The Educational Experiences of Street-Life-Oriented Black Boys: How Black Boys Use Street Life as a Site of Resilience in High School

Yasser Arafat Payne¹ and Tara M. Brown²

Abstract
This Participatory Action Research (PAR) project worked with four active street-life-oriented Black men to document how a community sample of street-life-oriented Black boys between the ages of 16 and 19 frame and use “street life” as a site of resilience inside schools. Qualitative data were collected in the form of written responses on 156 surveys, 10 individual interviews, and one group interview. Data were primarily collected inside the street communities of Harlem, New York City and Paterson, New Jersey. Qualitative findings reveal the young men, overall, hold positive views of formal education and its significance in their lives. Yet they hold negative attitudes regarding previous and current educational experiences. Also, results demonstrate the young men ultimately position their street orientation as an adaptive identity to have inside schools.

Keywords
Black men/boys and crime, Black boys and school, school violence, participatory action research (PAR), street ethnography

A core variant of Black boys in many low-income urban K-12 high schools identify as street-life-oriented. These boys participate in a street culture that includes a variety of illicit activities like gang involvement, interpersonal violence, and selling narcotics to

¹University of Delaware, Newark, DE
²Brandeis University, Waltham, MA

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Yasser Payne, 424 Ewing Hall, Black American Studies Department, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716
Email: ypayne@udel.edu
survive in the harsh impoverished communities in which they reside. These boys often bring illicit activities into schools and, for many school personnel, these students represent the most difficult of the “hard cases”—hard to reach, hard to teach, and hard to control. The primary means for responding to the “problems” they pose inside schools has been disciplinary action, which has increasingly relied on more rigid and punitive disciplinary policies, law enforcement, and surveillance equipment (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2009c). Low-income Black boys are suspended, expelled, and arrested in school at comparatively high rates and for those who are street-life-oriented, these rates are undoubtedly higher (NCES, 2009c).

Ironically, growing rates of disciplinary action and prison-like security strategies have not increased overall safety in large low-income urban public high schools (NCES, 2009a). Such measures do, however, exacerbate the difficult life circumstances of street-life-oriented Black boys. This has dire consequences for the boys and society at large. As increasing numbers of street-life-oriented Black boys are equipped with little means for educational advancement and gainful employment, they will likely be among the chronically unemployed, continue to engage in illegal street life activities, and be incarcerated at increasingly alarming rates. Research strongly suggests that punitive disciplinary actions as the primary and, often sole interventions, has been largely ineffective in alleviating the challenges that street-life-oriented Black boys grapple with inside schools (Ayers et al., 2001; NCES, 2009c). In general, such interventions are based on mistaken interpretations of these boys’ behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes—which lead to poor conceptual framings of these boys as nonresilient, maladaptive, disaffected, and defiantly troubled (Ferguson, 2000; Payne, Starks, & Gibson, 2009).

The present community-based phenomenological study examines the educational experiences of street-life-oriented Black male high school students by focusing on the young men’s relationships with school personnel, preparation for economic and educational opportunities, and the use of “street life” as identity and activity inside schools. Also, we argue that street-life-oriented Black boys very much want a good education and some of their activities inside schools, though often interpreted otherwise, are functionally adaptive within the contexts of their lives. Better contextualizing how street-life-oriented Black boys experience schools, and rethinking notions of anger and resistance among these boys, from their perspectives, will help researchers to conceptualize and create more effective interventions. Specifically, this study examines the educational experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys by way of (a) attitudes toward education, (b) experiences with educational officials or authorities, and (c) the young men’s attitudinal and behavioral responses (i.e., street identity) to such experiences.

**Theoretical Framing**

This study conceptualizes street life as a “site of resilience” in street-life-oriented Black boys (Payne, 2008). A sites-of-resilience theoretical analysis argues that the streets offer particular psychological and physical spaces that operate in tandem to produce a site
of strength, community, culture, and ultimately resilience for street-life-oriented Black men. Resilience in the context of sites-of-resilience theory is understood in terms of how the streets organize meaning around feeling well, satisfied, or accomplished as well as how the young men choose to survive in relation to adverse structural conditions. Street life is a phenomenological term essentially viewed by the young men as an ideology centered on personal and economic survival (Payne, 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Payne et al., 2009; Payne & Gibson, 2008). In addition, street life is also conceptualized as a spectrum of networking behaviors that manifest through bonding and illegal activities. Bonding activities include such interpersonal acts as joking, “hanging on the block,” or playing basketball, to organizing and sponsoring local events in the community. Illegal expressions, for instance, may include burglary, interpersonal violence, or selling drugs. It is important to note that a central assumption of the theory is that low-income Black boys acquire a street life orientation primarily as a means for economic survival, given most have experienced little access to quality economic and educational opportunity. In addition, a sites-of-resilience analysis theorizes resilience in the context of (a) race and racism, (b) sociohistorical patterns, (c) the intersection of concentrated economic poverty (capitalism) and resiliency, as well as (d) phenomenology to understand personal constructions of resilience.

**Literature Review**

Social scientists have a rich legacy of examining the educational experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys. Theoretical and empirical work in this area of inquiry has been conducted in the fields of education, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and criminal justice and has addressed many school-related issues, including Black boys’ attitudes towards education (Ferguson, 2000; Ogbu, 1991, 2004; Payne et al., 2009), their relationships with school personnel (Gibbs, 1988; Noguera, 2008; O’Connor, 1998; Ogbu, 1991; Payne et al., 2009; White & Johnson, 1991), their behaviors (and misbehaviors) in school (Devine, 1996; Gibbs, 1988; Patton, 1998; Young, 2004), and the disciplinary practices used to respond to them (Ayers et al., 2001; Brown, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Peterson, 1998) as well as Black boys’ strategies for coping with adverse schooling conditions (Dance, 2002; Carter, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Ogbu, 1985, 1991; Payne et al., 2009).

