

**Fantasies of Ballin': The Educational and Occupational Aspirations of
Homeless Youth of Color**

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Curlie Rushing Robinson, who brings love, life, and light to everyone she meets. From the day I was born, she has given me loving, lasting water. May I do all I can to bring it to others.

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PREFACE

Why I Do the Work I Do

I began teaching high school social studies two years after the Columbine High School massacre. The catastrophic and heartbreaking events of that day reverberated throughout the country, and indeed, years later I could still see ramifications echoing in school policies and procedures, even in the school I was teaching in over 1,000 miles away. By my third year of teaching, I was fully accustomed to the annual routine of practicing school emergency preparation and instructions during the first few weeks of each school year. It was during one of these routine practice exercises that I first saw Matthew (pseudonym).

I knew little of Matthew's personal and educational history before he was placed in my classroom, and the information (or better yet, gossip) I did have included not-so-flattering teacher reports and his problematic reputation with other students. Some of the rumors about Matthew were that he sold drugs in school and in the community; he belonged to a local violent gang and carried weapons on school property; he had been arrested several times and faced the choice of attending school or going to prison; he hated school, and hated teachers more. It was not hearsay or rumor, however, that none of the teachers in the school wanted him in their classrooms. On the first day of school of my third year of teaching, Matthew was in my class.

Although Matthew had a bigger-than-life faux persona, his real life and character attributes were far more common and distressing. He had a lot of similarities with other African American male students in my classroom. The icebreaker activities I facilitated on the first day of our class revealed that he loved basketball, pizza, and Air Force Ones (the shoes, not the plane). He also disclosed that his father passed away when he was a toddler, that he was frisked every morning before entering school by the security officer, and that he spent the summer without a steady home, sleeping on various friends' couches from week to week. Much to my surprise, and to the surprise of other teachers who "felt sorry" for me once they learned he was in my class, Matthew exhibited no obvious signs of classroom disruption or contempt for me, his classmates, or the academic content. In fact, other than a few icebreakers and a couple questions about the homework policy, he rarely talked to me or his classmates at all.

That is, he rarely talked until the third day of class. That day, all teachers had to review emergency procedures, including what to do in case of fire, tornado, and in-school crisis situations, like school shootings. The class paid dutiful attention as I explained the process of exiting the building, covering their heads with their hands, and lastly, some of the important points to remember if someone in the school had a weapon and meant to do harm. While this discussion was never cheerful or upbeat, it was very important and students, although they heard the same information every year, usually approached the procedures seriously.

Just as I was telling the students how to remain hidden and safe during the event of a school intruder, Matthew raised his head from his desk, pulled his hoodie back from his head and interrupted, "Ms. Robinson, listen, you don't have to worry, 'cause if

anybody comes in this building with a weapon, a gun or somethin' like that, I got you. No matter what they got, they ain't got nothin' on me, believe that.”

I stood there, silent and in shock. As I did a quick scan of the class, I noticed that the other students seemed surprised as well. No one spoke, and a few of the students looked at me as if they wanted to say out loud (but dared not to), what does that *mean*? I finally pulled myself together enough to respond to Matthew. I answered, “Thank you Matthew. I appreciate that you got me, although I’m not sure what that means or why, of all people, that you got me.” He replied, “I got you because you care about me and all of us. Don’t nobody else at this school care about me.” He replaced his hoodie and rested his head once again on the desk.

There have been few times in my life where I’ve been simultaneously overwhelmed with happiness and sadness. I did care about Matthew, just as I cared about all of my students. I was pleased that he and possibly other students recognized that I cared about them. I was dismayed that Matthew did not feel cared about by anyone else in the school, including over 100 teachers, dozens of staff members, 4 counselors, 4 administrators, and 2 social workers.

What was puzzling, however, was what I had done or said in the first three days that would lead him to know, unequivocally, that I cared about him. The three class periods had been filled with school rules, classroom procedures for turning in missed assignments, and quick reviews of history material that I’d hoped they already knew but didn’t.

Matthew and I had a very productive semester together. He was a good student—he turned in all assignments, performed better than average on exams, and he was quite

funny. Matthew confided in me that most of the rumors circulating the school about him were indeed true. He did sell drugs, he did belong to a gang, and he often carried weapons on school property for his safety. He was homeless and unaccompanied after his mother kicked him out, although he paid all of the living expenses for his mother and other siblings to live comfortably in a rental property. Matthew ached for a better life, and he had no perception of realistic avenues for how to achieve one. There was little I could do for him except keep motivating his academic achievement, push him to continue his education beyond high school, and try to convince him that other teachers cared about him too. The former two were easy; the latter was complicated.

I never experienced the plethora of horror stories that I heard from other teachers or students involving Matthew; he continued to be disruptive and defiant in other classrooms, and he continued to stay on the radar of school resource officers. I can't help but believe my positive and rewarding encounters with Matthew were made possible because he knew—felt deeply—that I cared about him from the beginning days of school, and that I somehow conveyed that his possibilities in life were not constrained by his current lived situation. I never asked Matthew how he knew I cared about him; I never asked what I did or said that convinced him, although he was sure of it by the third day of class. It is my one regret from the classroom.

Matthew's other teachers, my colleagues and school-day confidants, had difficult times with Matthew, and it is clear on the outside to see why. He acted out; he talked back and used profanity to express his mood; he walked out of class when he thought the teacher was presenting busy work. He made their jobs difficult, and they resented him for that. Matthew had what I and others call "grown people problems". The livelihood of his

immediate family depended on him making enough money to pay bills and provide other essentials. He was caught up in the criminal justice system and had to make sure his monthly income included enough money to pay for his parole and restitution. But Matthew wasn't "grown," he was 16, and if anyone had a reason to be angry at the world for the cards he had been dealt, Matthew did. While I certainly never condoned his disruptive and disrespectful classroom behavior, I understood where it was coming from and I felt ill-prepared to teach him constructive ways to channel that anger.

It is difficult for me to find where my connection with Matthew is explained in the scholarly education literature. For example, the connection between me and Matthew could have been the result of our matched-race; we are both African American, and therefore, we have cultural congruency (Irvine, 2002; Roberts & Irvine, 2009; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005). This congruency may have led Matthew to experience a heightened level of comfort with me. However, Matthew had several other African American teachers, including African American males, and his positive classroom experiences seemed to start and end at my door. The same goes for age—he had other teachers who were closer in age to him, yet it was my classroom where he spent lunch periods and early morning free time.

Perhaps I exhibited traits similar to a "warm demander" (Vasquez, 1988), or engaged in "other mothering" (Collins, 1991) or "colortalk" (Thompson, 2004). Then again, maybe I utilized a culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) or cultural synchronization (Irvine, 1990). These theories, while useful, provide fragmented and context-constrained insight into the relationships between students and teachers and do little to explain the relationship between Matthew and me. The theories lose even

more authority as we factor in the classroom environments for a growing cohort of students like Matthew who are dealing with the intersecting marginalized identities of being a homeless student of color.

I hypothesize that the care I conveyed had little to do with distinct and separable actions, words, teacher characteristics or quantifiable qualifications, but something else, a combination of factors that when put together at an exact time and place for specific students becomes *care*. I approach the following research agenda with Matthew and others like him in mind. I am in constant pursuit of how to further teaching practices and policies so that other students, especially those shunned, stigmatized, and invisible within their schools, can feel cared about by their teachers, and cared for in ways that push them to be their best selves and fulfill their dreams, and find support and compassion in buildings whose missions are to offer just that.

My teaching experiences, and my experiences with Matthew and other students like him in particular, remained at the forefront of my mind as I designed the following dissertation study. I made sure to ask the questions of my study's participants that I failed to ask of Matthew. I met the young people experiencing varying forms of homelessness in their spaces, on their terms, and I prioritize their voices throughout this study. This study will answer some important questions, such as the current state of education for these young people, their aspirations, and how care in various forms is active and missing in their lives. While I answer some questions, I introduce far more in my conclusions. All of this is designed to move the scholarly conversations about marginalized young people forward in a way that privileges their stories—both the written and yet to be written.

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Abstract

The Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Homeless Youth of Color

by Shantá R. Robinson

Chair: Carla O'Connor

This dissertation study explored how homeless young adults, particularly those who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, made sense of their educational experiences (formal and informal) and occupational futures given their self-proclaimed intersecting identities (i.e. race, class, gender, homeless status) and their interactions with schools and Empower, a nonprofit organization. More specifically, I investigated the adolescents' past school experiences and present educational statuses, examined the supports and obstacles to their expectations and aspirations, and considered how their future life chances are influenced by the articulation of care in institutional settings.

This year-long study set in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area employs ethnographic methods (i.e., semi-structured interviews and participant observations) to capture the complex, situated experiences of homeless youth. Data consists of 25 homeless young adult interviews, 12 nonprofit organizational staff interviews, and over 150 hours of participant observation. My method of analysis involved an iterative process between data collection, coding, and memo generation as informed by constant comparative analysis.

Several findings emerged from the analyses. The youths' identities, particularly the intersections of race and gender, shaped their professed aspirations of “ballin”—or living extravagantly and aggressively—in distinct, albeit fantastical ways. The homeless youth formed three distinct subcultures based on their aspirations, social identities, and past experiences—the Homeboys, the Sistergirls, and the EmoCores. These subcultures provided (mostly unvalued) social capital and a sense of belonging. The findings also suggest that school members (via youth and staff renderings) and non-profit staff interacted with these three subcultures in significantly different ways, shaping the educational experiences and occupational opportunities of homeless youth through formal and informal means. The Black boys and Black girls are most positioned to obtain occupations that reproduce their ascribed social status, while the White youth are poised to improve their socioeconomic condition

Chapter 1

Introduction

I'm so sick of living in the projects.

John, age 17

I had bruises all over my body. Why didn't anyone ask me about them? I wanted someone, anyone to ask so that I could tell them and they could help me. Why didn't they ask?

Henry, age 16

I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill.

The Bible, Psalm 3:4

Career Day

There are 23 homeless young men and women tightly gathered in the small living area of Empower's Drop-In Center, anxiously awaiting the adults to begin their Career Day panel introductions. They shift uncomfortably in the hard, unforgiving wooden chairs, and seize any unsupervised moment to push or shove a neighbor for more elbow or leg room. They are finding it difficult to calm down and pay attention as the heat in the room rises to meet the outside summer temperatures, and it is clear that the aging central air system is struggling to keep up with the 75 degree request. By the time the first panelist begins sharing her journey from teenager to successful businesswoman, the room is filled with an oppressive smell of old cigarette smoke, minutes-old pizza grease, and teenage-boy perspiration.

The last career panelist is Edward, an early 30-something African American male who is introduced as a self-made restaurant entrepreneur. He shares his life story, one that

is not unlike the young people in the audience; he grew up impoverished, not knowing where his next meal would come from day to day. As he speaks about having no food, no money for bills or to buy diapers for his young daughter, the tears stream down his face and, through strangled gulps of air, he shares that at his lowest point, just a few years prior, he was ready to give up. He said, “I forgot myself, who I was. I felt like Paul from the Bible, like there was no good in me. That’s when I called on God to make me a person of importance, someone valuable”.

The young people in the audience sat captivated; no one moved, no one whispered to his neighbor, no one fiddled with cell phones that had no working service. Like Edward, and as the beginning quotations from John and Henry imply, these young people are familiar with the pleas, the fervent appeals to a higher power (physical and metaphysical) for safety, basic necessities, or access to any opportunity that would increase their chances of upward social mobility and stability. They cry out often with their voices, occasionally with their fists, and, unfortunately, at times putting a period at the end of their short-lived lives.

At its heart, this dissertation is about the homeless young people in the nonprofit organization Empower yearning to be regarded as important, valuable people in an increasingly stratified and inequitable society. This dissertation describes the experiences, opportunities, aspirations, and expectations of the young men and women in the career day audience and how institutions tasked with assisting them— schools and Empower organization—are culpable in the reproduction of existing social inequalities. Beyond the considerable task of illustrating how their aspirations and expectations are shaped by outside forces, I also seek to demonstrate how these young people negotiate their life

chances given the intersection of their race, gender, class and other disenfranchised social statuses. Further still, I seek to be the conduit of the voices of these young people as they search for power, security, and a sense of self against considerable internal and external challenges.

One of the goals of this dissertation is to advance the literature by examining the aspirations and expectations of a diverse group of young adults who happen to be homeless, some for a short time, others chronically. More still, the objective of this study and its findings is to shed a much-needed light on the promises and pitfalls of educational settings. Education is the institution that, more than any other in modern society, holds the promise of social advancement and equality of opportunity (Walters, 2000). While schooling and the resulting educational credentials may not guarantee social and economic mobility, they are still considered the “sine qua non” of mobility in the new global economy (Weis & Dimitriadis, 2008, p. 2291). Improving the system of education, particularly for marginalized young people, is important, and a premise of this research is that improvement begins with knowing these young peoples’ formal and informal schooling experiences and their explanations for how education may or may not play a role in their futures.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of clarity, it is important to outline the use of the term homelessness and to explain how I will use it throughout this dissertation. The literature surrounding youth homelessness abounds and the definitions of homeless within such studies vary (Toro, Dworsky, & Fowler, 2007). In this study, I utilize the definition provided in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a federal regulation created

in 1987 and reauthorized as part of the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation and once again in 2007. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless young people are defined as:

Individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night time residence including: Children and Youth who are: Sharing the housing of other person due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as doubled-up); Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; Living in emergency or transitional shelters; Abandoned in hospitals; or awaiting foster care placement; Children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. Children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances above (Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Unaccompanied youth is another term used by the McKinney-Vento Act in defining the homeless student. This definition includes:

Youth not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. This would include youth living in runaway shelters, abandoned buildings, cars, on the streets, or in other inadequate housing and other children and youth denied housing by their families (sometimes referred to as “throwaway” children and youth), and school-age unwed mothers, living in homes for unwed mothers, who have no other housing available. (Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, 2004, p. 31)

While many homeless young people spend their transiency with family members, others have left home and go at life alone for multiple reasons including physical and sexual abuse.

In addition to the policy definition of homelessness, the scholarly literature has broken down homeless young people as belonging to one of three categories: throwaways, street youth, and systems children. Throwaway youth are those who are asked to leave home by a parent or another adult in the household. Throwaway youth are away from home overnight and prevented from returning (Hammer, Finkelhor, & Sedlak,

2002). Street youth reside in high-risk, nontraditional locations, such as under bridges or in abandoned buildings. Street youth may or may not use shelters or other homeless service agencies, but they spend most nights sleeping in inadequate, unsafe spaces. Systems children are those who have been involved in government institutions, such as juvenile justice and foster care, due to parent or guardian abuse, neglect, incarceration, or family homelessness. They often become homeless due to running away from their temporary homes (for many reasons) or by aging out of the foster system.

These constructed definitions of homelessness are important, particularly for designing policies, running categorical analyses, or evaluating pointed interventions. However, these definitions fall short with helping us understand “homelessness” as a socially constructed identity. I maintain that homelessness is not simply the absence of a stable residence, but also a social identity category and *way* of being that brings particular social and cultural significance. My study design and analysis provides space for homeless participants to define and articulate how their living situation has impacted their lives, particularly their educational experiences. For this dissertation, I will use the term homeless to refer to young adults who lack a stable, safe, and permanent residence, as well as homeless as an identity factor that carries constructive and destructive significance.

Statement of the Problem

The most significant problem with research concerning homeless young people, particularly young people who identify as racial minorities, is that we do not know enough about them—their numbers, their formal and informal schooling experiences, and their hopes and dreams for the future. In order to impact their lives in positive and

relative ways (ways that matter for them, defined by them, at a given time, not what others want for them or think they should have at a given time), including ways that may improve policy, we need to know more about their lives.

Since the onset of the recent economic recession, rates of student homelessness have increased rapidly in urban, suburban, and rural school districts throughout the United States (Miller, 2011). The National Center for Homeless Education (2010) estimated that over 1 million school-aged youth were homeless in the 2009-2010 school year, a 41% increase from 2007-2008. Those statistics, while staggering, underestimate the population of homeless children—precisely because of the difficulty in accurately counting these transient young people. Some may not tell school or social service personnel of their living status because they fear the social stigma it brings. Others may be running away from abusive home lives and if returned, may fear for their physical well-being. No matter the reason for homelessness, the young people who find themselves in this position are in vulnerable and often pernicious situations daily.

Homeless youth are a vulnerable group not only because of their young age and lack of stable housing, but their vulnerability is magnified by their stigmatized statuses as low income, their lack of economic support, and limited access to quality health care (Ensign, 2006). In addition, they disproportionately experience physical, developmental, mental health problems, and poor academic performance in school (Duffield & Lovell, 2008). Although 80% of homeless youth attended school on a regular basis prior to homelessness (Fernandes, 2007), and the majority of homeless youth express a desire to earn a high school degree and transition to college (Tierney, Gupton, & Hallett, 2008), most do not complete their high school education. Approximately 75% of all homeless

youth eventually drop out of school (Cauce et al., 2000). This research indicates that there is a disconnection between students' previous academic experiences, their expressed goals, and their educational attainment. Furthermore, there is a gap in scholarly knowledge regarding the factors that influence the educational persistence of homeless students.

Young people who are living on the streets experience multiple consequences from the lack of adequate shelter and protection. As adolescents under age 16 are prohibited from legally earning money in many localities, they often turn to unsafe and illegal means to meet their basic needs. For example, some homeless young people may be forced to exchange sex for food or shelter, while others engage in selling drugs or robbery to earn money. Given the scope of the problem, it would make sense that the focus of homeless young adolescents' attention is to survive and get to a new day. A prominent line of research maintains that homeless youth are focused on their day-to-day survival, and as such, are unable to entertain their future goals. According to Epstein (1996), "Survival becomes a moment to moment preoccupation and, for those in such a situation, the ability to divide and order time so as to contemplate let alone plan for a future is an unfamiliar luxury" (p. 290). Given the plethora of challenges that homeless youth face, it makes sense that the most salient need of homeless youth is to survive and maintain their health and well-being. It is a presumption of this research, however, that homeless youth do contemplate and plan for their futures, and that there are macro and micro factors in their lives that influence their aspirations.

One of the best predictors of academic and educational outcomes for all students is educational aspirations (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1994; Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Aspirations are idealistic orientations toward the future and reflect the hopes, wishes, and dreams of the individual. They represent life preferences "unsullied by anticipated constraints" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 60). There is a robust line of research detailing the factors that influence the aspirations of students, including gender (Eccles, 1994), race (Strayhorn, 2009; Portes & Kelly, 2008), community type (Stewart, Stewart & Simons, 2007), family involvement (Kao, 2004; Jodl et al., 2001) and influential significant others such as extended family or teachers (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1994). However, it is currently unclear how homeless students fit into these scholarly frameworks; unlike teenagers with stable homes, homeless adolescents are often without community ties, family support, and the vast majority also lose school-based relationships. Indeed, there is an absence of empirical research on homeless young people that does more than reduce their life occurrences and future expectations to variables; extant research would benefit from a rich exploration of their educational experiences, including an examination of how those experiences may influence their future educational and occupational goals.

No scholarly research currently addresses how homeless young people navigate their educational pathways or the tools they utilize to gain access to occupations that provide economic mobility. Further, no studies address the role of homelessness in shaping identity. This study fills a significant gap in the literature by illustrating the educational experiences and identity of homeless young people and how institutions play a key role in shaping educational and occupational aspirations.

The Purpose of This Project

Beyond fragments of data, the literature, particularly qualitative accounts on homeless young people, their classroom experiences, and future orientations is thin. This ethnographic account provides a nuanced picture of how the intersections of poverty, homelessness, race, and gender circumscribes the horizons of young people and how, at the societal level, institutions play a key role in how the class structure is reproduced. This study also adds to a particularly sparse literature on homeless young people who identify as racial minorities—African American or Black and Latino. The stories and analysis included in the forthcoming chapters are real and told by the young people who live them every day.

The significance of this project is three-fold. First, its design accounts for limitations identified in previous investigations (Duffield & Lovell, 2008; Fernandes, 2007) of homeless adolescents of color and their educational experiences and aspirations. Race, gender, and social class are not isolated variables, but complex and multifaceted identities that impact the lives of homeless young people in unique ways. This may, in turn, aid teacher educators, policy makers, and nonprofit organizational staff in how to better connect with and engage homeless students for the sake of reducing their drop-out rates and increasing their educational and occupational attainment. Second, this dissertation will extend the intellectual conversations surrounding the educational experiences of homeless adolescents—and more specifically—homeless adolescents who identify as racial or ethnic minorities. Having high aspirations is an important component of positive educational outcomes, and knowing more about this subgroup of school-aged young people may assist educators in crafting pointed interventions for this population

that are more relevant to their lived experiences. Gleaning details of the micro and macro factors influencing homeless youths' of color future educational and occupational aspirations may also translate into more applicable educational policy and practice within secondary schools. Third, in addition to giving a voice to these marginalized students, this dissertation may introduce innovative methodological approaches in terms of how to access and connect with hard to reach school-aged populations.

Research Questions

The intent of this study has been framed in broad terms in order to allow as much information to emerge from the site and participants as possible. To that end, I have designed a study centered on analyzing how different social identities get articulated among a group of homeless young people, how their articulations are both positive and negative sources of social capital, the different levers that influence the young people's educational experiences, and the factors that inspire or discourage their occupational aspirations. My research questions, which will be re-introduced and followed up upon in Chapter 8, are:

1. What are homeless young peoples' present educational experiences, including challenges and successes?
2. How do the young people imagine their educational and occupational futures given the racial and social class groups of which they self-identify?
3. What factors facilitate, construct, or bound the young peoples' educational and occupational opportunities?

Outline of Dissertation

I have organized this dissertation into 9 chapters. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of literature that summarizes the current scholarly knowledge of homeless young people and a conceptual framework for this study. I report the contributions of this literature, but moreover, I highlight the shortcomings of this work. I describe my research methodology, the young people under study, and the various types of educational institutions in Chapter 3. Chapters 4 through 6 detail the homeless young people in my study. Chapter 4 introduces the Homeboys, a group made up of 12 young men of color. Chapter 5 explores the Sistergirls, a group of 9 Black young women. And Chapter 6 details the EmoCores, a small group of White young men and women. I analyze data across these three groups and the role of institutional influences in Chapter 7. I return to my research questions in Chapter 8, and finally, I summarize the dissertation, offer directions for future research and conclusions in Chapter 9.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

“Youth must be the worst time in anybody's life. Everything's happening for the first time, which means that sorrow, then, lasts forever. Later, you can see that there was something very beautiful in it. That's because you ain't got to go through it no more.”

-James Baldwin

This review does not claim to encapsulate the scholarly universe of literature addressing the educational challenges and occupational outcomes for all homeless young adults. My attempt here is to conceptualize what we know about homeless youth, from their health risks to educational outcomes, and how race, gender, and issues of class are taken up in this literature. Furthermore, the conceptual framework, although highly valuable in providing field-responsive guidance to my analysis of homeless young peoples' educational experiences and aspirations precluded extensive investigation of some pertinent issues. In other words, no one theory guided my research design, data collection, and analyses; several frameworks stayed with me during this study, and some emerged only during the data analyses. I divide this chapter into 2 distinct sections. The first section is a review of the extant literature on homeless young people, including educational outcomes and how race, gender, and class play a role in their lives. In the second section, I discuss literature that makes up my conceptual framework—status attainment theory and the idea of aspirations and expectations.

Homelessness: A Protected Status

Schools that serve K-12 students ideally provide the needed tools to assist in the academic and social development of children and youth, preparing them to succeed in higher education and/or vocational settings. When children and youth become homeless, keeping up with their role as student becomes difficult. In response to these growing concerns, the United States Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (1987) (now referred to as McKinney-Vento in accordance with revisions under No Child Left Behind). Of particular interest to this research is Subsection "Part B—Education for Homeless Children and Youth," which provides federal and state funding, mandating certain actions by any state that agrees to accept funding under the Act (Heybach, 2002; Heybach & Nix-Hodes, 2000). The impetus for this subsection was reports that over 50% of homeless children and youth were not attending school regularly (NCHE, 1999). Barriers to enrollment and educational access negatively affect academic progress for homeless children and youth (NCH, 2005). The McKinney-Vento Act is a comprehensive Act that includes funding for a wide array of services such as shelter, food, and medical care. In regards to education, the McKinney-Vento Act "requires that states receiving funds under McKinney-Vento assure that each homeless child shall have access to a comparable free, appropriate public education in the mainstream school environment... including transportation services, gifted and handicapped educational services, school meal programs, vocational education, bilingual programs, and before and after school programs" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Prior to the 1987 McKinney-Vento Act, there were practically no standards (state or local) to address the educational rights and needs of homeless children and youth within schools.

Preceding McKinney-Vento, children and youth were denied entrance into schools as they lacked such things as proof of permanent residence, medical records, social security cards, etc. The McKinney-Vento Act mandates that all children and youth be enrolled into schools immediately without having the required documentation, to reduce the number of school days children may miss. Despite the implementation of this act, there is a high mobility rate associated with homelessness, having severe educational consequences. It has been over 20 years since McKinney-Vento was signed into law, yet many homeless students are still denied access and enrollment to schools, due to their status as homeless. The disconnect between what is written and what is practiced needs to be examined, and is critical in understanding current educational inequities for unaccompanied homeless youth.

Homelessness: A Risky Status

Although difficult to operationalize and measure, homelessness is believed to affect children in profound ways, possibly different from the ways they are touched by poverty writ large (Tobin, 2014). Many studies have found homeless children experience physical, developmental, mental health, and educational problems at much greater rates than national norms. The vast majority of research on homeless school-aged young adults focuses on their psychological or physical health; from suicide (De Jong, 1992; Yoder, Hoyt, & Whitbeck, 1998; Kidd, 2003, 2004; Kidd & Shahar, 2010), substance abuse (Regional Task Force on the Homeless, 1997; 2001; Klein et al., 2000; Huba et al., 2000; Bousman et al., 2005), to HIV/AIDS (Ensign, 1998; Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999), and sexual or physical abuse (Ennett, et al., 1999; Bao, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2000; Kidd & Kral, 2002; Baron, 2003; Kidd & Shahar, 2010). Given the plethora of odds against them,

it makes sense that the most salient need of homeless adolescents is to survive and maintain their health and well-being (Rew, 2008). Homeless people, particularly those who are still minors, are a medically underserved population in the US (Ensign, 2004). They are at great risk for physical abuse, injuries, homicide, and thousands die every year from treatable illness, suicide and assault (Klein et al., 2000). Homeless young people have significantly greater obstacles blocking their access to health care than all other age groups, despite being at greater risk for illness (Klein et al., 2000). Emergency rooms are often their only access to care due to lack of insurance, confidentiality, and embarrassment of their status as homeless teens (Klein et al., 2000; Weinreb, Goldberg, Bassuk, & Perfloff, 1998; Ziv, Bolet, & Slap, 1998). Despite their increased risk for illness and injury, they are less likely to seek out care due to their mistrust of adults (Klein et al., 2000).

Another extensive literature base concerning homeless adolescents studies the homelessness in relation to a resilience or coping framework (Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz & Jarvis, 2001; Kolar, Erickson, & Stewart, 2012; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Kidd & Shahrar, 2008; Hyman, Aubry, & Klodawsky, 2010; Cleverley & Kidd, 2011). Resilience represents the interaction between risk factors (negative factors that create vulnerability) and protective resources (factors that offer protection). Young people who have good or desirable (or socially acceptable) outcomes in the face of high risk are described as being resilient (Rutter 1993; Tiet et al., 1998). It is a premise of this research, however, that all of the homeless participants in this study have resilience and have found coping strategies (good, bad, and in-between) that assist them in moving their lives forward. It is also a premise that these young people, although resilient and “making it” in various ways, still

need significant assistance in order to meet their basic needs and to actualize their full educational and occupational potential. A study by Hall (2007) found that homeless students indeed face a number of emotional, psychological, and cognitive problems. He proposes that the school environment is likely the most stable component of the homeless student's life; hence, understanding students' experiences with schools and other educational institutions is worthy of further exploration.

While homeless youth are diverse across a broad spectrum of demographic characteristics (e.g., region, gender, sexual orientation, and class), African Americans and other ethnic minorities are disproportionately overrepresented in this population (McCaskill, Toro, & Wolfe, 1998). Yet, there is no research devoted to the educational experiences of homeless African American students from the student's perspective. The existing research on homeless African American youth mimics the universe of scholarly research and reduces their experiences to risky behaviors that impact their mental, sexual, or physical health (Unger et al., 1997; Madriz, 1997; Liverpool et al., 2002), providing in turn little opportunity to investigate school-based interventions that may positively impact future life outcomes. The research young women who happen to be homeless is also thin. As the numbers of African American, Latino, and female homeless school-aged adolescents continue to rise, it is important to empirically explore how they are (in similar and different ways) articulating their educational experiences and occupational aspirations given their social locations.

Diminished Educational Outcomes

The diminished academic achievements and educational outcomes of homeless school-aged adolescents are documented in a thin cadre of scholarship. Much of the

educational research literature distinguishes the disparities in academic achievement between homeless students and non-homeless students (Molnar, Rath, & Klein, 1990; Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitman, 2004). Specifically, the research on homeless young people identifies three broad areas in which they experience educational difficulties: academic achievement, school mobility, and grade retention. Indeed, one study found that homeless children fare worse in these domains than very low-income housed children (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001).

Academic Achievement: First, multiple comparative studies reveal that homeless students generally have lower scores on achievement tests than students with homes (Rafferty, 1998; Rafferty & Shin, 1991; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitman, 2004). Their reading and mathematics scores are more often well below grade level when compared to their housed peers (Rubin et al., 1996). Another study found that almost half of children housed in a temporary shelter merited a special education evaluation, but only 23% ever received the evaluation or any special education services (Zima et al., 1997). While studies of homeless youth assert that they score lower on tests of academic achievement, other research indicates that the school is important to homeless students (Masten et al. 1997).

School Mobility: One of the primary predictors of academic achievement, and the second area where homeless students find educational difficulty, is in the increased rate of school-to-school mobility. Student mobility refers to changes in school enrollment at times other than those prompted by grade level promotion (Staresina, 2004). Stability refers to students whose enrollment is continuous and in a consistent place (Rhodes, 2005). Changing homes and schools forces students to adjust to a new social

environment, make new friends, and adapt to a new curriculum, all of which are daunting prospects for more privileged students. For homeless youth (and we could argue, their low-income peers), the transition to a new school may hinder their educational development. When highly mobile adolescents do not expect to remain in a school for an appreciable time, making friends or investing in their academics may seem like a pointless endeavor (Cauce, 2000; Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003).

Mobile students may have personal and family problems that contribute to their needing to change residences or schools (Rumberger, 2003). Several studies have shown that homeless students change schools more times during the school year than their housed peers (Nunez & Fox, 1999; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; Zima, Bussing, Forness, & Benjamin, 1997; Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; Masten et al., 1997). A study by Obradovic et al (2009) found that homeless children who were also highly mobile not only had lower initial achievement than their housed peers, but they experienced slower academic growth over the course of 18 months than their peers. While research indicates that mobile students score lower on achievement tests, other research reveals that mobility is a symptom of poor school performance, not necessarily an outcome (Rumberger, 2003).

Grade Retention: In addition to school mobility, homeless students also experience higher rates of grade retention when compared with their permanently housed peers. Multiple studies have found that homeless youth are more likely to repeat a grade than residentially stable students (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001; Rafferty, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004; Rubin, Erickson, San Agustin, Cleary, Allen, & Cohen, 1996). The bulk of the research suggests that many homeless students will repeat at least one grade level

during their elementary and secondary careers. While homeless adolescents are more likely to repeat a grade, there is no evidence that grade retention improves their academic achievement.

Shortcomings of Existing Literature

One of the issues with studies on homeless youth and education is isolating the effect that homelessness has on education (Buckner, 2008; 2012). As homelessness might result from issues of poverty, substance abuse, or family conflict or abuse, it is difficult to decouple homelessness from the myriad of factors that may lead an individual into a state of homelessness. In addition, the literature does not take into account school effects on homeless student achievement. For example, homeless students might be more likely to attend schools that have a history of poorly preparing students regardless of their living situations, thus, the low academic achievement for homeless students may simply reflect the school's deficiency not the student's. While the findings highlighted in the above studies are important, they leave us wanting to know about the experiences of homeless students in their own words.

A second problem with the previously mentioned literature is that it treats homelessness as a static category and not as also a socially constructed identity factor that acts in concert with other socially constructed identities. The literature has yet to take into account the different manifestations of homelessness or the ways students think about themselves as homeless individuals, and how this interacts with their other identities. For example, it is also well-documented that students of color are more sensitive or responsive to school-based factors including teachers (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Hanushek, 1992; Oates, 2005; Dee, 2004; Clewell, Puma, & McKay, 2005; Hanushek,

Kain, & Rivkin, 2005). The research by Dee (2004), Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2005), and others (Carter & Larke, 2003; Oates, 1992; Saft & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999) find that race is important in the classroom and that race plays a significant role in student achievement. These studies also suggest that African American students tend to be more dependent upon positive teacher-student interactions (and are more negatively impacted by off-putting teacher-student interactions) (Irvine, 1990). What does it mean that a disproportionate amount of homeless adolescents are Black or African American, yet these students are more likely to be responsive to school effects? An intersectional exploration of race, homelessness, and other identity factors is warranted.

My interest in this dissertation is not to conduct a comparative study of homeless and housed adolescents. Nor can my primary concerns be answered by surveying a large group of homeless students on how many days of school they have missed or what curricular initiatives are conducive to their unique needs. Other scholars are better prepared to address those issues. My interest is in privileging the voices of my study's participants, analyzing the educational experiences of these young people who cross various racial and gender boundaries as they negotiate their social locations, and analyzing the role of institutions who play a key role in shaping and facilitating their educational aspirations and occupational experiences.

