



“Harriet Jacobs didn’t learn to read and write so that she could get an A”

Critical Racial Awareness for Educational Resilience

C. Ray Borck

Confronted by school systems that persistently reproduce race- and class-based educational inequality, how can individual poor students of color navigate their own educational paths to realize self-actualization, engaged learning, and scholastic success? Urban ethnographer C. Ray Borck shows how one school in Brooklyn is teaching students to harness their historical disenfranchisement and cultural strength for educational achievement.

Poor youth of color are more likely to attend struggling schools, or to be pushed out of school altogether, than their wealthier, white counterparts. However, federal education policy operates as though race and class are not predictive of academic struggle, even as decades upon decades of research has shown otherwise (Kozol 1991; Noguera 2008.) The Obama administration’s Race to the Top contest—which sanctions standardized test scores with school funding just as No Child Left Behind had—focuses on “attracting and keeping great teachers, designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments, and using innovative and effective approaches to turn around struggling schools” (White House 2009). Here, problems of retention and achievement are blamed on bad teachers, shoddy assessment tools, low standards, and lack of innovation.

These policies are endemic to the neoliberal turn in education, typified by surveillance and discipline, emphases on personal accountability and responsibility, and applications of corporate-style incentivizing models to teachers and students (Cahill 2007; Harvey 2005). Over the past 15 years, the mandate has become: if you want to succeed, you will work hard, and if you work hard, you will be financially rewarded. This ideology legitimates unequal federal funding for public schools and echoes throughout popular culture and public opinion.

Neoliberal publics

The idea that poor Americans can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and work hard to improve their lot in life is a persistent national dogma—a fundamental fantasy of the American Dream.

At a 2004 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) gala commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. The Board of Education*—the 1954 US Supreme Court case that decided racially segregated schools were unconstitutional—black comedian and actor Bill Cosby tied persistent educational inequality to bad parenting and depraved culture in black communities:

People are not parenting. They’re buying things for the kid—\$500 sneakers, for what? They won’t spend \$250 on *Hooked on Phonics*... people with their hat on backwards, pants down

around the crack... Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can't land a plane with "Why you ain't..."¹

Former congressman Herman Badillo takes a similar tone in his 2006 book *One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups*, lauded by former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani and former New York State governor Mario Cuomo. Badillo states that "education is not a high priority in the Hispanic community" and that a "cultural siesta" is the reason that Latinos have lower educational attainment than other immigrant groups (pp. 50–51, 32).

But the idea that the solution to educational inequality inheres in the individual student is not only posited by a few pundits.

Last year, popular photographer Brandon Stanton posted a photo of Brooklyn eighth-grader Vidal Chastanet on his blog *Humans of New York* (HONY). Chastanet attends school in a neighborhood known for its large public-housing projects, high rates of poverty, and prevalent street crime. Accompanying the image of Chastanet was a quote where he described the principal of his school as the most influential person in his life.