**Attitudes Toward education**

Black male K-12 students, particularly those who attend low-income urban schools, consistently demonstrate comparatively low levels of academic achievement “on every known measure of academic performance” (Noguera, 2008, p. 189). Nationally, the high school graduation rate for Black males is about 50% and this statistic is significantly lower in many large cities: as low as 31% in New York City and 20% in Cleveland (Schott Foundation, 2008). One way that Black boys’ academic and disciplinary troubles
with school have been explained by both researchers and educational practitioners as a result of presumed poor attitudes and dispositions toward academic learning. The perception that street-life-oriented Black boys do not care about succeeding in school is supported by the “acting White” theory, which posits that due to historical racial oppression in the United States, some Black youth develop “oppositional identities” (e.g., street identity) in which formal education is rejected as a prerogative of Whites’ and as culturally incompatible or even hostile to Black youth (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2004). Indeed, some Black boys do resist and reject aspects of formal schooling. However, as argued by Carter (2005, pp. vi, viii), what has been misinterpreted as rejection of learning and education or “opposition to conventional formulas for success” among Black boys is actually “contestation of the schools’ cultural environment, especially when they perceive that educators ignore the values of their own cultures.” This argument is reflected in Ferguson’s (2000) study of the attitudes and behaviors of a group of street-life-oriented Black boys in elementary school, who called themselves Niggers For Life (NFL). She observed how differential value systems put these boys in conflict with school personnel and academic and institutional processes and she found that they resisted a “White middle class” value system embedded in academic processes, not “mastery” of the academic content. Furthermore, Ferguson (2000) found that those boys who acquired a middle class value system were more likely to succeed academically. Ferguson (2000) asserts,

Success and social mobility . . . is dependent on the mastery of middle class linguistic codes, lifestyles, disciplinary modes, and relational manners; that schools reflect the familial and neighborhood practices of upper- and middle-class students who fit smoothly into its forms of communication and social organization. These youth do not have to make the kind of profound adjustments made by children from working-class and poor families . . . they (Black youth) point out that “acting white” is a prerequisite for fitting in at school and is absolutely basic to any kind of success. This requirement ruthlessly excludes African-American cultural modes as relevant and meaningful knowledge practices. (pp. 204-205)

In schools, curricula, modes of instruction, definitions of success, behavioral expectations, and disciplinary practices are posed as culturally and value-neutral. This serves as a basis for framing Black boys’ “failure” as a willful and outright rejection of the professed purpose of formal schooling: education. However some scholars, while few and far between, argue that street-life-oriented Black boys demonstrate a strong desire to be educated well and to attain the elements of a middle class life—postsecondary education, a well-paying job, and economic stability. The seeming contradiction between the boys’ educational aspirations and their troubles with school reflects, as Carter (2005, p. viii) points out, conflicts between “dominant cultural expectations for achievement [and minority] students’ cultural styles, tastes, and displeasure in what school curricula provide for them.” These conflicts play out in multiple ways, including in students’ interactions with school personnel.
Relationships With School Personnel

Research underscores how tensions with teachers and school administrators characterize many Black boys’ schooling experiences (Conchas & Noguera, 2004; Dance, 2002; Gibbs, 1988). Strained relationships with high school personnel have been attributed, in part, to the cultural difference and conflicts described above, which are indicative of racial/ethnic, class, and gender differences between teachers and students. In 2007, while students of color comprised 44% of the public school student population, nearly 85% of public school teachers were White, mostly female and middle class (NCES, 2009a, 2009c). According to Patton (1998), this plays a role in low-income Black boys’ relative underachievement in a school system where race, class, and gender biases are prevalent among school staff (Ferguson, 2000; Skiba, 2001).

In addition to low academic expectations, low-income Black boys, in particular, are often seen as dangerous and threatening. Ferguson (2000) found that beliefs among White teachers included perceptions of Black boys as inherently different from and more criminally disposed than White children. As a result, she posits, “misbehavior [by Black boys] is likely to be interpreted as symptomatic of ominous criminal proclivities” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 89). Munroe (2005, p. 49) argues this is, “in large part a function of macro-level problems such as the criminalization of black males.” It should be underscored that fear and criminalization, low expectations, and the cultural devaluing of Black boys by school personnel contributes significantly to troubled student–teacher relationships and negatively affects these boys’ educational and economic opportunities.

Street Activities and Disciplinary Practices in High Schools

Among street-life-oriented Black boys who engage in (and are exposed to) street life activities in school, like violence, gang activity, and drug trafficking—academic and disciplinary troubles and conflicts with school personnel are particularly prevalent as such activities can exacerbate fear and low expectations among school personnel and put these boys at risk for expulsion, arrest, and incarceration.

Violence is a reality in many high schools that serve significant numbers of low-income Black youth, who are both victims and perpetrators of school violence at comparatively high rates. According to NCES (2009a, p. 14), Black high school students report “being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property,” and fearing assault in school at higher rates than other racial groups. Black youth are most likely to suffer from and engage in violence during school hours and during the 3 hr after school (Synder, Sickmond, & Bilchik, 1999; Synder, Sickmond, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996). Furthermore, gangs can now be found in schools throughout urban America. According to The 2004 National Youth Gang Survey, 37% of all gang members in high school were Black, whereas Whites accounted for only 8% and Black high school students report gang presence in their schools at higher rates.
than other racial groups (Egley & Ritz, 2004). Gang members sometimes, but not always, engage in gang-related activities like drug sales and intergroup violence in the school building.