Conceptual Framework

To fully understand (and possibly change) the social processes that lend themselves to diminished educational attainment for homeless young adults, I focus my attention on the orientations that may contribute to these outcomes: status attainment theory and the ethic of care. Status attainment framework (Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf,

1970) is predicated on the notion that future educational success among adolescents is at least in large part contingent on current beliefs that such success is desirable and likely. I utilize the concepts of aspirations and expectations, which are key components of status socialization theory, to explore this study. It has been suggested that educational aspirations and expectations are important predictors of educational and occupational status in adulthood (Haller & Portes, 1973; Kao & Thompson, 2003). Scholars Beal and Crockett (2010) found that young people's educational expectations were positively associated with educational attainment in young adulthood. Similarly, Feliciano and Rumbaut (2005) reported that educational expectations of high school students increased expected occupational status at the age of 30. And finally, work from Lee, Hill, and Hawkins (2012) suggests that when children from low-income families develop high educational aspirations and expectations, "they are more likely to graduate from high school and are more likely to have higher income at age 30" (p. 149). As such, it is useful to use these concepts to explore my particular interest in the aspirations (and influences of those aspirations) of homeless young people.

I also include as an essential component of my framework the ethic of care. I presented my interest in the ethic of care in the prelude, but it figures prominently throughout this study as a guiding framework in research design, data collection, and analysis. The ethic of care as a theoretical framework is understood from many perspectives. Various scholars from philosophy, psychology, and education have contributed to this body of knowledge and have attempted to characterize care in different ways. What is common across these characterizations and definitions is the focus on relationships between individuals and the actions or behaviors that are involved

over the course of the relationship between those individuals. I define the ethic of care and how it is relevant to this study in the final section of this chapter.

Aspirations and Expectations

Two important orientations suggested by status socialization theory are aspirations and expectations. Educational aspirations and expectations have a notable impact on the educational attainment process (Hanson, 1994; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Kao & Tienda, 1998). Aspirations are the educational credentials and occupations that individuals *hope* to achieve. As such, aspirations are considered to be somewhat abstract, representing idealistic preferences for the future and to represent values, as aspirations to attend college may reflect students' recognition of the social and economic importance of higher education rather than their personal desire to attend college (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006). In contrast, expectations are the educational credentials or occupations that individuals *expect* to achieve (Bourdieu, 1973; Kerckhoff, 1976). Scholars argue that expectations are based on knowledge of the real world and all of its constraints (such as discrimination, traditional gender role definitions, socioeconomic position); aspirations are imagined without those constraints or structural ceilings.

Scholars currently debate the linkages between aspirations and expectations and which one or combination of both influences the educational and occupational attainment of young adults. The literature base is clear on another aspect of the factors that influence expectations and aspirations—women, Blacks, and those from low-income backgrounds have a greater tendency to have lower expectations than their male, White, or middle-income peers, but higher aspirations (Alexander & Eckland, 1975; Kerckhoff &

Campbell, 1977; Hanson, 1994). The remaining sections of this chapter discuss aspirations and expectations in light of class, race, and gender differences.

Class and Aspirations

Bourdieu (1973), Kerckhoff (1976), McClelland (1990), and others have stated that class is one of the most powerful and consistent group characteristics in the status attainment and socialization process. According to Bourdieu, educational systems are a major arena in which the structure of class relations is perpetuated. When children from lower SES backgrounds enter the academic arena, they enter a cultural milieu in which they have few resources (cultural capital) to compete with others, and the values of the dominant culture reign. Students then develop systems of attitudes, aspirations, and activities (habitus) that reflect a realization of their opportunities and of the larger structure of class relations.

From the beginning, researchers who have modeled the educational achievement process have acknowledged the effects of class (family background or ascribed status) that are above and beyond the effects of presumed abilities (Sewell et al. 1969, 1970). Research on the mechanisms through which students from different SES backgrounds get sorted shows that selection into ability groups, placement in curricula, teachers' expectations, class-segregated schools, and the resultant unequal resources, as well as bureaucratic control and an emphasis on competition, all work to fit young people into economic positions that are similar to their parents' (Rist 1970; Alexander and Eckland, 1974). In other words, schools work in macro and micro ways that result in children repeating or reproducing similar class positions of their parents. McClelland's (1990) study of the post-high school experiences of a sample of U.S. youths with high

occupational aspirations added support to Bourdieu's theory by demonstrating that class was strongly related to high school aspirations.

While the aforementioned studies transformed and somewhat revolutionized how educational researchers studied, analyzed, and interpreted the educational aspirations of school-aged children, Bourdieu and others left many questions unanswered. Is this approach to status attainment too deterministic? What is the role of individual agency, both for the young adults and the actors of the schooling institutions (teachers and administrators)? How does this process play out for young people with various intersecting identities (race, gender, marginalized social positions like homelessness)? While we have a foundational sense of how class and socioeconomic position complicate our understanding of young adults and their educational and occupational opportunities, other socially constructed identities—particularly race and gender—also play a role in the construction and realization of aspirations.

Race and Aspirations

Beginning with the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), there has been considerable evidence of the positive educational attitudes of African American adolescent attitudes that often persist in the context of poor achievement (Crichlow, 1986, as cited in Hanson, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). African American children have significantly higher aspirations than whites (Hauser and Anderson, 1991) although their expectations are often lower. To some scholars, this aspiration–expectation mismatch reflects the measurement of abstract rather than concrete educational orientations (Mickelson, 1990). Hauser and Anderson's (1991) study provided additional support for the mismatch between attitudes and behaviors among young Black men. It found that

young Black men and young White men have similar plans and aspirations to attend college and that recent decreases in the actual rates of college attendance by Blacks have occurred despite the lack of change in their aspirations. Thus, research on race and aspirations shows that considerable selection processes are at work and that there are large gaps between educational hopes and achievements among racial minorities.

One of the most influential scholarly works on how race is situated within the discourse on status attainment is Jay MacLeod's *Ain't No Makin' It* (1995), an ethnographic study of two male-only teenage groups: the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers. Both groups grew up in the Claredon Heights housing project and attended similar neighborhood schools. The Hallway Hangers, an almost all-White group, were resigned to a life of poverty due to their perceptions of a class-based and increasingly racially diverse economic system. The Brothers, all Black adolescents with the exception of one member, were optimistic that they could transcend their current economic situations with hard work and higher education. In the end, the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers experienced similar occupational outcomes, although the Brothers were poised (due to adherence to the dominant achievement ideology and high school credentials) to secure better jobs and economic rewards. MacLeod's analysis highlighted how race is a powerful factor in not only how young adults, particularly males, conceive of their futures, but it is a strong predictor of eventual occupational outcomes.

Gender and Aspirations

In addition to race, gender is also a key factor in influencing the educational and occupational aspirations of young adults. Males and females vary in their educational and occupational aspirations and expectations, with females having higher aspirations and

lower expectations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Despite the fact that women have gained much in terms of educational attainment over the last decades (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006), there are persisting gender inequalities in occupational attainment. These differences may result from females perceiving more barriers to their educational attainment and the achievement of career goals. Females are more likely to anticipate gender discrimination and structural barriers to career success (Mau & Bikos, 2000), and they still earn less money for similar work and are less likely to be promoted to the top of their professions (Scott, Crompton, & Lyonette, 2010).

These gendered perceptions are changing, slowly. Mickelson's (1989) study found few gender differences in two kinds of educational attitudes-abstract and concrete. Abstract attitudes are, according to Mickelson, based on ideologies about education and opportunity. These attitudes reflect the dominant belief systems of most Americans, including notions about working hard to get ahead and education as a resource for opportunities. Concrete attitudes, on the other hand, are indicators of beliefs about the empirical realities of the benefits of education. Mickelson argued that almost all students have positive abstract attitudes about education, but those who view inequitable opportunity structures in the labor market will have more negative concrete attitudes. The increasingly similar educational expectations and attainment of men and women and the match between concrete and abstract educational attitudes among White males and females in her sample led Mickelson to conclude that young women have not adjusted their educational expectations and behaviors downward. Mickelson speculated that different reference groups, beliefs that gender inequalities in the labor market are a problem only of older generations, and the use of college as a means to find educated

husbands are some reasons for the continued high educational attainment of young women despite poor prospects in the labor market. Thus, the research on gender and lost talent suggests that although gender continues to be associated with lowered educational expectations, gender differences in some educational attitudes are decreasing.

Status attainment research tells us that aspirations and expectations are important influences on educational attainment. The question remains: do homeless adolescents, particularly those who identify as racial or ethnic minorities and female, recognize the numerous structural barriers to attending college, causing them to be less optimistic for their chances for high attainment? If both educational aspirations and expectations are low, one could conclude that the young people lack the desire to continue their education past the secondary level. In contrast, if aspirations are high yet expectations are low, one could alternatively conclude that it is not the lack of desire, but perhaps the (realistic?) belief that the post-secondary opportunities do not exist for young people in their social locations. In either case, gaining empirical clarity about these young people, and the group differences among them, will enable educators and policymakers to direct their resources to improving the educational attainment of homeless adolescents.

The Ethic of Care

Finally, an important conceptual thread that flows throughout the remaining chapters of this dissertation is the ethic of care. In this study, I use Siddle-Walker's (1993) definition of care as "the direct attention an individual gives to meet the psychological, sociological, and academic needs of another individual or individuals" (p. 65). This definition is intended to attend to the interpersonal relationships between people—particularly teachers and students and Empower employees and homeless young

adult clients. According to the author, African American students in particular need support with self-awareness and self-esteem (psychological), more guidance about the social environment inside and outside of school (sociological), and high expectations for academic achievement (academic). The majority of participants in this dissertation study self-identify as Black or African American, making Siddle-Walker's definition apt. This dissertation study, at least in its conception and beginning stages, is also focused on interpersonal caring instead of institutional caring, which Siddle-Walker maintains is focused on the good of the larger group (for example, all students, not subgroups of students), and group needs are met through broad, generalized policies.

While Carol Gilligan (1982) is credited with elevating the ethic of care on par with other theories of moral qualities (such as justice and fairness), Nel Noddings (1984) is credited with bringing the theory to educational settings, what she dubbed the "ethic of teacher care". Over the past 25 years, Noddings has written extensively on what it means to care in schools (Noddings, 1988; 2003; 2005; 2007). In her landmark book, *Caring: A feminist approach to ethics and moral education*, Noddings began her longstanding argument for the presence of an ethic of care in educational settings. She examined the feminine understanding of care developed by Gilligan and she expanded its application to the classroom while simultaneously acknowledging its accessibility to both male and female caregivers.

Noddings begins her theoretical argument with the assumption that teachers and their students are involved in a reciprocal, dependent relationship (Noddings, 1988). In this relationship, teachers are the carers and students are the cared-for. The caring involved in the teacher-student relationship involves three fundamental elements:

engrossment, receptivity, and reciprocity (Noddings, 1992). Engrossment initiates the caring encounter, and it involves the carer receiving the cared-for and relating closely to that individual. For however brief their encounters, carers are totally and fully attentive to the cared-for. In return, the cared-for must be open and receptive to the caring presented to them, and they must interpret the caring act as caring. Finally, reciprocity completes the interaction with the cared-for acknowledging the carer and the care bestowed to them. The caring act must be interpreted as caring by the one receiving the care. Reciprocity, therefore, is vital, as it fuels a cycle of further engrossment and ongoing receptivity and reciprocity.

These three components make up *authentic* (or what is commonly referred to as interpersonal). Authentic caring, however, is often overlooked or disregarded in favor of aesthetic caring. *Aesthetic* (or institutional) caring focuses on the technical aspects of teaching and learning, such as curriculum, standardized tests, and teaching strategies. Teachers who care aesthetically are committed to the school-sanctioned practices believed to lead to academic achievement (Noddings, 1992). While Noddings acknowledges that aesthetic care is important, she advocates for more authentic care in schools. Aesthetic care is the usual focal point of administrators, superintendents, and government policy makers. Authentic care attends to students social and emotional needs, which Noddings (1992) maintains is missing from classrooms and a possible reason for student disengagement.

Valenzuela (1999) also broadens the conceptualization of care theory, specifically the two different types of caring introduced by Noddings. She takes up Noddings (1984) distinction between aesthetic caring, “a commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly

leads to achievement” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61) and authentic caring “that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students” (p. 61). Aesthetic caring refers to a lack of engagement between teachers and students that both Noddings and Valenzuela hold is “the basis for all learning” (Valenzuela 1999, p. 61) with an emphasis on structures and content. In contrast, according to Valenzuela, authentic caring is premised on engaged and respectful relationships. Authentic caring, which is more preferred by Valenzuela, requires that teachers move beyond making assumptions about who they think students are and create sustained interactions that enable them to intimately get to know students, and how issues such as race, social class, and gender, impact the student-teacher relationship on a daily basis. This expansion of care theory is important because it not only attends to these cultural issues, but it also identifies and describes teachers’ assumptions about students and how these views can negatively impact students.

The ethic of care as it is currently understood does have limitations. For example, it fails to attend to issues of identity intersectionality (the youths’ self-ascribed identities) and social context. We do not know if the condition of homelessness influences how teachers and students receive and reciprocate care. With that being said, Noddings, Valenzuela, and I agree on several of the theoretical basics, including the premise that schools and classrooms (formal and informal environments) lack a caring ethic and that we will not achieve our societal goals of educational equity until we attend to the interpersonal relationships within those spaces. We also agree that schooling institutions (formal and informal) are important for issues of care because as homeless students lose their home connections, they also lose their school connections, and this often serves as a barrier to educational attainment (Reeg, 2003). Homeless adolescents reported the

process of leaving school as a turning point in their lives with their situations worsening after they dropped out of school (Lindsey & Williams, 2002). Schools can (and I argue, should) serve as anchors of stability for homeless youth, providing a space to gain valuable developmental skills and to maintain relationships with teachers, classmates, and the larger school community (Reed-Victor & Pelco, 1999).

The ethic of care is an important conceptual lens that I use to explore the educational experiences and aspirations of the homeless participants in this study. While the definition of care, and much of the work on the ethic of care attends specifically to formal classroom relationships (teachers and students), I broaden it for this study to include the interactions between informal educational agents (Empower staff) and the homeless young adults they serve. The connection will be made more clear in the following empirical chapters.

Together, these three bodies of literature—status attainment, aspirations/expectations, and the ethic of care—set up my distinct research objectives. There are perceptions of constraints and opportunities attached to the life aspirations of all young people, including those living in poverty and experiencing periods of homelessness. While much has been written about the influence of class, race, and gender on aspirations and expectations, it is unclear how the intersections of these three identities shape or influence the aspirations of marginalized young adults. For example, we presently do not know if impoverished Black girls envision their futures differently than impoverished Black boys, and if they do, in what ways and why. In addition, there are currently no scholarly investigations of how the ethic of care—both authentic and aesthetic displays—play a role in how these aspirations are developed, pursued, or achieved. I link all of

these literatures together in an effort to offer a more complex and full picture of the educational landscape for some of the country's most vulnerable school-aged adolescents.

Chapter 3

Methods

In order to capture the lived experiences (past and present) of participating homeless young adults and how their interconnected identities impacted their educational outcomes and perceptions of the future, I utilized an ethnographic approach. Ethnography enabled me to enter the social setting and get to know the social actors who move within it (Gobo, 2008; Patton, 2002). In the case of this dissertation study, these social actors were homeless school-aged adolescents, as well as the nonprofit organizational staff providing services located in the suburbs of a large metropolitan Midwestern city. I specifically adopted the ethnographic approaches of semi-structured interviewing and participant observations in order to capture the rich and complex personal and educational backgrounds, experiences, and ambitions of the study's participants (Patton, 2002).

Throughout this study I privileged the everyday interactions, voices, and experiences of the homeless young adults while also remaining consciously aware of being, as Winn (2011) writes, “betwixt and between” the shifting complexity of the research context and my researcher orientation—my lived experiences as a Black woman both converge and diverge with the youth in this study. I will speak more specifically to my researcher positionality later in this chapter. To begin, I will 1) outline the setting and participants for this study; 2) describe my methods for data collection and analysis; 3)

discuss issues of research ethics and positionality; 4) include a detailed description of the types of schools the homeless youth attended in order to provide educational context; and lastly, I provide a short introduction to the three groups of homeless youth around whom the remainder of this dissertation is focused.

Setting and Participants

It is difficult to gain access to homeless school-aged young adults because they often “hide” in order to avoid authority figures (e.g., police or family members) and they usually distrust strangers due to fear of being arrested or sent back to abusive homes (Wills, 2008; Slesnick et al., 2009). The participants in my study sought cover in abandoned houses, dark isolated alleyways, and they stay out of sight during traditional school hours so as not to draw attention of adults. They are invisible, particularly during the day, making my access to them particularly difficult. As such, I interviewed homeless young adults with the recruiting assistance of the nonprofit organization Empower¹, which provides temporary shelter, counseling, educational support, and other services for homeless adolescents. Empower is an established “Safe Space”, a place designated for homeless people to go for a safe place to sleep and to receive food and assistance. Law enforcement officials and other adults (i.e. parents searching for their runaway children) are not allowed inside Empower without explicit permission.

Empower serves young people between the ages of 10 to 20, and is almost always at full capacity; the need for their services, including family counseling, food and clothing pantry, and temporary housing far exceeds their institutional capacity. The organization has 3 separate locations, including a temporary shelter, designed for housing

¹ Empower is a pseudonym.

adolescents up to 6 weeks in duration, a permanent shelter for emancipated young adults or those 18 years of age or older, and a drop-in center open Monday through Friday in the after-school hours (typically after 3:00 each day). Empower formally serves over 500 homeless adolescents a year, the vast majority of which are African American and Latino, which is disproportionate given the demographics of the suburban area². Ninety-eight percent of the young people turn to the organization because of serious family conflict; 66% flee unsafe circumstances due to neglect, physical or sexual abuse. Many are considered “throw-away” children by policymakers and Empower staff because their parents no longer have the capacity to care for them due to substance abuse, mental illness, or the stresses of poverty; all of them fit into the aforementioned definition of homeless (see Literature Review). Empower is grant funded, and all of the grants they receive stipulate that services must be provided to school-age adolescents, or 20 years of age or younger. Once the young adults turn 21 they must cease coming to the Drop-In, and they receive little if any of the previous services offered to them, including counseling.

Empower’s three locations are located in a Midwestern county that has a population just over 350,000. The county is mostly White (75%), and the median income is just under \$60,000. A slight majority of adult county residents have a bachelor’s degree (51%). Most of the homeless participants in my study live or spend their time in Aberdeen, a small town of about 20,000 residents. Aberdeen is more racially diverse than the rest of the county, with a population that is 60% White, about 30% Black or African American, and a growing Latino population. Its residents have a lower median income of

² This descriptive information about Empower is taken from the organization’s annual report, which is public accessible data. As such, no specific information beyond what is mentioned here will be provided in order to ensure confidentiality of the organization and the youth it serves.

about \$33,000. Finally, 35% of Aberdeen's adult residents possess a bachelor's degree (US Census Bureau Quick Facts, 2014). Of Empower's three locations, only the Drop-In center is located in Aberdeen. This, I hypothesize, is what bounds most of the young people to Aberdeen. The Drop-In provides hot meals, showers, and a food pantry, and if they remain in the immediate surrounding area of Aberdeen, they do not have to travel far to have these specific needs met.

I utilized a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit my participants. The sample was convenient because all of the young people were at Empower—I did not observe or interview homeless adolescents who were not receiving services. This decision was ultimately one of safety for me and the homeless young adults—I did not want to risk my safety by entering precarious locations alone (alleyways, abandoned houses, etc.). I also wanted to ensure that the homeless adolescents hiding places stayed hidden from other adults who sought their locations. Empower was a safe, neutral place for all of us. The sampling was also purposeful as I chose adolescents who were not brand new to the organization of Empower (young adults who had received services for less than a month were not interviewed). Young people new to Empower were more sporadic in their attendance to the Drop-In center, and they were least likely to be able to talk about their experiences with the organization in terms of their educational trajectories. I also sought to interview those young people who seemed to be “information rich” in regards to the research questions I seek to answer. School-aged young people who had varied experiences in the local school systems and had a long history with Empower were especially informative. To take part in the study,

they must have met the following criteria: 1) High-school aged (14-20)³; 2) Are currently experiencing homelessness or experienced homelessness during the last year and 3) not brand new clients to Empower. Although the participant's racial identity was not a criterion for inclusion in this study, the majority of homeless adolescents who participated in qualitative interviews were African American or Black (*18 of 25*). Table 1 offers the demographic breakdown of all the participants' self-reported demographic information, including their ages, race, gender, and educational status at the time of the semi-structured interview.

Data Collection

I performed data collection by conducting semi-structured interviews and participant observations at all three Empower sites for a year. While my main sample is homeless young adults (see Table 1), I also interviewed and observed the staff at Empower in order to better understand the influences on homeless youth's educational experiences and occupational aspirations. The staff members of Empower are responsible for monitoring students' progress in school while the students are receiving housing services. If there are thematic issues or problems that young people in this geographical area face in relation to their education (from experiences to future aspirations and goals), the staff at Empower were most likely aware of them and could offer useful insights. I digitally recorded all interviews in order to not only have an accurate record of the interview, but to give my primary attention to the participants and the stories they were sharing. As suggested by other researchers, the seemingly innocuous act of writing or

³ This age range is designed to encompass the full-spectrum of high-school aged adolescents, including youth who have had gaps in their schooling or have been retained and finish high school at 20.

typing may have interfered with the natural flow of the conversation and lead to a more stilted interview (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1994).

Semi-Structured Interviews with Youth: My primary source of data collection was via semi-structured interviews with homeless adolescents. Based on prior scholarly research, I designed my study to utilize semi-structured interviews anticipating that my information would come from a transitory population, homeless adolescents, and this method is particularly appropriate when there is only one chance to interview someone (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). It was in the field, however, that I found most of the clients of Empower were not very transitory in where they obtained resources or services. The majority of clients were mobile. They moved week to week, sometimes several times a day for their safety, but Empower stayed constant. No matter where they moved throughout the county or in the town of Aberdeen, they made their way back to the Drop-In to have their pressing needs met. Empower made this movement between youths' temporary and changing living situations and the Drop-In easier by providing city bus tokens. Homeless clients were provided two free tokens per day, one to reach Empower and one to return to their housing location.

I interacted with many young adults at the Drop-In, but I interviewed 25 who were regulars to the site. I saw them often and was able to develop a trusting rapport. The 25 participants were also the first ones to agree to be interviewed, and as I'll explain in detail later, my monetary constraints prevented me from interviewing more young people. The interview protocol (see Appendix A), contained three domains of interview questions which were designed to elicit rich descriptions about the following:

- Domain 1, Education: participants' educational experiences, including information about the schools they have attended, their current educational situation, and their relationships with school personnel.
- Domain 2, Future: how the young people imagine their educational and occupational futures, including the actual and imagined plans for successful achievement;
- Domain 3, Supports and Obstacles: past and/or present experiences, individuals and organizations that influence the school-aged adolescents' thinking and actions regarding their educational aspirations and future occupations.

In addition to the domains, I also asked participants to share the racial and social class groups of which they self-identify to allow for analyses of how these memberships may play a role in their educational experiences and aspirations. All participants verbally consented to the interview and were informed of their right to skip questions or stop the interview completely. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. While I created an interview protocol with the domains in advance of the interviews, the interviewee had a fair degree of freedom in what to talk about, how much to say, and how to express it. In appreciation for their time and their stories, each participant received a \$25 gift card to a local retailer regardless of the length of the interview. This monetary honorarium also limited the amount of young people I interviewed, capping my study to 25 participants given the funds I had available.

Semi-Structured Interviews with Staff: I also interviewed 95% of Empower's organizational staff ($n=12$) including clinical therapists ($n=3$), administrators ($n=3$), peer outreach workers ($n=3$), and drop-in house volunteers ($n=3$) regarding their observations of the challenges that homeless young adults in the Aberdeen community face. I additionally asked them to discuss the ways that they see the young adults making meaning of academic achievement and talking about their aspirations (see Appendix B).

These interviews provided critical insight into homeless youth's experiences, as staff members were responsible for monitoring school-aged adolescents' progress in school while they were receiving housing and other support services. If there were issues that young people in this geographical area faced in relation to their education (from past experiences, access, and aspirations), I was hopeful that the staff at this organization were likely aware of them. Staff members received no honorarium for their participation.

Table 1: Youth Demographics

The Homeboys				
Pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Educational Status
Nathan	18	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
William	17	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Michael	17	White	M	Drop-Out
Manuel	18	Latino and Black	M	Drop-Out
Frank	18	Black	M	H.S. Graduate
John	17	Black	M	Drop-Out
James	14	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Henry	19	Black	M	Drop-Out
Terrance	19	Black	M	Drop-Out
Benji	17	Black	M	Enrolled in H.S.
Karim	18	Black	M	Drop-Out
Jeremy	16	Latino and Black	M	Drop-Out
The Sistergirls				
Camille	17	Black	F	Enrolled in H.S.
Gabbie	14	Black	F	Enrolled in H.S.
Kim	17	Black	F	Drop-Out
Laura	18	Black	F	H.S. Graduate
Dana	20	Black	F	H.S. Graduate
Megan	19	Black	F	Enrolled in H.S.
Patience	19	Black	F	H.S. Graduate
Sonia	17	Black	F	Drop-Out
Amber	16	Black	F	Enrolled in H.S.
The EmoCores				
Eddie	17	White	M	Drop-Out
Roxy	16	White	F	Enrolled in H.S.
Skylar	16	White	F	Enrolled in H.S.
Lucas	16	White	M	Drop-Out
<p>All of the names in this study have been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of participants. While I may at times use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably in this study, the racial categories above are self-identified by the participants themselves. The “Educational Status” describe the statuses of participants at the time of the semi-structured interview and were not static. Participants routinely enrolled in high school or alternative educational institutions and dropped out shortly after due to foreseen or unforeseen circumstances.</p>				

In addition to learning more about the formal mission of the organization, I wanted to interview the staff members because of the influence they have on the lives of these homeless young adults. While I could approach my discussion of Empower from a distanced organizational studies approach, I know that the organization is a sum of its staff members who make daily decisions that impact the lives of homeless young people in real and significant ways. The influence these (mostly young) adults have on the participants of my study go beyond organizational objectives. Some of the staff members, particularly the ones who are in charge of the Drop-In, are the only stable adults in the lives of several of their “clients”. The adolescents trust them and look to them for advice and mentorship. Furthermore, all of the staff members of Empower possessed bachelor degrees, and some had masters’ degrees or were working toward a terminal degree in social work. As such, they could all pursue other careers that offered more pay and benefits than this nonprofit organization. I wanted to know why they chose to work with Empower, whose mission is to assist homeless adolescents, and how their personal beliefs or backgrounds play a role in how they interact with their clients.

This dissertation study is about the experiences and ambitions of homeless young people, but I also include staff members’ opinions and perspectives where applicable and pertinent. While all of the information gleaned from the staff will not be included in this study, some of it is very important to getting a full picture of who the young participants are and how and why their futures are open or circumscribed. The following is a summary of three staff members who spend the majority of their work days at the Drop-In, and as such, know these young people the best and show up in significant ways in this study.

Emilia, Empower’s Drop-In Center Case Manager: Emilia is in charge of the client database at the Drop-In. Homeless clients must sign-in with her on an official daily attendance roster, and she adds all necessary information (such as new client information) to a regional social services database. Emilia is a White female in her mid 20’s. She is almost six feet tall and has brown hair that flows straight down to the middle of her back. Emilia is currently attending night classes to obtain her master’s degree in social work. She has been working at Empower for 5 years, and she provides direct counseling and support service referrals to the youth in her caseload. The young people of Empower call her a “hard-ass” because they think she is inflexible when it comes to bending Drop-In rules.

Faith, Empower Case Manager: Faith is another case manager for Empower. She is responsible for a number of client’s cases, and fills most of her workday counseling youth or transporting them to social service appointments (including appointments for their application to subsidized affordable housing). She is in charge of programming for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young people at the Drop-In. Faith is in her early 20’s, is about 5’3, and has shoulder length brown hair. She identifies as African American. She recently graduated from a local 4-year university with a degree in social work. She has been working at Empower for almost a year, joining the staff as an intern in her senior year of college and as a full-time staff member upon her graduation. Faith is well-liked by

the homeless clients, particularly the girls who say that she can relate to them because she is young.

Clinton, Empower Employment Coordinator: Clinton is in charge of an Empower program called “Professional Pursuits”. It is a 4 week job training program that teaches resume writing, interviewing skills, and workplace etiquette. The program ends with a paid internship in a local business or nonprofit organization. Clinton is in charge of selecting youth for this opportunity and for recruiting businesses that make internships available. Clinton has been with Empower for three years. He is a White male in his early thirties, is about 5’9, and he speaks with a deliberate Midwestern drawl. He has brown hair, bright blue eyes, and he always wears an old worn baseball cap, even when he is wearing a suit and tie. When asked, the youth tell me that Clinton is an “okay guy”.

These employees, Emilia, Faith, and Clinton, are the face of Empower at the Drop-In. They are in charge of daily activities, such as video games and crafts, as well as the dinner menu, and snacks. They also enforce organizational rules and decide which infractions result in which consequences. Their perspectives and insight into the lives of the homeless young people will be evident in upcoming chapters.

Participant Observation: To understand the young clients’ everyday experiences in interactions with one another and organizational staff, I spent more than 150 hours conducting participant observations at Empower. I sought information on their peer networks and how educational issues factored into their interactions with Empower staff members. I actively listened for conversations about school or education, and I used these

moments to gain more information about how school figured into the lives of the homeless young people. I also attended informal gatherings and workshops at the Drop-In two-to-three times a week for a year. In the safety and comfort of the drop-in center, homeless clients were able to get hot meals, wash their clothes, take showers, and socialize with friends. Spending time with the young people in this setting allowed for organic interactions and conversations about their educational experiences and aspirations to emerge. I also attended regular youth training events, which included topics of GED preparation, job trainings such as Professional Pursuits, and possible career trajectories. I also joined homeless adolescents peer outreach workers as they passed out Empower brochures and calling cards to other homeless adolescents on the streets of the town. In every observation, I paid particular attention to homeless client's and staff's discussions about race, homelessness, gender, and education, as these identities and issues directly relate to my research questions and research interests. I composed observation fieldnote memos after each visit.

I attempted, in every observation and interaction, to be an authentic participant (Paris, 2010). This means I attempted to create genuine relationships with the young people by spending time with them and participating in activities that matter to them. I joined the clients in playing board games and watching movies. I played video games and assisted them with their job resumes, applications, homework, and social services paperwork. I answered their sometimes pointed questions about who I was or why I was interested in learning about their past and present lives. In return, the young people permitted my presence in their limited spaces and they trusted me with their life histories and exceptional experiences in our one-on-one interview. Throughout this study, I

focused on being a “worthy witness” (Winn & Ubiles, 2011) to the lives of these young adults. As a worthy witness, I kept their voices central to my data collection and analysis, I kept our conversations confidential, and there are some stories I choose not to tell. The young adults deemed me worthy to hear their histories and traumatic experiences, and a part of that responsibility is that I chose which stories needed to be told in this dissertation. I tell the stories central to the research questions at hand and I withhold the specifics that are dramatic yet tangential.

Finally, throughout this research I held onto the principle that I could (and ultimately should) care deeply for the participants of my study and continue to conduct a rigorous ethnographic investigation. So while I took copious fieldnotes at the beginning of my research in order to get a firm understanding of the space and the people within it, there came a time when I waited until I was alone or away from the site before recording my observations and thoughts in order to spend as much time as possible getting to know the young homeless adults in their environment. This method of delayed writing, I believe, strengthens my study, as I have a deep understanding of who these young people are, but I also have fieldnotes and memos that allow me to analyze their interpersonal interactions.

Data Analysis

My method of analysis involved an iterative process between data collection, coding, and memo generation as informed by grounded theory and constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). While this process may seem linear, it was, if you can imagine, circular with two-sided arrows going between all three—data collection, coding, and memo generation. I began by charting the demographic data to

describe participants' race, gender, class, homeless condition, and educational position (see Table 1). This was the first data I learned about the young people. I came back to this chart repeatedly in order to modify or add information where warranted, particularly when the young peoples' educational status changed. After spending more time in the field, I recorded case-by-case memos of the homeless young people which included notes about their private lives, personality traits, and any other information to which I was privy, and this was an ongoing process. I gained access to this information through informal interviews with the homeless clients, observations, and informal interviews with organizational staff. I then used the domains from my interview and observation protocols (see Appendices A and B) to create an initial coding scheme that reflected the categories embedded in my working conceptual framework, including social class, homelessness, educational experiences, race/ ethnicity, gender-related issues, and the intersections among and between them. For example, I created the initial code of "student mobility," which attends to both the previous research literature on the educational experiences of homeless youth (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003; Rumberger, 2003) and my research interest in how mobility impacted their educational goals. This initial coding scheme enabled me to stay attuned to important issues related to homeless young adults, while also remaining open to disconfirming evidence about their educational ambitions and future concerns.

The preceding is almost all about data collection, charting, and organization. My analysis involved a constant comparative process. I begin my discussion by offering a summary of how I analyzed interview data. I transcribed 25% of the digitally recorded interviews; the remainders were professionally transcribed verbatim and I managed the

final transcript data using AtlasTi software. Direct quotations were edited minimally for readability and, unless otherwise noted, are representative of the data.

- 1) **Comparison with a single interview.** I began by analyzing each individual interview in an effort to learn as much as possible about the participant and his or her educational experiences. I asked questions of the interview, such as “How are these young people describing themselves?” “What is consistent or inconsistent about his or her educational trajectory?” “How were his or her classroom experiences described, defended, rationalized?” “What people proved significant for the young people, particularly with his or her ambitions?” One of the results of this analysis is that I found the young participants organized themselves into distinct cliques based on gender and racial identities—the males of color, Black females, and White males and females.
- 2) **Comparison between interviews within groups.** I compared all of the interviews with the males of color (self-named the Homeboys) to each other. I then did the same to the other groups. I compared all of the interviews with the Black females (self-named the Sistergirls) to each other, and the White young people (self-named the EmoCores) with each other. I asked similar questions as I conducted this within-group analysis—“Are the young people talking about education (school, teachers, credentials) and other people (Empower staff members, other young people) in the same ways?” “What are the similarities and differences with their educational trajectories?” One of the

results of this level of analysis is there was a high level of group agreement about education, aspirations, and belief in the dominant achievement ideology.

