on him:

ERIC

KMG: Now, I talked to you before. You said that if you don't pass this year, that you would drop out.

BD: Yeah, I would drop out, I know, but—I dunno, sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. Right now I can't, because I'm on probation.[17]. . . But once I'm off of that, I can do whatever I want.

KMG: So once you're off probation, you're going to drop out.

BD: Nah, I'll probably stay [in school], but I wanna go to another school. I can't take that portfolio thing, too, man; I'm getting tired of that. I wanna go to a school with credits. Shorter classes.

Benjamin's more flamboyant dreams—"I want to be a Tony Montana. . . I wanna own the world," his idolization of his "cousin" in Puerto Rico,[18] or of being a "fed" like his older brother—perhaps may be ascribed to an adolescent pursuit of an identity, an identity standing in stark contrast to his rather modest reality as a failing high school student whose classmates probably consider him less "cool" or tough than he would like. Most likely, such fantasies are somewhat common among young people attempting for the first time to define a self-image separate from that formed in the shadow of parents and family members. It is Benjamin's more mundane fictions, however—that things will be completely different for him if he gets to go to a "credit school"; that "tomorrow" he will choose *not* to hang out with his friends on the corner and will stay inside and go to class; that in spite of the academic choices he has made and continues to make, he will be accepted into, and succeed at, a competitive college; that being someplace other than New York will spell a new life—that emphasize the chasm between his assumptions and CBA's. That his parents support his fixation on a credit school makes it unlikely that such a chasm can be breached. The Duartes suspect that in some way CBA, a school so different from the schools they themselves have known, has failed their child. They are willing to believe that credit school may be just what Benjamin needs to once again become the "number one, focused" student that they say he once was.

Because of its longer class periods, its use of portfolios rather than credits, and other features that Benjamin dislikes are so definitive to CBA's philosophy, it is difficult to see where Benjamin and his school can come to share an intellectual culture. This is not to say (as many schools have implied through the choices they make) that children must fit themselves to schools and schools need do nothing to fit themselves to children. CBA itself acknowledges that the forms it chooses to enact its philosophy—advisories, or two-hour classes, for example—are not inher-

[17]About two years before, Benjamin had spent nearly two months in a youth offenders' facility for his role in assaulting and robbing another boy.

[18] When I mentioned to Mrs. Duarte that Benjamin had claimed a connection to "killer" Mario Orejas, she was taken aback. Orejas did exist, she told me, but Benjamin has made up the part about being related to him.

ently unassailable. As the school gains maturity and experience, it is likely that some of the forms they have adopted will change.

What probably will not change, however, are the core values that are reflected in its policies—those that students like Gisela and Leo have connected with and that heighten their respect for the school. Although both have complained about requirements such as portfolios (Leo has said they "make his head hurt"; and more than one portfolio defense season has left Gisela frustrated, threatening to transfer out), they believe in the underlying value of such requirements. They recognize that demanding experiences such as longer class periods and portfolios "prepare you for college." In the adult world, they believe, you are asked to do hard things, and school is just getting you ready for that. When it comes down to it, neither really longs to return to "credit school," and they even compare such schools unfavorably to CBA.

Benjamin, however, does not seem to feel that meeting CBA's standards is a necessary prerequisite for success. Perhaps his own school experiences, or those of older siblings and friends, have led Benjamin to believe quite firmly that CBA's demands are excessive. Credit schools, he thinks, will give him a diploma at a far lower cost: they will not demand that he engage with, or reflect on, his work, only that he churn it out and turn it in.

By not permitting students to give birth to and quickly disown the work they do and by creating time structures that permit deeper-than-average study and investigation of a subject, CBA has become a place where a student will find it difficult to "hide" and still succeed. This is not to say that in order to create a truly effective educational experience, the boundaries between a child's life inside and outside of school must be trampled down (to become what some educators rapturously describe as "a home away from home"). Yet CBA believes that blurring those lines of delineation makes for what it considers a more powerful form of schooling.