Violence and other street activities in schools have prompted punitive and rigid federal school policies like the Gun-Free Schools and the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Acts of 1994, which brought “zero tolerance” and mandatory sentencing from the criminal justice system to the K-12 public school system. Other responses to, particularly, the threat of violence have been to increase the numbers of disciplinarians (e.g., security guards, police officers, and resources officers) in schools and to involve law enforcement in matters that were once handled by and within schools (Ayers et al., 2001; Noguera, 2008). These approaches to school discipline are particularly prevalent in low-income, high-“minority” urban schools and have disproportionately affected low-income Black male students who, as a group, are disciplined at higher rates and more severely than other students (NCES, 2009b; Skiba, 2001). For example, in 2007, Blacks, mostly boys, made 15% of the public school population but accounted for 36% of all school suspensions and 37% of expulsions (NCES, 2009c). Ayers et al. (2001, p. xii) assert that urban public schools are increasingly . . . turning into fortresses where electronic searches, locked doors, armed police, surveillance cameras, patrolled cafeterias, and weighty rule books define the landscape . . . Recent research indicates that as schools become more militarized they become less safe, in large part because the first casualty is the central, critical relationship between teacher and student . . .

Ironically, there is little evidence that more rigid and punitive disciplinary practices and increases in security equipment have resulted in safer schools, overall (Brown, 2007; Skiba, 2001), especially for Black boys in low-income urban communities. Such tactics contribute significantly to school failure, dropout, arrest, and incarceration among Black male students. As high schools rely more heavily on law enforcement, school arrests become more frequent and schools increasingly become direct conduits to prison, especially for street-life-oriented Black boys and young men. Furthermore, such practices decreases the likelihood of the cultivation of caring relationships with school staff that, as Ayers et al. (2001) point out, are so critical to school success.

Resilience and Black Boys’ Coping Strategies

Traditional discussions on the resilience of street-life-oriented Black males have been grounded in four problematic assumptions: (a) a middle class and upper middle-class orientation; (b) an ahistorical stance; (c) an individualized perspective that often holds the individual solely responsible for the development of resilience; and (d) a failure to incorporate a structural dimension that explicitly includes an analysis of the impact of blocked economic and educational opportunity on the lives of street-life-oriented Black men. Consequently, such conceptualizations of resilience allow only particular
populations, for example, those considered to reflect middle-class values, to be perceived as resilient. Conversely, street-life-oriented Black males have been perceived as incompatible with resilience. In the traditional literature, the concept has been dichotomized; one is either resilient or not. Thus the construct has been framed mostly as an outcome and as a result; individuals who consistently experience social failures (e.g., dropping out of school, unemployment, incarceration, etc.) are viewed as nonresilient, whereas those who succeed along similar measures are viewed as resilient (Carver, 1998; Freitas & Downey, 1998; Garmezy, 1991; O’Leary, 1998).

Some scholars have radically reframed Black boys’ use of a street orientation in high schools as a form of resiliency or coping with adverse schooling conditions and the mainstream socialization practices institutionalized by schools (Brown, 2000; Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000; Foley, 1983; Harris, 1992; Nettles & Pleck, 1996; Ogbu, 1985, 1991; Payne et al., 2009; Peterson, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). For example, Ogbu (1991) notes four strategies employed by inner city Black adolescents to excel in high school: (a) competition and conflict, (b) collective struggle, (c) clientship or uncle tomming, and (d) hustling. He asserts that there are at least three aspects to “hustling” that can describe some of the attitudes and behavior of street-life-oriented Black boys in high school: (a) refusal to respect White teachers because they represent an extension of White economic and political oppression; (b) manipulating people for personal gain; and (c) using street life activities in school. In the case of students who are economically impoverished, these activities are necessary for survival. Dance (2002) highlights three ways to better understand and respond to issues related to street-life-oriented Black boys in school: (a) identify and address assumptions made by scholars and other authorities about Black boys, (b) more seriously incorporate phenomenological testimonies of street-life-oriented students in research analyses and, (c) provide solutions that more strongly emphasize and incorporate social structural change.

The present study addresses these three recommendations and is guided by the following three research questions:

**Research Question 1:** What are street-life-oriented Black boys’ attitudes toward education?

**Research Question 2:** How do street-life-oriented Black boys frame experiences with teachers and other school officials? How do these experiences with teachers shape their academic opportunities?

**Research Question 3:** How do Black boys conceptualize and use “street life” as a site of resilience inside schools?

**Method**

This analysis examines how a community sample of Black boys between the ages of 16 and 19, frame and use “street life” as a site of resilience inside schools. Mixed-methods were employed to collect data in the form of 156 surveys, 10 individual interviews, and one group interview.
Survey Subsample

A total of 156 participants completed a survey for this analysis. Sixty-five percent of surveys were collected in the streets of New York City while 32.1% of surveys were collected in the streets of North New Jersey. As a condition of the Internal Review Board, data were not collected from students under 16 years of age. Consequently, 9th graders make up 5.1% of the survey subsample, 10th graders make up 28.8%, 11th graders make up 28.8%, and 12th graders, 30.8%. Most boys reported being in a mainstream academic track: 3.8% in special education, 8.3% in remedial or basic, 76.0% in regular/academic, and 9% in advanced placement (AP)/Honors. Also, nearly 11% of the high school subsample reported having attended more than one school.