- 3) **Comparison of interviews between different groups.** Next, I analyzed the interviews across the different groups. I compared the Homeboys to the Sistergirls and the EmoCores. I asked the questions, “What themes are similar across groups? Dissimilar?” “What nuanced information do the Homeboys offer to understanding the Sistergirls? The EmoCores? Vice-versa?” One of the results of this level of analysis is that there are clear distinctions between the three groups when it comes to their educational ambitions, occupational aspirations, and the significant others providing guidance.

I analyzed the interview data using open and focused coding methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), where during the open coding process, any and all codes were identified in line-by-line inductive coding (e.g., “focused on the present” and “teachers don’t care”). In the focused coding phase, I refined and synthesized the inductive codes to put “like” ones together, making the overall number of codes more manageable (e.g., synthesizing “pursing GED” and “enrolling in community college” to form a broader theme of “higher education aspirations”). At the same time, theoretically relevant themes were deductively identified (e.g., “internalized failure” and “post-racial attitudes”).

I used observational data, staff interviews, informal interviews, and fieldnote memos as triangulation, to confirm, extend, or refute the findings I was discovering in my interview analysis. I asked different questions of these data: “Do my observations substantiate the young peoples’ narratives?” “Do the staff members have differing accounts of the young clients’ educational ambitions and past experiences?” “What do I

think the young people aren't seeing in terms of their educational experiences and life chances?" "Given the educational options in this area, how does race, gender, and class play a role in their educational experiences? This analytical work enriched the complete story of these young people's experiences and aspirations.

As a result of all of these analyses, I contend the following: All of the homeless young adults accepted the dominant achievement ideology to varying degrees and in various ways. The homeless young people gained (unvalued) social capital and aspiration-clarity with group membership. I also found that school members (via homeless client and staff renderings) and non-profit staff interacted with these three subcultures—the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and EmoCores—in significantly different ways, essentially facilitating access to particular educational and occupational experiences of homeless young people through formal and informal means. These institutions encouraged the idealistic ambitions of the Homeboys; they tempered and diminished the realistic and economically viable ambitions of the Sistergirls. And they bolstered the pragmatic aspirations of the EmoCores. These findings, along with their significance, will be explored in great detail in the upcoming chapters (see Chapter 8 for full elaboration of all of the findings).

Research Ethics

Finally, preserving participants' confidentiality and anonymity is a particular challenge with in-depth interviewing (Allmark et al., 2009) and observational data. Although individual accounts may not be identifiable to the general public, they may be identifiable to peers and staff in the study. I took great effort to preserve participants' identities as some of the homeless young people are still living in uncertain and often

dangerous situations. First, all participants were given pseudonyms. Second, I changed identifying components of stories when necessary. For instance, if a young person mentioned the name, school, and subject area of an unsupportive teacher, I might have omitted the teachers' name and changed the subject the teacher taught while preserving the spirit and logic of the story. And third, in cases of truly unique narratives, such as accounts of extreme abuse and trauma, I also changed the physical description of the participant. An example of this practice would be the changing of a Sistergirls' hair style from "a short, straight bob" to "long, braided hair"—this allows for increased confidentiality when I'm describing the young adults. Although this slightly altered the content of participants' accounts, I have taken every care to retain their language and experiences whenever possible while privileging the goal of preserving their anonymity.

Researcher Positionality

My experiences as a high school teacher and graduate student of color shaped and informed my interest in understanding the educational experiences and aspirations of homeless youth of color. I possess a commitment to rigorous research that not only contributes to the field of education, but also raises important issues of social justice and educational equity for marginalized young people in both process and outcome. I am aware that *how* education research is conducted may be just as important as *what* is actually discovered in a study (Milner, 2007, emphasis in the original), and I paid particular attention to the "seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers in conducting education research" (p. 392) in this study. According to Milner (2007), these dangers arise when researchers do not consider, negotiate, balance, and attend to the complex nature of race and culture (and I would add gender, gender expression, social class, and sexual

orientation) in their research. As such, I used the following questions from Milner's "Framework of Researcher Racial and Cultural Positionality" to guide my observation notes, reflection memos and analysis of all data⁴:

Researching the self

- In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how do I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences?
- How do I negotiate and balance my racial and cultural selves in society and in my research? How do I know?
- What do I believe about race and culture in society and education, and how do I attend to my own convictions and beliefs about race and culture in my research? Why? How do I know?
- What racialized and cultural experiences have shaped my research decisions, practices, approaches, epistemologies, and agendas?

I used these questions to interrogate my racial and cultural biases during data collection, writing fieldnote memos, and conducting analysis. My view of race, class, and gender issues in the US are influenced greatly by my identity and experiences as a Black woman.

I believe that identities matter in how people are treated and in how they treat others. I believe that we live in an unequal, stratified society. And I believe that education is power and it is the key to interrupting the hegemonic structures that maintain the inequitable status quo. I kept these convictions close as I conducted this study, mindful through my reflection and memo notes that these perspectives are mine, and holding others to the same views is iniquitous.

⁴ I intentionally omitted Milner's third frame "engaged reflection and representation". Central to this tenant is that the researcher and participant come together to develop the interpretations and findings of the study so that one voice or narrative is not privileged over the other. I took great care to listen to the perspectives of participants and I present the findings, including counter-narratives, in this paper as authentically as possible. For a more detailed analysis of Milner's framework, please see original reference.

Researching the self in relation to others

- In what ways do my research participants' racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they experience the world? How do I know?
- What do my participants believe about race and culture in society and education, and how do they and I attend to the tensions inherent in my and their convictions and beliefs about race and culture in the research process? Why? How do I know?
- How do I negotiate and balance my own interests and research agendas with those of my research participants, which may be inconsistent with or diverge from mine? How do I know?
- What are and have been some social, political, historical, and contextual nuances and realities that have shaped my research participants' racial and cultural ways or systems of knowing, both past and present? How consistent and inconsistent are these realities with mine?

The participants in my study are experiencing a different world than the one I encountered at their age, and that is a function of time, place, luck of birth, and experiences. As such, my view of the “isms” of society—racism, classism, sexism, and the heteronormative—may differ in substance and function from theirs. I was unsure of whether their perspectives would be guided by a “post-racial, post-gender, Horatio Alger” world view or one of critical consciousness and social justice. One of the major goals of my research is to represent the young adults' voices as they are—accurately and with scholarly consideration. As such, I look to the young people to tell me what they believe about race, gender, class, and culture in society, and how their educational experiences have shaped their views on their occupational futures. And I accept all that they share with me as their truth. This also means that I use full articulations of their words, even the ones steeped in histories of the profane, hateful, or misogynistic (i.e. “motherfucker”, “faggot”, “nigger”, and “bitch”). While the young people and I diverge

on the usefulness and appropriateness of these words, these are their words and how they choose to express themselves, and I will represent them without censure.

Shifting from self to system

- What do race, racism, and culture mean in the community under study and in the broader community? How do I know?
- What does the research literature reveal about the community and people under study? In particular, what do people from the indigenous racial and cultural group write about the community and people under study? Why?
- What systemic and organizational barriers and structures shape the community and people's experiences, locally and more broadly? How do I know?

I look to community organizations, newspaper articles, and current events to decipher the interactions between the different community constituents. I know that Aberdeen is a working-class community and is surrounded by towns where people make more money (median estimates) and have access to high performing schools (see Census information in “Settings”). I also know from the Census and observational data that Aberdeen is more racially diverse than the surrounding towns. I kept this information in mind as I explored the institutions that came into contact with my homeless young participants.

Limitations

This research had limitations, some of which are inherent in all qualitative studies that are focused on depth more than breadth. First, some of the questions asked of participants required them to be retrospective and recall educational experiences that, even in their original space and time, were complex and often physically, emotionally or socially difficult. My participants experienced traumatic events, such as physical abuse and bullying in schools. Therefore, the perspectives and experiences they share are the truths they are currently living with, and as such, are their definitive realities. Second, for

the sake of convenience and safety, I only interviewed homeless young adults who were formally involved with the Empower Drop-In. Unfortunately, this excludes the important viewpoints of homeless adolescents who, for many reasons, do not receive structured assistance in meeting their day-to-day needs. While the experiences of these young people are not entirely applicable to the nature of my research (as I'm concerned with how the institution is interacting with the homeless youth), the perspectives of homeless adolescents who have disengaged from all institutional assistance are also crucial in understanding how to best serve this population. It is my hope that future research attends to this regrettable dearth.

The 3 Types of Schools

Before introducing the Homeboys, the Sistergirls, the EmoCores, and their distinctive educational experiences and occupational aspirations, I describe the 3 types of schools that the youth of Empower experience in order to provide a schooling context for the discussions in my empirical chapters. These are the three types of schooling institutions available to the young people in this particular geographic area, and they all play a critical role in the lives of these homeless young adults. While all of the homeless participants in this study have a variety of educational options available to them, more than half drop-out and do not pursue additional education or training. Along with Empower, the schools are another “actor” in my final analyses.

Comprehensive High Schools: Four of a Kind. Almost all of the homeless young people in the community began their secondary schooling at one of the four comprehensive public high schools in the county. The four schools span two adjacent governing districts, differ in size, racial and ethnic diversity, as well as percentage of

students on free and reduced lunch. However, like most comprehensive high schools, they are similar in curricular offerings, organizational structure, and extracurricular activities. Students in all four comprehensive high schools take classes in one or more of three stratified curriculum pathways that arrange the sequence of courses based on academic ability levels: college-preparatory, general education, or vocational.

It is usually the case that the students in the vocational track in any given high school are also the students in the lower ability levels (Oakes, 2000). However, the majority of vocational courses in two of these high schools are built around either higher achieving students (those with high GPAs) or those students who are more compliant to the behavioral norms of the schools. It is my contention that these classes are vocational in name or tradition only—they are classes designed for high achieving students. For example, health sciences technology, cosmetology, and construction/ home building are available by application only and students must have good attendance records, be in satisfactory academic standing, and have the support of teachers or guidance counselors to register for the courses. Students who have behavioral referrals from teachers are less likely to be recommended for these courses. The same entrance criterion is used for cosmetology. Students exit high school with their cosmetology license and are able to immediately gain work in salons. Students in the construction/ home building courses work with local non-profits and builders to construct a real home for low-income community members. In the process, they gain valuable social networks with construction companies in the area. Health science coursework is limited to 50 students a year, is science content heavy, and prepares students for college-level health science classes. These classes focus on preparing students for professions in the health sciences

(e.g. physicians and scientists) and, while vocational in name, are highly competitive and designed for high-achieving students.

Students who have neither the grades nor teacher support for these and other highly sought-after vocational or professional preparation classes are often enrolled in culinary arts or hospitality, courses that offer no certificates, credentials, or confirmation of tangible and transferable skills. A small number of homeless adolescents do well in these traditional comprehensive schools, and those who do well are disproportionately in the college preparatory track (see William and Amber in Chapters 4 and 5). As I will make evident in later chapters, the majority of Homeboys and Sistergirls, plagued by high absences, low achievement, and limited course offerings often quit these schools in search of an alternative that could provide a path to high school completion and, in turn, economic and social mobility.

The “four of a kind” schools are not the only traditional high schools in the county—there are other popular comprehensive high schools that serve local young people. However, the four of a kind presented here in this study are the only ones the homeless young adults in my study have access to due to stringent enrollment practices of the high school principals. The McKinney-Vento Act, as mentioned Chapter 2, gives all homeless or unaccompanied adolescents the right to enroll without paperwork, prior records, or parent involvement in any school. There is little enforcement of this policy by local, state, or federal authorities, and in return, little compliance by local school administrators. Empower staff provided me with detailed examples of where, time and time again, they escorted homeless youth as they attempted to enroll in these high schools only to be turned away by the principals. Staff members from Empower and the local

educational advisory association accompany these young people into these prestigious high schools, only to be told by administrators that the school “doesn’t accept homeless kids” and to search elsewhere for a school that is “more conducive to their needs.” As such, it is no surprise that once homeless, the young people no longer find these “home” schools welcoming or responsive to their academic and social needs.

Alternative High Schools: Jasper High and Washington Alternative. When homeless students leave one of the comprehensive high schools in search of another education option, they seek out one of the two alternative high schools in the area. These schools are the welcoming centers for students who failed too many courses in the comprehensive high schools to graduate before they turn 21, or for students who have been expelled from their “home” school. Both alternatives offer a shorter and often a more flexible school day, an opportunity to earn more credits per school semester, and small class sizes. The curricular options are narrowed—they offer the core academic classes in a regular or general level (no Advanced Placement or honors-level courses) and limited vocational offerings, such as drafting, introductory construction and information technology. Students who successfully navigate the alternative setting do graduate with their high school diplomas but no additional credentials or advanced training.

There are stark differences between the alternative schools and the traditional high schools in their educational perspectives. The alternative schools receive a disproportionate amount of students who have disciplinary records, and perhaps as a result their school handbooks are heavy on rules, codes of conduct, and consequences. Detailed attention is given to students’ “positive attitudes,” on-time regular attendance,

and their behavior on the public buses⁵. For Jasper Alternative, students report that they are provided with two bus tokens a day—one to travel home and the other to travel back to school the next morning. There is a marked distinction in the school mottos also. While the traditional schools communicate a vision of “agile minds,” “deep questions,” and preparing students to be successful through “rigorous study” and “social development,” the alternative schools put forth the credos “credentials matter,” “accountability,” and “urgency” (see footnote 5).

The alternative schools offer another educational option for homeless adolescents who, for whatever reason, leave the comprehensive high schools. The hours and class scheduling is flexible, both options are located on the city bus routes, and students graduate with a genuine high school diploma. The schools are also bound by some of the rules and procedures that guide the traditional high schools. I make evident in later chapters how these alternative institutions, along with the other school types, act upon the lives of the homeless young people in ways that circumscribe or expand their educational outcomes and future ambitions.

Online Learning: Knowledge and Skills Incorporated (KSI) Academy. The last option available to homeless young people in the area who desired to earn their high school diploma was the local online learning academy. Located on the top floor of a local downtown business, the public charter high school focuses on online and project based learning. KSI boasts small class sizes, dedicated teachers, and cutting edge technology. It is essentially one large room filled with desktop computers, and teachers take turns

⁵ Much of the information on these schools is taken from school handbooks, websites, and school publications designed to entice new students to the district. As such, I provide no citations as detailed information beyond that mentioned may compromise the anonymity of the schools, the districts, and as such, the location and identities of the homeless youth.

circulating in order to answer student questions. Students attend the academy four days a week with modified hours depending on whether they pursue the online courses or the project based learning modules. Students are able to complete a GED program or “credit recovery” for the core academic classes they failed or had yet to complete at their “home” high school.

It is common for the homeless young people to experience all three types of schools. They often start 9th grade at the local comprehensive high school, transfer to Jasper Alternative, and eventually spend some time at KSI before dropping out to work full-time. KSI offered an alternative to the people-centered setup of the alternative and traditional comprehensive schools. Students attended tutorials and labs in the building when they had time and transportation, but their physical presence, and that of their guardians, was not a necessity. The flexible hours of KSI are more suited to the homeless adolescents schedules, and it is common to see the students completing their computer-based project homework at the public library and at Empower where they spend most of their free time.

Other Educational Options: The GED. The previous three school types are not the only educational options available to students in the local area. Indeed, this metropolitan suburb has a vibrant educational community, and this extends down to the primary levels. However, there are options that are more readily available to the homeless young people in this study than others. The educational opportunity that most homeless youth in my study choose is the General Educational Development (GED) program (colloquially referred as the General Equivalency Degree by the youth of Empower and many others).

First, the GED allows individuals who would otherwise lack a high school credential because they did not complete a regular high school program of study to obtain an alternative credential (Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2011; Cameron & Heckman, 1991). The exam covers four subject areas: science, social studies, mathematical reasoning, and reasoning through language arts. The exam lasts over 7 hours, is administered by computer or paper, and costs \$140, although it is usually subsidized by state governments (Murnane, Willett, & Tyler, 2000). While the numbers fluctuate each year due to changes in the test and new state educational requirements, the GED exam continues to grow with over 700,000 test takers each year (Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2011). The credential is accepted by the majority of post-secondary institutions, including community colleges, universities, and the preponderance of U.S. employers.

The administrative website of the GED advertises that “People with a high school credential earn \$568,000 more in a lifetime than people without a high school credential” (GED Testing Service, 2012). Contrary to the convincing plugs from the GED Testing Service website and the Empower Drop-In staff, the preponderance of research is clear that the GED is not equivalent to the high school diploma. While GEDs provide an important opportunity for youth to obtain a high school credential, GED recipients tend to fare significantly worse than those holding regular diplomas across a range of measures, including low wages, depressed job tenure, and poorer health outcomes (Tyler, 2003; Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2011). In addition, while GED recipients who go on to postsecondary education experience the same economic benefits as regular high school diploma earners who access postsecondary education, GED recipients attend postsecondary programs at much lower rates than regular high school diploma earners

(Patterson, Song, & Zhang, 2009; Tyler, 2003). Unfortunately, the research is clear that the benefits of earning a GED are being lost on the majority of recipients.

Perhaps the most important question concerning the GED is not whether those who earn the credential have the same or greater chance for social mobility as those with a high school diploma, but whether those with a GED fare better economically than those with no high school credential. Is the achievement of *any* credential better than no credential at all? The research on this question has produced mixed results. Studies by Tyler (2003) and Heckman and colleagues (2005) maintain that the economic outcomes for GED recipients are equivalent to the economic outcomes for high school dropouts. In an interview on National Public Radio, John Deasy, the Los Angeles School Superintendent, quoted, “If I were prepared today with a GED, and that’s what I had as an 18-year old, I’d be scared to death of the future” (Sanchez, 2012). In contrast, research by Ou (2008) finds that GED recipients fare worse than those with high school diplomas, but they are doing better than high school dropouts on five young adulthood indicators (quarterly income, life satisfaction, future optimism, depression, and substance abuse). For the sake of this dissertation study, I ask if the GED, given its mixed results, is being pushed and promoted in a way that convinces some youth—differentiated by identities—that it is a proven way to get ahead, which is misleading at best, and purposefully deceptive at worse. I will follow up on this and other questions about the GED in later chapters.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction chapter of this dissertation, I began this research with the purpose of exploring how homeless young people defined and experienced teacher (broadly defined) care. My research questions and dissertation focus changed as themes of occupational aspirations, educational experiences, the achievement ideology, and institutional support surfaced again and again. More evidence of homeless young people defining their educational and occupational futures through their schooling experiences and intersecting identities subsequently emerged. I used ethnographic methods to investigate my research questions and a constant comparison analysis approach to examine the data. My analyses revealed compelling findings about homeless adolescents' educational experiences, how they viewed their life chances, and how their aspirations were influenced by their particular social origins, identities, and interactions with educational institutions. I also found that the life chances of the young people were influenced in positive and negative ways by schools and Empower, and that the opportunities offered to them differed based on youths' race, gender, and ascribed socioeconomic status. The ethic of care is still important and is visible/ invisible in various ways. I offer explanations of all of these findings in the forthcoming chapters.

The next three chapters provide detailed descriptions and analyses of my time at Empower and the homeless young people who participated in my study. On any given day, particularly the bitterly cold afternoons of a Midwest winter, you can find the homeless school-aged young people of the community seeking shelter, food, and friendship at the Empower Drop-In. I developed close relationships with many of these young people, and I worried day to day when a regular failed to show up or when a new

young person entered the doors, providing a fake name and visibly marked with fresh signs of abuse or trauma. Few of these youth spoke of biological family—most were the source of their disfavored plights. I received no invitations to churches, mosques, temples or community centers— they belonged to none. Their family consisted of each other, and after some time, they invited me to be a part of their close-knit communities.

I present the next chapters in much the same way that I analyzed the raw data— chapters 4, 5, and 6 presents the results of my within case and within group analyses of the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and EmoCores, respectively. Chapter 7 imparts the findings from the across group comparisons and includes how the institutions—schools and Empower—play a critical role in shaping the educational ambitions and occupational aspirations of the young people.

Chapter 4

The Homeboys

Introduction

It seems like a regular, uneventful day at the Empower Drop-In. Most of the youth are hanging out downstairs, gathered in small groups chatting about the latest music, events, or the newest teenage gossip. There is a knock at the door, and Emilie opens it. It is the sheriff of the county—he had made an appointment with the Drop-In staff to come by and bring chocolate chip cookies for the youth on behalf of the entire department. He makes an immediate impression—towering above most the youth with a booming deep voice—his presence (and the munching of the cookies) silencing much of the house. As the sheriff introduces himself to youth in the front room, Emilie walks to the back room, points to two Black males and whispers to them to leave—“*The sheriff is in the house*”. They swiftly exit the Drop-In via the back door and they run down the back alley; within seconds they are out of sight. Another young man approaches the sheriff before he reaches the back room, offers his hand and introduces himself as William, and proceeds to ask the sheriff why he and his friends are constantly harassed by the sheriffs’ deputies. The sheriff seems taken aback at first—turning his head and not responding for a few seconds. He then engages William in a 5 minute conversation. These three young men—William and the two who exited the back door—are members of the Homeboys.

Basic Demographics

The Homeboys represent about half of Empower’s clientele and regular attendees at the Drop-In. There are between 8-10 Homeboys at the Drop-In on any given night, and that number grows to 15-20 on evenings when events are scheduled. The Homeboys are a racially diverse group of young men (see Table 1). While the majority self-identify as Black⁶, some identify as bi-racial, Latino, or White. The youngest Homeboy is James at 14 and the oldest is Marcus at 20⁷. The mean age is 17. Although the Homeboys vary in race and age, they do not vary in gender or gender-expression. There are no female or transgender members of the Homeboys. Here, Michael explains why the Homeboys are absent female members:

SR: So, who are your best friends?

Michael: I don’t have best friends. I have homeboys and acquaintances.

SR: What about Amber? It seems like you and her are best friends.

Michael: Yeah, but she’s a female. Girls have their own categories. So she can be a female friend, even a best friend, or another word I try not to use anymore, but she can never be my homeboy. Homeboys are homeboys and females are just females.

The young women of Empower, no matter how close they may be to a member of the Homeboys, are not considered Homeboys. Girls are friends, even at times best friends with members of the Homeboys. While there are Homeboys who explore their sexual orientation—some are questioning their heterosexuality and others have come out as

⁶ Although the participants of this study use the term Black to describe themselves, I use Black and African American interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

⁷ Due to grant-funding requirements, all Empower Youth must cease frequenting the Drop-In once they turn 21. While they may still have contact with their case managers and social workers, they are not allowed to attend any Empower event. See more about this in Chapter 3- Methods, page 5.

homosexual or bisexual—they all identify with the gender they were assigned with by doctors at birth.

The following pages sketch the broad demographics and culture of the Homeboys. I include background information, including how the majority of Homeboys came to be homeless, their emotional and mental health, and their educational statuses based on information gathered from interviews with the Homeboys themselves, interviews with Empower staff, and observations. I conclude the chapter with a detailed description of the educational experiences and achievement ideology of the Homeboys. All of this information is intended to 1) present a comprehensive picture of who these young men are, and 2) connect to later sections and chapters that take up how their identities and culture influence their experiences with school systems, their perspectives on education, and how agentic they feel in making their aspirations come true.

Homeboy Culture

Not every young man who is homeless and frequents Empower is a Homeboy. There are several homeless young men who do not fit into the group. The Homeboys dress, speak, and spend their free time in distinctive ways from the other young people of Empower, creating a very visible subculture within the Drop-In. First, they all tend to wear similar fashions—brand name baggy jeans, a branded t-shirt or hoodie, and tennis shoes or Timberland boots. The clothes advertise chic urban-based styles such as Sean John, LRG, Mecca, and Ecko, styles made popular by big cities and hip hop endorsers. The jeans are so baggy that bystanders are often gifted with full views of underwear or near-naked rear ends. The tennis shoes seemed to be the most important clothing accessory—the young men are particularly partial to the Nike and Adidas brands, and the

more custom the shoe the better. The Homeboys differ from other young men who may come to Empower and wear similar clothing because they wear these clothes every day, only deviating with a plain white t-shirt on occasion. It is a rarity to see a Homeboy in clothes that depart from the repetitive jeans-shirt-tennis shoes attire. Adhering to this dress code seems to be a prerequisite for being a Homeboy, as they mock or make fun of youth not wearing similar clothing:

Fieldnotes, March 19: John and Michael have been whispering to each other on the couch, and they keep looking at Jayden. I overhear John say that Jayden is cool and all, but he has “absolutely no shoe game”. Michael starts laughing and says “Yeah, I know right.” I look at Jayden’s shoes—he’s wearing a pair of non-descript white and blue tennis shoes. Just then, Ray walks into the living room and John says, “Now this nigga here, he just don’t know how to wear the clothes he got. If I had his clothes, man.” I look at Ray—he is wearing a pair of Levi jeans with a brown belt, a tucked-in red t-shirt that reads “Ecko Unltd,” and a pair of red and white Nikes.

Jayden and Ray are not members of the Homeboys. Although they are regulars to Empower, they rarely speak with John or other members of the Homeboys, and they often sit in the background, not participating in group discussions or events. Jayden’s tennis shoes are in good shape but non-descript; they are not Nike or Adidas, which excludes him from the group. And while Ray wears similar name-brand clothing as the other Homeboys, John proclaims he doesn’t know how to “wear the clothes” in ways that fit in with him and the other Homeboys. One can only assume this is because Ray’s jeans are not baggy and he wears his Ecko t-shirt tucked inside his jeans.

Another facet of the Homeboys’ fashion dress code is perhaps more of a regrettable consequence of their social class status than a sought-after fashion trend. The clothes they wear are often in poor condition. The jeans typically have rips and tears in the knee area and are tattered at the bottom hem. Their shirts are often stained,

particularly under the arms, and their shoes are gray and brown from dirt and excessive wear. While many of the homeless young clients of Empower repeat outfits, it is uncommon for them to have clothes so visibly frayed—Empower’s pantry includes clean, often new clothing of various sizes that are free to any young person who ask. The pantry’s clothing, however, is mostly devoid of labels. There are bins filled with plain colored t-shirts and polo shirts, non-descript mesh and khaki shorts, and Sonoma or UnionBay jeans. I witnessed several young men and women take advantage of the clothing in the pantry, and while it is possible I was not present when it occurred, I never saw a Homeboy inquire or accept any clothing from Empower’s pantry.

The Homeboys also speak in ways that separate them from the other young men and women who frequent Empower. Empower has rules regarding speech, such as no profanity and no hate-filled speech, which includes the n-word and the f-word. The Homeboys dismiss these rules, making these words and profanity a part of their daily conversations with each other.

Fieldnotes, April 11: Emilie (staff member) is not working at the Drop-In tonight. Clinton is filling in, and he spends most of his time at the front desk. The kids are in the back room, and I can hear the profanity all the way in the living room. I hear Nathan repeating the phrase “My nigga”. I go to the back room and sit at the table, and the profanity doesn’t stop. They know I’m not an authority figure—I’m mostly ignored. Marcus starts telling a story about a young woman he knows, and the only words I am able to make out—because they are the loudest—are “motherfucker” and “pussy” and “nigga”. Clinton (Empower staff member) comes to the entrance of the back room and says the profane language has to stop. Some of the kids disperse, but Marcus and three other young men huddle tight in the back corner and continue the story to its conclusion.

The profanity-laced story Marcus shared was uncommon for me to hear in my observations or conversations with the Homeboys. Far more of their profanity or misogynistic language came as they repeated popular rap music lyrics or recited ones

they had written. For example, John often walked around the Drop-In repeating the A\$AP Rocky lyric “Yeah I love to fuck, I got a fucking problem”. Terrance usually sat on the living room sofa whispering over and over “Bitch don’t kill my vibe”, a lyric made popular by Kendrick Lamar.

While these cuss-word laden lyrics were often said to each other in hushed tones or in moments with little supervision, they often leaked out during Empower’s Rhapsody and Rhyme open-mic night. Rhapsody and Rhyme was a two-hour open-microphone event that invited all Empower young people to stand before a full-house of Empower clients and staff and share their spoken talents. Youth could sing, rap, or recite self-created poetry.

Fieldnotes, March 28: It’s Rhapsody and Rhyme night at the Drop-In. William is up next. He brings a piece of paper that he just tore out of his composition book to the stage area with him. He gets the microphone and Emilie starts the music on the computer for him. He starts rapping. I can’t understand most of the words. Then he says the “f” word and the “b” word really fast and really close together. John, Manuel, and Nathan start laughing. Emilie interrupts and tells William to check his language. He laughs a little, says okay, then continues. He slips up and says a few more cuss words before his time is up.

It’s the last performance of open mic night, and John, Nathan, William, and Cedric all take the stage. Although they are taking turns I can barely understand any of the rap lyrics. Then, John says the words “bitch” and “pussy” really clear. The guys starting laughing again, William starts laughing and gives Nathan and Cedric a high five. Emilie cuts off the music and says that the open mic night is over.

While the rules of Rhapsody and Rhyme night are explicit, and the young people are reminded each time to not use profanity, the Homeboys who perform use them at every performance with little negative consequences—at most they are interrupted and reminded of the rules, and less often, the open mic is ended early. It seems expected by the staff and other homeless youth that the raps they present will have some harsh, often

derogatory language involved. It is important to note that other young people, including other young men of color and the young women of Empower also used harsh, often derogatory language. However, it seemed as if they used this type of speech as an extension of their communication, not camaraderie; the language was a part of the comprehensive message in the poem or song, not an add-on expletive for shock or comedy. For example, one of the Sistergirls, Amber, recited a spoken word poem she found online. It included these lines:

*All you do is talk about your pussy
So your walls and your rhymes are half as tight...
All y'all talk about is pussy, hoes and gun play
But God so loved the world that he sent me to spit you an Easter Sunday
Your reign is over, it's His Son's Day*

This poem was filled with expletives that the Homeboys used on the regular in their rhymes. However, Amber received no high-fives or other accolades from the Homeboys or other homeless youth when she used profane words, only reprimands from the staff. The words she used were part of the overall powerful message of the poem, not add-ons for shock value or entertainment.

Finally, the last distinctive factor that separates the Homeboys from other Empower clients is how they choose to spend their hours at the Empower Drop-In and in their free time. While they enjoy playing video games and basketball, their favorite pastime is writing rap lyrics, performing them in front of their peers, and listening to the music they emulate. For example, writing rap lyrics is Karim's hobby in the evening.

SR: What do you do in your free time?

Karim: Not much free time. But when, like at night or when I get a chance I work on my rap lyrics, write them down. I have a notebook where I keep all of them. Just trying to perfect the lyrics.

It is also Terrance's go-to activity:

SR: What do you do in your free time?

Terrance: I just work on my lyrics. I write a lot of lyrics and try to come up with new beats.

Writing rap lyrics is William's pastime at school:

Fieldnote, July 11, 2014: I sat with William most of the evening today. He brought his lyric notebook so that I could take a look. It is a two-subject blue composition book, and it is about 1/3 filled with rap song lyrics that he has come up with. Just glancing through, most of the lyrics seem to be about the same things: money and violence. No dates-- I asked him how often he wrote in the journal. He said almost every day, mostly when he is at school.

And an activity John shares with his brothers:

SR: What do you do in your free time for fun?

John: I work on my lyrics, I write new songs.

SR: What's getting a lot of play on your iPod now?

John: Oh, my music, me and my brothers' music. That's what's gettin' the most play.

SR: You and your brothers make music together?

John: Yeah.

SR: You play that a lot around the house?

John: Twenty-four seven, well, if I'm around my mom, there are certain songs that I don't play. I can't play them all because some of the lyrics are—they're kinda explicit, but yeah, I play our music every day, and then when I'm tired of listening to me rap all day, I'll listen to some songs by like Frank Ocean or some old songs by J. Holiday or something like that.

This process of coming up with new rap lyrics is not a secret hobby. Like John and his brothers, the ultimate goal is to record the songs and let others hear them. The Homeboys typically share their musical creations with each other at the Rhapsody and Rhyme nights. The performer list is often filled with Homeboys, and while others in the Drop –In express an interest in performing, they are often put on the schedule by Empower staff at the end of the allotted 2 hours, leaving little time to showcase their talents. I will offer more discussion about this placement on the talent showcase in Chapter 7, as the process lends deeper insight on the staffs' influence on the young peoples' aspirations.

From Home to the Streets

The majority of all of the Homeboys came to their homeless status in similar ways. With the exceptions of John and William, all were either legally removed from their family's home or they fled because of abuse or neglect. Social service workers intervened in Michael's life and removed him from his father's home:

SR: So, you did fine in school until you moved in with your father?

Michael: Yes. I loved school before then.

SR: What changed?

Michael: My dad. He was really strict. Physically abusive. Mentally abusive. I just really wanted to get away from him. That's it.

The same process occurred for Jeremy:

SR: How did Jeremy come to be at the Empower?

Emilia: Well, both his mom and dad are dealing with some addiction issues, and he was finally taken out of the home and put in foster care. Then he was with his grandmother,

and now he is couch surfing and spending time on the street. I think he still has his grandmother though, so not sure what's going on there.

For Michael and Jeremy, the formal structures of the social work system intervened in their lives and removed them from their parents' homes. Karim, however, spent years with a physically abusive mother before he took his chances on the streets.

Karim: I remember one day [my mother] kicked me in my ribs, broke them. It was hard to breathe for a couple days. Whatever. She hit me with this wooden plank right in my kneecap and I was limping to school. One night, she choked me. I'm talking like literally just choking me. I couldn't breathe. I really thought I was dead. I really thought I was about to die that night because I'm sitting there gasping and kicking for air and she's still choking me.

But when I turned 14, that's when I really just had enough of [the abuse] and that's when I started lashing back out at [my mom]. I'm like, "You're not going to keep putting your hands on me."

