Keepin' it Real: School Success Beyond Black and White

PRUDENCE L. CARTER

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KEEPIN' IT REAL

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PREFACE

It has become fashionable these days to assert that many African American and second-generation Latino students reject academic excellence because they perceive it as "acting white." The expression is an old one, originating in an era of American history when former slaves and some freed Blacks used "acting white" to characterize those group members who either resisted affiliation with the slave experience or passed as White in exchange for high status and success (Fordham 1996). The idea's currency increased in the mid-1900s as the Black middle class grew and as poor Blacks viewed the middle class and wealthy as "sell-outs" (Frazier 1957). In this contemporary era, the "acting white" moniker still has not lost its resonance. As the argument goes, Black and Latino youth have chosen to define their identities in opposition to whiteness by refusing to speak standard English, do their schoolwork, earn high marks, or fully engage in school because they do not want to be seen as embracing behaviors that they label as "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Lewin 2000; McWhorter 2001; Gates 2004).[1]

And yet, over the years as I have presented talks in numerous forums

on the topics about which I write in this book, I always encounter audience members who say, "I wish they would just get it! We don't disown or devalue education. It has never been a white thing for us!" And indeed, historically, Blacks and Latinos have pursued hard-fought legal challenges for quality education and equity in school resources, from the Supreme Court battles of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 to dismantle segregated schooling to *Castañeda v. Pickard* in 1981, a case brought to court by Mexican American families to ensure adequate bilingual education, access to quality school programs, and equal participation for their language-minority children. These efforts indicate that education and socioeconomic mobility are valued as precious resources and goals in such communities.

How can we believe that the youths of the post–civil rights, hip-hop generation, however, actually hold the same values for education that their parents and foreparents espoused? How can we comprehend that they do not intentionally collude in academic failure? As I will argue, though Black and Latino youths may describe certain practices as "acting white," or in contrast as "acting black" or "acting Spanish," they employ these expressions primarily for cultural reasons, not academic ones. They use their racial and ethnic identities to facilitate in-group solidarity and to assert various cultural symbols of pride and self-worth, not as signs of opposition to conventional formulas for success. However, once these students are enrolled in schools—those cultural places that transmit evaluative messages about whose ways of life are noteworthy and whose are not—and once they exhibit low academic performances, their practices and proclamations get translated by many educators as a rejection of excellence.

This book gets at the crux of a social tension between students' educational and career aspirations and their confrontations with a hierarchy of cultural meanings within schools. Black and Latino students face this hierarchy of meanings as a contestable source of social control, and publicly and privately, they critique how the middle-class and Whites dominate school organizations and the labor market, two spheres integral to their economic attainment and productivity in U.S. society.

Moreover, this book examines how these minority students deploy culture to gain status, a complex story that is better understood as a con-

tinuum of cultural attachments rather than a reflection of their educational values. For many African Americans and Latino youths, their ethno-racial cultures are important sources of strength and are not merely reactive or adaptive by-products of their positions in a stratified opportunity structure. Their cultures provide them with senses of belonging, connection, kinship, and with mechanisms for dealing with experiences in a society where resources and opportunities are not entirely accessible and open. Many appreciate who they are as cultural beings, their differences in speech, interactions, and social tastes; and they intentionally seek distinction, not sameness, to maintain active sociocultural boundaries.

The current mainstream perspective about Black and Latino students' resistance to "acting white" in education backs itself into a conceptual wall through oversimplification. It depicts ethno-racial cultures as primarily responses to exclusion, discrimination, and historical interracial tensions. One consequence of such a perspective, however, is to disregard the substantive contributions of ethno-racial cultures and also to ignore how heterogeneous the members in these ethno-racial groups are. That is, racial and ethnic group members hold multiple intersecting identities shaped by varied forms of socialization and experience, from different class and gender identities to different ideological perspectives on how in-group members should behave and interact with out-group members. Some seek achievement from both a personal and collective perspective, while others individuate and seek primarily personal achievement. Some desire socioeconomic mobility in a nonassimilative way and others adhere to mainstream cultural paths.

The scope of this book is limited, however, and does not focus on all of the multiple identities that members of the same racial or ethnic groups hold. Rather, I focus only on the experiences of groups of *low-income* African American and Latino male and female youths living in particular families and attending specific schools in Yonkers, New York. And these youths are discussed in the contexts of their different racial and ethnic, cultural, and gender identities.