Individual Interview Subsample

Ten individual interviews were conducted with street-life-oriented Black boys enrolled in high school. The average age for this subsample is 17.1 years while ages ranged between 16 and 19 years and while the average grade level for the boys in this subsample is 10.5. Grade level for this subsample ranged between 9th and 12th grade: 9th grade \(n = 1\), 10th grade \(n = 4\), 11th grade \(n = 2\), and 12th grade \(n = 3\). Individual and group interviews were conducted in a private location of the participants’ choosing (e.g., apartment, home, etc).

Group Interview Subsample

The group interview with street-life-oriented Black boys in high school consisted of 4 participants between the ages of 16 and 17. One student was enrolled in 9th grade, 1 student in 10th grade, and 2 students in 11th grade. Also, interviews (individual and group) were conducted with at least one street PAR member present. All interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hrs.

Procedure: Organizing the Street PAR Team

Four active street-life-oriented Black men, ages 19 to 29, were selected to participate on this study’s street participatory action research (PAR) team. The 4 men who made up the street PAR team were asked to participate in a research methods workshop that consisted of four, 3-hr sessions. Research methods training consisted of exercises centered on theory, method, and analysis. Responsibilities for the research team, on successful completion of research methods training, included (a) literature reviews, (b) data collection, (c) qualitative analysis, (d) writing contributions, and (e) professional presentations. All street PAR researchers were monetarily compensated for all time contributed.

On completion of training, the research team mapped out street communities of interest into street locations classified as (a) “cool” sites—low street activity; (b) “warm” sites—moderate street activity; and (c) “hot” sites—high street activity. In each of these locations,
the research team identified a set of “street allies” or gatekeepers to these street communities. A snowball sample was organized and with the permission of identified on-the-ground community residents, we entered the street community to collect data. The street PAR team went to the various sites in which the men could be found in large enough numbers. The street PAR team, including the first author of this article, collected survey data in five spaces classified as “hot” sites. Data collection sites ranged between street corners, schools, the barbershop, corridors of apartment buildings, or the actual residencies of street-life-oriented Black boys (i.e., apartment, home, etc.), for instance. Survey and interview data were collected primarily in street communities or neighborhoods in Harlem, New York City, and Paterson, New Jersey. Participants received US$10 for completing a survey and US$20 for completing an interview. Also, participants received an informed consent form as well as a resource package with information about employment and educational opportunities.

Instrumentation

Opportunity Gap Survey. This 142-item survey is designed to assess high school students’ attitudes on educational and economic opportunities in the United States (Fine et al., 2004). It includes 12 opened-ended items in which participants are asked to write a brief response. One item selected for analysis asked respondents to “Describe what you imagine to be the worst possible situation in school.”

Data Coding Process

The principal investigator and two members of the PAR team used a content analysis to generate codes for this study. This coding group met two times a week for approximately 3 weeks in a private classroom located in the Social-Personality Psychology department at the Graduate Center-City University of New York. Coding sessions lasted for approximately 2 hrs. The principal investigator reviewed, at the beginning and end of each coding session, the dimensions of: Sites of Resilience (Payne, 2008) and Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) frameworks. The men coded transcripts of qualitative interviews in relation to these theories.

Five domains were developed from the men’s data coding: (a) Education/School, (b) Socioeconomic, (c) Social Structural, (d) Attitudinal Affect, and (e) Phenomenology/Positionality (Payne, 2005). The analysis for this article, however, will focus on those data associated with the Education/School domain (see Table 1), which included two core codes: (a) Student–Teacher Interaction and (b) School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Interrater Reliability

Four undergraduate Black students, who have formal experience with PAR and interrater reliability, were selected to be raters for this study. Also, all raters have taken at least one undergraduate criminal justice course that specifically focused on street-life-oriented
Black men. Raters convened in a conference room and were each given five transcripts ranging between five and eight pages. Raters were instructed to highlight all passages perceived to be congruent with codes presented and defined for the raters. Raters’ transcripts were averaged out against a master copy. Reliability codes were generated for the following core codes: (a) Student–Teacher Interaction (1.0) and (b) School-to-Prison Pipeline (0.64). A subset of six codes and corresponding reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, Student–Teacher Interaction: (a) Career Interest (0.60); (b) Positive Experiences (0.70); (c) (Dis)respect (0.70); (d) (Lack of) Preparation (0.90); (e) (Inadequate) School Resources (0.80); and (f) Race/Racism (0.40). A subset of three codes and corresponding reliability alpha coefficients were generated for the core code, School-to-Prison Pipeline: (a) School Violence (0.74); (b) School as a Site of Economic Opportunity (0.74); and (c) School Surveillance (0.83; See Table 1). This interrater reliability coding exercise lasted approximately 2 hrs. All raters were given US$20 for their participation in this activity.

**Results**

Findings from this study are organized to report a three-part holistic perspective on the educational experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys and young men enrolled in large low-income urban high schools. Specifically, findings grounded in the standpoint of the young men report: (a) attitudes toward education; (b) experiences inside schools with school authorities (which are not congruent with this sample’s attitudes toward education); and (c) attitudinal and behavioral responses (i.e., street identity) to such experiences with school authorities. Data reported through the aforementioned three research questions offer a phenomenologically based integrative understanding of the
oftentimes “difficult to comprehend” educational experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys and young men.