Unfortunately, Karim lived most of his childhood in physical and emotional abuse. Removed once from his home by Child Protective Services, he was reunited with his mother and the abuse continued until he left the home on his own volition. Frank, like many other homeless youth in Aberdeen, was kicked out of his home because of his sexual orientation.

Frank: If it was my choice I actually never would have told them, because actually at a young age they grabbed...because I have two older brothers. They grabbed all of us and brought us in the room, and they told us 'If I ever find out any of you guys are gay we'll kill you.' And at the time I knew in the back of my head that I liked guys so I just could hear myself breathing, my heart was pounding.

SR: So your sister outed you to your grandparents?

Frank: Yeah, and I looked over at them and my granddad had his mouth open and he was just...and he said are you ready to

go live with these fags. That's always been a trigger word for me, still kind of is, but it's always been...at that age it was...that was like a White person calling a Black person the N-word. I guess I got grown and I was like hell yeah, because I was mad at this point. I was ticked off and he was well go pack your stuff. I went in my room and I packed up. I stayed up all night, afraid of what my granddad would do.

The reasons why each of them ended up homeless did not seem to matter to the

Homeboys. They embraced each other as friends.

The destructive relationships with their families often left the Homeboys with more emotional and mental scars than physical ones. The point of including detailed information on their mental dispositions is not to pathologize these young people, but to acknowledge that it is impractical for adolescents (or adults, for that matter) to experience distress and suffering without being scathed (Cauce et al., 2000; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006). These mental health issues, for better or for worse, connected the Homeboys to each other.

All of the Homeboys I interviewed shared sentiments of depression, loneliness, and/ or anger. For example, 14 year old James' anger is very discernible and is revealed in his interview.

SR: You said that your friends call you crazy. Why is that?

James: I like sharp knives and I like playing with fire. So that's why my friends call me crazy. So I will sit and take a knife and take some gasoline and just light it on fire and just cut you with that. And then I have like these little blackouts where I just sit there and I'm fully awake. I just sit there and like just think about killing people.

SR: And that happens when you're angry?

James: Like after I cut you up then yes. Then I just sit there and

like, Okay. I'm going to tie you up. I'm going to cut open your chest and I'll cut your lungs open while you - I'll cut your lungs open while you're still breathing. It's that simple.

SR: Do you carry knives with you?

James: Oh no. I stopped. I stopped carrying knives.

SR: You stopped?

James: 'Cause I got into too many blackouts.

James directs most of his anger at his school peers who bully him because of his worn clothes, small stature, or his perceived sexual orientation. He tells me during our interview that he reacts physically in most cases, getting into fist fights in school or destroying his room at his temporary home. While he claims to no longer carry knives on his person, I witness him shuffle a sizeable knife in his book bag on several occasions.

I only had to interview Faith, an Empower staff member and therapist, to learn about more of the Homeboys formal diagnoses:

SR: So, some of the youth have shared that they have some mental illness issues. I'm curious as to what types of mental illnesses they have.

Faith: Oh, man, where do I start? Let's see. Yes, almost all of them have some major issues. Danny has been diagnosed with depression and he has a tendency to become physically violent. Lance is also clinically depressed, and we think bi-polar as well. Manuel has rage issues that are brought on by post traumatic stress disorder. Karim is clinically depressed and has been hospitalized for suicide ideation. I could go on and on and on.

SR: And all of this is directly linked to their family experiences?

Faith: Yes, mostly. Most of them had horrible abuse and trauma at the hands of family members. But some of them are also dealing with bullying and trauma that has happened at school or in group homes or on the streets.

While much of the trauma the Homeboys experienced occurred in their home lives, some of it also occurred in schools with peers and teachers. Empower staff heard these stories from the young people themselves, and witnessed some of the bullying from teachers and administrators firsthand as they attempted to be the educational advocates for the homeless youth. All of the Homeboys came to Empower for similar reasons. The organization provides assistance for teens who need housing or teens who are missing basic necessities—food, clothing, safety. Almost every Homeboy experienced some trauma in their families or schools and none of them were immune from the emotional and physical distress that followed.

Educational Status

As evidenced by the sections above, the Homeboys harbor many emotional, mental, and physical scars because of their past experiences. They are young, yet they have been through a lifetime of distress, misfortunes, and challenges. Their past experiences, however, do not preclude them from the statutory obligations of schooling. All of the Homeboys were school-aged at the time of this research, and as such, education remained a relevant, non-threatening topic of discussion for me to initiate in my daily interactions with them.

Fieldnotes, April 18: I played video games with Henry and Lance today. I asked them if they were in school, and they both started laughing and said no. I asked why that was a funny question, and they first looked at each other. Then Lance said, "I don't know, most people don't ask us that question." I asked Lance how old he was. He said 16. I then asked why he wasn't in school. He smiled and said, "Because I got grown people problems."

The topic of school often emerged between me and the Homeboys (brought up by myself) over video game sessions or during meal time. Information about their homeless

status or family background emerged over weeks of building trust and came in small segments, giving me the task of putting the stories together. The most delicate stories emerged during our private one-on-one interviews. But the Homeboys were at ease speaking about their schooling experiences and their educational status, often talking about their classroom encounters with me in the common areas as other homeless young people and staff members listened.

Very few of the Homeboys were enrolled or attending local high schools. The “grown people problems” comment aside, Henry and Lance were representative of several of the Homeboys who, due to circumstances beyond their control, had to leave formal educational settings. For example, Karim had to quit school in order to take care of his younger siblings.

Karim: I remember one day my mom said I had to stay home to watch my siblings. I cried because I couldn't go to school. And that's why I'm out here today. I'm trying to get my GED finished and stuff like that. It sucks I've got to settle for a GED, but it's a credential. I can't really complain, but I rather had gotten a diploma though.

You know, I go on Facebook and all my friends from high school and stuff talking about they're graduating. Oh, my goodness. I haven't been on Facebook in a while because every time I go on there, it's like either prom or graduation because you know everybody is getting out of school this week, so that's all I see in my newsfeed is like oh, I'm finally graduating, I'm done with high school, blah, blah, blah. It sucks, but whatever. Yeah, just rolling with the punches and that's how I ended up out here.

Through no fault of his own, Karim lost out on the high school experience, which included more than the academic components. He also missed out on the important social events, and he seems aware of how missing these traditional rites of passage differentiate him from his other friends.

The Homeboys did have options for formal education and its credentialing, however, and some of them remained continuously enrolled in school despite the hardships in their personal lives. Empower held various types of educational workshops and GED (General Educational Development) preparation seminars for all interested homeless youth. Young people who reside in Empower's temporary housing must remain enrolled in school, and the organization becomes the educational advocate for the them. I asked Faith, Empower's case manager, how they assist youth with their educational needs:

SR: So, what help do you give the kids who are still in school?

Faith: Well, we used to do "Homework Help Wednesdays" but the program was discontinued because the kids would either not come in or they would leave because they didn't want to participate.

SR: The ones in school didn't want to do their homework here? Why not?

Faith: I don't know. It could be because maybe they didn't think it was cool, especially for the boys. They come here to hang out and socialize, so doing work was not something they wanted to do. They would leave and go to the public library or to the park and hang out. We hope to start the program again though. I hope it's better next time and that the kids use it.

SR: What about the GED workshops?

Faith: Now those are popular and we push those a lot to the kids. They show up for those workshops and we try to let them know what will be on the test, how to study, and we help them register for the exam and everything.

There is much complexity in Faith's answer, but what is compelling here is the push for the GED workshops. Empower staff often speak of the young peoples' pressing needs—a stable home, food and clothing, and financial security, and traditional schooling limits the

hours in a day young people can acquire these necessities. Instead of pushing the Homeboys to study and stay enrolled in their local high schools, Empower staff encourages them to take the GED in order to move past the formality of “schooling”, get the credential, and obtain the financial means to take care of themselves. To be fair, Empower’s client base is the young people, and not showing up for workshops is a way to show the staff that the workshop is not meeting the clients’ needs.

The Homeboys still enrolled in a traditional comprehensive high school were the minority, which may be why most boys failed to attend the Homework Help Wednesdays. William was one of the few exceptions. He remained in school and was tracked into a college preparatory program called the Early College Alliance Program. It provides college credit for courses and students remain at their high schools throughout the school day. The program also provides college application counseling and financial aid workshops, as well as some intrinsic skills:

William: I’m in the Early College Alliance program. And they kind of broke the shackles of public schooling. They basically give you the tools that you need to teach yourself, educate yourself and be educated. You know, they let you go on your own personally educational journey, you know, instead of trying to build onto you like an assembly line, you know, they allow you to expand, you know, and grow. They give you college assignments.

William was the only Homeboy in a college preparatory program. The more common experience for the Homeboys in traditional high schools was a vocational training program.

Nathan: Well, I wanted to take the automotive classes because I want to be a mechanic in a few years. Work on cars and motorcycles.

SR: What did you end up taking?

Nathan: My counselor said that I didn't sign up soon enough, so I took culinary arts again. I took that last year too, and I'm in it again this year.

SR: Are you interested in being in the culinary field? A chef or cook?

Nathan: Not really. I mean I am now. I have the most courses in it, so I think I could do it.

Like Nathan, the Homeboys had limited options in the local vocational programs. None of them were enrolled in the more prestigious automotive, health occupation, or construction programs that provided additional credentialing. Because the young people were very transitory, they often registered in new schools late, and as such, they settled for culinary arts or beginner automotive or construction for the second or third time.

The majority of Homeboys had some experience as a high school dropout, even the ones who go on to be enrolled in alternative schools or those who eventually finish with a high school diploma or GED. Michael spent a year out of school deciding which institution to enroll in after being suspended from his local high school. Frank spent periods of time out of school, moving from one school to another as his housing situation changed before he finally graduated with a diploma. The Homeboys not enrolled in any schooling institution all shared that they all had every intention to enroll in another school or a GED program. Even Lance, who quipped that he was not enrolled in school because he had “grown people problems,” added later, “I’m going to go back to school soon though and get my diploma. As soon as I get a little more stable.”

The 4 Leaders

Before I discuss the aspirations, educational experiences, and occupational futures of the Homeboys, it is important to describe in detail the four leaders of the Homeboys—

John, Nathan, Karim, and William. They are different in almost every physical and character quality. They come from different families, attend different schools, yet they have the same ambitions and dreams.

John: At 17 years old, John is the recognized leader of the Homeboys. John walks through the front doors of the Empower Drop-In and the sound level grows exponentially. The other young people, males and females alike, smile ear to ear and echo his name until they get his attention, and once acknowledged, he gives a smile and a head nod. He reaches out his hand and his Homeboys take turns grabbing it and bringing him in for a half-hug. He fully hugs one young woman and whispers in her ear, at which time she pulls away responding “John you so nasty.” He smiles and continues making his rounds throughout the downstairs area. It is an entrance worthy of someone they haven’t seen in a while, but this welcome is an everyday occurrence for John. He finds a seat in the living room. This will be his seat for the remainder of the evening. The other Homeboys come through and jockey for a seat next to him. The young man who sits down to John’s right has won the coveted seat by bringing John a plate of food—fried chicken wings with a side of macaroni and cheese. John will not have to rise from his seat to have his needs met; the other homeboys cater to his food and drink cravings.

With neatly braided corn rows, a caramel-brown complexion, and charismatic smile, John is the most attractive of the Homeboys and as such, is romantically sought after by many of the young women (and a couple of the young men) of Empower. He identifies as bi-racial, claiming Black and Latino heritage. He rotates through the same outfits each week: a baggy pair of Mecca jeans with silver embroidery on the back pockets, a white or other solid-colored t-shirt, and a pair of white Nike’s. Although he

wears a belt with his jeans, they are still baggy enough to show his red basketball mesh shorts and his boxer underwear. Standing at about 5'9 and weighing in at far less than the other Homeboys, he gains the respect and loyalty of the other young men not by physical means, but by his arrest history and his frequent sexual exploits with young women in the community. He is on probation for assault and is the only member of the group who has experience in the adult penal system. Being sent to "real jail" for his crimes catapulted his reputation as a survivor of the streets. John reported during our interview that he is newly enrolled in a GED program through the local community college.

John is generally relaxed and in a good mood. He spends most of his time playing video games at the Drop-In, laughing easily when he wins and grimacing quietly when he loses. But he also possesses an explosive and violent temper that is usually aimed at his estranged family members. His mother recently kicked him out of the home (again) due to his violent outbursts, failure to attend school regularly, and not following the conditions of his probation. Although he has a firm reputation as a "ladies man", he openly flirts with other Homeboys and evades their direct questioning of his sexuality. His mostly friendly disposition and love for video games made it easy for me to get to know him through casual conversations and shared fun with Super Mario Brothers.

Nathan: Whereas John is a combination of youthful attractiveness and charisma, Nathan exudes a larger-than-life physical presence at six feet tall and over three-hundred pounds. One of the oldest in the group at 19, his difficult and disadvantaged upbringing is marked by two rows of brown, rotting teeth, patchy short cut hair, and long-standing round scars on his arms. He wears the same pair of baggy gray Akademiks jeans every day, usually with a black or purple stained t-shirt and gray and brown tennis shoes that

were once white. He suffers from severe over pronation on both feet when he walks, so the sides of his shoes are almost completely worn while the soles are mostly intact.

Nathan is the comedy relief of the group, always telling jokes or dancing to make the others laugh. He is generally loud and talkative, but he is missing the self-confidence of John and other Homeboys; an abundance of his humor is self-deprecating and is usually aimed at his body size or his intelligence:

Fieldnotes, February 28, 2013: Nathan and Eric are dancing to the Michael Jackson Experience on the Nintendo Wii. They choose the song Billy Jean and begin the competition. Minutes later the competition is over, and the game determines that Eric is the winner. Eric says, "See, I told you Nathan, you cannot compete with me when it comes to Michael Jackson. I am the best at this game." Nathan responds, "That's okay, you won because I'm fat, and when I went down to the floor I couldn't get back up very fast." The other young people in the room laugh. John gets up and mimics Nathan's dancing—he is on the floor and pretends to not be able to get back up. Nathan joins in and does an exaggerated version of not being able to get off the floor, holding his large stomach as though he can't lift it.

Nathan can also be socially awkward—he tells jokes with missing punchlines, does imprecise comedic impersonations, and laughs at inappropriate times, particularly when there are new people in the Drop-In. But he has a sweet, caring disposition, he is almost always in a good mood, and he is steadfast in his love for his friends, even when it results in negative consequences for him.

Nathan: I was supposed to graduate high school last year, but I got into a fight at the end of the year and got suspended. I got into a fight and ended up fighting the principal and vice principal.

SR: What happened?

Nathan: You know, I claim certain girls as sisters sometimes. And there was this chick that was a sister to me, she was like a real sister to me. And she told me that she went to get tested for being pregnant. She came back to me like 'I'm not

pregnant, but I have gonorrhoea. ' I was like who did it and she said this guy name Larry. I knew who Larry was...I rolled up my sleeves with my boys behind me hyping me up and I went after him...and the principals came after me.

The running joke is that Nathan speaks often of a fiancé that no one has ever met. He is enrolled in a special education program in high school when I meet him, and he successfully achieves his high school completion certificate during my study. He is one of the only Homeboys who hasn't been arrested.

Karim: Karim is the most unassuming leader of the Homeboys. He is shorter than most of the other boys, standing at about 5'3". Identifying racially as Black, he has smooth coffee-colored skin with thick eyebrows and large round brown eyes. He wears his hair cut very short and usually carries a short wooden handled hair brush in his back pocket. He dresses in similar fashion to the other Homeboys, most days wearing a solid-colored Ralph Lauren polo shirt or white t-shirt with baggy Levi jeans and Nike or Adidas sneakers. He is soft-spoken and is never without his basketball, just in case he is invited to play a pick-up game. Karim is very quiet, often blending into the background as the more gregarious Homeboys take center stage. He never joins the other young people in the dance video games, instead choosing to play the combat-based games.

Karim was the most difficult Homeboy for me to get to know. He avoided eye contact and often sat with his back or side to me. It wasn't until after several joint meals and basketball games shared, and many video games lost, that Karim spoke with me about his past personal and educational experiences. When he did open up, he disclosed that he hadn't had much luck with the adults who entered his life. After being kicked out of numerous family members' homes starting at age 14, he lived on the streets for an extended time before finding his way to Empower. He acknowledged being the survivor

of extreme abuse and trauma at the hands of family members and strangers. He has several non-visible scars hidden by his clothing, including one from a knife attack brought on from his mother. It is the physical, mental, and emotional scars from these past events that promoted Karim to the leader board of the Homeboys. He often counsels others about how to live on the streets under the radar, and how not to be a target of violence (or at least how to get away with your life if you aren't so lucky).

Unfortunately, Karim's experiences led him to drop out of school and seek full-time employment. Due to his history of trauma, his mental well-being is often on the verge of surrendering to psychiatric illnesses.

Karim: I'm the oldest so I had to grow up super early. I was deprived of a childhood because I'm busy raising my siblings. And it would've been different if [my mother] was out working, going to school, or something like that, but it wasn't like that. It was either she was out with her boyfriends or at the club.

I wouldn't be here at Empower if I didn't have to. I would be with my mom, my dad, somebody. But I ain't got it like that, so basically, I'm just here because - I don't know.

SR: Because you've got to take care of you.

Karim: Right.

SR: You've got to do what you've got to do.

Karim: It's crazy because when I was like 16 or 17, I tried to kill myself so many times.

SR: How did you try?

Karim: I'd like - like pills. I tried to hang myself one time. I thought about slitting my throat. I used to cut myself all the time.

SR: Why did you want to die?

Karim: Because I felt like I just had nothing. I had nobody to turn to, nobody - I just had no stable support system. I felt like nobody never will whatsoever care about my well-being, where I was at, this, this, and that. And I guess that's really how I felt. But as I got older, it looked like all I got is myself, so that's why I've stopped doing the cutting and stuff like that and just started trying to focus more on me. Even now sometimes I be like damn, I should [commit suicide], but it's not worth it. It's really not. So, I'm just here, just doing the best I can.

When asked whether or not he has received counseling for his cutting and suicide attempts, Karim is honest and cynical. He acknowledges that he received counseling when he was admitted to psychiatric wards, but that he no longer shares his emotional well-being with the counselors in his life for fear of being, on one hand, pathologized, and the other hand, dismissed.

Karim: They feel—like in order to stay here, I've got to attend a weekly session with one of the counselors at Empower, which I don't even think I need to. Like her telling me I'm depressed and I need to see a counselor all because I get to the shelter from work and for a couple days and don't feel like talking to nobody, I got my headphones in, and I just want to be left alone, I'm depressed? Okay.

So I didn't really say too much about it. I'm like you know what? Fuck it. I'm just going to these counseling sessions even though I feel like it's a waste of time. Do you know how many counselors I've had to talk to?

SR: No. How many? Lots?

Karim: Plenty of counselors and I just feel like I'm good. I'm doing what I gotta do now. I ain't got time for all that depression and so I don't need a counselor. I'm dealing with it. I'm coping with it in my own way, so how are you going to sit there and tell me that I'm depressed?

Karim, being essentially on his own since 14, prides himself on being independent and is looking forward to affording a place of his own. He often says out of the blue, as if it is his motto, “Ain’t it funny how you can’t count on no one.”

William: “Black males are set up to fail. You want proof? Just look at the school-to prison pipeline and the military industrial complex.” This statement, which articulates a sophisticated yet contested viewpoint about the structural impediments to Black male success, was my first introduction to 17 year-old William. William is a relatively new face at the Empower Drop-In, and he is making a name for himself with the staff and other youth with his garrulous personality. In the short three months that he has frequented the center, he comfortably engages in (somewhat one-way) conversations about race and inequality. He casually drops the names Karl Marx, Gandhi, and Huey Newton in the same sentences and theorizes why Black History Month celebrations focus on the “palatable” Black leaders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. He gained immediate influence and respect with the other Homeboys when he started dating Camille, the leader of the Sistergirls.

Although he speaks and thinks distinctively, William’s first impression offers no different assessment from the other youth of the Drop-In. He is a Black male, about 5’7” in height, has a slight build that is partially hidden by baggy clothing, and he carries a skateboard and cell phone everywhere he goes. However, deeper inspection of his clothing and presentation signifies the differences between him and the other participants of the youth center. His clothing, the Levi and Pepe jeans, Ecko and LRG t-shirts, are clean and pressed and he rarely repeats a full outfit; his Van and Nike shoes have no scuff marks or tattered shoe laces. His hair is immaculately trimmed and has a pronounced

wave pattern that only meticulous brushing can produce. Unlike other young people who use their cell phones as music devices or just for show, his cell phone has service and he receives phone calls periodically while he is at the Drop-In. Finally, he lacks the cues of physical hardness that living on the streets often bring—he has no facial scars or visible bruises, his teeth are straight, white, and show no signs of rotting, and lastly, he does not jump or sit anxiously when unknown adults enter the Drop-In.

Although he is technically homeless, it is obvious to observers that William hails from a different background given his clothing and well-kept appearance. His mother, feeling guilty about kicking him out of the home because of his increasingly unmanageable behavior (he admits to talking back and staying out past curfew), supports him financially as he couch surfs with family members and friends. He remains in high school, both he and the Empower staff reporting that he is very high achieving (which I gradually learn means he makes mostly A's and B's in school), and he hopes to graduate on time. Although he is more financially privileged than the other Homeboys, his mental disposition is similar.

William: Sometimes I talk and I speak my mind and I feel like nobody understands me. I feel lonely, you know? I feel lonely very often. Like I said, I don't have many friends. All my friends that I do have are all here.

And I think I have a depression. I think there's—yeah, there's definitely a depression there looming.

SR: Have you spoken to anyone about it? Any of the counselors here or therapists?

William: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

SR: Are you in therapy now?

William: Huh-uh. It didn't work.

SR: Why not?

William: Because psychologically their pseudo sciences called me an angry black kid. Which I probably am, but it's not like I'm the ferocious gorilla. You know, I mean I'm not angry. I'm not an angry black kid. I refuse to call myself angry, you know? But that's just, with views like mine that are so difficult it is hard to relax.

The precise, elevated language William uses separates him from the other Homeboys. This short statement is extraordinarily powerful—he thinks that the counselors at Empower view him in racialized, negative ways. He is angry, just not at the superficial things the counselors believe—he is angry with racism, sexism, classism, and dealing with these issues as a seemingly powerless adolescent. William reluctantly acknowledges the relationship between his depression and his anger, and he is fearful of what this connection may mean for him as a young Black male.

All of the Homeboys fit into one or more of the above categorizations. Some are like John, youthful, attractive, yet plagued by their criminal histories. Others are more like Nathan, physically and socially awkward as only teenagers often are. Most of the other Homeboys are like Karim, forced to live on the streets for years, scarred physically, emotionally, and mentally by abuse and trauma. And there are few like William—academically talented, new to the streets and the distress that the newfound homeless status can bring. These four leaders set the tone for how all the Homeboys interact with each other, the Sistergirls, Empower staff, and other homeless young people that frequent the Drop-In. If John is in a joking mood, the group joins in and they all joke around. If Nathan wants to spend the evening playing video games, the low-ranking Homeboys (the non-leaders) follow suit.

Aspirations as Expectations

In my first few visits to Empower, I had the pleasure to get to know the organization's development director Melissa. She is in charge of writing and managing grants for the organization, which is arguably the most important job because the establishment runs almost entirely on grant funding from local, state, and federal governments and private foundations. She casually mentions that the organization gives the homeless youth annual surveys to find out what programming they desire. She tells me, "The overwhelming majority of the kids want to be entertainers, like rappers, so we design most of our programming around those career options."

The young people Melissa is referring to as "the majority" are the Homeboys. Of all the homeless adolescents who frequent the Drop-In, the Homeboys outnumber the others on any given night (Sistergirls and EmoCores). All of the Homeboys (absent Michael) have a one-track ambition to be rappers and hip hop artists. None of them have aspirations to be major league athletes or doctors, lawyers, or even music producers or executives—perhaps because they do not know of these occupations, or they are not interested. They want to be performers, showcasing their art in front of millions of fans. They aspire to be in the rap business, and they fully expect this singular dream to come true. In my formal and informal interviews with them, they offer no hesitation, no viable alternatives to this goal. The Homeboys are a group of young men who see no distinction between expectations and aspirations—when I ask them where they expect to be in 5 years, their answers are "rapping". When I ask them where they hope to be or wish to be in 5 years, their answers are "rapping".

The only time the Homeboys' aspirations include occupations other than the rap business is when the rapping career is over, because, as one Homeboy says, "You can't be a rapper forever. That's just unrealistic". For example, Terrance, an African American male living at the Empower shelter, dreams of being a rapper one day. People say he reminds them of Kendrick Lamar when he raps, and taking this as evidence of his talent, he is seriously writing lyrics and saving money for studio time. When I asked him where he saw all of this going, he responded, "The ideal ending? Try to put \$1 million away and really just have a family, a house, cars, just the American dream I'd guess you call it, but yeah. I wanna put \$1 million away and just have a family. That's my basic goal." I followed up with pointed questions about his expectations versus his aspirations, and he made it clear to me: there is no difference between the two for him. His aspiration to become a rapper is his expectation, and he anticipates succeeding at it.

What the Homeboys lack in housing stability and low economic security, they seem to make up for it threefold with their sense of confidence. They are indeed a part of the Millennial or "Me Me Me" Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2007; 2009; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). The Homeboys *know* they have the talent and drive to be the next young hip-hop music star. The Empower staff tells them they are talented. Their peers and best friends tell them they are talented. By the time most of the Homeboys reached high school age, they know they wanted to be rap or hip-hop artists. John shared that the reason he first came to the Empower Drop-In was because he heard that they had music equipment and that he could create a demo tape. That was two years before this research, and while the demo had not yet materialized, his hopes that it would soon be realized remained high. William, who I would argue has the greatest potential to

go to a 4-year college due to his high school record and middle class background, keeps his rap lyrics with him at all times in a neat compositional notebook. When I asked him why, he replied, “*You never know when you’re going to need to spit for somebody. That’s how you can get discovered.*” As mentioned earlier in the culture of the Homeboys, they all spend their free time writing and practicing songs, not just as a hobby, but as preparation for their life’s work.

There was one exception to the rapper-based dream—Michael. He knew he had no future in the music business because, as he told me one day during open mic, “*I’m not blessed in the rapping talents.*” He never participated directly in the rap battles or open mics. Instead, he was the designated videographer, charged with recording the sessions and posting them to YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook. Instead of music, Michael wanted to be a mechanic, following in the footsteps of his uncles and cousins. His family members already had mechanic shops and told him when he was ready he could join them and apprentice the trade. He planned to begin work full time once he received his GED. Although Michael had one of the worst school experiences and an extensive criminal record in the juvenile justice system, his social capital offered a viable occupation that could lead to more economic stability. I bring back Michael’s interesting position among the Homeboys in Chapter 7.

It’s another Rhapsody and Rhyme night at Empower. I sit with the kids as I usually do, and I’m excited to see the presenters tonight as they usually offer some funny and interesting performances. Soon it is Frank’s turn with the microphone. I have seen almost all of the Homeboys perform on the regular, formally at event nights and informally as they hang out at the Drop-In. But this is the first time I have seen Frank

perform, and it seems that he is a little nervous because it takes him a while to clear his throat and begin. Amber, a Sistergirl, offers support by saying, “Come on Frank, you can do it. We all family here.” He closes his eyes, brings the microphone to his mouth, and starts singing without music, and the entire Drop-In goes quiet. I am expecting the usual rapping and hip hop that comes from the Homeboys, and instead I am presented with a soulful, melodic song. Frank’s deep, beautiful voice fills the entire house. The youth and staff sit captivated until the song ends, then the crowd erupts into applause and cheers and snaps. I smile and wonder to myself, “Where has this astonishing talent been hiding, and why?”

I offer this example of Frank’s talent as an anomaly to my experiences as a participant-observer at the Empower Drop-In. I became intimately aware of the gifts that these young people possessed in my months with them. While I am no music executive or producer, I have been a life-long fan and consumer of hip hop and I shared some common music interests with the homeless youth. Of all the Rhapsody and Rhymes presentations I sat through, Frank’s melodic performance was the first and only one from the Homeboys that I thought—knew—had real potential, and he was not rapping. Not that the other Homeboys aren’t talented—I believe they have talents in other spaces, but they lack the skill, precision, and voice that most mainstream rappers possess. Yet, they do not detour from this singular aspiration. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer some insight into why the Homeboys may have rapping on their minds and no alternatives.

Part I Conclusion

The Homeboys are a distinct sub-group at Empower that embody an affinity for Black male urban culture, a speech that portrays their love of rapping and rap music, and a shared background of adversity, abuse, and isolation that has resulted in mental health concerns. All of the Homeboys fit into one or more of the descriptions of the following four leaders described in this sub-section. Some are like John, youthful, attractive, yet plagued by their criminal histories. Others are more like Nathan, physically and socially awkward as only teenagers often are. Most of the other Homeboys are like Karim, forced to live on the streets for years, scarred physically, emotionally, and mentally by abuse and trauma. And there are few like William—academically successful, new to the streets and the distress that the newfound homeless status can bring, and critically conscious about social ills. The majority of Homeboys have disengaged from formal high school education. So how is it that these young men, whose rhetoric espouses appreciation and high esteem for formal education, aspire to only be rappers and hip hop entertainers? The answer may lie in their middle and high school experiences. The rest of this chapter will detail their educational experiences, positive and negative, and how the youths' educational and occupational aspirations are inextricably connected to these past experiences.

Part II:

Educational Experiences and Occupational Aspirations

The Homeboys espouse a rhetoric of appreciation and high esteem for formal education. They encourage the Sistergirls and other homeless youth to stay in school and

they genuinely celebrate the educational success of others. The Homeboys also hold a corresponding view of education attainment as, at most, an optional supplement to their occupational futures—they do not need a high school diploma or college degree to be successful rappers. I attempt to make sense of this disconnect—or conflicting perspective—by offering a deeper investigation of their educational experiences, from elementary to middle and high school. Part II of this chapter details the Homeboys’ educational experiences (both positive and negative), and how the young peoples’ educational and occupational aspirations are inextricably connected to these past experiences.

The Homeboys and Education

Like many students, the Homeboys had varied experiences in the public school system. To some, school was a sanctuary, a safe haven from the difficulties of turbulent home lives. To others, it was an added problem. In any case, the Homeboys’ persistence or resignation in formal educational systems appears to be the result of a combination of the influences of personal ambition and institutional influence. The vast majority of the Homeboys’ elementary school experiences had the recurring description of “*a passion for learning*,” as characterized by descriptions of engagement, sparked interest, and personal joy as an elementary school student. In contrast, the Homeboys’ details of their middle and high school educational experiences were marked by malevolent neglect as teachers and other school officials consistently provided little or no help to Homeboys in terms of 1) addressing the adversity and abuse in their lives from their families and peers and 2) supporting and encouraging academic achievement instead of rap-based aspirations. While I focus primarily on the leaders of the Homeboys for many of the following

examples, I also include examples and adages from other Homeboys where necessary and pertinent in order to illustrate that these experiences were common across the group and not just emblematic of one or two isolated experiences.

A Passion for Learning: The Elementary School Years

Surprisingly, most of the Homeboys repeat similar elementary school experiences. They recounted good memories of caring teachers, good friends, and a joy for learning new ideas. While many of them moved around a lot and changed school frequently during these formative years, they described every primary school as a safe, fun place. Karim unapologetically and wholeheartedly loved school. He shared his earliest school memories, including positive experiences of learning to read and checking out books from the library. He never had a favorite subject—he loved all of them, and according to him, he soaked up as much information as he could. He spoke of his early classroom experiences fondly.

Karim: “I loved school. I loved going to school. I remember one day my mom said I had to stay home and watch my siblings. I cried ‘cause I couldn’t go to school.”

He was never suspended, expelled, or in trouble in school because he enjoyed being there.

Karim: School has been like my main like, I used to strive for excellence in school. When I was in 6th grade, my proudest moment ever was getting an A++ on a science test. Nobody else in the class got an A++ but me, so it made me feel like super extra proud. I’m like, yep, I’m really gonna be a scientist. But, it didn’t work out, so.

SR: Where did that come from? That desire to be excellent in school?

Karim: It's always been that way. I'm talking about from the time, from 1st grade until now. I always tried to strive for excellence. Always. And nobody had to tell me, behavior wasn't ever a problem in school because I loved going there, I loved learning. So, like, everything it just always been like that. From the first time I was introduced to school I loved it. And I had a knack for the learning of stuff. I wanted to know everything.

For Karim, his passion for formal schooling is still within him (when he says “*from 1st grade until now*”). His separation from school was not one he wanted. John, Benji, and William also enjoyed their formative years of schooling. John moved around a lot, but found that he loved math because it remained the same no matter where he attended school. He shared,

Math is the easiest subject for me to understand. Like the other subjects, I like them, like I like English also because I like making music and stuff, but math is my favorite because, I don't know, I just understand it. Like if you had like a math problem and stuff, just explain it and I can pretty much take it all in and then I'll be able to do it, so it's the easiest for me to comprehend.

John liked his English class because it offered opportunities to showcase his poetry skills—poetry and rapping are similar for him. John reported making good grades in math and his other subjects until middle school, which is when his family also began experiencing housing instability. His mother enrolled him in the most challenging comprehensive high school in the area because of his high test scores, but he said he dropped out soon after because “*I didn't want to do the work and they wanted to hold me back although I understood all the classes.*” Empower staff, particularly Faith, confirms that John is “*wickedly smart*” but that his behavior “*puts people off of him*”.

William is one of the few Homeboys to persist through high school. He is still enrolled, and plans to graduate in the next year. He is a self-promoter, claiming that he has the best of both worlds at being book smart and street smart. He is an avid reader, and

while he does not enjoy the comprehensive school that he attends, he enjoys the learning component.

William: My favorite subject in school has to be English.

SR: Why is that?