The following pages are filled with stories of students who all profess a strong belief in education but who negotiate both schooling and their communities differently. This book discusses how three groups of students from similar class backgrounds, and in some cases similar ethno-

racial backgrounds, all aspire to the American dream of middle classness, to the benefits that an education brings, including jobs that pay high salaries, home and car ownership, and intact families. For some, though, a disjuncture between their aspirations and their performances exist. Some of this split is linked to these youths' limited access to and familiarity with dominant resources and cultural know-how. Other parts of the disjuncture are associated with students' contestation of the schools' cultural environment, especially when they perceive that educators ignore the values of their own cultures.

The gatekeepers of schools and different economic organizations maintain cultural expectations that do not necessarily mesh well with African American and Latino youths' cultural practices. And I argue that both school officials' and minority students' failure to reconcile their differences—dominant cultural expectations for achievement with non-dominant students' cultural styles, tastes, and displeasure in what school curricula provide them—facilitates, in part, the students' limited attachment to school and their academic disengagement. In this "No Child Left Behind" and school accountability era, these cultural conflicts and differences can undermine educators' effectiveness and production of high results. By paying careful attention to the effects and dynamics of culture at the institutional, group, and individual levels and by enlisting the aid of those whom I call "multicultural navigators" (sources of what social scientists dub as social capital), principals, teachers, parents, and students could find better ways to communicate, interact, and improve students' attachment and engagement to school.

The study on which I base these arguments began in the summer of 1994 while I was working with a research team to survey low-income mothers and their children about their perceptions of communities, economic opportunities, interracial relations, and various aspects of their lives in several Yonkers, New York, neighborhoods. After a brief period of limited contact between 1996 and 1997, I reconnected with many of the families to conduct my own follow-up study with the youth in these families. As a graduate student, I was on the cusp of that age between the mothers' generation and that of their adolescent children, but I came to know the youths better than I came to know their mothers (fathers were rarely present in the households). Though I moved back and forth between the worlds of adolescents and adults, I spent most of my time hang-

ing out with the students in their homes and in the social spaces they frequented, such as the local community center and a fast-food restaurant a few blocks away. And by the time the study was completed in the late 1990s, it was centered on the sixty-eight students whom I introduce here.

In this setting I interviewed and surveyed second-generation Cuban, Dominican, and Puerto Rican, and Black or African American youths who had ancestral roots that stretch mainly from the southern United States and New York.[2] Three in the latter group mentioned having at least one parent who had emigrated from Africa (Liberia) or the Caribbean (Antigua). The majority of the Latino boys (seven out of twelve) identified themselves as "Black Hispanic," while five identified as only "Hispanic." As for Latinas, two identified as "Black Hispanic," two as "White Hispanic," and eight as only "Hispanic." (Throughout this book, I will refer to females of Hispanic descent as "Latina" and males as "Latino.") Overall, females composed more than half—56 percent—of the sample.

All of these students' families qualified for government-subsidized housing assistance. More than half lived in homes with an annual household income of less than ten thousand dollars, headed primarily by a single female. At least 90 percent of them came from families who had been dependent on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) before the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) that established the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.[3] Some lived in what housing analysts refer to as "scattered-site" public houses (government-subsidized homes with neatly manicured front yards and fenced-in backyards, to which the back door was the only entrance) located in predominantly White, middle-class neighborhoods. Others lived in traditional high-rise buildings located in high-poverty, predominantly minority neighborhoods—what is commonly referred to as the "ghetto. " As table A-2 (see appendix) shows, however, there were no significant differences on key demographic and family characteristics by neighborhood type.

The students' home city, Yonkers, is racially diverse and highly segregated, the largest municipality in mostly suburban Westchester County (pop. 188,000 in 1990), and the fourth largest in the state of New York. In many ways, Yonkers resembles many other U.S. cities: it includes both a poor urban center whose residents are mainly people of color, and wealthy suburban-like neighborhoods whose residents are mainly White.

The city can be divided into three areas, each with distinct demographic traits. East Yonkers is predominantly White and middle- to upper-income; several neighborhoods here resemble those of more affluent bedroom communities such as Scarsdale and White Plains. Northwest Yonkers is home to both low-income and middle-income non-Hispanic Whites and to a small neighborhood of African American middle-income households. In southwest Yonkers, which surrounds the older central business district, most of the population is African American and Latino, and 22 percent of households in this area make up the city's oldest and most dilapidated housing stock.