**What Are Street-life-oriented Black Boys’ Attitudes Toward Education?**

Across methods, street-life-oriented Black boys in this study indicate positive attitudes toward education and learning. In general, they demonstrated that they understood and valued the importance of a quality education. All participants noted they wanted to go to college on graduation from high school and all those interviewed looked favorably on those who were fortunate enough to attend college or secure quality employment.

Survey responses indicate that 75% of the boys agree or strongly agree with the statement, “I care a lot about my grades” \((N = 153)\); 75% agree or strongly agree with, “In my school, all students can achieve if they try hard” \((N = 154)\); 80.1% of the men think that it is important or very important to be “going to a good school” \((N = 154)\); and 86% think that it is important or very important to “get a good education” \((N = 154)\). In addition, 67% of these young men disagree or strongly disagree that, “In the United States, a “low-income” student has the same chance of a good education as a “wealthy” student \((N = 155)\).

During individual interviews, 7 young men noted something positive about teachers and/or their overall school experience and most expressed a desire to pursue a professional career. A number of interviewees aspired to become “teachers,” “lawyers,” “engineers,” and “construction workers.” Several described relationships with teachers and school that were productive, respectful, and even “fun.” For example, both RJ (16, 10th grade) and Ron (16, 10th grade) regarded their school experiences favorably and insisted they will eventually go to college and secure meaningful employment.

**Individual Interview Participant**

Yasser: So what kind of grades do you get?
RJ (16, 10th grade): B’s.—*Positive Experiences*
Yasser: What are you looking to do after high school?
RJ (16, 10th grade): Go on to college.
Yasser: I hear that . . . What are you looking to do [after college]?
RJ (16, 10th grade): Build stuff [i.e. construction work].

**Individual Interview Participant**

Yasser: What is it like going to high school for you?
Ron (16, 10th grade): It’s fun to me . . . . —*Positive Experiences*
Yasser: What’s fun about it?
Ron (16, 10th grade): . . . [I can] get my education.—*Positive Experiences*
Yasser: What do you want to do when you graduate high school?
Ron (16, 10th grade): I’m trying to . . . [get a] . . . house and that’s it.
Yasser: Are you looking to go to college at all?
Ron (16, 10th grade): Yeah, I’m going to go to college.

Group Interview Participant

Wah Benz (17, 11th grade): As Black people we need to go to college if we’re going to be something higher in life than just this high school diploma.—Career Interest/Race

In addition, 59% (92) of survey respondents reported that they probably will or definitely will, “pursue a Bachelors of Arts degree,” and 55% (86) of the young men responded that they probably will or definitely will “pursue a professional degree (lawyer, dentist, doctor, engineer, or a PhD),” at some point in their life. In tandem, survey and interview data speak powerfully to how, overall, these street-life-oriented Black boys value formal education and understood it as significant to their lives.

How Do Street-Life-Oriented Black Boys Frame Experiences With Teachers and Other School Officials? How Do These Experiences With Teachers Shape Their Academic Opportunities?

Across methods, most of the boys did not view their schools as nurturing or supportive environments and expressed feelings of alienation and frustration, particularly in relation to school personnel. While several participants acknowledged both caring and uncaring teachers, findings strongly suggest nonetheless that more often than not, participants had troubled relationships with school personnel. Several described teachers and other school officials (e.g., security staff) as “racist” and “phony” and, overall, the boys characterized their schools and school personnel as disrespectful and not genuinely interested in their academic development.

Group Interview Participant

Wah Benz (17, 11th grade): You feel me. Like teachers in different races [who are not Black] . . . sometimes I feel discriminated [against], because if I do something and another person do something of a different color . . . they . . . get treated less harsh than what my punishment was. Yeah, I feel discriminated [against]. I don’t feel respected as a Black man in this school at all.—Race/Racism

Individual Interview Participant

Rock (18, 11th grade): . . . they’ll be like, “. . . you’re always in the hallway . . . When you graduate, when you get out of high school, you ain’t going to do shit.”
Yasser: So your teacher told you, “that you ain’t going to do shit?”
Rock (18, 11th grade): Yeah, “I ain’t going to be shit. I ain’t never going to be shit, but be in jail, because I look like a hustler, I’m going to be hustling.”—Disrespect

Further, Ron (16, 10 grade) characterized some teachers as more interested in “their checks” than in student learning and as unwilling to invest in student learning.

Ron (16, 10th grade): The teachers . . . [are] just there for their checks, and some of them are . . . there for students. You got some teachers that respect . . . [students] . . . love you like their child. And some teachers that don’t care if you come to school or not.—Disrespect & Positive Experiences (Individual Interview)

Ron, like other participants, differentiated among teachers, criticizing some and describing others as caring, fair, and respectful. However, even among these participants, overall perceptions of teachers were significantly negative. For example, Wah Benz (17, 11th grade), noted in the group interview that, “[there are] teachers in here [school] who try to do their job fairly and try to work with everybody” but he remained largely critical of teachers as a group. Brick (19, 12th grade) noted in his individual interview that “a couple” of teachers in his school showed that they cared for students but that “a lot” did not care and that there is a “limit” to which teachers, overall, are willing to respect and help Black boys.