William: It's probably kind of ironic that I chose English and or history as one of my favorite subjects considering that they teach you white literature. Everything—unless it's an African-American class you're going to learn about White, you know? Everything's going to be White.

Like I just took British poetry and literature, you know, and they didn't offer African-American literature. But I like those because I'm good at them. I tend to be able to recall a lot of history. I tend to absorb, that's what appeals to me: I want to know. I want to, I like to do literary analysis and I like to compare text, I like to compare text to movies, I like—a good example would be my British poetry and literature class. We read Macbeth by Shakespeare. That ain't nothing but "Scarface." That's basically what it is. It's "Scarface" from start to ending. You start from humble beginnings, you illegally climb your way to the top and you fall. You know?

Here, William offers what I consider an enlightened and apt critique of a classic piece of British literature, *Macbeth*. He is able to connect what he is learning in school to what he knows is valued on the streets of his community—the story of *Scarface*. As a result of the connections he sees, he is able to value the educational component equally, if not more than, the street version; he knows that the Shakespeare story came first, so that the struggle from rags to riches is an old one, not a contemporary one.

The only Homeboy to not express any positive experiences about school, elementary or otherwise, was Michael, the group's only White member. The fifth born child of 12 children, Michael had a very turbulent and violent childhood and he still wore

the physical scars. He expressed dislike for everything about school. Michael blamed himself for his poor performance in the classroom.

Michael: I'm a Fuh-Duh student.

SR: Fuh-Duh. What does that mean?

Michael: It means I'm all F's and maybe a few D's. Fuh-Duh. My family was always trying to see if I was special ed. I wasn't. I was smart. I was just lazy.

When pushed, Michael provides an interesting explanation as to why he found no incentive to participate in the classroom.

Michael: Because I'm lazy.

SR: And what else?

Michael: I don't want people to expect a lot out of me.

SR: Okay. Why is that?

Michael: Because they'll expect like a lot, like really a lot out of me. When I play the stupid role, or the role like I don't care, my family they don't push me away but they try to help me. But I don't need no help. I can do it by myself.

To Michael, succeeding or excelling academically meant that he would have to continue that success, and people would no longer hold him to low standards. Although he thought of himself as extremely smart and capable (and indeed my observations noted that his self-perception and ego was exceptionally high) his worst fear was that people would recognize his talent and hold him accountable to make use of it. He lamented that teachers were always trying to motivate him and inspire him to achieve academically, which he never did. After spending a year away from all formal schooling, Michael recently enrolled in the KSI GED online program where, as he puts it, “*Teachers are not*

always breathing down your neck.” If he finishes, he will be the first person in his family to earn a high school credential.

Teachers and Malevolent Neglect: The Middle and High School Years

A commonly held belief inside and outside of the educational field is that teachers care about their students. Scholars are united in their contention that students benefit from teacher care—it is an aspect of the classroom experience that initially and continually engages students and promotes academic success. Michael experienced this type of care, with teachers attempting to motivate him and letting him know they cared about him. However, for the majority of Homeboys the concept of teacher care was a foreign notion after elementary school, one that was consistently missing in the interactions with their classroom teachers. The prevalent Homeboy opinion about teachers was that they failed to care about their students, especially the ones in emotional or physical turmoil who needed care the most. I asked William if he thought his teachers cared about him, and he likened the profession of teaching to that of a drug dealer. He responded, “*All teachers care about their students because they care about money. If you’re a teacher you’re making money teaching kids. It’s the same thing except they not dealing in drugs they are dealing in kids.*” For William, teachers treated their students like commodities, items that added up to their paychecks.

This sentiment was echoed time and time again. James shared with me that he was the target of intense bullying due to his gender expression; his voice is softer and higher than most boys, and he lacks a “masculine” walk or pronounced “swagger”. He said his teachers never intervened because “*they didn’t care or they were scared to*”.

Benji moved from his comprehensive high school to Jasper Alternative because he was looking for a more personal approach in the classroom.

Benji: I've been in schools where I can sleep through every single class and the teacher won't say anything. I can never turn in an assignment, and the teacher will never say anything. No one motivated me to really get schoolwork done or even attend class. Once I missed like 66 days of school. Like not 66 days, I mean, like one class, because I would skip one class. And nobody ever said anything, nobody ever did anything. But it was just the lack of caring, I guess. Like when a teacher saw a student failing or skipping, there just wasn't much effort put to try to stop it, or help, or figure out why or what was going on or anything really.

SR: What class were you skipping?

Benji: I was skipping my math class. It was my geometry class.

SR: What was your reason for skipping?

Benji: Mostly because I just didn't want to go. And the class was very hard. The teacher, she didn't do much explaining or helping. She just more so talked and gave a worksheet, and then that was it. And asking for help was kind of useless because she'd try to quickly give an answer, like a two-minute run-through. She wouldn't go in-depth or actually try to help; she would just try to get the information across as quickly as possible.

Benji enjoys attending Jasper Alternative because it has smaller class sizes and a more hands-on approach to student learning and behavior. When asked if he thinks the teachers at Jasper care about him more than the teachers at the traditional high school, he replies, *"Yes, definitely. They care if I do the work and if I'm there. It seems like they want me to be there."*

The most powerful example of how the Homeboys came to believe that teachers failed to care adequately for their students occurred for Karim. Subjected to years of

abuse from family members, he often attended school with what would seem to be obvious abuse marks. His elementary school teachers intervened when they suspected abuse, and he spent a short time in foster care. He recalls that year as the best year of his life. Returned to his abusive mother and moved to a new middle school, the violence resumed, this time without the help or intervention of teachers. He recalls how one teacher explicitly wanted to be left in the dark regarding the abuse.

Karim: I remember one day [my mother] kicked me in my ribs, broke them. It was hard to breathe for a couple days. Whatever. She hit me with this wooden plank right in my kneecap and I was limping to school. One night, she choked me. I'm talking like literally just choking me. I couldn't breathe. I really thought I was dead. I really thought I was about to die that night because I'm sitting there gasping and kicking for air and she's still choking me.

She finally let me go. I'm sitting there throwing up, coughing, and she punched me in the face, blacked my eye. Sometimes I had to go to school with a black eye.

SR: And teachers never said, "Where did you get that black eye?"

Karim: Nope. And that's what I'm saying. Physically, there is something wrong, and [the teacher] tell me that 'I don't want to know'. Why didn't you say nothing? I'm limping in class. Why didn't nobody say nothing? [My mother] kicked me down stairs one time. That felt like the longest tumble ever. Oh, my goodness. I can go on and on and on because from like 8 to 14, all I know is abuse.

Karim loved school. As detailed earlier, Karim cried when he missed days of school to care for younger siblings, and he dreamed of being a scientist. I hypothesize that for Karim, teachers were his only connection to safe and violence-free adults outside of his turbulent family members, and once his teachers let him know they could not or would not assist him in his personal issues, he left school. Given his passion for schooling and

learning, my guess is that disengaging from this space was a difficult decision for Karim, a decision he made when he was all out of viable choices.

Frank experienced similar issues with teachers and administrators during his middle and high school years. Once excited and passionate about school and learning, his positive attitude changed once he entered middle school.

Frank: Middle school was bad.

SR: Why was that?

Frank: I don't know middle kids...middle school kids are just mean. I got picked on a lot in middle school just because to me I was a smart kid, I was the nerd. So I got picked on a lot, kids trying to steal my homework and I got shoved into lockers. I remember this one time I was so mad, and that's second time everybody thought I was crazy, because I was in gym and it was a regular gym class. We got changed or whatever at the beginning of class, and I went back at the end of the class, changed back into my clothes, my locker was open, and I was like...so I go in there, I grab my shirt, my shirt is wet, and not only is it wet it smells like pee. I go off, I'm pushing people, screaming, yelling, I said I'll kill all of ya'll. I was heated.

SR: That's horrible.

Frank: It was. I was in tears, because those were the only other clothes I had, and it was a nice...I think it was a button down. I was upset, I was really upset. I went to the principal and everything, he didn't really do anything. He yelled at who he thought it was and that was about it. He was like just wear your gym clothes, I was like okay, I was highly upset.

SR: So the gym teacher didn't do anything either?

Frank: No, nothing. It probably didn't help that I was cussing everybody out, but you're mad...

SR: I'd say that's very...considering the circumstances. So is that when you started disliking school or did you still really like middle school?

Frank: At this point it was...call it the lesser of two evils. I didn't really have a nice home life so school was always my outlet. I'd rather be at school than be at home.

By the time Frank entered middle school, the positive experiences and passion for learning new information dissipated, and instead, school became the lesser of two evils. He was bullied incessantly and shoved into lockers in the hallway. He maintained good grades and a clean behavior record, and he still wonders why teachers never intervened to stop the bullying. Soon his home life impacted his classroom experiences. After he was outed as gay to his grandparents by his sister, his grandfather told him he was going to kill him. Afraid, but having nowhere else to go, he went to school and attempted to go about his day as normal as possible.

Frank: I think I broke down in school; everybody asking what's wrong and I couldn't say anything. I ended up running away that day, because I usually stay after school pretty much every day. So I stayed after school and I'm just crying my eyes out, and one of the after school teachers came and she was what's wrong, and I said I can't go home. She goes why and I was I just can't, because...I told her if I go home I'm going to kill myself or I'm going to kill somebody. I was really at that point. She didn't say anything; it was like she didn't know what to do so I just sat there until it was time for people to go home. She came to me and said what are you going to do, and I said I don't know.

Fortunately, Frank sought refuge with a friend and did not go home that night or any night after. He has spent every night since then couch surfing and spending time at the homeless shelter. Sadly, this was a similar story from many of the homeless youth. Several young people shared stories of teachers and administrators telling the students they wanted to be excluded from the details of their turbulent personal lives, or upon

learning something potentially harmful as in the cases of Karim and Frank, shirked their professional duty as mandatory reporters and did nothing.

Based on the Homeboys' descriptions, they occupy a unique social space in schools. Other than Michael, all of the Homeboys report positive elementary school experiences and a passion for learning new information, and teachers were important in instilling this passion. However, by middle school the passion waned and they no longer aspired to be scientists or mathematicians. The next section details the occupational aspirations of the Homeboys and how they came to know what they wanted to be or who they were capable of being in the future.

Future Occupations: Hustle and Flow Ideology

The Homeboys are familiar with the dominant achievement ideology—the widespread belief that society is one of equal opportunity and that education and hard work leads to economic and social success. They verbally encouraged other homeless youth, including the Sistergirls, to stay in school and go to college or get their GED. They acknowledged that formal education is important, but they did not believe that higher education, and by extension the dominant achievement ideology, worked for their particular lives. Strikingly, it had not worked for their family or community members, and this could be the reason they never internalized the ideology as one that could work in their lives. Some of their parents graduated high school and had stable jobs but were still unable to financially make ends meet. With the exception of William (whose mother received her real estate licensure after high school) none of the parents of the Homeboys attended post-secondary schooling. They could name several friends who were high school graduates but were still working minimum wage jobs side by side with high

school dropouts. Discouragingly, some of the Homeboys worked hard in school, stayed out of trouble, but correspondingly, experienced peer violence and teacher indifference. Thus, the dominant achievement ideology, while valid for other young people, was expressively not an ideology the Homeboys believed relevant or true for their lives. The following sections offer insight into why the Homeboys believed this—from the available culture they see in their communities and the media, to their occupational role models.

Emulating the (visible and available) culture: The Homeboys are a subgroup of homeless youth who express through dress, speech, and hobbies an affinity for urban, Black male-centric culture. Although this could be a diverse rendering, because of the social location of the Homeboys, this includes the urban, Black males who 1) they access through their families or local communities or 2) are visible in the narrow renderings of the mainstream media. The African American men in the community that the Homeboys knew and had access to gained economic success through other means than education. According to the Homeboys, most of the men in their families or communities sold drugs. Others dabbled in illegal markets, selling stolen goods or using violence to secure money and other resources. These community members promoted their lack of formal educational credentials and how school was not a factor in them becoming, as they saw it, successful entrepreneurs. The Homeboys seemed to embrace this philosophy—an ideology I call hustling and flowing. The Homeboys maintained that if they hustled hard enough and long enough, that the money and success would begin to flow their way regardless of how many educational credentials they had. Hard work in the conventional, academic way was traded for a different type of hard work, one they were more

accustomed to engaging in to survive their circumstances. Every day I asked Nathan how he was doing, and his standard reply was “*You know me, I stay hustlin*”.

The other Black males the Homeboys had access to were ones who are visible in the mainstream media—particularly the music-based programming like MTV and BET. The artists, the lyrics, the commercial endorsements, and the music videos are selling a lifestyle that is steeped in material consumerism and monetary excess (Pope, 2005). It requires (through de facto means) an adherence to these and other cultural codes, such as hip-hop fashion and speech to prove or confirm belonging (Thomas, Day, & Ward, 2008; Powell Hammond, 2002)—all of which the Homeboys do and maintain as a component of Homeboy membership. The Homeboys spend their extremely limited money and resources (legal or not) acquiring the latest jeans, t-shirts, and shoes that are being marketed by hip hop moguls. Few of them can afford these items; hence they repeatedly wear the items they have acquired over and over. If their ambition is to become rappers, then they must “walk the walk” in order to be considered legitimate

Individual Responsibility and Role Models: Interestingly, the Homeboys did not ascribe to the dominant achievement ideology for themselves, but they did not blame institutional or systemic bias on their potential to make their dreams come true. The only thing that stood in their way of making all their dreams come true was the amount of hard work they were willing to put into it. To them, they could be millionaires before their 21st birthdays if they wanted it bad enough. All but William answered with a non-hesitant yes when I asked if they thought the playing field was level for everyone in US society. William was the only Homeboy to mention issues of racism, prejudice and social class oppression in his interviews and daily conversations. He was acutely aware of his social

position and that of his less fortunate friends, and he often tried to “educate” the others on the inner workings and conspiracies of “the man”.

The Homeboys may internalize their success and failure as a personal, individual attribute because of their occupational role models. The Homeboys’ role models were drawn, not from a diverse array of successful men in society, but only to rap and hip hop icons who have gained great success rapping about their unfortunate circumstances growing up. For instance, these popular rap lyrics by Lupe Fiasco could often be heard in Empower:

*I was once that little boy
Terrified of the world
Now I’m on a world tour
I will give up everything, even start a world war
For these ghettos girls and boys I’m rapping round’ the world for
Africa to New York, Haiti then I detour, Oakland out to Auckland
Gaza Strip to Detroit, say hip-hop only destroy
Tell em’ look at me, boy*

The Homeboys rapped these lyrics over and over in the Drop-In. The Homeboys also listed Kendrick Lamar as a role model. He rose to hip-hop success at the young age of 17. One of John’s favorite songs, and therefore, a favorite for all of the Homeboys, is *Poe*

Man Dreams by Kendrick Lamar:

*This is the ism this is the vision
You know what I’m talkin’ about?
You gotta get up off your ass and get it, man
That’s the only way your pockets gonna expand,
I tell you every day, you know what I’m talkin’ about
Apply yourself to supply your wealth,
Only limitations you’ll ever have are those you
Place upon yourself.*

In this song, Lamar puts the onus for success on the individual, telling the audience that if they want something go get it, as if it is a linear want it-get it- process. If you fail, it is

because you failed at applying yourself. Like Lupe Fiasco and Kendrick Lamar, the rap stars of today are young prodigies, growing up impoverished and often in communities rife with violence. They are discovered in what seems to be the most serendipitous ways, going from ghetto to Gucci-living overnight. For example, Lamar began circulating his mixed tape to people in his community (South California, Compton) when he was 16 years old. Within months, executives at a record company heard the tape and offered him a music deal (Collins, 2012). The Homeboys see little difference between themselves and these successful stars, and as such, aspire to be the next big thing on the urban cultural landscape. To them, rapping was the most viable career option—they already have the tragic background stories, they emulate the culture in sincerity, and they seem to wholeheartedly subscribe to the hustle and flow ideology that emanates from the lyrics of the successful artists that made it. All that was missing was a little luck to come their way.

When pushed, the Homeboys offered other occupations that may make them happy if the music dreams are derailed—occupations they were not necessarily qualified for yet. For example, John mentioned to me during our interview that if he needs a “backup” occupation to the music business that he wants to be a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter. He took some classes as a tool of anger management and while it has been years since he has taken a class, he remembered the teacher telling him he was really good at it. He knew no MMA fighters, however, or how to enter the occupation. Terrance would consider being a psychologist after his music career, but at the time knew no one in his life that had been successful at navigating this vocation. Benji would like to enter a science field, and Nathan mentioned that he could work as a cook as he took

several years of culinary classes in school and already held a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. William wants to travel the country and find himself:

William: Yeah, I'm hoping to start a life in California that will extend all the way out here. I want to travel. I want to find my soul. Yeah. Vegas, or I'm thinking about Portland or Seattle. I've been thinking about New Orleans too or even Miami.

SR: So, on this journey to find yourself, where do you see yourself ending up?

William: I really want to start a multipurpose studio. I want it to have a recording studio, I want it to have a dance studio, an art studio, a kitchen, a computer room and I want it to be in the ghetto. White ghettos, brown ghettos, black ghettos, you know, just any area where people are restricted...I want to be able to give people a voice. I want to community build. I do.

Thus, the Homeboys held firmly to the occupational aspiration of becoming rappers or hip-hop stars through an engagement in a hustle and flow ideology, not a traditional educationally engaged ideology. Their “fall back” occupations require advanced educational preparation, all of which they were not receiving or actively seeking out. One Homeboy stood out as an exception—Michael—who told me during a Rhapsody and Rhyme night that he had no dreams of college. He did, however, have existing social capital in the automotive field that could provide a viable, stable future occupation.

SR: Michael, are you going to be a rapper as well?

Michael: Me? No, not me. Let's just say I'm not blessed in that department. In the rapping skills department.

SR: Then what will you do in the future?

Michael: I don't know. Probably be a mechanic. That's what most of my cousins do and they can get me a job.

Homeboys and Education: Conclusion

*Look, I've never had a dream in my life
Because a dream is what you wanna do
But still haven't pursued
I knew what I wanted and did it till it was done
So I've been the dream that I wanted to be since day one
A\$EOP Rocky*

The occupational aspirations of Homeboys appear unsullied by glass ceilings or statistics on economic and educational disparities. Although they display symptoms of depression and are at times knocked down by the adversities in their lives, they are teenagers who are optimistic, hopeful, and excited about the trajectory of their futures. It is clear the Homeboys understand the prevalent achievement ideology—they know that education is important and credentials are the key to upward social mobility, but they respond as though those messages are not for them. In the time I spent at Empower, none of the Homeboys who were considered drop-outs enrolled in a formal schooling institution. Yet I witnessed them time and time again supporting their peers in their academic pursuits, seeming to be genuinely happy when a peer achieved a high school diploma or GED certificate.

Based on the Homeboys' affiliation with limited role models, the Homeboys reflect messages of achievement from those in a similar social positioning. Indeed, the voices of rappers speak of an achievement ideology seemingly based in the reality of most Homeboys' lived experiences. Thus, the Homeboys speak of depending on their individual-level hard work, talent, and good fortune as their achievement ideology leading to an eventual occupation as a professional hip-hop star. The Homeboys describe back-up occupations without explicit engagement in preparation for such results.

My previous discussion of the 4 leaders of the Homeboys—John, Nathan, Karim, and William—will come back into focus in my across group analysis in Chapter 7. While the young men are different from each other, they have the same ambitions to be rappers and exclude schooling from their future aspirations. This may be because of the ways schools and Empower are engaging with the young people around issues of education, achievement, and success. These four young men will be illustrative of these points. But first, in the next chapter I take up the culture, educational experiences, and occupational aspirations of the Sistergirls. I spend time detailing similar aspects of their personal lives and school careers, and how they take up the achievement ideology in distinct ways.

Chapter 5

The Sistergirls

Introduction

There is a group of young women at Empower that refer to themselves as the Sistergirls. All of the Sistergirls are low-income, experiencing temporary or chronic homelessness, and have experienced disturbing episodes of neglect, abuse, trauma, or a combination of all three. They vary in age, interactions with the juvenile justice system, and educational status. Like the Homeboys, the Sistergirls also find their family, safety and security behind the doors of the Empower Drop-In.

This chapter, similar to the last, is divided into two parts. Part I of this chapter focuses on the description of the Sistergirls, specifically background demographics and the culture of the group. I also include background information, including how the Sistergirls came to be homeless, their mental or emotional health, their current educational statuses, and occupational aspirations based on information gathered from interviews with the Sistergirls, interviews with Empower staff, and observations. Lastly, I provide rich descriptions of the three leaders of the Sistergirls—Camille, Sonia, and Amber.

Part II focuses on the educational experiences, achievement ideology, and occupational aspirations of the Sistergirls. The information shared in both parts of this chapter is intended to 1) present a comprehensive description of who these young women are, and 2) form the foundation for subsequent chapters that take up how their

backgrounds and social identities play a role in how institutions (schools and Empower) act upon them, and how agentic they feel (compared to how agentic they are) in making their aspirations come true.

Basic Demographics

The Sistergirls is a group of homeless young women who, like the Homeboys, are regular attendees at the Empower Drop-In. There are 9 Sistergirls in this study and 2 more that make up the group. There are between 5-8 Sistergirls at the Drop-In on any given night, and they almost always congregate in the back room near the kitchen entrance. The current chef at Empower, Monique, is a former Sistergirl, and at 21 years of age, she has transitioned from being a client to working as the cook for the organization. She is the “big sister” of the group, often providing advice or assistance to the young Sistergirls. Her scope is limited however—she still identifies as a Sistergirl, a homeless Black teenager who came to Empower for assistance, but now she is a staff member, bound by the organization’s rules and codes of conduct. It is in the back room near the kitchen entrance that all of these young women gather to chat about the current events in their lives, out of the earshot of other Empower staff.

The Sistergirls are racially and ethnically diverse and hail from African, Caribbean, or biracial ethnic backgrounds. When asked, however, they all answer “Black” as their racial identity. The oldest Sistergirl is Dana, who turned 20 during the later stages of my study, and the youngest is Gabbie, who recently turned 14. The mean age is 17. They are also diverse in gender expression and sexual orientation. Two of the Sistergirls are “questioning” their sexual orientation, two others self-identify as lesbians and one identifies as pansexual. There is one transgender member of the Sistergirls who

declined the invitation to participate in this study's interview portion for reasons unknown.

Sistergirl Culture

Not every young woman who frequents the Drop-In is afforded Sistergirl status. There does seem to be a membership method for entry into the group, but it is not as visible or obvious as the Homeboys; the Homeboys have a dress and speak that is easy to pick out of the crowd of young people. The Sistergirls have no shared fashion or speech code, they listen to a variety of music, and their hobbies vary widely. What binds them as a group is their shared racial and gender identity and a strong sense of loyalty to each other.

Closed Circle: The Sistergirls tend to be a more restricted group, offering membership to few of the youth who come to Empower for services. First, all of the young women identify themselves as Black, regardless of their ethnic or racial background. For example, Patience is a naturalized citizen from West Africa, and when asked about her race, she replies, *"I am Black. That's how people see me when they look at me, and even with my accent. So I just say I'm Black if people ask."* There are no White members of the Sistergirls and this seems to be a deliberate membership preference. There are several White females who frequent the Drop-In, and unless they fit in with the alternative EmoCore group, they struggle to find a "clique" or group with which to attach. This is not to say that the Sistergirls are restrictive in a negative way—I was never witness to one of them being inconsiderate or unkind to any White female at the Drop-In, but they also never welcomed one of them into their circle of Sistergirls.

There are also Black females who are not a part of the Sistergirls, but their absence from the group seemed to be more of a personal preference or being new to the Drop-In.

There are also no Homeboys or male-born males in the group, and the Sistergirls' relationships with the Homeboys are at times strained. The most intense episodes of anger and threatened violence often erupt between members of these two groups.

Memo, May 2: I hear a loud "thud" in the back room. It sounds like a book hitting the floor, but louder. Then I hear the boys start laughing, and the girls start talking loudly, although I can't make out their words. I get up from the couch and move to the wall near the door at the back room. I then see that the commotion is an argument. Marcus [Homeboy] marches out of the back room right past me, both of his hands are balled into fists and his shoulders are hunched. He is followed by a few more boys and a couple of girls, and I'm still unsure what's going on or who is involved in the argument. Marcus then turns around and it looks as if he is going to grab one of the young women who has followed him out—it looks like it may be Dana. He hesitates, then screams, "Bitch I will fuck you up right now. I will knock the shit out of you". The way he says it, I know he is serious. Emilia (Empower staff member) immediately runs over, gets in his face and tells him to leave the drop-in and cool off. He leaves and slams the door. A couple of the Homeboys follow him out, while the other Homeboys start to loudly laugh and joke about the incident.

Unfortunately, incidents of near physical altercations happen with some frequency, at least once a month during my time at Empower. Dana, who I later learn is dating Marcus, is hugged and consoled by the other Sistergirls as they try to figure out what happened and why the argument escalated so quickly.

The exclusion of Homeboys does not necessarily mean that young men would be unwelcomed with the Sistergirls. The group does have a transgender member, and he is very involved with the group, hanging out with the other Sistergirls in the back room when he is at the Drop-In. It is unclear from my observations if the Sistergirls consider him a "man" or a "woman". The lack of males in the group may have more to do with the type of males who frequent Empower rather than a deliberate male-female segregation or

hostility. For example, Camille makes her feelings for members of the Homeboys very clear to anyone who asks:

Camille: Michael calls me his best friend, but the feelings aren't really mutual. I've been knowing Michael since middle school, but Michael aggravates me too much. I mean the other [Homeboys] aggravates me too, but Michael I just...no, I couldn't call him my friend.

Sense of Loyalty: There is also a strong sense of care and loyalty or belongingness between the Sistergirls. They often travel to and from Empower together. I pass them at the nearby bus depot as we all make our way to the Drop-In. They look out for each other, seeming to be accountable for each others' whereabouts. When the Empower staff are looking for one of them for counseling appointments or other things, they ask the other Sistergirls:

SR: I haven't seen Sonia today. Is she here?

Emilia: No, I haven't seen her either. Camille, Amber, have either of you seen Sonia?

Amber: Yes, she went to the corner store to get something to drink with Megan. She will be back in a minute.

Emilia: Yeah, I figured you two would know where she is.

In addition to traveling together, they talk about their personal lives and they share each others' sadness.

Memo, April: I have witnessed this phenomenon happen multiple times—four times I have noted in my fieldnotes. The Black girls are almost always in the back room near the kitchen. They are talking in hushed tones, and they are surrounding one of their friends, almost shielding her from sight from the rest of the youth at Empower. They are all crying—all 5 or 6 of them. The one in the middle—be it Gabbie, Laura, or Amber—has shared something distressing or saddening. One time the young woman failed to get accepted into the affordable housing unit, which meant she was on the streets

for a few more weeks. Another time it was a young woman who was upset after a fight with her boyfriend. The tears flowed freely and in solidarity. When one cries, they all cry.

It seems that whatever the young women lack in care and belonging from their families, they make up for in their relationships with each other.

From Home to the Streets

Abuse, neglect, and limited housing options for low-income families all played a part in leading the Sistergirls to their homeless situations. Three of them ran away from their biological families on their own volition, tired of the abuse and not sure when or how it would end. Kim left her family home at 16, unable to continue living with her mother's physical and emotional abuse.

Kim: My mom's very addictive and she's very cold hearted and like she'll do anything to do whatever she likes. She'll burn her whole family and she won't even think twice about it... Like me and her we have nothing to do with each other. I've been up here for like I think like two months now and I haven't talked to her. I don't think I really want to. I know that's kind of bad to say but I don't want no contact with her. I think that's one of the reasons I want to change my name too. Because she made me be like that, like I don't want no part of her so I'll change my name and move far away. I don't want to have anything to do with any of my family at all.

I know it's like coldhearted to say but I have a real messed up family.

Interestingly, Kim's self-imposed separation from her mother is not a decision she made lightly. Kim wants to care about her family members, but their treatment of her led her to run away and seek a sense of belonging and safety somewhere else. Kim researched runaway shelters and teen-centered homeless shelters, and after calling Empower's information hotline to ensure that the website advertised truthfully—free, confidential

support and shelter—she spent the little money she had and took a bus out of her home state to escape her abusive family members. She arrived at Empower’s temporary shelter in the middle of the night and has been in their homeless shelters for the past few months.

It turns out that Kim was one of the more fortunate Sistergirls. Her relationship with Empower began at the beginning of her life as a homeless teenage and she never had to spend a night on the streets. Most of the teens that live on the streets and find help at Empower do so out of luck, circumstance, or court order. The Sistergirls who do not reside at Empower’s shelters spend time couch surfing, or in cases such as Megan, sleep wherever they can find safety and warm shelter.

Megan: Somehow, I think all I needed was stable housing because trying to worry about where I'm going to lay my head every night, I did - it was the one point in time I didn't have my car. I slept in my car for like six months.

Megan’s mother kicked her out one night after an argument. She slept in her car, in parks, and abandoned houses until she found housing assistance at Empower. She currently lives at Empower’s transitional housing unit.

Two other Sistergirls were removed from their biological families by social services and placed in foster homes. As they tell it, they fared no better in their new found homes, still suffering physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of their foster families.

SR: How old were you when you were in the [foster care] system?

Laura: Ages 7 through 13. Five years.

SR: Were you in one foster care home, or were you in several?

Laura: No, I was in several.

SR: *Why was that?*

Laura: *I guess according to them, I wasn't the perfect child. No, I know I wasn't, but they didn't understand me, maybe they didn't want to... I used to go house to house to house, but it's not me. It ended up giving me a bad reputation.*

It was at one of these foster homes that Laura was physically attacked by her foster brother, and when she defended herself by hitting him with an iron skillet she was charged with felonious assault, placed on probation, and moved to another foster home. She said she was never allowed to tell her side of the story, *“Not that they would’ve believed me anyway”*. Laura’s mother, battling drug addiction for years, regained custody of Laura when she turned 13, and the housing instability and physical neglect continues.

The four remaining Sistergirls have remained with family members, mostly their mothers and younger siblings, throughout their periods of homelessness. Their lack of stable, consistent housing is a function of the limited affordable housing options in the area, particularly for people who are impoverished and also need mental health assistance. The families couch surf, spend time in family-based homeless shelters, or squat for weeks at a time in abandoned houses.

Unfortunately, the Sistergirls fare no better than the Homeboys with their mental and emotional health; the stress of being in homeless conditions takes its toll. They talk of psychosomatic symptoms to Empower staff, often speaking of migraines, stomach pains, and body aches. Several Sistergirls, like Camille and Gabbie, have been formally diagnosed with serious psychoses from severe depression, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. Over time, I notice that the Sistergirls argue with the Empower Drop-In staff and the other homeless youth (including each other) on a regular basis, often getting so angry that they leave the facility, not returning for days.

SR: *Did you have a temper before you started taking your medication?*

Gabbie: *Yes. I was so angry, I used to bite people.*

SR: *Why were you so angry?*

Gabbie: *When you make me mad, I never let it go. I also have that oppositional defiant disorder, I feel as if once you make me angry that one time then I'm done, I'm going to fight you. But I realized, growing up has taught me fighting won't never make you a bad girl, cool, whatever. Fighting is never the answer. Fighting will either get you on probation, killed, shot, something. So growing up, I figured, let it go. Like, let it go. You know who you are. You are who you are. Embrace who you are. Don't let what people say get to you. Because if you fight them, you are getting the consequences, they aren't.*

Gabbie shared with me that people bully her because she doesn't wear the latest fashions, and because she is "tomboyish". Her comment of embracing who she is directly speaks to these experiences. While Gabbie speaks eloquently of taking the high-road during disputes, her actions in the Drop-In demonstrate how difficult it can be for her to control her impulses when under duress, even when taking her many medications.

Memo: April: Most of the girls stormed into the Drop-In today very animated, with exaggerated hand gestures and speaking louder than usual. Several of them begin arguing in the backroom. I'm not sure why they are arguing, but I can tell that it is quickly escalating by the increasingly loud voices and instigating laughter from some of the boys. I think you can always tell if the girls are going to fight by watching the actions of the boys. After a few minutes, two young women I've never seen before rush through the living room, and Gabbie is following closely behind. Gabbie is angry and crying. She wipes away tears from her face and she yells loudly, "I don't care who see it, if she wanna step, she can step. I will beat her down for everyone to see." The two girls leave the Drop-In quickly as Faith (staff member) cuts Gabbie off and takes her to the back room to cool down.

[later that evening] I asked Faith if Gabbie would face any sanctions due to her outburst. I was told no, that she often has trouble controlling her emotions, and that today was a good day because she never threw a punch. It is rare that they can stop her from being violent once she gets going.

Although Gabbie is on a steady stream of medication to curb her temper and impulsivity, and she has adopted a live-and-let-live mantra, her anger continues to surface and cause disruptions in the Drop-In.

After spending considerable time with Gabbie and the other Sistergirls, it becomes clear why their anger seems almost palpable. There is perpetual distress in the lives of these young women; from day to day, week to week, they subsist without knowing how they are going to provide for themselves and often their young children (3 of the Sistergirls have young children), and that negatively impacts their mental health.

SR: What's life like for you?

Dana: It's hard. It's hard. I'm still out here trying to be a single mother and do everything a single mother can do for her kid and don't have enough money for everything. But at the same time I'm still out here doing the best I can.

My friends are gone. I have no friends. And it's like just me and myself and my baby and whoever I try to mess with at the time. But right now I'm struggling to think about keeping going.

Similar to some members of the Homeboys, some Sistergirls wrestle with suicide ideation, and as Dana mentions, they struggle to think about continuing their lives in their current situations.

Educational Status

The Sistergirls, similar to other homeless adolescents, are plagued by high school absences, prohibitive mobility, and as a result, low course completion and decreased

academic achievement. Similar to the Homeboys, the Sistergirls vary in their educational trajectories. However, unlike the Homeboys, the Sistergirls are more likely to be continuously enrolled in one of the educational institutions in the community despite their personal difficulties. Of the 9 participating Sistergirls in this study, 7 are either still enrolled *and* attending school or already graduated. The two who are considered drop-outs desire to return to the classroom to receive their high school diploma or GED.