In southwest Yonkers, many low-income Black, Latino, and even a few White families congregate in brick high-rises with dark hallways and steel staircases often strewn with refuse. Occasionally, I lost my way in the maze of hallways where units sometimes went unmarked. Youths from the southwest and I chatted at the tables in their modest kitchens or on the couches of their living rooms, where in the summer we sat near the window in un-air-conditioned spaces; they were not afforded the luxury of central air-conditioning like their peers in east Yonkers who lived in the new townhouses. Younger siblings sometimes regaled me with stories or sang along with a musical celebrity as the latest R&B and hip-hop hits played on the radio.

School was located not far from home for the Yonkers youths. With two exceptions, all of the students in the study either currently attended or had attended one of the eight public magnet middle and high schools in the city. In 1980, the Yonkers Public School System faced a major legal challenge by the U.S. Department of Justice, the federal Office for Civil Rights, and later by the Yonkers chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These plaintiffs accused city officials and the board of education of maintaining racially segregated schools, and on May 13, 1986, federal appeals court Judge Leonard Sand ordered the school district to develop a plan that would ameliorate school segregation. The plan submitted by the Yonkers Board of Education sought to bring about voluntary school desegregation through magnet schools. These magnet schools were designed to attract White students from the wealthier east side of town to the minority districts on the west side, and vice versa. In this way, Black, Hispanic, and White students all boarded school buses and crisscrossed the city to attend newly created magnet programs.

While I was conducting this study, the school district comprised thirty-two elementary and secondary magnet schools, some with different focuses and specialty areas. Each year the schools held fairs and open houses to help parents decide which magnet schools to send their children to, and in a designated week, parents listed three school choices. The district held a lottery for students' school placement. According to estimates, the schools became racially balanced with a more equitable distribution of resources after the implementation of the board of education's plan in the late-1980s. Increasingly, however, the school ratio of minority to nonminority students shifted significantly from a ratio of 47 percent minority and 53 percent nonminority in 1985, to 70 percent and 30 percent, respectively, in 1997. As for personnel, of 824 teachers in both the middle and high schools, 82 percent are White, 10 percent Black, 7 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian.[4]

More than a decade after implementing the desegregation plan, the unequal performances between racial and ethnic minorities and White students persisted (Brenner 1998). Census data reveal that in 1990, the enrollment rates in the Yonkers schools were roughly the same for White sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds—92 percent—but lower for Blacks and Hispanics—86 percent and 79 percent, respectively (U.S. Bureau of Census 1991). In spite of significant improvements in school enrollment rates, the unequal performances of minority and White students on standardized tests also persisted. Yonkers Public School System data showed that since 1987, the gap between Black and Latino students and all others (Whites and a small percentage of Asians) actually widened on the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. Black and Latino students score nearly two grade levels behind White students on standardized tests, just as they did in the early days of the desegregation drive (Brenner 1998). While White students in the Yonkers Public School System represent only about 30 percent of the district enrollment, they received 76 percent of high school regents' diplomas in 1997. The statistics also revealed that Black and Latino students have been suspended from school at a disproportionately higher rate. For example, of the 5,641 suspensions in the 1994-95 school year, 82% were given to Black and Latino students.

Graduation, suspension, and test-score profiles constitute and perpetuate a master account of "Black" and "Hispanic" student achievement. Some educators and researchers do the same as they spin these data, and

the fallout is the tendency to homogenize the social and academic experiences of students who fall within a particular racial/ethnic or class groups. To fully comprehend what is going on for those students with the lackluster academic profiles, we should make sense of why some Black and Latino students disengage from their schools while others strive for and achieve academic excellence.

Keepin' It Real does not present a fully representative story of the educational and socio-cultural experiences of *all* African American and Latino students living in the United States, nor are these findings generalizable to all of the students in Yonkers, New York. Thus I caution the reader to interpret the survey findings in the context of my study. Nevertheless, the patterns found here are illustrative of social and cultural processes that may occur in wider society, and I would hope that the discussion that follows would inform the practices and views of researchers who conduct large-scale, nationally representative studies. In addition, they should provide some insight to educators examining similar issues that confront students with similar profiles elsewhere.

I have written this book to add another perspective on a matter of importance to many: social scientists conversant with the theoretical concepts and frameworks used to guide educational research; parents and students from disadvantaged groups who seek fuller incorporation in schools; and teachers, principals, and policy makers who desire to produce quality educational results. Collectively, they strive to increase Black and Latino students' school engagement and performance, and I hope that my contributions here will assist in thinking about how school success can indeed move beyond "black" and "white."