Individual Interview Participant

Yasser: Do you think most teachers respect Black boys in high school?
Brick (19, 12th grade): Yeah, a little something. It’s to a limit [with] teachers . . . you got a lot of like nasty teachers in there . . . who really don’t care. You failing out, you ask, “who’s going to help?” and they are not trying to help you . . . A lot of teachers in there you can’t get along with. There’s a couple of teachers in here . . . that will sit down, call your mother if you do something wrong. These are teachers that care.—Disrespect & Positive Experiences

During his individual interview, Brick (19, 12th grade) also discussed how teachers must believe in students in order for them to be academically successful, connecting student attitudes toward schooling to teachers’ perceptions and treatment of them (Ferguson, 2000; Payne et al. 2009). He plainly noted that street-life-oriented Black boys who want to be educated must tolerate negative attitudes and/or poor treatment from educators. Brick (19, 12th grade) poignantly describes how such experiences made him feel to encounter educators “who don’t really care.”

Brick (19, 12th grade): It’s bad, . . . it’s bad to see that [poor treatment by teachers]. Because I mean we’re going to be doing this shit anyway [going to school]. They don’t really care about nothing that we’re here for . . . like most kids might need like an idol [mentor] or somebody, a person who influence them more . . . . If the
teachers ain’t influencing you to the education that people say is important, then how are we going to learn something. *(Lack of) Preparation & Disrespect (Individual Interview)*

Here, Brick (19, 12th grade) connects poor treatment and lack of support on the part of teachers to students’ failure to learn. This link was reinforced by other participants as well.

Individual Interview Participant

Cool Black (17, 9th grade): *Seriously . . . our school is shit man. Teachers don’t really like care about you, man. You know. They’re just talking to you . . . like, “we’ll care about you” or whatever, but most of them teachers, they don’t really care about you. We don’t really get taught nothing anyway.—Disrespect*

Group Interview Participants

Iceberg (16, 9th grade): Me, personally, when I leave [my high school], I know I ain’t going to be able to go to college, because of what they taught here and like basically what I did while I was here.—*(Lack of)-Preparation*

In general, street-life-oriented boys in this study felt that they were neither receiving a quality education nor being adequately prepared for future economic and educational opportunities. They saw this, in large part, as a function of experiences with school personnel who demonstrated disrespect toward them and insufficient investment in their learning.

**How Do Black Boys Conceptualize and Use “Street Life” as a Site of Resilience Inside Schools?**

Most street-life-oriented Black boys in this sample considered their high schools to be unwelcoming. Insufficient resources and facilities like old computers and overcrowded classrooms, and disrespectful school officials are among the conditions cited as creating a hostile environment. Such egregious conditions send a message to students that they and their education are not valued. Several participants likened their high schools to “jail,” speaking about security guards and police officers positioned throughout their schools, some of whom, according to participants, harassed and were inappropriately violent with students.

Group Interview Participants

Iceberg (16, 9th grade): Like the cops in this school, the cops be on some ‘ole other shit . . . —School Surveillance

Wah Benz (17, 11th grade): . . . Like they punch you [students] in your face type shit.—School Surveillance & School Violence
Iceberg (16, 9th grade): . . . yeah on the sneak, you feel me, and then you can’t do shit about it, because you hit them back, then all the cops going to be there to witness that you punched that one cop in the face. You’re going down for like eight months for defending yourself . . . —School Surveillance & School Violence

Wah Benz (17, 11th grade): . . . it’s your word against theirs [security & police] . . . Man believe me, I done got caught up in that shit. . . . recently, I got locked up for some bullshit. Niggas jumped some kid in the back of the school. You feel me. I didn’t have nothing to do with it. But it’s like they [security & police] wanted me to rat [report students involved]. And I’m like, no, I ain’t going to tell. So they locked me up . . . For them to have so many cops around [the school] . . . how could they even let something like that escalate so far? I’m like damn. . . . It ain’t no positive changes for this school for a long time, I don’t think. I think shit is going to go the same for a long time.—School Surveillance & School Violence

Participants across interviews identified violence among students as well as gang activity in schools. One gentleman noted, “Yeah, there’s fights [in school] . . . Gangs don’t get along like that all the time.” Participants also described how school buildings and particular spaces within these buildings are used by street-life-oriented Black boys as sites in which to engage in illicit or illegal activities like fighting, gang recruitment, as well as using and selling drugs. They most often reported marijuana as the “hardest” narcotic sold in school although in some instances “crack” and other illicit narcotics were also reportedly used and sold by students in school.

Group Interview Participants


Iceberg (16, 9th grade): Sell weed in school. The only thing that don’t really happen in [this high school] is like the crack game [sales of crack-cocaine].—Economic Opportunity

Wah Benz (17, 11th grade): But there’s some White kids in here that do the shit.—Race

To more closely analyze how street-life-oriented Black boys conceptualize illegal activities inside schools, survey participants were asked to respond in writing to the open-ended item, “Describe what you imagine the worst possible school experience to be for yourself?” As opposed to academic failure or being expelled from school, a number of participants poignantly identified circumstances related to school violence and incarceration as their “worst possible school experience.” Below are some of the young men’s responses to the item, “Describe what you imagine to be the worst possible situation in school?”
Black boys unabashedly report observing and/or engaging in “street life” or street activities inside their schools, like selling illegal narcotics and interpersonal violence. Many understand these activities as pervasive or as D-Black (16, 11th grade) described as part of “everyday living” in schools. According to participants, a street identity and its concomitant activities become salient in school environments perceived to be hostile. RJ (16, 10th grade) asserts that some street-life-oriented Black males enrolled in school feel unprepared for college or quality employment. He argues that such school-based underpreparation directly leads to some Black male students engaging in illegal activities in or out of school, “They feel that they ain’t going to make it that far because of school experiences, or they feel they could do better on the corner than in school. That’s how they feel.” Brick (19, 12th grade) poignantly describes how overcrowded classrooms creates a frustrating learning environment for both teachers and students. He notes how in one instance a chaotic overcrowded classroom caused a teacher to inappropriately “yell” at students. In another instance, he describes how a teacher asked him if he was “dumb,” thus causing him to walk out of the classroom. Brick (19, 12th grade) says,

You have a roomful of people, the teacher yelling at you. Your first response is this about respect . . . You’ve got some teachers that’ll curse you out in a second . . . So it’s like an up and down with the teachers. . . . I done been cursed out by a teacher, not a female, but a male teacher. . . . They take it out of context [sometimes] . . . [One teacher even] said [to me], “What the hell . . . Are you dumb?” . . . I just walked out, because I’m really not about making a show, you know, for nobody. I’m not about that.