Enrolled or not, all of the Sistergirls talk fondly of school:

SR: Did you like school, like earlier school, elementary and middle?

Sonia: I did, I really did. It was fun, I had friends. And I was an okay student, not great or anything, but I was a good student, you know, I got good grades I guess.

SR: Do you like school?

Patience: Oh yes, I love school.

SR: Do you like school?

Amber: Yes, I really do. I like the teachers and the classes.

Others speak fondly of their favorite classes:

Dana: I love science. It is so interesting to me. I guess that's what makes me want to be nurse.

Gabbie: I love math. I don't know why.

Amber: I like all of them, but I really like math and science.

Camille: I love history, well, Black history. I'm really into that.

More importantly, the Sistergirls talk of enjoying the act of learning that happened while at school:

SR: What do you like about school?

Laura: Everything, you know. Just learning new things and being able to say that I know this fact that I didn't know before. It's a nice thing to feel, you know.

SR: What do you like about school?

Patience: Everything really. School and learning is very important and a lot of people over here take it for granted. Other people in other countries don't have schools or can't go because of poverty or corruption. I try to appreciate it all and I try to, like, soak it up, you know.

Regardless of their current educational status, all of the Sistergirls express positive attitudes toward school.

Sistergirl Megan recently graduated from her local comprehensive high school. Her journey to graduation was a difficult one—she had to spend over an hour on the city bus each way to get to school. She awoke every morning at 5:30 in order to reach school by 7:30. Once there she made good grades, mostly B's and C's, and had no discipline referrals. I asked her why she persisted through so much hardship, and she responded, *“Because that's the first thing you're supposed to do in life, is graduate from school.”* Tracked at 9th grade into a “Regular” curriculum, she repeated some of her elective courses in order to fill her schedule.

Megan: I had this one class...we had to come in and we had to cash our check at the bank. She was the banker. We had to write down our little budget thing and go grocery shopping at the store. We had to get our mail to the mail place and stamp it and make sure everything was right, that you wrote everything down in the right places. You have to fill out your check. You have to - it was like real world stuff and we had under an hour to do it, so everybody was scrambling and stuff. I actually did pretty good. I think I got an A in that class.

And then second semester, [the teacher] told me you could take the second semester and then you've completed the whole course and you'll get your certificate. I was like

okay, I'll do that. So I was the only one in that school for a long time that did that. She's like, "Do you want to do it again?" I was like, "Yeah." So I did it again and she had me help other people and everything, so that was a good class to take. It focused on how to dress for an interview and what not to say, how your hair should be like, and what everything else should be like and everything. So, that was good.

Megan's duplication of courses seemed to be a function of, one, being successful in the vocational business courses, but also tracking and limited course counseling. Instead of enrolling in another class that can offer a different set of skills, Megan re-takes a course that, for all intents and purposes, failed to challenge her academically or prepare her for future academic coursework. In contrast, Sistergirl leader Amber is in the Advanced Placement or college preparatory track and, as such, takes additional courses of foreign language or doubles up on her core coursework as her elective hours.

Megan and Amber are the exceptions in the group, as they have only attended one comprehensive high school and found or are still finding success there. It is a more common experience for the Sistergirls to attend all three types of schools available to them before they find academic success and completion. For instance, Laura started 9th grade at the local comprehensive high school, transferred to Jasper Alternative, and finally received her high school diploma through KSI.

SR: KSI Academy, alright. How did you like it?

Laura: I loved it. I did.

SR: What did you love about KSI?

Laura: It's an online class, so you do everything online. I'm not really a fan of teachers face-to-face, so I like learning stuff my own, by myself. Yeah, I like the schoolwork. I'm not gonna lie. It was hard, but it's worth it. I still learned. I can believe any school is hard, or a lot of work...

For Laura, KSI offered an alternative to the people-centered setup of the alternative and traditional comprehensive schools. She attended tutorials and labs in the building when she had time and transportation, but her physical presence, and that of her guardians, was not a necessity to receive course credit. Laura works two jobs, so the flexible hours of KSI suited her schedule. She completed most of her assignments at the public library and at Empower where she spent most of her limited free time. This educational pathway is similar for Megan, Camille, Dana, and Kim. They begin 9th grade at their local comprehensive high school, and for similar reasons, they soon transfer to the alternative schools or to one of the online offerings.

The Sistergirls also seem to recognize the importance of traditional comprehensive high schools and what they miss out on once they leave and go to alternative or online schools:

Camille: If it was up to me I would still be going to [my local high school], because I wish I was still going to there for my senior year. Because it's a lot of opportunities I could have had at there. I could have got scholarships, I could have did ROTC, Culinary Arts, but I can only blame myself because I messed up skipping and...

SR: What happened?

Camille: I was skipping, I didn't do my work stuff like that. So I didn't have my credits so I had to go to KSI.

For Camille, the ability to get college scholarships vanished once she left the traditional high school, and with the hope of scholarship money gone, she no longer aspires to attend a four year college.

There are two Sistergirls not enrolled in a formal educational institution: Sonia and Kim. Kim blames herself for her educational failings:

SR: *So why did you have to change schools?*

Kim: *The school that I was at wasn't good for me. I did not do that good. I think I can't blame it on anybody else because that was more my fault because I should have been paying more attention [in class].*

Because it's my fault that I should have been at school doing what I had to do. But at the same time my mom didn't get up and enroll me into school. Like every day I would ask like can we walk up there to school, can we walk up there to school so I can enroll. She should have got up and enrolled me but at the same time I could have did that myself too. I know certain things but I could have walked up there to school and like well I'm such and such well my mom can make like a home visit to school then. Because I should have did that instead of like lying on my butt.

Kim's mother failed to enroll her in her local middle school for over a year, and when she did finally attend, she had trouble keeping up with the work. Although Kim acknowledges her mother's responsibility in this, she ultimately blames her 13-year old self for not enrolling in school on her own volition. She hopes to enroll in another schooling institution in the upcoming fall semester.

The educational paths of the Sistergirls are not linear. Their journeys often detour off the traditional course due to their family issues and mobility. Nonetheless, they speak fondly of school and recognize education's importance, as evidenced by their enrolling in almost every educational option in the community in order to finish their high school coursework. As Megan stated, graduating from high school is "*the first thing you're supposed to do in life*".

The 3 Leaders

The following section details the three leaders of the Sistergirls: Camille, Sonia, and Amber. These young women are very different from each other, in physical ways and

personality or character. Their personal and educational biographies shape much of who they have become. This detailed information will resurface in Chapter 7 when I use the three leaders as typologies and I analyze the youth across groups in an effort to show how schools and Empower shape their educational experiences and occupational aspirations in distinct ways.

Camille: Camille is the leader of the Sistergirls. She is 16, and has been frequenting Empower since she was 12. She is petite, standing at well under 5 feet tall. Although she is short, she has broad shoulders that are not often found on young women her age. Camille's complexion is the color of dark chocolate, her face is mostly round, and she has high cheekbones. Her straightened hair is short—too short for a ponytail—and it is often curled on the ends. Camille is shy, but not soft-spoken. The adage “if you have nothing nice to say, say nothing” is lost on Camille—her usual conversations with peers, particularly the Homeboys, include the usual phrases “I can't stand you”, “Nigga don't try me”, and, because profanity is not allowed in the Drop-In she improvises with “I will fonk you up”.

Camille is the leader of the Sistergirls because she has a solid reputation as a fighter. She received her first concussion at age 10 during a fist fight, and she has had several more vicious physical altercations over the years. She has a quick wit and even quicker temper; she rarely passes up the opportunity to physically joust with the Homeboys when inside the Drop-In. At the young age of 16 she is already a survivor of several sexual assaults, and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome due to a ruthless sexual attack by a family member. She shared her experiences with me during a formal interview:

Camille: Then it's just a lot of crazy stuff that happened to me in my life; a lot of it I don't remember and a lot of it I do remember. Something...every time something good happened something bad happened. When I stayed out in my old neighborhood I witnessed a lot of people getting killed, little kids getting shot and stuff like that...it was to the point my mom didn't even want us even playing in the front yard anymore that's how bad it was. We couldn't even go outside sometimes.

Camille has stopped a lot of the fighting she is accustomed to, and she gives the credit to her blossoming relationship with Homeboy William.

Camille: Because I used to...I didn't care, I'd fight if I felt like fighting I'd fight, I'd cuss, be disrespectful, I didn't care. But then once I met this boy, William, it like, I changed. Then I got the job here at Empower [as peer outreach worker] and I just calmed down once I got with [William].

Although her new relationship has curbed her propensity to start and end every disagreement with a physical fight, Camille is still tough and street-smart, and the other Sistergirls avidly seek her out for advice and companionship.

Camille's living situation recently improved and she currently resides in the local housing projects with her mother. Because her home life is more stable, her living room couch is often a temporary dwelling to other Sistergirls who have nowhere else to go. Unlike most of the young people who frequent Empower, Camille has a good relationship with her mother, and even in periods of extended homelessness, has always remained with her mother in shelters. She immediately softens when she speaks of her mother, sharing with me, *"So [my mom] said once she saw my face on the [ultrasound] ...because she said she knew exactly what I was going to look like before I was born. So she said once she saw my little face on the screen she said she just fell in love.* And it seems, at least to Camille, that her mother's love is unconditional:

Camille: Because I love my mom to death even though we argue and all that good stuff I still love my mom. Because she could have gave up on me a long time ago, because I was a bad child, very bad; I was very bad. But she didn't give up, she kept trying.

Although she desires to quit her local traditional high school, she remains enrolled to keep her mother happy.

Sonia: Because of her size, I first mistook Sonia as the leader of the Sistergirls, but she is second-in-command. Where Camille is the soul of the Sistergirls, Sonia is the body. At just under six feet tall and broad bodied, she towers above most males and females her age. She has a caramel complexion, blemished only by spots of acne scars, large brown eyes, and full lips making her look older than she is. Her hair is light brown, short, and although she could do it herself, she often seeks the help of other Sistergirls in brushing it and putting it up in a small ponytail. All of Sonia's clothes are too small, from t-shirts showing a large portion of her mid-drift to unbuttoned, unzipped, high-waisted jeans, to tennis shoes that she wears like sandals, with the back heels pressed down. Sonia is about four months pregnant when I first meet her, and I'm unsure if her clothing is a function of her growing body or her general condition. Although pregnant, she still presents an intimidating presence and never backs down from physical challenges or threats from anyone at the Drop-In.

Sonia has an infectious personality, and a snarky sense of humor. She has been arrested several times for selling drugs and physical assault, and is currently serving probation and doing community service. At 17 years old, she enjoys the usual social media outlets, and still appreciates the simplicity of Saturday morning cartoons. Sonia came out as a lesbian to the other Sistergirls during my study, and they responded with

“Duh. We already knew that.” She recently stopped smoking marijuana so that she will not be at risk for losing her newborn baby, but she continues smoking cigarettes in order to, as she puts it, *“keep a lid on my stress”*. She is the only participant in my study to object to being interviewed in a private space, choosing instead to talk with me in the living room unrecorded. When I asked why, she responded, *“I want you to have to work for this interview. I’m worth it though. I’m worth all of the work.”*

Sonia has experienced chronic homelessness; she cannot remember the last time she had a stable home. While Camille is explicit with her abuse history, Sonia is more vague, only telling me that her family life was plagued with drugs and abuse, and she shares, *“It just got to where I would rather be on the streets at the hands of strangers maybe than be with the people who called themselves my family.”* She is a high school drop-out and cannot remember the last time she set foot in school; she is unable to recall any specifics about her high school classes or teachers. She is currently staying with Camille, sleeping on her living room couch. She disappears from Empower and Camille’s house a week before her baby is due to be born, sending the Empower staff and youth into a worried frenzy looking for her. Her whereabouts remained unknown for days until she called Empower, alerting everyone that she had given birth to a baby boy in the local hospital.

Amber: The next Sistergirl, Amber, is a constant presence at the Drop-In; she is there when it opens, and she remains until it closes. Similar in physical stature to Camille, Amber is a couple inches taller and thinner. She has unblemished dark brown skin, short black hair that is curled in the same way every day, and she wears thin rimmed glasses. Amber is quieter and has a sweeter, more open and trusting disposition than Camille and

Sonia. She was the first young person to welcome me to Empower, and she often asked how I was doing or if I needed anything to be more comfortable. That disposition followed her everywhere in the Drop-In. She could often be seen vacuuming the common areas, moving furniture for guest speakers, or helping in the kitchen. Although similar issues brought her to Empower, she smiles and laughs easily and loudly, actively participating in every workshop or task the Empower staff initiates.

If Camille is the soul and Sonia is the body, then Amber is the mind of the Sistergirls. She is enrolled in one of the most academically challenging high schools in the region and is a high achieving Advanced Placement student. It is the end of her sophomore year and she has finished all of her required math and science credits. Although she is highly accomplished in the classroom, she has few friends outside of the Empower Drop-In.

SR: Is it tough being a teen?

Amber: Yes.

SR: What's it like, being a teenager in 2013?

Amber: I don't know. I have no life.

SR: You have no life?

Amber: I'm kidding. I don't know. It's hard, but it's not hard because you have a lot of technology, but it's hard because you have a lot of technology.

SR: What do you mean by that?

Amber: People think that because you have technology that things are so much easier, but even now, it's odd - I don't know how to do that... It's hard being a teen because people always depend on social media and stuff like that now, and it's 2013. Ain't no way around it. I don't want to say I like

being poor, but I like how I was brought up because I'm not like all these other kids out here.

Amber lives in the in-between. She attends a great school that expects her to have the same resources as her classmates, but she owns no computer, has limited access to internet, and her housing instability makes doing homework difficult. She does not socialize with her school peers outside of the Monday through Friday classroom time. While Amber considers herself an outsider among her more economically privileged school peers, she feels at home while inside the Drop-In.

Amber stands out among the other Sistergirls because she doesn't engage in drug activity, has never been in a fight, and has no experience in the juvenile justice system. She is one of the leaders, however, because she is a dependable, trusting friend to the other Sistergirls, and she happily assists them with social service paperwork and filling out job applications as needed. Camille is her protector, often running to her side when Homeboys or other young men argue with her. As Camille puts it, *"Amber is my sistergirl—come at her, you come at me"*. Like other homeless youth who frequent the Drop-In, Amber's class position is visible through her clothing—she repeats her clothing day to day, her off-brand jeans are too short for her growing body and her shirts are often stained from the day before. She has encountered sporadic periods of homelessness, always alongside of her mother, but at the time of this study she is in a stable housing arrangement.

Sistergirl Aspirations

It is a quiet day at the Drop-In center. The center recently opened for the day, young people are hanging out downstairs, there are no planned activities from the staff tonight, and dinner is still cooking. Raye comes downstairs and walks over to me. She

asks me my name again, and after I tell her she asks me if I can help her on the upstairs computer. I agree, not sure if the assistance she needs is something I can offer. Raye received permission from Emilia to use the upstairs desktop to type a resume and apply for a job. I help her find her drafted resume on her flash drive, and after she pulls up the document I realize the resume is not hers. I ask her who it is for. She replies, *“My boyfriend. He lost his job and has been really depressed lately. I’m trying to help him get his resume out there and everything, you know, just trying to help”*. I sit beside her, and for the next two hours we edit the resume and upload it to the job sites for three local companies that are hiring. Once finished, I asked her if she wanted to apply for the jobs as well. She replied, *“Well, I’m working at [the fast food joint] and [the other fast food joint], so I’m okay with jobs for now.”* When I ask her what job would be ideal, she tells me, *“You know, at some point I would love an office job or doing social work. But for now this will have to do.”* I found this situation saddening—Raye cared about her boyfriend, and she was willing to help him in ways that she failed to help herself. I could only wonder if Raye had the type of person in her life who looked out for her best interests in the same way that she did for her significant other, how could that potentially better her financial well-being and, ultimately, her life chances and happiness?

Raye is also a member of the Sistergirls. Her visits to the Drop-In were more sporadic because of her two jobs and taking care of her small child. As such, I was unable to interview her formally, and it took longer for us to develop a trusting relationship. Raye graduated high school the year before I met her and is working the same jobs she had when she was in school. Her career aspirations, however, are similar to all the other Sistergirls. The majority of them desired to make a living in the “helping professions”,

such as nursing, social work, and counseling. Dana, Laura, and Patience aspire to be nurses; Megan wants to be a social worker to help other youth in difficult life situations.

Gabbie desires to be a counselor or psychologist. She shares her life goal with me:

Gabbie: I want to help people like me who have disorders, I want to stand up and let them know, "Hey, yeah, we're different. Yeah, you may have ADHD, dyslexia, or whatever. It's hard but it's never impossible. We have a right to be on this earth the same way everybody else does that does not have our disorder. We have a right to stand up and fight back.

God put us on this earth for a reason, so let's take advantage of that in the right way. Show them just because we take medicine, just because we have a disorder and we can't comprehend everything does not mean we cannot make a change in this world.

Like her friends, Gabbie has been profoundly impacted by the events and mental health diagnoses in her personal life, and she translates those events into potential occupational careers. Camille aspires to be a chef, having taken the most electives in culinary arts during her tenure in the comprehensive high school.

Amber, the one Sistergirl on track to attend a 4-year university directly out of high school aspires to be an athletic trainer for a major league sporting team. Her school has an apprenticeship course program in athletic training, and she has been promised—twice as of the time of this research—that she is next on the list to enroll in the class. I also ask her where she sees herself in 5 or 10 years and she replies, *“Oh, man, I think I’m gonna be living the life, you know. I want to be athletic trainer for a NFL or NBA team, something like that. Traveling with them, making bank and just living my life.”* I ask her where she got the idea to be an athletic trainer and she says, *“From that movie with Queen Latifah where she plays the athletic trainer, I think it’s called ‘Just Wright’.* I

didn't think people like her existed before seeing that movie." Amber's aspirations are realistic given her educational accomplishments and future potential. Although she is not athletic and plays no organized sports, she loves sports and likes to spend time at live sporting events.

The two Sistergirls not attending a formal educational institution, Sonia and Kim, also have career aspirations; however, theirs are significantly different from the other Sistergirls. Kim bounces around in her career answers; she wants to be a caricature cartoonist, working in booths during fairs and carnivals. She also likes fashion design, as she makes a lot of her clothing, or she will be a writer, a skill she says she gets from her father. Sonia is even less specific.

SR: What do you want to do for a living?

Sonia: I don't know. Anything.

SR: Anything? I don't believe that. I think you are pickier than that.

Sonia: I am but...I guess I want to do anything that gives me enough money to live. I want a house, a car, be able to take care of my family. So whatever job gives me that. That's what I'll do.

It seems as if Kim and Sonia "see" or acknowledge the limitations in their occupational opportunities due to their lack of educational credentials. As a result, they have the least defined, and perhaps the lowest aspirations and expectations of the group.

Outside of Kim and Sonia, the Sistergirls all have similar aspirations to obtain a middle-class helping profession. These are not lofty dreams; I know of no millionaire case manager or nurse practitioner. When I ask the Sistergirls how they plan to achieve their ambitions, they offer two responses: "*hard work*", and "*more education*". The

Sistergirls acknowledge that they must gain additional credentials in order to obtain nursing, social work, or counseling jobs. They accept the dominant achievement ideology—to be successful takes hard work and doing well in educational settings. Unfortunately, most of them are unaware of how to get from where they currently are—working fast food or low-wage customer service jobs—to four-year degree institutions.

Part I Conclusion

The Sistergirls are a diverse group of young Black-identifying women. Their backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations are varied. Unlike the Homeboys, they do not share a common fashion or speech, and they all aspire to have different occupations. What binds them as a group is their shared racial and gender identity, a strong sense of loyalty to each other, and a fervent desire to escape their current economic and social positions through the dominant ideology—hard work and higher education. Even Sonia desires to return to the classroom at some point. She mentions during our conversation on the Drop-In couch, *“I want to graduate school, you know, if only to one day show my son that this is what you do and you can do it no matter what.”* The educational statuses of the three leaders are illustrative of the educational statuses of all of the Sistergirls. Amber is succeeding against all odds, Camille is hanging onto formal schooling by a thread, and Sonia, unfortunately, has fully disengaged. Part II of this chapter details some of the reasons why their experiences in schools are so varied and how, even with this variation, their current situations are similar.

Part II:

Educational Experiences and Occupational Aspirations

It's a celebratory day at Empower's Drop-In. There is a large sheet cake and juice boxes on the communal table. The cake is covered in white frosting and yellow writing that reads "Congratulations Graduates". All the young clients and staff gather in the living room as Emilia announces the new high school and GED graduates for the semester. There are three graduates—and one of them is Sistergirl Laura. She steps forward when her name is called and everyone applauds her accomplishment. I offer my congratulations to her later that afternoon in the back room near the kitchen. She thanks me, then responds "*It's exciting, I'm really proud of myself. Not that anything changes, you know. But I'm still very proud of me. I am.*" It was Laura's caveat of "*Not that anything changes*" that caught me by surprise. I always thought that it is at this milestone, this rite of passage from adolescence to young adulthood that almost *everything* changed. Why was this not the case for Laura, and how did she become acutely aware of this actuality?

The remainder of this chapter discusses the educational experiences and occupational aspirations of the Sistergirls and sheds light on the answer(s) to this question. While I focus primarily on the leaders of the Sistergirls for many of the following examples, I also include examples and adages from others where necessary and pertinent in order to illustrate, once again, that these experiences were common for several group members and not emblematic of one or two isolated experiences.

The Sistergirls and an Absence of Care

One educational experience common across all the Sistergirls is an absence of care inside the school walls, from peers and from school employees. All of the Sistergirls have trouble making friends and have to deal with bullying from peers. Camille was bullied and picked on because of her physical appearance:

Camille: I didn't have a lot of friends because people made fun of me because I was dark and stuff like that; so they made fun of me because I was dark. Then they used to tease me about my hair, because my hair was really long and they said I had weave in my hair and stuff like that.

The White students at Gabbie's school used derogatory racial terms to bully her:

SR: What do people do to make you so angry?

Gabbie: It's constantly, "You're a nigger" or "You're an Oreo" or "You're... whatever you wanna call me. I am mixed, I am crazy, but at the end of the day, I'm smart and I will be your best friend because I'm not gonna change because of two or three people.

The males at Laura's school bullied her based on gendered and racial stereotypes:

Laura: Well, you know there's always stereotypes...like [the boys] call all of us young Black females hood rats, we don't care about nothing. We just like attention. Those are stereotypes. But how is it?

It's like - we have them stereotypes placed to us 'cause we in here, that's how people think of us. Even from outsiders, that's how they think of us. But what I like about me is I'm not that. I'm different. I do go to school, I do work. I like that about me. I like being different.

Laura's statement is especially poignant because she links her verbal assaults and bullying to being “in here”, which is Empower's Drop In and temporary shelter. Students at her school, particularly the boys, think of her and the other Sistergirls in stereotyped, negative ways because they are Empower clients—which signifies something specific

about race, gender, and class; indeed, “hood rat” is a disparaging term that is often used to describe women of color who are promiscuous (Eyre, Nelson, dal Santo, & Tran, 2012). While bullying is common in secondary schools (indeed, research shows that bullying is a prevalent problem in schools; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Chapell, et al., 2005), the bullying the Sistergirls encounter is at times directly linked to their identities as homeless Black women, and the verbal assaults may contribute to a lack of belonging and connection to the school itself.

These examples of unkind or uncaring relationships extend beyond peer relationships to include teachers. Laura explains how she felt sitting in most of her classrooms:

SR: Let's talk about the statement you said, you don't really like teachers face-to-face.

Laura: Yes.

SR: Why not?

Laura: I feel like 'cause there's a lot of students in the classroom, so I never could - they just be so busy. I don't have to worry about other kids and they be drained out. So, when I want to ask a question or something, it be harder and stuff like that. I really can't learn face-to-face. It just gets boring. It does. It gets boring.

SR: Did you feel like you weren't getting one-on-one attention? Or did you feel like you were bothering them in asking questions?

Laura: I hate to say it, but yeah, I do feel like I was bothering them.

To be academically successful, Laura needed additional support. She asked a lot of questions in class, and she told me that teachers acted like she needed too much attention. Interestingly, Laura also shared with me that she understood where the teachers were

coming from—*“they have a lot of students and can’t spend all their time on me”*. Laura left her comprehensive high school where she felt like the teachers were bothered by her questions to attend Jasper High Alternative, where she still needed more assistance than the teachers could offer. She finally graduated from KSI where she had no teachers and could repeat computer modules over and over to understand the material. I asked her who was her favorite teacher throughout high school and she hesitates for some time. She finally mentions *“Mr. Rosen at Jasper High. He let me stay after school to get help. He interacted with me.”*

Amber, although academically talented and having a different experience than the other Sistergirls, has trouble providing me with the name of a favorite teacher as well. She shares, *“I walk into any accelerated class and the teacher - I was the only sophomore in there and I was the only Black kid in there. So, she was like, ‘Are you sure you’re in the right class?’ I’m, like “Yeah, I am’.”* For Amber, having to constantly prove her belonging in upper-level courses may have contributed to a lack of belonging. I asked Amber if she thought her teachers cared about her. She replied, *“No, not really. But that’s not what they are being paid to do.”*

These negative classroom experiences, as detailed by the Sistergirls, range from somewhat indeterminate occurrences and comments, like the previous examples from Amber and Laura, to more callous and racialized remarks. For instance, Camille shares an illustration of the types of comments her history teacher made to her:

Camille: Yeah, plus I’m really into Black History so when I go to Alabama I like to go to the museums and stuff that they’ve got down there and the house that Dr. Martin Luther King grew up in. I really like Black History.

SR: Why do you like Black History?

Camille: I don't know it's just...I like to know what really happened instead of...when I was in eighth grade I had a history class, and my teacher would not teach us about Black History. He told me, because I asked him when we were going to learn about Black History he told me to go home and ask my mammy; that's what he told me.

Camille says that the “mammy” comments were common; the teacher would hear other students call her “darkie” and “pickaninny” and he would do nothing. The racially charged atmosphere in the classroom got so bad that her disabled mother had to come to the school for a conference. No changes came out of the conference, however. Camille maintains that the treatment continued and that, as a result of how she felt when she was in that class she started skipping it, ultimately failing the course.

Although Camille continues to persist in KSI, even by the smallest of margins, other Sistergirls quit as a result of the uncaring atmosphere. Sonia dropped out of school after beginning 9th grade. She has difficulty remembering her experiences, or felt uncomfortable sharing them with me, but she does offer a reason for disengaging:

Sonia: I quit because there was nothing there for me. The teachers acted like they didn't care whether I was there or not. Or like I was bothering them by being in the room. They always had something smart to say. And I had problems at home with my family, so I just did everybody a favor and left.

Although she had been looking at me in my eyes during our interview, answering my questions while making jokes and laughing, she looked off into space as she shared this with me. She did not smile; she did not make a joke, which is her usual coping mechanism when uncomfortable. For Sonia, quitting school was some sort of act of kindness for her teachers, who perhaps gave her the impression that her personal

problems were too big for the classroom. Empower staff member Faith offers more information into Sonia's school experiences:

SR: Do you know why Sonia quit school?

Faith: Oh, yes. Well, at least I think I do. She was having a lot of trouble at home, and was in and out of the house, on the streets. So, she had an IEP and is labeled as learning disabled and all that, and you know how sometimes teachers take students under their wing? No one did that for Sonia. I don't think she had anyone to go to the IEP meetings with her. She was really struggling to keep up with her work. Put that on top of not having clean clothes to wear, nothing to eat. It was just too much for her I think. And now that she's pregnant I'm not sure she will ever go back. I hope she does, she is very smart but I just don't know.

For Sonia, who did enjoy school and believes that educational credentialing is a ladder out of poverty, quitting school was a sad last resort. While it is not fair to place significant responsibility for Sonia's academic resignation on Sonia's teachers, as their perspectives are not represented in this study, it is appropriate to charge that none of her teachers took on the extra responsibility to be her advocate or her sponsor. Sonia quit school for several reasons outside of the control or purview of school officials, but she also quit because she failed to find care within its walls. It is clear that, at least for the Sistergirls in this study, a sense of personal connection to teachers and others in school maybe essential for the development and maintenance of academic motivation and completion.

Future Occupations

The Sistergirls' career aspirations are tightly linked to their career expectations. None of them aspired to be surgeons, engineers, or financial advisors—careers that would need substantial educational preparation and resources. They all desire to work in helping

professions. Given the lack of care in the educational experiences of the Sistergirls, it is no surprise that none of them wanted to pursue careers in the educational sector. They aspire to be nurses, social workers, careers that they are familiar with and realistic ones—they see African American female nurses when they visit the free community clinic, they interact with African American female social workers on a regular basis. Even Amber, who has the academic potential to pursue any occupation, draws vocational inspiration from an African American female (Queen Latifah) acting in a Hollywood movie. Like Sonia and Kim, it may be that all of the Sistergirls witness the limitations they face in the availability of viable career opportunities due to their social class, race, and gender. They, like the Homeboys, mimic the people in their lives that have found economic success and life stability.

In addition to aspiring to the helping professions, the Sistergirls are also overt when it comes to economic mobility and having careers that offer it. The Sistergirls also desire to “make bank” or “ball” and live a life of unrestrained financial freedom, but most of them think they can achieve this with the helping professions and other careers to which they aspire. While the Homeboys speak of nice cars, expensive clothes, private planes for exotic travel, the Sistergirls speak of having traditionally middle class jobs, a stable home, and family. I ask all of them the same question and receive similar responses from all:

SR: Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?

Camille: I don't know. You know, ballin', having a job, nice car, house, family. That's it.

Dana: I see myself having a job, being a nurse somewhere with elderly people. Having a house, car, my daughter taken care of, you know, just ballin' hopefully.

Laura: I think I'll be a nurse. I think I'll achieve that. And be happy with a nice house, a family, a nice car, you know, the normal stuff.

Gabbie: Oh, man, I'm be ballin' I think. I'll have a house, all of that.

The Sistergirls, like their Homeboy peers, also desire to “ball”, but the term means very different things to them. Theirs is a moderated “ballin”, one that is steeped in economic stability, not material excess.

The Sistergirls Future: A Reconciled Ideology

The Sistergirls believe in the achievement ideology and they all have a meritocratic orientation. They consider hard work and higher education the path to upward mobility and economic stability, hence their occupational ambitions. Higher education is inextricably linked to a better life for these young women who are experiencing great poverty and housing instability:

Patience: You know, always like since I was young, I usually like always wanted, you know, something nice which mean great education, better life, good job because in my home town, you know, it's like where I'm from, it's really hard.

Well, here if you have your dream and you work hard, you can benefit of all that stuff. You can, like, at least in the head say oh my god I didn't like work for nothing. I got something. That's really the only thing I really, really like here. It's fair actually. You don't work for like - if you work hard, you got something. If you don't, call you lazy, you don't got anything.

But like when you have your education you get respect. They give you more respect. And then you become an important person in the world. Not in the world, but like you become an important person, you know.

For Patience, education meant respect, and that respect meant you become an important person in the world. We see once again how being “*an important person in the world*” is inextricably connected to not just who they are as young people navigating the world, but what they do insofar as educational credentialing and livelihoods.

Unlike the Homeboys, who subscribe to a “hustle and flow” ideology, the majority of the Sistergirls work within the confines of the established mobility system in an effort to find economic success and stability. Graduating high school is, according to Megan, “*the first thing you’re supposed to do in life*”. They work hard for this accolade, and their aspirations and expectations are to continue their formal education until they reach their desired careers—mostly helping professions of nursing, counseling, and social work. Unfortunately, these realistic careers are still far outside of the grasp of most of the young women because they still, by and large, require higher education training. Laura graduates high school and works two jobs at fast food restaurants as she figures out the next move to her nursing dream. Patience works two jobs in the service sector as she deciphers local community college bulletins in an effort to “*figure out what I have to do to enroll and get money and major in nursing.*” Dana works as a ward assistant in a convalescent home while saving money for community college courses in nursing. Even Camille, who is settling for a career as a cook because of her culinary arts experience, does not believe scholarship money or financial aid is available to anyone who fails to graduate from a traditional comprehensive high school.

Beneath it all, the Sistergirls seem to know that their ambitions are tempered by their social class and the traditional options open to women of color. The Sistergirls are working steadily to make their aspirations come true, and indeed they think their dreams

will eventually come true. They work, sometimes two jobs, in order to save money for community college and university. They attend all of Empower's educational workshops—indeed, when I ask Faith who attends most of their educational functions, she replies, "*The girls, they are always here.*" The Sistergirls are going at this alone—they have no parental guidance, no adult advocates, and other than Amber, no invested teacher who is working along their side to make sure they can navigate the terrain of higher education and its financial hurdles. The assistance they receive at Empower is dedicated to more of their immediate needs—food, shelter, clothing—and little of what they receive outside of that caters to their future ambitions.

The Sistergirls' hard work is what the achievement ideology is all about—if you work hard and achieve then you will be rewarded for it. However, even with their meritocratic orientation, they seem to work and situate themselves and their ambitions within the constraints of a class, race, and gender-based divisive educational and economic system. Perhaps this is because they have done the math—if their current economic condition continues, it will take them more than a decade to save enough money for nursing college, attend, and graduate. This is time most of them do not have to improve their living conditions and gain some sense of housing stability. Their once realistic and achievable career ambitions seem more and more out of reach and they reconcile to continue having these confined dreams, working hard despite the odds against them.

At the beginning of this part of the chapter I quoted Laura who, after graduating from high school was proud of herself but she noted "*Not that anything changes*". Given her experiences in schools and the difficulties in her personal life, it is clear why, for her,

she sees no difference between the day before and the day after graduation. She is not matriculating into an institution of higher education; she is not apprenticing as a nurse's assistant. She maintains the two jobs she had before and although she now has an important educational credential, she receives no wage increase from her bosses and her social class remains the same. Laura knows that to make her ambition of being a nurse come true, she will have to do more of the same—work hard, even if very little comes of it. For her and the other young Black women of color, what other viable options do they see and perhaps as a direct result, choices do they have?