But what is powerful to students like Gisela and Leo may be intrusive or superfluous to students like Benjamin. Although some students at Central Bronx Academy have found their experience at the school transformative and describe with awe "how hard they make you work," there are others, like Benjamin, who have found that things go farther than necessary. Gisela may find it inspiring that "you have to show *you* to the teachers" at CBA; Benjamin, however, wants no part of this. As his choices and words reflect, he does not buy CBA's fundamental premise that getting an education involves intense investments of time and self rather than just "seat time" in a classroom. If a credit school will reward him with a diploma for showing up and turning in paper, why won't CBA? This is the impasse at which CBA and Benjamin find themselves.

The world that CBA is preparing him for is not (for now at least) the world as Benjamin sees it. As Sedlak (1986) notes:

> Like adults, adolescents sensitively assess the potential value of alternatives for investing their time and effort. They constantly attempt to determine the potential contribution to their lives of opportunities that compete for their attention and loyalty. The meaning of diplomas or other educational credentials, for example, affects adolescents' assessment of the potential payoff for investing their energy in academic pursuits. Although they probably cannot articulate it, youth are aware that historically this nation has pretended that the possession of a high school diploma represented the possession of a certain body of knowledge, when in fact it has symbolized no such thing—at least in the twentieth century—for the vast majority of graduates. They have responded to this unarticulated awareness by offering their educational loyalty in order to acquire the diploma through minimal compliance with whatever was needed to earn the credential (p. 15).

To successfully educate students—whether those like Gisela and Leo, or others like Benjamin—it is imperative that, first of all, schools be very explicit about the worldview that their own structures and systems convey. As young as CBA is, it has already arrived at some basic philosophies of where children need to go and what they need to do to get there. A clear view of its own position may help a school to understand where children enter.

At the same time, however, teachers need to get to the heart of the premises that the students themselves bring to school. Although schools are places where children and teachers should learn new assumptions, or at least develop a willingness to question those most central to them, it is the core values that students bring from home and community that act as their entering wedge into the world. Understanding what these values are—attitudes about other people, about work, about the things you can expect to encounter in life—is the first step to negotiating the terms around which teachers and students can meet.



ERIC

# Bibliography


Fine, M. (1991) *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Fordham, S. (1996) *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kohl, HR. (1994) *I Won't Learn From You: and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment.* New York: New Press.

Palmer, PJ. (1998) "Evoking the spirit in public education." *Educational Leadership (56)*, 4 Dec. 1998/Jan. 1999, 6–11.

Sarason, SB. (1982) *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (2nd ed). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Sedlak, M., Wheeler, CW., Pullin, DC., and Cusick, PA. (1986) *Selling Students Short: Classroom Bargains and Academic Reform in the American High School.* New York: Teachers College Press.

## About the Authors

**David Bensman** is an Associate Professor in the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he teachers labor and employment history and global economic policy. He has been studying school reform since 1987. His publications include *Lives of the Graduates of Central Park East* (NCREST) and *Learning to Think Well* (NCREST) and three works on labor history: *The Practice of Solidarity, Rusted Dreams,* and *Who Built America? Volume II. Graduates of a Learning Community* will be published by Teachers College Press, Fall 1999.

**Kathe Jervis** has been a Senior Research Associate at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) since 1993. For over 25 years, she has taught kindergarten through twelfth grades and college courses in Massachusetts, California, and New York. In 1996, she wrote *Eyes on the Child: Three Portfolio Stories* (Teachers College Press). She participates in national educational communities such as The Prospect Center for Education and Research and the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation. She has an M.A. in Medieval History from New York University and an M.A. in Human Development from Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California.

**Kemly A. McGregor** has been a researcher at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) since 1992. She is pursuing a doctorate in educational administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her interest is in the area of Black students' access to foreign languages and global study.

**Jianzhong Xu** has been a research associate at the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) for the past five years. He has recently taken a faculty position in the College of Education, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, Tennessee, where he teaches courses in graduate research. His recent article with Lyn Corno, titled "Case Studies of Families Doing Third-grade Homework," appeared in *Teachers College Record,* Winter 1998.

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
*Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)*
*Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)*

# NOTICE

## REPRODUCTION BASIS

☐ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☒ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

ERIC