Street identity is imbued with the sense that one must be “strong,” “tough,” or willing to take significant personal risks to adapt to and survive in environments that are physically dangerous, psychologically traumatizing, and provide few (legal) opportunities for socioeconomic and educational mobility. Street-life-oriented boys and young men
understand, very well, the negative consequences that can result from leading a street life—and risking one’s life or freedom in pursuit of personal and economic security makes sense to them; it is noble to survive and to provide for one’s needs even at extreme costs—i.e., the ideology, “only the strong survive.”

Discussion

Many of the participants in this study understood the importance of getting a good education and were keenly aware that their schools did not or would not provide them with quality learning experiences needed for socioeconomic mobility. If street-life-oriented Black boys do not see school as a viable space for academic development, they may, for right or for wrong be more likely to use that space for activities that they see as vital to their immediate and future economic survival, like selling drugs. In this way, “street life,” as expressed through selling drugs or interpersonal violence inside schools, can be seen as an adaptive response to both societal and schooling conditions.

Perceived opposition to academic success. As reflected by the data in this study, opposition to academic success is not intrinsic to a street life identity. However, widespread assumptions of street-life-oriented Black boys as oppositional to academic success have been central to common understandings of the relationship between these boys and school—understandings that this article argues must be reframed. The perception that street-life-oriented Black boys do not care about succeeding in school is supported by the “acting White” theory (Carter, 2005; Ferguson, 2000; Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004). This study found no basis for framing participant’s street life activities as evidence of opposition to academic success. In fact, the majority of survey respondents indicated that they very much valued and understood the importance of formal education as did a number of the interviewees. Furthermore, participants expressed dismay and regret that they were not “getting a good education”. Also, many of the boys envisioned career paths for themselves in which formal education would play a vital role. This is quite remarkable, given their many dismal descriptions of their present high school experiences.

Findings underscore how some illicit street behaviors inside schools can be responses to and strategies for coping with psychologically and physically hostile school environments. Other behaviors considered troublesome to teaching and learning in school, like antagonism towards teachers, academic disengagement, and truancy, also associated with poor Black boys, can be similarly explained. Research, including the present study, reveals that these boys’ schooling experiences are often fraught with racism and disrespect, low expectations, unfair punishment, and intellectual degradation (Akom, 2001; Brown, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Skiba, 2001). It is actually not difficult to understand why these boys would hold anger and resentment toward school authorities and disengage from the activities and spaces over which these adults have control, as means to cope with such psychologically hostile conditions inside schools. Many participants saw their high schools as hostile: characterized by violence, brutality, discrimination, and a lack of care for students and their economic
and academic development—the very conditions to which street identity and activities are adaptive.

Street activities in high schools. The third research question examines more precisely how Black boys conceptualize and use “street life” as a site of resilience inside schools, primarily through their engagement in activities that are profoundly problematic to schools: namely, perceived opposition toward school, the sale of illegal narcotics, and interpersonal violence. Violence is prevalent in many low-income, high-minority urban high schools and Black high school students report fear of assault at higher rates than other racial groups (Snyder et al., 1999; NCES, 2009a; Synder et al., 1996). The boys in this study described violence between students in school—namely, fighting, assault from others, gang violence, as well as the imminent threat of physical harm. Several participants also mentioned assaults by police officers in school, which is not well documented (if at all) in the literature (New York Civil Liberties Union 2007). However, if students are or feel physically threatened by school security, this would certainly contribute to a hostile school climate. Street-life-oriented Black boys use violence to defend themselves and to stave off future assaults in threatening environments (Peterson, 1998). Given the descriptions of low-income, urban high schools in the study’s findings and the literature, as physically dangerous spaces, it elucidates why these boys may use “street life,” as expressed through violence, as an adaptive survival strategy inside schools.

Sales of illegal narcotics was also supported by the findings and determined by the young men to be an activity affiliated with “street life,” as an adaptive strategy to cope with sustained economic poverty and/or blocked economic opportunity. Sales of illegal narcotics can also be understood as connected to the conditions in many low-income urban high schools as described by study participants—namely, a prevalence of teachers not invested in students’ academic development and environments that are neither conducive to learning nor adequately preparing students for future educational and economic opportunities.