Conclusion

This chapter introduced and detailed the lives, educational experiences, and occupational aspirations of the Sistergirls. They, like the Homeboys in the previous chapter, have faced tremendous adversity and while they also have some suicide ideation, they manage to persevere. Their path out of poverty and housing instability includes the attainment of traditional middle-class jobs, particularly jobs that are not new to Black women. However, the journey to attain these jobs is still difficult for the Sistergirls because of their social class positioning and the lack of adult guidance.

Chapter 6

The EmoCores

Introduction

It is about 5:30 on a Thursday afternoon, dinner time at the Empower Drop-In. The noise level and amount of movement in the house greatly increases as the youth gather their plates of food and pour their glasses of water. I move to the back room to make space for the dinner rush, and I notice two young people in the reading corner. A young White female, Roxy, is sitting on the lap of a young White male, Eddie. Roxy is in tears—her mascara runs, leaving black streaks down her cheeks. She cries out, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do!” Eddie holds his head in his right hand, his left hand holding Roxy close to his body. He has tears in his eyes as well, and neither of them act as though they care that I am witnessing this tender moment. The other young adults walk past these two; they talk to each other and eat their food as though the emotionally distraught pair are not in the room. I leave the room and ask Faith if she needs to intervene and check in on the two upset teens. She laughs and replies, “Those two? No, that’s a drama that happens frequently. Let’s just say we are used to them being really emotional.” Faith was right on this point. Over the next year I would witness the same scene play out several times in the same way—Roxy and Eddie enter Empower, escape to the same back corner and allow the catharsis to flow. These particular young people had a reputation for showing their feelings and unpredictable emotional outbursts. They refer to themselves as the EmoCores—short for emotionally hardcore.

This chapter, similar to the last two, is divided into two parts. Part I of this chapter focuses on the description of the EmoCores, specifically background demographics and the culture of the group. I also include background information, including how the EmoCores came to be clients of Empower. Lastly, I provide rich descriptions of the two leaders of the EmoCores—Eddie and Roxy. The EmoCores are a small subgroup of teens (4 total members) and there is less variation within the group to describe and explain. I rely heavily on accounts from Eddie and Roxy, as I have the most primary data from them (formal interviews and observations). I also wait to detail much of the information about them, such as their educational and occupational aspirations until Part II. Part II focuses on the educational experiences, achievement ideology, and occupational aspirations of the EmoCores. The information shared in both parts of this chapter is intended to 1) present a comprehensive description of who these young people are, and 2) form the foundation for the next chapter, which takes up how their life chances are influenced by institutions (schools and Empower).

Basic Demographics

The EmoCores is the smallest clique of youth who attend Empower. There are 4 total EmoCores that I met during this study. There are two males and two females in the group. I formally interviewed the two leaders of this group—Eddie and Roxy. Eddie seemed particularly forthcoming with me, most likely because I was a different type of representation inside the Drop-In—one of a university representative. I have a preponderance of data from these two participants. I informally interviewed the other two EmoCore members—Skylar and Lucas, as time and monetary resources were expended before we could schedule a time to talk privately. Eddie is the oldest at 17; Roxy and

Lucas are 16, and Skylar is 15 years old. All of the EmoCores identify racially as White—although Roxy adds that her race is made up of Hungarian, Irish, German, and British ancestry. While there are no EmoCores who identify as racial or ethnic minorities, identifying as White is not an explicit statute of the group.

Emo Culture

When I asked Eddie to describe himself and his group of friends, he responded, “*We are emo I guess. But like, hardcore, so like, we are like emocores, but we aren’t really. You know what I mean?*” I had to admit to Eddie that no, I did not know what he meant, and I had no idea what he was speaking of in terms of emocore. That moment began my lesson into a unique subculture that belongs almost exclusively to adolescents (indeed, one scholar noted that in all the years he researched emo subculture, he never met an adult emo; Peters, 2010). Before I detail the subculture of the EmoCores in this study in particular, it is important to discuss the larger societal Emo culture because the EmoCores of Empower emulate much of it.

The Larger Emo Culture: Emo is an abbreviation of the terms “emotional hardcore” or “emocore” (Phillipov, 2009). Writers (academic scholars and music-based journalists) agree that the subculture rose in the 1980’s as a melodic subgenre of punk rock music—“a combination of punk, skate, and what was once deemed alternative youth subculture aesthetics” (Peters, 2010). However, the historical beginning is where consensus ends. There is no one clear definition of emo. Indeed, a succinct description of emo is difficult to pin down and scholars describe the subculture in many different ways. In his book *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo,*” Andy Greenwald states:

Emo means different things to different people. Actually, that's a massive understatement. Emo seems *solely* to mean different things to different people—like pig latin or books by Thomas Pynchon, confusion is one of its hallmark traits... It's been the next big thing twice, the current big thing once, and so totally over millions of times. And yet, not only can no one agree on what it means, there is not now, nor has there ever been, a single major band that admits to being emo. Not one. That's pretty impressive. And contentious. And ridiculous. Good thing too—because so is emo (2003, p.1, emphasis in original).

In his study of youth who subscribe to emo culture, Greenwald finds great inconsistency in what constitutes emo and a preposterous tendency for those in the middle of it to deny its existence. Just as Eddie described to me earlier, he and his friends are emo, but at the same time they are not; to subscribe to the culture in such an obvious, unconcealed way is, in essence, anti-emo.

Although there is no consistent definition of Emo, there are some constant variables that mark or identify the subculture—specifically music, behavior, and clothing. Emerging after the punk rock surge of the early 1980's, emo music strays from the hardcore punk music that was notable for the subject matters of politics, anger, and “smashing stuff up” (Greenwald, 2003, p. 2). The genre is overwhelmingly male⁸, with band names ranging from “My Chemical Romance”, “Panic at the Disco”, and, one of the favorite bands of the EmoCores according to Roxy and Skylar, “Dashboard Confessional”. The music is melodic, usually guitar based, and is characterized by emotional lyrics. For example, the following lyrics come from the “Dashboard Confessional” song *Saints and Sailors*:

This is where I say I've had enough
No one should ever feel the way that I feel now
A walking open wound
A trophy display of bruises

⁸ Indeed, the first emo bands to surface in the 1980's and early 1990's were exclusively male. There are a few contemporary emo bands who have female members, such as “Paramore”, “Hey Monday”, and “Black Veil Brides”.

And I don't believe that I'm getting any better
Any better

Teens like Roxy and Skylar connect with these lyrics and the bands that sing them because of their vulnerability and emotional exposure. In some way, the words speak to their lives (or perhaps, their imagined lives). Unlike its hardcore rock predecessors, emo music focuses on emotions, putting feelings in the public sphere for all to see and consume. Critics of the genre, however, accuse the music of being inauthentic and emotionally indulgent with a “whiny sound” (Aslaksen, 2006; Greenwald, 2003).

Emo is a musical genre, but it is also a performative culture that relies on consistent ways of acting or behavior. Kettemann (2011) describes Emo as "a label applied to an alternative youth culture characterized by introversion and withdrawal from an outside (adult) world perceived as unsympathetic, misunderstanding and demanding, with a concomitant emphasis on negative and depressive moods and suicidal ideals” (p. 47). This emotionality matches the anecdote at the beginning of this chapter with the two teens displaying overwhelming feelings, depressive moods and emotional withdrawal from others. Indeed, the majority of the research that has been conducted on emo culture is concerned with depression, suicide, self-injury, and social isolation (Simon & Kelley, 2007; Strauss, 2012; Zdanow & Wright, 2013; Scott & Chur-Hansen, 2008; Phillipov, 2009).

In addition to specific behavior, people who adhere to emo culture also dress in similar ways. The subculture clothing includes skinny jeans, black makeup, and long hair. Peters (2010) describes emo boys as being like, “the mods of the millennium: black hair, sweeping, dramatic bangs; heavy eyeliner, and tailored clothing. They are post-1980s androgynous young men, like skater boys with more fashion-forward style, like

hyperstylized almost-punkers (p. 129). The author goes on to say, “The emo look is also White, or at times vaguely Asian, laden with kittenish features, stick straight and dark hair, and milk white skin. Emo, like punk, embodies a White bias.” This may be why there are no young people of color in the EmoCores of Empower.

The emo subculture is inclusive of both genders, and it also encourages alternative or non-binary gender expressions. Writers describe emo dress as androgynous, with the boys wearing similar or the same clothing as their girl counterparts: “When it comes to jeans, the same rules apply to emo guys and girls. You shop in the same department, so it shouldn’t come as a such as shock...Not Acceptable...anything with the words ‘loose’ and ‘fit’ in the description” (Simon & Kelley, 2007, p. 49). This unique display of fashion—in both dress and facial makeup—separates the emo adolescent subculture from other adolescent subcultures that signify teen angst and coming of age.

The Emos of Empower: All of the previous descriptive information—the music, behavior, and dress of the larger emo culture is emulated by the EmoCores of Empower. They, like the Homeboys and Sistergirls, have shared musical taste, behavior, and dress that differentiate them from other youth who attend the Drop-In. These three tenets bound them as a distinct subgroup. In regards to music, all of the members of the EmoCores subscribe to a music-based skill. Each member either plays an instrument, attempts to play a musical instrument, or sing.

The larger culture of emo behavior is also mimicked by the EmoCores. While some researchers have marked emo with depressive characteristics (Schmitt, 2011), I characterize the EmoCores as more melodramatic in their public expressions. Depression is a physical and mental manifestation of psychological health. For example, a depressed

person may feel hopeless and helpless, while also experiencing sleep problems or have trouble eating. The EmoCores are different. All of their emotions are exaggerated; happiness is extreme happiness, and sadness is extreme sadness. They feel everything *hardcore*, not because of a chemical imbalance, but because it is expected and rewarded within their group of like-minded peers. None of their feelings or hyper-emotions seem to have physical repercussions (at least from the outside looking in or through my inquiries with them). This isn't to say that the EmoCores have no depressive symptoms or are not clinically depressed, but that depression is not a subculture tenet to which they all subscribe. They all, however, subscribe to expressing every feeling they have in amplified ways.

Finally, the EmoCores dress in similar ways to the larger emo culture and to each other. Every member wears worn Vans, DC shoes, or black combat boots, all of which look oversized and too large for their teenage feet. They wear tight, skinny jeans, although the brand of the jeans may differ. The only requirement of the jean is that they are tight. The jeans are not only tight—they are short. The bottom hem rises above the ankle and the opening is tapered, making it seem difficult for the youth to put them on. In addition to the jeans, the EmoCores wear t-shirts that are often slightly torn, slightly ragged, or have large safety pins holding a small hole together. These t-shirts range from plain colored gray or black (never bright colors, like red or yellow) to thrift-shop finds with band logos and pictures (e.g., the bands Nirvana and Chicago). Jewelry is a necessary accessory, with all of the youth wearing studded bracelets, nose and eyebrow piercings, or a group of silver chains hanging from their pants. All of the EmoCores wear black eyeliner and at times, gray, green, or blue eye shadow.

These three tenets of EmoCore culture, particularly the dress, separate them from the other youth who frequent Empower. Other young people, particularly White teens who visit Empower, also wear jeans that are too tight and overly worn t-shirts, but their clothing choices are a result of their socioeconomic and homeless status; these young people visit the clothing pantry at Empower often to acquire new t-shirts or pants. The EmoCores are consciously choosing these worn clothes, and spending time and money on the way they look, in order to adhere to the dress standards of the larger emo culture. Indeed, the outfits with the added accessories of studded bracelets, chains, and piercings make it appear as if the EmoCores spend a great deal of time and resources on their appearance in order to make it appear as if they care nothing about their appearance.

From Home to the Streets

Unlike the majority of the Homeboys or Sistergirls, three of the EmoCores, all but Roxy, have spent their periods of homelessness with their families. Roxy has lived with her mother in the same house for 5 years and came to Empower for different reasons. Lucas couch surfs with his immediate family, spending their nights with extended family members that can accommodate them. According to Empower staff, Eddie and Skylar have spent the majority of their adolescence in short-term apartments and local motels, moving frequently due to their family's financial difficulties.

While none of the EmoCores have spent extended time alone on the streets, this is not to say they have been spared from periods of abuse and neglect. I asked Roxy what her family life was like during our interview:

Roxy: My mom's in the position of remarrying right now. I don't like the guy.

SR: No? Why not?

Roxy: They've been having problems. Three months ago, I think, before school was out, he almost sent her to jail. She was sent to the hospital 'cause she tried to OD [overdose]. She became an alcoholic, but she's recovering now.

A situation similar to the episode above is how Roxy came to be a client of Empower. The organization stepped in on several different occasions in the past couple of years when Roxy's mom needed institutional assistance, the latest occurring when she was admitted to the hospital for her suicide attempt and substance addiction. Roxy stayed at Empower's temporary shelter for a few weeks until her mother was well enough to care for her again. The other EmoCores have similar familial issues—parents and guardians dealing with addiction or mental illness and, as a result, their housing is often precarious and the young people seek Empower's services to fill in the gaps.

Like other Empower youth, the EmoCores also wrestle with mental health issues. They live in the same neighborhoods, go to the same or similar schools, and come to Empower to obtain help for a litany of problems that begin at home. Roxy's depression is a result of living through several different bouts of violence in her family.

Roxy: My dad got murdered when I was really young, and so I guess I feel that if I get close to anybody, that'll happen. 'Cause my mom's love died, my sister's love died. I think it's a curse... There was a shooting over in Nico Park 10 years ago, and my sister's boyfriend got hit. She hasn't been the same since.

SR: So in response, you kept things to yourself?

Roxy: Yeah. I still keep things to myself like how I'm depressed, but I don't really let it show.

SR: Why not?

Roxy: I don't want people's sympathy. I understand that they want to help me, but there's really nothing they can do. My

mom's trying to make me see a psychiatrist or whatever, or a therapist.

SR: How do you feel about that?

Roxy: She's trying to help me in ways she can. I just don't want to see them because I don't want them to warp my brain. 'Cause I have all these thoughts about therapists, and they put you in a trance and they try to make you their special little minion.

Similar to other youth who frequent Empower, Roxy has lived through some traumatic events, and she is also weary of therapists because she fears they will “warp” her brain. As a result of her depression, Roxy has attempted suicide, and she is not the only EmoCore to attempt it. According to Faith, one of Empower’s case managers, Lucas has also attempted suicide due to clinical depression.

The 2 Leaders

The EmoCores are a small group of Empower clients, but they still have a leadership structure in place. Unlike the Homeboys and Sistergirls, who are all very different from each other in appearance and personality and are bound by their group membership, the EmoCores are similar in both arenas—they are all White, thin in body structure, wear similar clothing, and, of course, overly emotional at any given time. They are also bound to each other through their group membership.

Eddie: I met Eddie the first day of my observations at Empower. He is not shy, and readily introduced himself to me as I made my way through the Drop-In. Eddie is an average teenager in several ways: he is 17 years old, thin in body structure, and is about 5’7” in height. He has blue eyes, long straight brown hair that hangs past his shoulders, and a big easy smile. His face is littered with fresh pimples and small scars from past breakouts. Eddie’s usual dress includes acid-washed skinny jeans that, while very tight in

the legs, barely hug his small hips. He wears gray or black t-shirts with a gray or black short-sleeve button down layered on top. He has a black leather studded bracelet that he wears every day, as well as a silver skull ring on his wedding finger. He wears black eyeliner and mascara on most days. His mother refuses to grant approval for his much desired tattoos, so he anxiously awaits his 18th birthday so he can have the lyrics to one of the songs he has written scribed on his body. He plays the guitar and hopes to create a band that can perform in local clubs and venues. Given my time at Empower, it is unclear how Eddie came to be the leader of the EmoCores, but it is a position that seems to not be questioned by the other members. When he says it is time to leave the Drop-In, all the members get up and go—there is no discussion or resistance.

It has been years since Eddie attended a schooling institution. He was expelled from his middle school for plotting violence against the school:

SR: So why were you expelled at the end of eighth grade?

Eddie: I was expelled because me and a friend of mine had this notebook. And we were making...playing around making fun of a show called Death Note. And they took—we were just writing down outrageous things in there based from the show. And they took the notebook out of my locker and said that I was threatening the school. So they had me expelled. They actually had the police involved and everything. And the police actually said that they were gonna drop the charges without the school's permission 'cause that seemed unfit.

SR: So the school upheld its suspension or expulsion?

Eddie: Yeah, the police didn't do anything about the expulsion. So I was still gonna be expelled. But they said that the charges needed to be dropped 'cause for what I wrote in the notebook that couldn't even have been done. No matter how you tried to do it, it can't be done. So they were like this is completely pompous.

Realistic or not, the school refused to reinstate him due to the threats he and his friend made. His mother homeschooled him for a year, but stopped at the end of 9th grade for reasons unknown by Eddie. By all accounts he is a high school dropout, although he fails to see it that way:

SR: So you were homeschooled from almost like, basically tenth through twelfth?

Eddie: Yeah, pretty much.

SR: And then graduated through homeschool. Did you graduate through homeschool?

Eddie: Actually no 'cause my mom, for some reason, she just quit doing it. So technically I'd be considered a dropout. I'm not—I was gonna get my GED because every time I - I went on to KSI 'cause my mom wanted me to. And I went there. And when I was talking to them, they were telling me that I'd be better suited for the [online only] program. And that was what I wanted to do originally anyway.

Since his mother never filed the homeschooling paperwork to the state, Eddie technically never finished high school and is seeking options to receive his GED. Although he has spoken to administrators at KSI, he has yet to enroll in any institution. He hesitates to call himself a drop out for reasons that will be taken up in Part II of this chapter.

Finally, it is important to note that Eddie has some interesting viewpoints on people of various races and ethnicities that, because he is the leader and sets the tone for the group, infiltrate the entire EmoCore subculture of Empower (Roxy and Skylar often makes racialized comments, such as “she is so ghetto” when referring to some of the Sistergirls, but not sure if this is their viewpoint or what they have learned from Eddie). For example, Eddie makes sure I know that his expulsion from middle school was about more than his written threats:

Eddie: But another thing about that school was they were actually— they were all Middle Eastern, and they all did not like Americans. They were all basically one family. And I was already having problems with the principal's son 'cause he used to always try to talk crap to me and stuff like that. Basically try to be a bully. One day I slapped his son and started choking him up. 'Cause I just had enough. I just couldn't deal with it anymore. But that's when the principal started going AWOL, like every time, like I couldn't spit in a trashcan without the principal being right there. The principal would come into the classroom just to check on me. It's like you shouldn't even be worried about me like that.

The way Eddie sees it, his expulsion from middle school, was also about 1) the administration of the school not liking Americans and 2) the Middle Eastern staff and students being “basically one family”, so they looked for any reason to get rid of him because of his fight with the principal’s son. There were other periods where Eddie’s racialized viewpoint came to the surface of our conversations:

Fieldnotes, April 17: Tonight’s round table discussion is about the environment because Earth Day is coming up soon. The youth are definitely not interested—most of them are talking loudly to each other, a few others are listening to their headphones, and a couple Black boys get up and walk out of the Drop-In. Three of the Black girls start talking and laughing loudly, which does not seem to bother Faith, as she continues with the lesson on pollution and the problem with littering. I answer one of Faith’s questions—what is the most littered item on our nation’s streets? Cigarette butts. I’m not sure how I even knew the answer to that question... Eddie is sitting beside me tonight. He leans over and whispers to me, “I’d like to apologize for the rest of my peers here. They are just ignorant and don’t know any better. We’re not all like that”. I look around—he is the only White youth in the building tonight. Interesting choice of words he used—“ignorant”.

I replayed this scene in my head several times during my analysis. I was unmoved by the actions in the room—it appeared to be typical teenage behavior. What did I do or say that made Eddie feel that he needed to first, apologize for the behavior of the other young people in the room and second, differentiate himself from them in such striking terms?

As I got to know Eddie better, I found that the answer to both question rested within him, not with my actions. He would often use the term “ignorant” to describe his Drop-In peers. He says that the music scene brought him to Empower, and has kept him there, but that the so-called “rappers” are making it a bad place:

Eddie: 'Cause with the people that come to the Empower now, it's they're all just - I'm trying to say it without being disrespectful. They're ignorant and they undermine themselves.

SR: Well, why do you think they act like that?

Eddie: 'Cause they don't know what they wanna do with themselves 'cause I noticed a lot of people these days are all about I wanna do me. I wanna be me. You can't tell me what to do 'cause I'm me. And it's like just because you are you, that doesn't mean that you can do whatever you want. Everybody has guidelines. Everybody's supposed to have guidelines. And everybody should follow guidelines.

Doesn't have to be the greatest guideline of like—you don't have to follow the most strictest guideline ever. Just understand that you have a place and you need to stay in your place. And you can't keep trying to be ahead of yourself. Everybody's each at their own individual level. And everybody - well, a lot of people try to stay in their level and work through it. But them here, they just - they put themselves at a higher mantle than they will ever deserve.

Given the demographics of the young people who attend Empower’s Drop-In, particularly for the music workshops and events, it is clear who Eddie is talking about in terms of “they’re ignorant”. The majority of young people who attend the Drop-In are Black adolescents, and Eddie and the other EmoCores are always outnumbered. The musical events that drew Eddie to Empower have changed with the young people— hearing emo music is a rarity in the Drop-In and Eddie resents the absence of music he values. What is also worthy of note from this passage is Eddie’s insistence that

everybody should have and follow guidelines—I will return to his claim regarding guidelines, what others “deserve” and how his perspective is shaped and supported in the last section of this chapter.

Roxy: It took me weeks of observing in the Drop-In to get to know Roxy. She is a regular at Empower, and is there almost every day. If there were a stock picture of emo in the dictionary, it would be an image of Roxy. She is very thin and, although it is summer when I interview her, she has pale milk- white skin. Her hair is straight and dyed black, with two thin streaks of bright blue highlights on each side. One of her eyes is brown and the other blue, which she guesses is a result of her diverse European lineage, but more likely her “*angel side and demon side*”. Her long eye lashes are accentuated with black mascara, eyeliner, and light blue eye shadow. Like other emos, Roxy wears worn skinny jeans or tight denim miniskirts with black leggings underneath. Her usual tops range from layered tank tops to ragged *Hello Kitty* shirts. She has several visible piercings—two in each ear, one in her nose, one in her tongue, and another in her right eyebrow.

Roxy lives with her mother in a neighboring housing project, in the same complex as Sistergirl Camille and other Drop-In youth. It is a small area of the community known for its concentrated poverty and disproportionate violence. She attends the local Aberdeen traditional comprehensive high school, is enrolled in regular level coursework, and says that her grades are “passable”. At times Roxy is cut off to the rest of the youth at Empower, not speaking to anyone other than Eddie, her boyfriend of just under a year. Other times she is vibrant and energetic, running through the downstairs area and entertaining her peers with her dancing and singing. Her romantic relationship with Eddie makes her second in charge of the group, and she often uses her position to bully other

young people. Going back to my previous statement, I am unsure whether Roxy's prejudicial attitudes are from her and her personal background, or if they have emerged as she has been a member of the EmoCores and being Eddie's girlfriend. For example, I asked her why she was not friends with other Drop-In clients, and she replied that she has lost a lot of friends because she bullies people.

SR: Why did you bully others?

Roxy: I thought I was better than everybody else, I guess.

SR: Why is that? Why would you think that?

Roxy: I don't know. I had a feeling that these people were going nowhere and I thought they would be going nowhere fast, and I wanted to give them a taste of their own medicine. So I decided to bully.

According to accounts by staff members Faith and Emilia, "these people" Roxy refers to are the Black youth, mostly girls, who live in her neighborhood and attend her school. The staff shares that there have been verbal incidents between Roxy and the Sistergirls over the last year. During our interview, Roxy shares, "*I know a lot of people in Aberdeen and some people hate me,*" and she blames her bullying as the likely culprit. There is no love lost between Roxy and the Sistergirls—in over a year of observing the Drop-In, I never witness them speak to each other and they are rarely share the same space. Like I do with Eddie's comments, I will follow up with Roxy's claim that these people "were going nowhere" in the last section of this chapter.

Part I Conclusion

Unlike their Homeboy and Sistergirl peers, the EmoCores are a racially homogenous, mixed-gender subculture within the Drop-In. They share a great deal in common with the Sistergirls and Homeboys, at least superficially: they live in similar

neighborhoods, they attend similar schools, and they are clients of Empower because of financial turmoil, mental health issues, or abuse in their home lives. Their subculture relies upon the characteristics that mark the larger emo culture found in U.S. society—particularly dress and amplified emotions. Eddie and Roxy are the leaders of the small group, and they rarely miss an opportunity to flex their positions within the Drop-In walls. The next section of this chapter details the educational experiences, achievement ideology, and occupational aspirations of the EmoCores.

Part II

Educational Experiences and Occupational Aspirations

The feelings the EmoCores have about schooling and educational credentials were difficult to determine during my observations at the Drop-In. While the Homeboys were vocal with their support of others who earned diplomas or high school certificates, the EmoCores remained quiet during these celebrations. While the Sistergirls could be seen supporting each other with school work or job applications, I never witnessed the EmoCores engaging in any work that could be deemed “academic”; they scoffed at the usual social media outlets of Facebook and Twitter. Even the workshops and events created by Empower staff seemed to have the majority of clients in mind—the Black youth. Where did these White young people fit in, and how did their educational experiences and aspirations play a role?

I gathered the majority of my information pertaining to the EmoCores through my formal interviews with Eddie and Roxy, and informal interviews with Lucas, Skylar, and Empower staff. While the EmoCores are similar in behavior and appearance, they differ

greatly in their educational experiences, occupational aspirations, and guiding philosophies for success. This section of the chapter provides detail of these. Insight into where these young people fit in within Empower’s mission will be explained in the next chapter.

Educational Experiences

One commonality across all of the EmoCores was their opinion on schools and schooling—they disliked it. All four expressed dissatisfaction with schools, school peers, and teachers. Eddie and Lucas have been disengaged from formal schooling for years, and they do not have fond memories of being there. For Eddie, traditional schooling methods were not conducive to him as a unique learner.

SR: Why did you hate school?

Eddie: 'Cause they would always tell me that school isn't supposed to be for the work. It's supposed to be help kids learn. But the way I wanted to learn and the way that it was easier for me to learn, they wouldn't have it 'cause I learned better just by reading. Like, I'd read it, memorize it, and then I'd be done with it. They didn't like that. They started trying to make me learn like every other kid, learning through practice. I don't learn that well through practice.

Yeah. So I just said screw it. If you aren't gonna let me learn the way I need to learn, then I'm just not gonna do the work. Well, I'm not gonna turn in the work.

As a result of not turning in assignments, Eddie’s grades skewed average to poor, a reflection of “*the structure of how schools work*” he says, not his intellectual capacity or current ability. He resented being treated “*like every other kid*”, and he performed poorly on purpose.

There were only two or three teachers Eddie spoke fondly of, and not surprisingly, the ones he preferred excused him from the daily class assignments and homework and allowed him to read during class.

Eddie: Yeah, seventh and eighth grade it was my science teacher. She was another one of the teachers that I liked 'cause she actually let me sit there and just read the book.

She'd give me work every now and then, but she wasn't worried about me turning it in. She didn't care 'cause she knew I was still getting what I needed. It's not like I passed her class with an A. I had probably about a D+ or a C- when I passed her class. But that's because she didn't really hand out too many tests, but she gave me as many tests as I could.

A “good” teacher for Eddie meant they left him to learn in ways that he found helpful. This also meant that they listened to him when he explained his learning style, and they gave him the freedom to do as he sought fit—all as a middle-schooler. Roxy’s teachers were attentive in different ways. When I asked her how she knew her teachers cared about her, she responded, “*Just little things. When we read *The Crucible*, they told me I didn't have to read it because I'm Wiccan and they don't want me to feel odd.*”

The schooling experience was different for Lucas, but the end result was the same as Eddie’s. Lucas never sought individualized instruction, or teacher attention. He dropped out of high school in the middle of 10th grade. Here, as I sit with him on the Drop-In couch, he tells me why:

Fieldnotes, July 17th: I spoke a short time with Lucas today. I asked him if he was still enrolled in school. He replied no, and I asked him why not. He said that teachers were always wanting to “be in his business”, and they always told him how smart he was, how he wasn’t using his “full potential” and how he was smarter than most of them, and they were being paid a good salary to teach. He said, “I know I’m smart, gifted or whatever, but I don’t feel like hearing it all the time”. He couldn’t take the

constant positive pressure, so he quit. He says he is glad that he did. He added, "I don't need school anyway. I know all I need to know from it."

After spending time with Lucas, I perused my observation notes, paying particular attention to passages that included Lucas. Other than his group affiliation, physical description, and his tendency to follow behind Eddie (he tended to be a follower, not a leader), I wrote nothing of interest concerning his intellectual abilities or other talents. Hearing Lucas speak of his intellectual gifts, I inquired with Emilia about him. She had a different opinion of Lucas:

SR: So, Lucas told me he dropped out of school.

Emilia: Yes he did. I don't think that was a good idea, but it is what it is. He was really struggling academically. I know that he had an IEP...he just struggled through school and finally let it go. We are pushing the GED for him, but studying for that...just between us, he would not pass that test. There's no way.

These two examples exemplify the disconnect with Lucas. He resents all of the teacher attention, the constant pushing from them for him to achieve academically. He fixes this by disengaging, leaving behind all of the attention on his academic gifts and being free to be himself. At least, this is the story he tells himself. Lucas has an overinflated sense of his academic abilities, one that was perhaps developed by his teachers in order to motivate him or get him to perform, or one he created for self-preservation, but one that is not supported by Empower staff or my observations.

While Eddie and Lucas were able to detail their experiences with teachers, even some whom they had positive experiences with, they had an overall disdain for teachers. Eddie was vocal about his antipathy towards teachers:

Eddie: Like I said, people just aren't worried about how people would rather learn. They're more worried about making

money off of it. And that is probably then my number one problem in the school throughout my entire life is that like the teachers will say they care. Principals say they care. They will do—they will tell you anything, and they will try to show you anything they can to make you believe that they actually care.

But it's all about money to them 'cause when I was in elementary school my teachers actually went on strike. Stopped coming into the classrooms and everything. They went on strike 'cause they weren't getting enough pay. And most of them were getting at least \$12.00 an hour. So that was basically it for school.

Because of his socioeconomic position, Eddie thinks \$12.00 an hour is a viable living wage, and while he is incorrect about that (especially given the cost of living in the area), the presumption is that teachers say they care, but they will not show up without the paycheck. Lucas espoused his opinion that he was smarter than most of the teachers he had in school. Skylar noted that her teachers were “*just alright*” and Roxy’s opinion of teachers was one of indifference—she could not name a teacher that she really liked or disliked. She stated, “*Teachers are just there. I don’t really notice.*”

Through all of their school experiences, none of the EmoCores shared stories of maltreatment from school faculty or staff. These youth share many commonalities with the Homeboys and Sistergirls—they are from the same or similar communities, similar class statuses, and all have turbulent family lives. Yet, unlike the other two groups, the EmoCores shared few negative school experiences with me, but they shared greater disdain for the institution. Even Eddie, who claimed that all the Middle Eastern people in his school “*hated Americans*” and he imagined unspeakable violence toward them, had no stories of teachers treating him poorly or espousing deficient comments. Just the

contrary—most of the stories about teachers were, particularly for Lucas, about how teachers cared *too much* about them and wanted to help them *too much*.

Occupational Aspirations

The EmoCores vary in their occupational aspirations, but they all have similar attitudes toward higher education—a college education is fine, but not necessary to have a successful and economically stable life. Lucas wants to be an audio engineer for musicians and plans to apprentice in order to learn the trade. Although Eddie is passionate about the music scene and playing guitar, he only sees his interest as a hobby, not a life's work. Instead, he wants to be a motorcycle mechanic:

SR: You want to be a motorcycle mechanic. How do you plan to make those dreams come true?

Eddie: Work basically. I'm gonna try to work my way into it. Like, I wanna use college as a last resort. Like, everybody always says you need to go to college to do this. You need to go to college to do that. But with my past experience with school, college really isn't gonna help me as much as me doing it on my own. So I'm hoping that I'd be able to get like an internship or something at a shop just so I can get my basic teachings down.

And then I can pursue a career in it. And then I can keep learning it as I'm working 'cause I actually know a couple friends who owned a shop together. And they want me to work for them, but the only problem is I'm too young. And they also don't have the time to train me 'cause they're barely at the shop 'cause they gotta take care of other things. So they really want me to work for them. But we just can't pull that off.

For Eddie, the only obstacle standing in the way of him becoming a motorcycle mechanic is his age and the time from the mechanics to train him. He has older friends who are already doing the work in his neighborhood, an immediate inside connection. College is a last resort, a fall back option in case his mechanic career fails to work out.

The larger emo culture, particularly the artistic and creative aspects, influences Skylar's and Roxy's ambitions. Skylar wants to be a fashion designer, creating couture for emo bands. Roxy wants to be fictional author. She makes up dark, dystopian stories and writes them down in composition notebooks. She imagines publishing these stories one day, and perhaps having them made into Hollywood movies.

SR: So, you want to go to college?

Roxy: Yes. I want to go to the United Kingdom because they have a college over there that, if you graduate from that, you can write anything. All the best writers graduated from there.

SR: Really? Do you know how you're gonna get in? Have you looked at the application process?

Roxy: No, I'm just gonna bribe my way in. I'm being serious, too, though. I seriously will try bribing my way in, if anything.

SR: With what? Money?

Roxy: Yeah.

Although I probe, Roxy is unable to remember the name of the United Kingdom college she wants to attend. She is unclear of their requirements, and she cares little about the specifics of how she will achieve the feat of enrolling in this school. Yet, she is serious about this dream coming true. At the same time, her ambition of being an author is not her only dream—she also wants to be a photographer and a professional model. If none of those occupations work out, her fall-back career is a pastry chef. When I ask about preparation for this last resort occupation she replies, “*No, I haven't taken any classes in culinary arts. Not yet. Maybe that's something I should do at some point*”. None of her dreams require her to attend a four-year university.