Figure 1. Illustration based on Brandon Stanton's photo of Vidal Chastanet

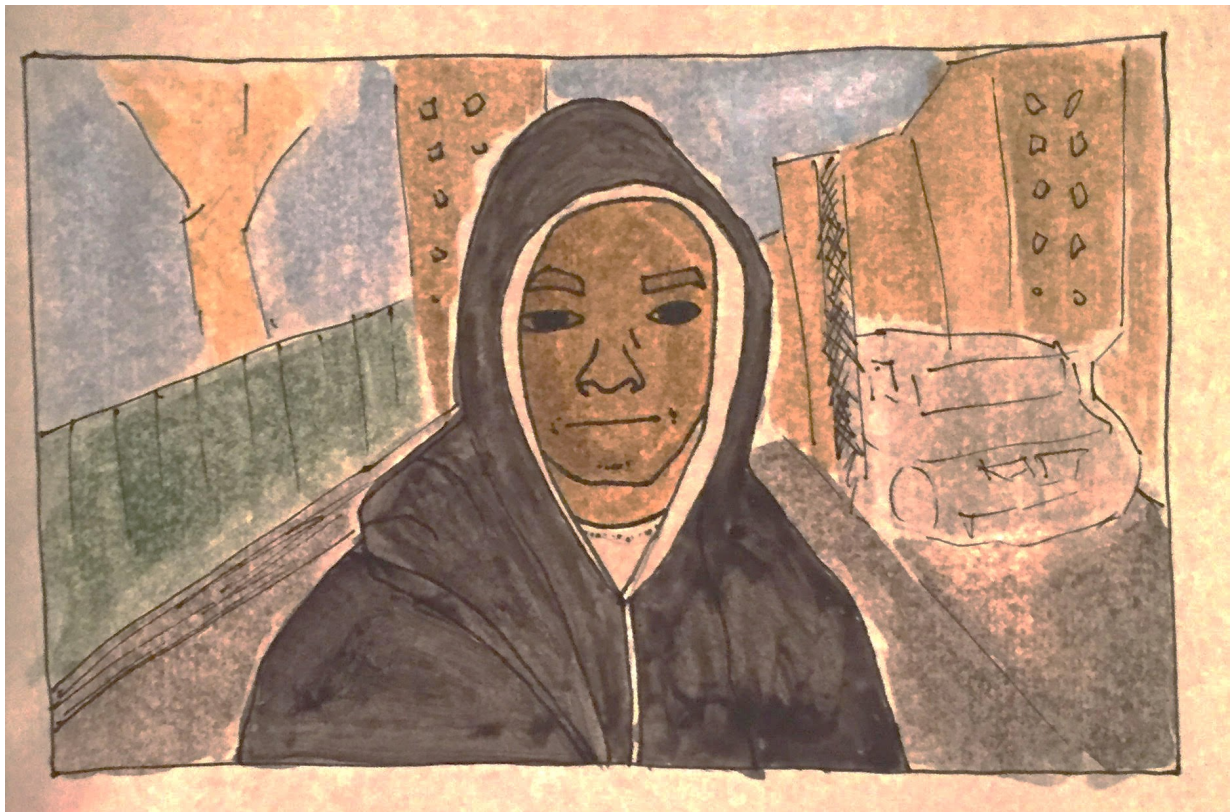


Illustration by C. Ray Borck, 2016.²

When the photo became an instant hit on social media, Stanton began a fundraiser to take Chastanet's class to visit Harvard, as though the students lacked a sense of their opportunities and somehow, given exposure, could choose to leave their circumstances and, moreover, they should. \$100,000 was raised online within the first 45 minutes and \$1.4 million in total, demonstrating widespread public support for the trip.

¹ Cosby 2004.

² I made illustrations for this article because I wanted to depict aspects of my fieldwork with a Brooklyn high school (described below) without using photographs, in order to protect the anonymity of the school. I also wanted to give a sense of Stanton's portrait of Chastanet while maintaining consistency with the style of the other two images below. Stanton's actual photograph is easily found on the internet.

There is no evidence that the structural effects of centuries of systemic racism currently manifest in residential segregation, unequal school funding, and relatively low levels of academic opportunity and achievement among poor youth of color could be successfully undone by Cosby's idea of judicial parenting, Badillo's mandate that "lazy" Hispanics prioritize education, or Stanton's "motivational" Harvard trip. And pending structural rearrangements, poor youth of color must continue to navigate their neighborhoods and schools.

Critical racial awareness and culturally competent curriculum

Two miles from the sidewalk where Stanton photographed Chastanet is Brownsville Commons High School (BCHS)³—one of 48 transfer schools in New York City. Transfer schools are set up to reengage students who have fallen significantly behind in school—a population that is composed primarily of poor and working-class black and Latino youth. Throughout the 2010/2011 school year, I conducted ethnographic research at BCHS. I chose the school because of its reputation for success with the city's hardest-to-reach youth.

Prior to choosing an ethnography site, I interviewed five transfer-school principals throughout New York City who all spoke highly of BCHS, regarding it as the school most successful with students who had fallen furthest behind—the end of the line, so to speak. A Department of Education report described the school this way:

[BCHS] embraces some of the city's most overaged and under-credited students, reflecting their philosophy that all students deserve a second chance. To this end, all stakeholders are highly effective in collectively supporting the specific needs of each individual student in a safe, secure environment that students love to come to.

BCHS also had Regents (New York State standardized examinations) pass rates in math and English language arts (ELA) that consistently put them in the top of their peer group as measured by the NYC Progress Report.

Approximately 300 students attended BCHS: 65% were Latino and 33% were black. All students qualified for free lunch—a proxy for poverty.

The school is located in the heart of an economically depressed neighborhood whose residents are largely recent immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The neighborhood has a post-industrial feel: its streets are lined with corner stores and churches, auto-repair shops and dollar stores, construction zones and apartment buildings. Supplied by the school with free public transportation fare, students commute to BCHS from all over the city via bus, subway, and in some cases, a ferry. The school is housed on the third floor of a five-story brick building that it shares with a middle school. Inside, the energy is frenetic and infectious. The walls are painted yellow and orange, and lined with student work. The hallways bustle with students, loud with laughter, sass, and clanking locker doors. Between classes, a young math teacher routinely encourages students to get to class on time by standing outside of his classroom yelling, "HOLLER, SCHOLAR! MOVE IT!"

A main goal of my research was to find out, from the perspective of students, why BCHS engaged them when other schools hadn't. What made BCHS special? Over and over again, students attributed their own retention, success, and—in the case of former students—graduation to what they frequently phrased as "learning my history," or, in the language of teachers, a combination of critical racial awareness and culturally competent curriculum.