Street-life-oriented Black boys, through illicit activities and behaviors discordant with teaching, learning, and order in schools, create significant challenges for educators. Schools address these boys by primarily punishing them through disciplinary action—at disproportionately high rates. Despite codified rules and procedures, in practice, school discipline can be very subjective and teachers and school officials have considerable discretion in interpreting students’ behaviors and deciding how they will be addressed (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, the widespread perception that street-life-oriented Black boys do not care about education, undoubtedly plays a significant role in how schools deal with these boys—more often through punitive and exclusionary means than through strategies designed to keep them academically engaged. Disciplinary practices of this sort oftentimes offer students no help in addressing problematic behaviors and typically leads to and exacerbates, “academic difficulties, irregular attendance, and distrust in or poor relationships with school adults . . . [and] Herein lies the tragic irony, when the interventions aimed at students’ troubles actually compound them” (Brown, 2007, p. 449). Street-life-oriented Black boys, as described in the data, do engage in behaviors that cannot be tolerated in schools, like engaging in selling narcotics and interpersonal
violence—behaviors that must be met with serious interventions. However, we believe that poor understandings of street-life-oriented Black boys, among educators, policy makers, and social scientists contribute to a lack of interventions that would more effectively help these boys to transform difficult lives and troubled relationships with school. Framing them as nonresilient, maladaptive, menacing, incorrigible, uneducable, and/or resistant to education directs interventions toward punishment, control, containment, and/or exclusion. Also, it directs away from strategies that are preventative and proactive by being simply reactive, thus not addressing the real, underlying causes of street-life-oriented boys’ challenges with school.

Much research on street-life-oriented Black boys is not analytically grounded in the boys’ own phenomenological perspectives. Researchers often locate the problems of street-life-oriented boys within the boys themselves, as individual and group “pathology,” “deviancy,” or “delinquency.” Also, it is imperative that more scholars respectfully breach the physical spaces of these boys in their own communities to effectively document how and why their activities inside schools make sense in their lives. This will help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to more accurately frame the experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys to aid in more appropriately conceptualizing and creating interventions that would help them, rather than only punish them. To analytically ground research in the phenomenological perspectives of street-life-oriented Black boys and young men, the authors of this study strongly recommend larger and more sophisticated qualitative and quantitative studies that include them in the research process. Admittedly, although this participatory action research (PAR) study’s data set technically moves from an unrepresentative sample, future work can and should build from the following work by including street-life-oriented Black males to evaluate the generalizability of the proposed findings. This study, like others, demonstrates that it is possible to organize street-life-oriented Black boys and young men to conduct community- and school-based research. We specifically encourage more social scientists to implement participatory action research methodological designs as a way to reach, organize, and provide quality economic and educational opportunities for street-life-oriented Black men (Payne, 2006b, 2008).

PAR is a methodological approach to empirical research in which people directly affected by the problem(s) under investigation engage as coresearchers in all stages of research (e.g., development of research questions/hypothesis, theory, study design, data collection and analysis, formal publications, and presentation of findings). Involvement in PAR can provide street-life-oriented Black boys and young men with a set of learning experiences that can help to offset the poor academic and/or criminal backgrounds that many of them have. Specifically, PAR can help street-life-oriented Black boys and young men to develop reading, writing, and analytical skills to provide them with professional experiences and products, like formal presentations and journal publications, that are viewed favorably by colleges, employers, and society overall. Lastly, PAR can serve as a venue through which to constructively frame the lived experiences of street-life-oriented Black boys and young men—a voice typically ignored and/or poorly understood by most professionals who work with them.
As the participants in this study indicated, street-life-oriented Black boys want what most Americans want—a good education, a decent job, economic security, safety, and respect. As evident in the findings and in the research literature, these boys face many obstacles to realizing these goals, which deeply and negatively affects their present and future lives. Without more effective interventions, street-life-oriented Black boys and young men will continue to experience academic failure, drop out of school, be among the chronically unemployed, and fill up our jails and prisons at increasingly alarming rates. Positively transforming the detrimental experiences and behaviors of street-life-oriented Black boys in schools must begin with adults believing in their potential and treating them with respect. Learning how to intellectually engage street-life-oriented Black boys in more effective and innovative ways is an endeavor to which educators and scholars should be persistently committed. Such undertakings would produce a valuable return to schools, to society, and to the boys themselves. Street-life-oriented Black boys face dire educational, socioeconomic, and environmental circumstances. Like all of our youth, they deserve to live secure and fulfilling lives and nothing short of our best efforts in helping them to do so.

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Notes
1. The larger project organized four street-life-oriented Black men into a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study to examine attitudes toward economic and educational opportunity in a community sample of street-life-oriented Black men ranging between the ages of 16 and 65 (Payne, 2008). PAR involves including members of the population of interest directly on the research team to contribute to all aspects of the study (i.e., development of theory, research questions/hypothesis, methodological design, analysis as well as formal publications and presentation).
2. Prior to the onset of the study, the four men who made up the street PAR team were active in the streets in a number of ways. Street activities ranged from gang involvement, sales of narcotics, interpersonal violence as well as arrest and incarceration for small periods of time.
3. All training sessions took place at the New Jersey Institute of Social Justice, which is located in Newark, New Jersey.
4. Interrater reliability is the degree of agreement among raters. Raters are deemed by investigators and/or the field overall to be experts of respective subject matters. This method or form of qualitative coding determines how much homogeneity, or consensus, there is with respect to ratings of a set of qualitative codes conceptualized by the investigator(s) of a study.
5. Responses presented are not ranked responses. Instead, responses represent an example of the kinds of responses written in relation to the question, “Describe what you imagine to be the worst possible situation in school?”

References


**Bios**

**Yasser Arafat Payne** is an assistant professor of Black American studies and sociology at the University of Delaware. His research examines notions of resilience and resiliency within the lived experiences of street-life-oriented people of African descent.

**Tara M. Brown** is an assistant professor of education at Brandeis University. Her research examines K-12 urban education, schooling inequities, and school disciplinary practices.