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KEEPIN' IT REAL

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INTRODUCTION

Minding the Gap: Race, Ethnicity, Achievement, and Cultural Meaning

A few years before I embarked on the study discussed in these pages, I traveled across eight states to recruit academically talented students for admission to Brown University. I visited an array of schools, from those in Detroit's inner city to the upper-middle-class suburban enclaves of Shaker Heights, Ohio, to the de facto segregated schools of Memphis, Tennessee, to the vast campuses of wealthy prep schools along the eastern seaboard in Massachusetts. The students I encountered varied, too, from the top achievers to the students who loitered in the hallways and cut classes. Often those in the latter group pointed me in the direction of either the principal's office or the counselor's office or would even escort me to the door. Most of the students visiting me during my information sessions, however, made up the schools' academic elite, usually Asian and White students who were among the top 1 to 5 percent of SAT scorers and exuded the confidence that they were the right matches for a selective university. There were also those like the Latino boy from Indiana, the son of semiliterate farm workers, and the African American girl from Montclair, New Jersey, the daughter of doctors—both top students in their graduat-

ing classes, one the first in his family to attend college, the other a second-generation collegian-to-be.

The farm workers' son and the doctors' daughter, however, were members of a small group of Latino and African American students whom guidance counselors considered the "cream of the crop," and often I wondered why was there such a low representation from these groups. In addition, I was curious about the apparent academic disengagement of my occasional escorts and about what would become of them. They did not jump at the opportunity to visit with a college admission officer, though when I asked them about higher educational plans, they responded, "Yeah, I plan to go to college. Got to get that degree." Teachers and counselors answered cautiously when I inquired about the low proportion of African American and Latino students who applied to places like Brown each year, and usually they said that these pupils did not perform as well as Asians and Whites, nor did they enroll in the advanced placement and honors courses—classes that selective university admission officers look for—to the same degree.

Over a decade after my contact with a multitude of American high schools, I still hear scholars, journalists, and politicians asking the same questions I had raised with those counselors and teachers: Why are so many African American and Latino students performing less well than their Asian and White peers in classes and on exams? Why are fewer African American and Latino students enrolled in advanced placement and honors courses in multiracial schools? And why are they seemingly less attached to school? Nowadays, newspapers headline the significant racial and ethnic achievement differences: "Reason Is Sought for Lag by Blacks in School Effort" (Belluck 1999), one shouts. "Closure Sought for Hispanic Education Gap," cries another (Henry 2000). The test-score gap, meanwhile, has become the focal point of an enterprise of research studies (see Jencks and Phillips 1998; Kao and Thompson 2003). Social scientists provide myriad explanations such as poverty, limited parental education, underfinanced schools, low teacher expectations, bad curricula, low parental involvement and limited access to information, and vestiges of racism in schools.

Culture makes a difference too. One reason that gained prominence and continues to have much currency within research and policy circles is Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu's provocative claim (1986) that many

racial and ethnic minority students do not perform well in school because they avoid the "burden of acting white." After the completion of an ethnographic study of a predominantly black high school in a low-income community in Washington, D.C., Fordham and Ogbu argued that Black students equate speaking Standard English and other achievement-oriented behaviors, such as studying hard and excelling in school, with whites. And to avoid being labeled as "white," these students succumb to peer pressure *not* to do well in school. Black students, Fordham and Ogbu suggested, either consciously or unconsciously develop ambivalence toward learning and achievement. The result is a collective resistance to the white, middle-class organization of school, or an oppositional identity that perceives schooling as a "white" domain and high academic achievement as being incongruent with their racial and ethnic identities (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu 1974, 1978; Ogbu and Simons 1998; Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi 1986).[1]

Like many American educators, school researchers, and policymakers, I also want to understand the academic achievement gap, and I aimed to understand it first by examining what factors are associated with students' attachment to school. I became dissatisfied with prevailing cultural explanations for low academic success, however, while a part of a team of researchers studying issues of poverty and social attainment and working with scores of low-income African American and Latino adolescents in the late 1990s. I, too, had heard students use expressions like "acting white," and even "acting black" and "acting Spanish" (the ethnolinguistic identity embraced by the Latino youth to describe those of Hispanic descent) when they described each other. Yet I did not find that these students equated studying hard and excelling in school with whiteness. Instead, I heard how minority youth often face social pressures to embrace cultural practices or "acts" associated with their racial and ethnic identities. Expressions like "acting white" also signaled various dynamics about social power and control among students *within* their ethnic, racial, and gendered communities.

It occurred to me that any explanation that links identity and culture to student engagement and achievement required further investigation, and so for a ten-month period from 1997 to 1998, I conducted a study with sixty-eight students, ranging in age from thirteen to twenty and focused on the students' educational, racial, ethnic, and cultural beliefs and practices.[2]