In the US cultural imagination, there is a negative association between blackness and intellectualism (Tyson 2011). Part of the process of being socialized as a poor student of color is learning to develop an anti-school stance. By contrast, developing a critical racial awareness among students involves teaching students to locate their own academic "failure" in the historical context

³ I have used pseudonyms for the name of the school and teachers.

of persistent educational inequality. When students are able to understand the difference between their personal failures and the failures of the school system, they are able to develop the resilience and self-esteem necessary to make significant educational progress (Graves 2014).

BCHS teachers worked hard to help students retain their racial identities while fostering intellectual curiosity and academic engagement. A white English teacher named Greg explained it like this:

So many students get taught that they're not college material, but we need to make them believe that they are college material. We have to counteract the negative messages they've gotten—implicitly or explicitly—from most people in their lives.

I do this exercise with my students at the beginning of the year. I ask them, "What are Dominicans known for?" They come back with all the standard stereotypes—it's always baseball or cooking. Then I say, "No way! Dominicans are really good at writing novels! Everyone knows that!"

Inevitably a Dominican kid is like, "I have been in a Dominican family my whole life, and no one has ever said that." And then I tell them about Junot Diaz and I tell them that Junot Diaz is the best writer in America, and he's Dominican. You can see their minds start to change—they start to be able to think about how people like them do things like write books.

Figure 2. Student T-shirts produced by BCCHS, emblazoned with "College Material"



Illustration by C. Ray Borck, 2016.

Greg's curriculum included short stories, poems, plays, novels, novellas, nonfiction narratives, and memoirs. To make the curriculum relevant to students, he assigned books by black and Latino authors, and many of the stories featured young people and took place in New York City. These curricular choices are in contrast to typical high-school English curricula, dominated by white male authors like William Shakespeare, J. D. Salinger, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edgar Allen Poe, Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King, and Albert Camus—although occasional token women and people of color are sometimes sparingly included. These more traditional narratives take place in geographical settings and cultural contexts far removed from the economically deprived urban communities where poor and working-class students of color live and learn. Greg's pedagogical strategy simultaneously engaged students by providing them with material that was relevant to their lives, while also showing them that poor people of color can grow up to author their own experiences without selling out.

Figure 3. Actual texts assigned in Greg's class



Illustration by C. Ray Borck, 2016.

Histories of oppression for future-oriented empowerment

A black-social studies teacher named Steve went to college at the University of California at Davis, which he described as an exercise in white acculturation. In college, he felt that he had to choose between his identity as black and his identity as a student:

By my junior year, the school had civilized me; they had successfully done what they had hoped to do. A few of my [black] friends had been arrested and were gone and [white students and

teachers] had pretty much convinced me that my home community and culture were shit, that if I could assimilate, I'd be successful. All of a sudden I'm going home and looking at my grandma with her hot combs and I'm looking down on her—the same stuff a lot of black kids go through.

Like Greg, Steve uses black and Latino histories to engage and empower students by showing them that people of color in the US have a long and robust intellectual tradition, and have used academic skills to improve their communities, instead of as tools for abandoning or escaping them. Describing his teaching philosophy and its rootedness in racial history, Steve said:

We have so much resilience in our history. If we understood the foot of piss and shit and vomit we were in on the three-month voyage coming here, chained to people who were dead. If we understood the 20 million that didn't make it. If we understood what we've been through and how strong we've had to be. You know, Frederick Douglass has that quote: "The fact that we've endured wrongs and hardships that would have destroyed any other race, [...] ought to strengthen our faith in ourselves and our future."⁴

I feel like if we can let our kids know that, then we can do anything, because now the glass is half-full. Kids can start to think, "Yeah my situation is fucked up, but shit, I got more than Denmark Vesey had, I got more than Harriet Jacobs had." I tell my students, Malcolm didn't learn the dictionary so that he could get an A—he saw power connected to it. Fredrick Douglass didn't learn to read so that he could get an A—he saw they were trying to keep it from him. Harriet Jacobs didn't learn to read and write so that she could get an A—she needed to forge letters for freedom. We need to make education and literacy practical so that our students can say, "Hey! This can benefit my life!"

In Steve's classes, being a poor person of color in a racist society and being a student learning history are one and the same. His pedagogical approach is to help students to care about themselves and their communities rather than to think of their communities as horrible, dangerous places that they must escape if they want to succeed in life. He encourages students to view themselves as the next generation of black and Latino thinkers, activists, and artists.

I began by arguing that mainstream educational policies and discourses don't properly take into account structural educational inequality. It may seem contradictory, then, that I offered ethnographic stories of personal empowerment. One of the things that I learned from BCHS is that teachers and students must continue to do their work in the face of significant structural challenges and staggering social inequality. The case of BCHS is instructive because it shows that where Race to the Top, "good" cultural values, and "inspirational" trips to Harvard don't effectively enable students to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, providing a curriculum that reflects their life circumstances, and teaching them how to intelligently navigate harrowing structural inequalities, can foster retention, engagement, and academic success for the city's most disadvantaged youth.

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⁴ Douglass 2008.

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