The EmoCores Ideology: Virtuous Resistance

All of the previous information in this chapter—the EmoCores culture, educational experiences and their occupational aspirations, contribute to their (unconscious) guiding philosophy, one that I call virtuous resistance. All of their experiences, all of their failings and resistance to the status quo are absolved because they are *different* from the other youth who attend Empower. Not only are they different, but somehow, they are better or more deserving than the other youth who attend Empower. It is important to note that none of the EmoCores used these exact words to describe their relationships with peers. Here I analyze three examples that I have presented earlier in this chapter to substantiate this ideology that I have assigned to the EmoCores.

Example 1: Eddie and the term “Drop-Out”

Eddie made it a point to differentiate himself from other Empower youth at different times during my observations and time at the Drop-In. He made it clear to me during our interview that he does not consider himself a drop-out like the other Empower youth. Drop-outs, he says, “*aren’t motivated*” and “*don’t want nothing out of life.*” He regards himself as being very motivated, particularly when it comes to learning new things:

Eddie: I like science I really love biology only because I like to study plants and stuff.

SR: That's cool.

Eddie: Like, I've never been able to go down on a molecular structure level, but I've actually sat there with like a leaf in my hand and looked over it. And you can actually see kinda like—the leaves actually kinda have fingerprints in a way. Like, it's not actual fingerprint, but they have different creases in it that no leaf will ever have the same one.

SR: That's pretty cool.

Eddie: Mm-hmm. Same with bark. You can peel bark off of a tree. Every piece of bark, it's gonna have something different about it. If you take bark from one tree and compare it to another tree, there's gonna be either a different shade, a different texture, a different smell, a different anything even if they're same type of tree.

While he disdains traditional compulsory schooling, he gives multiple examples of random scientific facts that he has learned on his own—and that motivation to learn outside of the classroom makes him different from his peers. The notion that drop-outs “*don't want nothing out of life*” does not apply to him either, as he wants to be a motorcycle mechanic and one day own a auto repair shop. For Eddie, resistance to traditional schooling, then is one of principle and presumed entitlement—schools are not responsive to his individual, unique needs as a learner, and the teachers are there to only receive a paycheck, therefore, disengaging is a virtuous, conscious decision, not a reflection of him as a person or his intellectual abilities.

Example 2: Eddie and Guidelines

I presented a quotation from Eddie earlier in the chapter where he claims there are “*ignorant*” young people attending the Drop-In and they do not follow guidelines. Here is the direct quotation once again:

Eddie: And everybody should follow guidelines. Doesn't have to be the greatest guideline of like—you don't have to follow the most strictest guideline ever. Just understand that you have a place and you need to stay in your place. And you can't keep trying to be ahead of yourself. Everybody's each at their own individual level. And everybody—well, a lot of people try to stay in their level and work through it. But them here, they just—they put themselves at a higher mantle than they will ever deserve.

Eddie is saying a great deal in this short passage. Of importance here is his statement that “*them here, they just—they put themselves at a higher mantle than they will ever deserve.*” He is not referring to the EmoCores—he is the leader of that group and he sets the tone for how other EmoCores behave in the Drop-In. Eddie is referring to the young people of color who attend Empower—particularly the Homeboys. When Eddie first started attending the Drop-In (3 years earlier), the music events and workshops were diverse; according to Emilia, there used to be multiple performances by alternative music lovers, pop music presentations in addition to the hip hop and rap. The demographics of the Drop-In changed only slightly with less White young adults frequenting the center—but more importantly, the musical taste and openness to other types of music of the young adults in attendance changed. Now, the Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings are almost exclusively hip hop and rap, and I never witnessed Eddie sing or play his guitar during these open microphone sessions. Eddie expresses his feelings that these young people are on a higher mantle than they will ever deserve—that they are gaining the majority of event planning and resources from Empower fails to sit with him well.

Example 3: Roxy and “they going nowhere fast”

Finally, Eddie is not the only EmoCore to have strong feelings regarding the other youth who attend Empower. I described his girlfriend Roxy’s interactions with other Empower youth earlier in this chapter:

Roxy: I don't know. I had a feeling that these people were going nowhere and I thought they would be going nowhere fast, and I wanted to give them a taste of their own medicine. So I decided to bully.

Given Roxy's past confrontations with the Sistergirls, it is safe to assume that "these people were going nowhere" is a direct criticism of them. Roxy lives in the same housing complex, down the lane from Camille. She attends the same traditional high school as some of the Sistergirls, yet she makes an assumption that they are going nowhere—a quip about their futures being bleak. In her statement is the implicit implication that she *is* going somewhere and, to some extent, the system will make this into "truth". Therefore, her bullying of them was justified, virtuous because they were going nowhere. This attitude Roxy held toward the Sistergirls was difficult for me to figure out, especially given Roxy's background of poor planning for her own future as a writer, photographer, model, and perhaps, pastry chef. But somehow, somewhere along the way, Roxy determined that there were some fundamental differences between her and the Sistergirls, and that of her or them, she was the one who would be successful in the future. I can only hypothesize that her opinion of the Sistergirls has been supported by others in her life. I detail this hypothesis in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced and detailed the lives, educational experiences, and occupational aspirations of the EmoCores. They, like the Homeboys and Sistergirls in the previous chapters, have faced tremendous adversity and while they also have some turmoil in their lives, they are optimistic about their life chances. Their path out of poverty and housing instability does not include college as an option—although it is a "last resort" in case all other career options fail. The EmoCores live their overly emotional teenage lives on a "virtuous resistance" ideology. They position their reactions to experiences in their lives—from dropping out of school (and remaining un-enrolled) to

bullying peers—as conscious decisions, worthy or honorable responses to their stifling environments, and this consciousness makes them different from other Empower youth. In the next chapter, I compare the life chances of the three subgroups by investigating how the institutions in their lives—Empower and schools—act upon them.

Chapter 7

The Role of Institutions

Introduction

The excitement at the Empower Drop-In was palpable the day the music engineering and production workshop was to begin. The organization had recently secured a sizable grant that permitted the purchase of new music production equipment, including a state-of-the-art soundboard, microphone, computer, and editing software. When I inquired about the grant and why the development office chose to pursue this particular funding, the staff informed me of a recent client survey that revealed the majority of the youth expressed interest in pursuing careers in the music industry. Winning the grant enabled the organization to satisfy two points of interest. First, the new equipment would keep the youth engaged with the staff and coming into the Drop-In for important services. Second, the youth would have the opportunity to learn valuable knowledge and skills directly related to their future occupational goals.

The turnout for the debut of the workshop was considerable. There were over 40 youth in attendance, and they filled the living area and back room. A 21-year old White male, Dale, was in charge of the equipment and the workshop, and he gathered everyone in the living room for the information session. By the end of the 2 hour seminar, almost all of the youth who desired to had an opportunity to do what would become routine at these workshops; they held the microphone, rapped their hand-written or free-styled

rhymes, and looked on in wonder as Dale interacted with the equipment and made studio-quality recordings from their voices.

The music workshop was designed and implemented by Empower staff for the benefit of a large segment of its client base—the Homeboys. While all the youth were invited and welcomed to participate in the workshop, it was the Homeboys who expressed a single-minded determination to be rappers and needed tangible means to make those dreams come true. They needed music demos in order to sell them in their local neighborhoods and to be serendipitously discovered by music executives. Unfortunately, the workshop never accomplished its goal to teach the Homeboys or any other young person how to use the equipment; the technical knowledge, the musical magic for these boys, remained in the mind and hands of Dale, and neither he nor the Empower staff ever attempted to share their expertise. This example is indicative of how the organization facilitates the education of its clients—great intention, poor execution with unconstructive outcomes.

The past three chapters introduced the Homeboys, the Sistergirls, and the EmoCores. I described their personal backgrounds, educational experiences, and their occupational ambitions in an effort to reveal the complexity of their lives as they navigate the terrain of adolescence. This chapter explores the role of institutions—Empower and schools—in the lives of these homeless youth and how their life chances are influenced and shaped by the actions (or inaction) of these institutions. As mentioned in earlier chapters, I focus the majority of my analysis on the leaders of the three groups and rely on their stories and my observations to illustrate how all the youth, while agentic in some ways, are persuaded to pursue particular educational trajectories or occupations based,

not only on their talents or abilities, but their group affiliations and social identities (race, gender, homeless status, and class). I begin this chapter with the institutional role of Empower.

Empower: A Note of Acknowledgment

Before I begin with specifics of how Empower influences the educational and occupational aspirations of homeless youth in the community, it is important to note that Empower is an amazingly important organization. It provides emergency housing, meals, counseling, and housing assistance to any homeless or unaccompanied youth who enter their doors—and they do all of this on a constrained, always shrinking non-profit budget. The staff members are dedicated, giving up their evenings and weekends in order to provide programming or to be on call for the youth who may enter the organization's doors at any time, day or night. They are highly educated, all with bachelors' degrees and most with masters' degrees. They possess the capacities and abilities to work in corporate organizations or private practice for twice the money and half the time commitment and yet, they are devoted to the mission of this nonprofit. Empower staff members are, at times, the only stable, trusting adults in the lives of homeless youth in this community. The youth depend on them and believe that the staff (particularly the ones they see every day, Faith, Emilia, and Clinton, who work in the Drop-In) always have their best interests in mind. There is power in that trust.

That is why this chapter is particularly important. The staff members of Empower have great influence and the youth pay attention when they endorse or sanction certain choices or accomplishments. Their organization's ability to create workshops, establish internships or job opportunities, and assist with daily living necessities

(showers, meals, clothing) gives them great power—both with and over the youth they serve. I believe that with that power comes great responsibility, and part of that is making sure every client has equal access to resources and equitable development opportunities that create personal growth and positive economic mobility.

Empower Workshops

The Homeboys

It is a common perception that you can determine an organization's priorities by following the money—where it is coming from as well as what programming and initiatives it is going to fund. If that adage is true, it is clear that one of Empower's top priorities is supporting the educational and occupational goals of the Homeboys. As evidenced by the introductory story describing the music engineering workshop, rap and hip hop music is integral to the lives of the Homeboys. Empower is accountable to its client base and seeks to have seminars that are of interests to the youth, and as such, the Homeboys' passion for music is reflected in Empower's workshop programming. Staff members wrote a grant for the primary purpose of purchasing musical engineering equipment and at least half of their Drop-In workshops or seminars deal with music. While there is never a statement of "this workshop is designed for," it is clear from the topic material that some workshops are designed for different groups of youth.

The music workshops are designed for the Homeboys. Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings occur every two to three weeks inside the Drop-In, but there are other music-based events that Empower supports with money and staff support. There is an annual outdoor festival in Aberdeen and Empower sponsors an afternoon of concerts on one of the stages. It is a big deal to the youth, as thousands of people from across the local

region come to enjoy the festival, and the youth are always hopeful that a talent scout or record producer could see them and it become the moment they are discovered. The youth practice their performances for weeks leading up to the festival. They perfect their music, determine who will present in what order, and they negotiate how much time each performer gets on stage with Empower staff. The Homeboys, given their interests, numbers, and the amount of songs they want to perform, acquire most of the stage time during the festival performance.

Unfortunately, the Homeboys have little to no training in music production. The grant-funded workshop on music production resulted in no additional skills for the youth. None of the youth ever, in all my days of observing these workshops, put their hands on the actual soundboard or Apple MacBook Pro computer. None of them left the sessions with demos to sell or share. The extent of their talents and accomplishments with the grant-funded workshops rest in writing lyrics and rapping, and this is what Empower staff encourages. In separate encounters, I asked staff members Faith, Emilia, and Clinton about John's talents and where they thought he would be in the future:

Faith: John is smart, he just doesn't like people to think or know that he is smart. He was enrolled in the really good high school here but he dropped out. But he could be anything he put his mind to. He is really good at rapping and doing music, so I think he will end up doing something in music.

Emilia: I don't know. I think he'll probably do something in music, like rap music. He is interested in it and is good at it.

Clinton: John has some skills in rapping and doing music-based things, so I think he will be successful if he keeps focused on that. He is super smart too. He is.

These staff members encourage John to present at every Rhapsody and Rhyme, and Emilia often allows John to determine who performs and how long they are on the living

room stage. They acknowledge John's intellectual and natural leadership abilities, "John is smart", yet they do not offer encouragement to him to explore and find other dreams that may work for him. To be fair, perhaps the staff members at the Drop-In are simply supporting the ambitions of their clients. Their jobs depend on homeless youth entering the organization's doors to receive much needed services. If John and his friends desire to be in the music business as entertainers, would we criticize the organization if it failed to support them in these endeavors?

Perhaps the larger issue is that the organization offers little more than lip service to the educational and occupational aspirations of the Homeboys. John shared with me that he is interested in attending a school of the arts in the state, although he is hard pressed to remember the name of the school or where it is located.

John: At first, I didn't really want to go to college unless it—it, I was like open-minded about it. I didn't wanna go, I just wanted to do whatever would get me on a set track to my music career, but then my probation officer started telling me about these colleges for music and stuff, music programs, that have good music programs...But yeah, so then I thought like, alright, I'll do that and it'll help me better like with a trade or whatever. Yeah.

Here, John expresses an interest in higher education as long as it assists him in his music-based aspirations. His interest was piqued, however, by his probation officer, not Empower staff. This is surprising because the local community college, which is a short bus ride from the Drop-In, offers a certificate in music production and engineering. While I witnessed Emilia, Faith, and Dylan spout seemingly memorized information about registration dates, withdrawal deadlines, and credit hour costs, I never heard them offer information about the music-based offerings of the community college. Instead, they touted their music workshop and the grant that enabled them to purchase state-of-the-art

engineering equipment that the young men and women of the Drop-In would never be allowed to touch.

The Sistergirls

While the Empower staff spends a great deal of time and resources on music programming and workshops, they also have a variety of workshops designed for the Sistergirls. Not that the Sistergirls were discouraged from attending the music workshops—quite the opposite. Staff members encouraged all of the young people to participate in the Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings and other music-based programming. The difference is that the music workshops were not *designed* with the Sistergirls in mind. During my tenure observing at Empower, I witnessed two types of workshops conceived for the Sistergirls in particular—sexual health and anger management.

The sexual health workshops occurred often in the Drop-In, and like any sex-focused discussion with a room full of coed adolescents, the topic always elicited several bouts of uncomfortable laughter and tactless jokes. The workshops are based on a program named “Street Smarts” and the lectures and activities spotlighted HIV and sexually transmitted infection (STI) awareness and prevention. I spoke with Faith about the program:

SR: Can you tell me more about the “Street Smarts” program?

Faith: Of course. It is a program that we use to get the kids to recognize how unprotected sex can lead to HIV and STI’s. These kids have so many misperceptions about sex and the diseases they can get so we try to help them understand more of the biology behind it and how they can make good decisions, especially the girls.

SR: Why especially the girls?

Faith: Well, I think with this population...well, for example, John.

We all know he sleeps around and probably doesn't use protection. We have tried talking to him about his sexual health but our best bet is to reach the girls that he is likely to have sex with and try to get them to insist on using protection.

At first I thought this perspective was empowering for the young women—a workshop teaching them how to take ownership of their sexual health. Two issues changed my analysis of this. First, the workshops included young men and women, and the young men failed to take the topics seriously. They made inappropriate remarks and often made comments that were meant to embarrass or shame the young women. For example, during one workshop, Faith asked the group, “Can you contract HIV through forks, spoons, or eating after each other?” Nathan replied, “Yep, that’s why I don’t eat after Sonia”. The young men were rarely reprimanded for their inappropriate outbursts, and the comments contributed to the disempowerment of the young women. Second, the workshops focused entirely on information about the act of sex—how to prepare for it and protect yourself during it. There were no conversations about how sex, particularly heterosexual sex, is connected to larger issues of gender inequality, notions of femininity and masculinity, or male power (Gupta, 2002). The workshops mostly focused on fearful concepts surrounding sexual intercourse—sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies—not an empowering concept of positive sex and reproductive health.

The second workshop topic targeted primarily at the Sistergirls was anger management. The anger management workshops often included strategies for controlling and redirecting feelings of anger, for example, counting or deep breathing. The Drop-In staff also spent considerable time attempting to convince the young people, particularly the young women, that expressing their anger in certain ways would backfire on them

and result in nothing but negative consequences: physical harm, negative reputations, or involvement with the criminal justice system.

Unfortunately, the anger management workshops (unintentionally, I think) teaches the young women that the best way to manage their anger is by suppressing it. The staff solicits ideas from the young men about how they can manage their anger. Answers ranged from “lift weights”, “play basketball” or “play video games,” to “fight it out”. When the young women respond to the same question, their answers include “take a walk”, “breathe deeply”, or “count to 10”. The staff agrees with these answers, nodding emphatically to show they approve of the responses. There is no encouragement to the young women to manage their anger in ways that allow them to be heard (literally and metaphorically), validated, and safe.

This is not to say that the Sistergirls would not benefit from strategies to control and redirect their anger. Indeed they would. The majority of arguments at the Drop-In included the Sistergirls. In addition to the altercation involving Gabbie (described in Chapter 5), I witnessed several other heated arguments between the young women and one brutal physical assault involving Kim who, caught outside without the other Sistergirls, was jumped by three local girls. The fight took place on the sidewalk outside the Drop-In and since it was considered public property, not Empower property, none of the staff members intervened until the fight was over and Kim was able to crawl, bloodied and bruised, onto the Drop-In front steps. I spoke with Kim a few days later regarding the fight:

SR: So, I was there for the fight the other day.

Kim: Yeah.

- SR: How are you feeling about everything today?
- Kim: Fine I guess. They won't try it again. They caught me by myself and I'm rarely by myself. I'm almost always with Sonia or Amber or Gabbie or somebody. It's all good.
- SR: I noticed that the staff here couldn't help you. How you feeling about that?
- Kim: I mean, I understand what they say about they can't get involved and all that. But they know me, I've been coming here to the Drop-In for years and I'm supposed to be one of their family or whatever that they say we all are. And yet there I was getting jumped by three people and none of them helped me, then they told me not to get angry or take my anger out on them. So what, they family to me sometimes and other times, when I really need them they not? Then I'm not supposed to be angry. Okay. Whatever. I get it. It just goes to show who I can trust and who I can't. It's all good.

Kim cried during this discussion with me, and I speculate that she did so not because of embarrassment or resentment or even anger, but because she was weary, tired of being let down by the adults in her life. In the instance with Kim, the rules and regulations governing the staff of the Drop-In took precedence over her physical and emotional well-being, and all of the talk of being there for the young people became more insincerity from the adults in her life. Yet the staff members pointed out her anger as being misdirected, failing to acknowledge that they may have let her down and her anger, therefore, fitting to the situation.

The sexual health and anger management workshops, while important, fail to assist the young women in achieving their educational and occupational dreams. There are no workshops specifically designed for them that speaks to or builds their academic or vocational skills. The Sistergirls are welcome and encouraged to attend the other workshops that the organization offers, but these events become little more than comedic

hours that, while entertaining and safe, do little to help the young women surpass their current social location of poverty and homelessness.

The EmoCores

In all of my time at Empower, I found that there were no workshops or events specifically designed for the EmoCores. This could have been because the low numbers of EmoCores—there were 2-4 in attendance on any given night, so maybe those numbers prohibited the staff from creating substantial programming for the group, particularly since they can take advantage of the other workshops as well. The music workshops were open to the EmoCores and they were encouraged by the staff to attend. Indeed, the Rhapsody and Rhymes nights first brought Eddie to Empower:

SR: Why did you start coming to Empower?

Eddie: I guess the number one reason why I started to coming to Empower was because there is a big music scene. Like, everybody here was doing music. Everybody wanted to do music, and they were all doing it the right way. They were all putting themselves into music. But as you know, lately I really haven't been coming here 'cause everybody we have here that supposedly says they're a musician or says they're a rapper, they don't actually put themselves into the music. And like to me, that's just insulting. You can't claim to be something if you can't put yourself into it.

The same thing that brought Eddie to Empower, the music, is pushing him away. He tells me on several occasions that he is not into rap or hip hop music—which is fine, as young people can and should have different tastes in music and the arts in general. He plays the guitar, writes songs, and prefers Emo music and musicians. He never performs at Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings, which disappoints me because I think his type of music would be—if not totally understood or liked—welcomed. One of the largest factors that

separate Eddie from John, Nathan, or any other Homeboy, is the type of music they prefer and how they believe that music will change their lives.

However, there is acrimony in Eddie's voice and his statements about the people who attend Empower *and* engage in the rap music scene. He maintains that these young people aren't "real artists", they are "posers", and that they are what's wrong with modern music. He does not shy away from sharing his opinions. On a night when Emilia is off work and her shift is being covered by Empower staff member Layla, who usually works at the corporate office not the Drop-In, he shares his thoughts with me:

SR: What's your biggest criticism of those performers?

Eddie: They're ignorant and they undermine themselves. And honestly, I wouldn't wanna be—I don't wanna be around it. I can tell Layla (Empower staff member) doesn't wanna be around it. I'm sure you don't. But if there is just a way to get them to understand that they have a place, then I probably wouldn't really have a problem coming here.

SR: Well, why do you think they act like that?

Eddie: 'Cause they don't know what they wanna do with themselves 'cause I noticed a lot of people these days are all about I wanna do me. I wanna be me. You can't tell me what to do 'cause I'm me. And it's like just because you are you, that doesn't mean that you can do whatever you want. Everybody has guidelines. Everybody's supposed to have guidelines. And everybody should follow guidelines.

It is difficult to listen to Eddie's opinions without noticing that his views are steeped in prejudicial perspectives. First, he believes that the young adults who aspire to rap or hip hop music dreams are "ignorant and they undermine themselves," that whatever happens to them (or does not happen to them, like musical success) is their fault. He assumes that Layla does not want to be around "it", though I do not hear her say anything that would support this notion. He wrongly assumes that I do not want to spend time with these

young men and women, and that if they would only “understand that they have a place” that he would feel more comfortable about visiting Empower and others would as well. It seems as if Eddie views Empower as “his” organization, and the organization would be better if the other young clients would understand their place. I find it no coincidence that the other young performers during Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings are all African American or Black, and that he accuses them of no longer knowing their place (which could be about Empower specifically, and society broadly). The first months of Rhapsody and Rhyme nights were more diverse and had more White Emo youth performing. According to Emilia and Faith, some of the Black clients who would be considered Sistergirls or maybe Homeboys used to perform a more diverse selection of music—from rap, to rhythm and blues, to alternative selections. Once these “new” people began performing more, Eddie lost interest and his attendance during these evenings became more sporadic.

While Empower does not intervene to make Rhapsody and Rhyme nights more appealing to Eddie and the other EmoCores, they do offer an alternative. The staff places Eddie and his friends as primary organizers for an annual talent showcase that happens at a local festival in Aberdeen. It is a big festival, full of family-friendly activities, food vendors, and local artists selling their crafts. Eddie and Roxy look forward to this festival all year, making sure they are still the primary organizers several times during the year with Empower staff. They are in charge of getting performers, ordering the sound equipment, and advertising the event. It is a big job, one that Eddie, Roxy, and the Empower staff take seriously, and it is always a success with a big crowd in attendance. It requires organization, talking to various stakeholders, public speaking skills, and

leadership—all professional abilities that every Empower client should have the opportunity to develop. This leadership role seems to be a concession to the EmoCores; while Eddie feels uncomfortable (or too talented for the crowd) to perform at Rhapsody and Rhyme, he always gives himself plenty of stage time at the Aberdeen festival to showcase his guitar playing and Roxy’s singing skills.

Empower: Job Training

The Homeboys

Empower’s support for the Homeboys’ musical futures is reflected in their organizational programming, but not in the internships and training provided by its established Job Club. Job Club is an intensive job training and paid internship program for Empower youth who are of legal age to work. Empower staff and local volunteers from the community spend weeks teaching the youth how to craft resumes, they practice interview skills, and they spend most of their time modeling and coaching appropriate workplace behavior. For example, one class session instilled the “10-5 principle”, a customer service practice that teaches employees to stop what they are doing and make eye contact with customers when they are 10 feet away, and greet them with the appropriate salutation when they are 5 feet away. Staff members take the youth shopping for professional clothing at the end of Job Corp, and if the youth attend all sessions they are placed in a 100 hour paid internship at a local business or nonprofit organization (at minimum wage). While these internships are designed to develop into full-time jobs for the youth, employment is rarely offered to the youth at the end of the paid internship. In

my year of research and observing 3 cycles of Job Corp, no youth were offered full-time employment from their internship placement.

The nonprofits and businesses that Empower reaches out to are conventional trade companies. They partner with local nonprofits such as Aberdeen Food Pantry, Aberdeen Community Center, Aberdeen Habitat for Humanity, and Aberdeen Public Library. They also have one for-profit business partners, a local clothing retailer. The job duties at each site differ depending on the needs of the organization. Most of the Homeboys who take part in Job Club end up at the Aberdeen Food Pantry. They sort food donations, help volunteers with their service assignments, and they assist the Pantry staff with community food drop-offs. It is a job with little room for growth—there is a very small organizational staff and most of the day-to-day work is completed by interns or volunteers. It is also a labor-intensive job—youth are stocking goods during their work hours, lifting boxes and moving constantly. If they work at the Food Pantry's Neighborhood Kitchen—a free hot food program that provides 20 meals a week to the needy—they spend all their hours on their feet cooking and serving food.

This is not to say that the work the Homeboys and other youth perform at the Food Pantry is not worthwhile—indeed it is. They learn valuable skills while working this internship, from customer service to interpersonal skills. At the Neighborhood Kitchen they learn basic food prep, how to read and follow recipes, and the Pantry staff focus on helping the youth learn how to cook healthy foods on a budget. The youth also receive intrinsic awards in addition to their hourly wage, providing a worthwhile service to community members and feeling good about giving back in a positive way.

Nathan participated in Job Club and worked in the Food Pantry's Neighborhood Kitchen. He took public transportation to work and back, spending about an hour on the journey each way. I asked him about his experiences:

SR: I know you are working or interning at the food pantry. How is that going?

Nathan: I mean, it's okay. I don't know. It's a lot of work. It is always busy.

SR: What are you learning there?

Nathan: I'm learning a lot you know, a lot of culinary arts skills so it's a lot like the culinary arts I took in school except it's like real work. I learn how to clean the food, how to keep your food prep area clean.

SR: You think you have a career in doing this job?

Nathan: I don't know. I hope they hire me after the internship is over because I need a job bad. It's not really what I want to do, you know, I see myself doing something else. But it seems like I keep getting put into situations where I'm working with food, and I don't know if that's because I love to eat, because I do love to eat, and I like to cook. But doing it for life, that I can't see.

SR: What other food situations are you put into?

Nathan: Like culinary arts in school, and they want me to be the cook here at the drop-in when Monique goes to have her baby. I'm thinking about that. I have to pass the certification test though to do that job.

According to Empower staff, Nathan got all positive reviews at the internship. He showed up to work (mostly) on time, was always pleasant to be around, and he worked hard and seemed interested in the duties. Unfortunately, the Food Pantry did not offer Nathan employment after the internship. Faith and Emilia, Empower's Drop-In staff, tried to convince him to become Empower's kitchen cook:

- SR: Nathan told me that he's looking for a job now that the internship is over.
- Faith: Yeah, he needs a job but we are trying to get him to take over Monique's position because she is going on maternity leave soon. I don't know. We told him that we will help him study for the test and everything. That's part of the reason why he was at the Food Pantry, we were setting him up for this job.
- SR: What test?
- Faith: Oh, he has to pass the ServSafe Certification test in order to be the cook here. We would help him study for the test and Monique was going to help him get prepared for it. But I know he's not going to do it.
- SR: Why not?
- Faith: Because he doesn't test well. I think he is afraid to even try because he has had such bad experiences with testing in school and everything. I know he has some learning disabilities. He does not want to try because if he tries and fails, then I think he will think he is a failure. And everyone will know that he failed it and he can't have all of his boys knowing that. But if he doesn't try, then he's not a failure, and I get that. But we are trying to help because he does need a job.

Faith seems sympathetic to Nathan's dilemma—she thinks he is reticent to take the certification exam because he has met failure in the public school system and would rather not experience similar failure at the Drop-In. He graduated high school with a certificate of completion instead of a diploma because of his learning and behavioral disabilities, so his difficulties are real and his fears of failure not entirely unfounded. Emilia's perspective on Nathan's job process is different. I had a similar discussion with her about Nathan's job future.

- SR: Nathan told me that he's looking for a job now that the internship is over.

Emilia: Nathan is not looking for a job because Nathan is lazy. He wants everything handed to him. He doesn't want to work. We have asked him over and over if he wants to be the cook here once Monique is gone and he keeps saying 'No, yes, maybe'. If he wanted a job he would do it, no excuses. There are so many other kids here who would jump at the opportunity to be offered this job, but Nathan thinks he is going to be rapper so he doesn't need to work here.

While Faith attributed Nathan's hesitance to the cook job to his lack of test-taking skill or ability, Emilia attributes his reluctance to a personal fault—laziness. For her, his need for a job should outweigh everything else, and if the possibility of a job is presented and he fails to take it, it is because of an individual deficit. This perception of Nathan goes against the positive reviews of the Food Pantry staff. None of the Drop-In staff acknowledge that Nathan must study and take an exam in order to make a minimum wage salary as a part-time cook in a local nonprofit that has been providing services for him and his family for years, and that failing at this process has real consequences for his reputation within the Drop-In.

It is also interesting that Emilia disregarded Nathan's musical rap ambitions, particularly given the heavy music programming that she and her colleagues design, implement, and support. While being a music entertainer or famous artist is a long shot for these youth, music production is a growing industry and could be a viable career for the Homeboys (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). There are no formal educational requirements to be in music production—many people intern or learn on the job (Heibutzki, 2014; Melvin, 2010). In fact, there is a professional recording studio five minutes away from the Drop-In, yet none of the staff or administrators of Empower have approached the owner to consider offering apprenticeships or internships. While Emilia assumes that Nathan wants to be rapper and is self-limiting in his career opportunities, it

is clear that the organization is supportive of certain ambitions through their Job Club internships and that they at least attempt to push certain adolescents into jobs they deem right for them.

Another example of this happening occurred with Karim. Karim participated in Job Club and was assigned to work at the Aberdeen Habitat for Humanity. He told me he was initially excited about this opportunity, but soon met disappointment.

SR: You worked at Habitat for your internship. How did that go?

Karim: Uh, not good. I mean, it went fine. I went every day. I got paid. I learned a little. That's about it.

SR: You were not offered a position after?

Karim: No (laughs). If I'm being honest, I don't think they ever had any intention on hiring me. I mean, everyone was nice to me. No one did me wrong or anything, but it was like I was just the hired help. I was manual labor, I mean, I worked hard. It was so hard, but I did it because I know construction pays well so I was hoping to get something full-time out of it. But no.

SR: Why do you think they didn't hire you?

Karim: I don't know...I could say it's because they didn't need another employee, but then they would always talk about how they needed more help. I guess they just didn't want to take a chance on me and that's okay, that's alright. I'm not sure why they didn't offer me a job.

Karim looks away from me during our discussion about his work at Habitat. He looks off in the distance as if, even after 6 months of ending the internship, he is still searching for the answer to why his internship failed to produce full-time or part-time employment. I asked his case manager, Anna, about Karim's job experiences:

SR: It seems like the kids here work really hard.

Anna: Yes, they do. They all work very hard and that's one of the requirements for them to live in the transitional housing here. They have to either go to school or work. Most of the kids here do both.

SR: Tell me about Karim. He told me he is working 2 jobs.

Anna: He is. I think he has two part-time jobs. He has applied, like, everywhere for full-time work. He did Job Club but that didn't work out.

SR: Why did that not work out for him?

Anna: Well, if you ask me, it has more to do with his attitude. Sometimes he acts as if he is owed something from other people. And sometimes you can tell he is so angry at the world I suppose. And people who may be hiring may not like that. I've tried to talk to him about his attitude and how he comes off to people but I don't think I've gotten very far with him.

Karim is unsure why his internship did not conclude with an offer for further employment, particularly when, according to him, he did everything right—he showed up on time and worked hard, both core tenets of the Job Club program. Anna, however, posits that his attitude determined his lack of employment—perhaps if he had been more jovial, or exhibited different personality traits, he would have a full-time job. Her assessment of Karim differed from my own—I found him to be responsible, approachable, and very hard working. Whenever I made inquiries about why the Homeboys were not receiving job offers from the internship sites, I was given similar answers—the Homeboys had personal deficits, ranging from laziness to bad attitudes that made them less likely to be employed. None of the staff members put forth the prospect that prejudice of any kind prevented the Homeboys from being employed by local organizations and businesses.

The Sistergirls

The Sistergirls also participate in Job Club, yet their placements and experiences are different. Again, the Sistergirls all have aspirations to be in the helping professions—nursing, social work, or therapists. Unfortunately, with the exception of one placement (Aberdeen Department of Human Services), none of the internships provide the young women with skills that apply directly to their occupational dreams. The internship at the Department of Human Services is coveted by the young women in Job Club. It is in an office building, the intern receives a cubicle space, and they get to perform office assistant duties and shadow social workers who go into the field. There is only one space in this placement each Job Club cycle and while many of the participants—male and female—desire to get the job, a young woman always receives it. The other young women are most often placed in retail stores where they work in customer service or stocking the floor, and a minority of them are placed at the Aberdeen Food Pantry.

Like the Homeboys, the Sistergirls seem to enjoy Job Club for the skill building workshops and the paid internship. However, like the Homeboys, the Sistergirls are not hired for full-time or part-time work as often as one would imagine for these jobs. First, none of the young women who are placed in the Department of Human Services ever go on to work there in any significant capacity after the internship is over. I asked Faith about this process:

SR: The internship at the DHS seems great. Are the girls then hired there full-time or part-time?

Faith: No, not really, and that's not really the purpose of it. I think we want to give the girls another perspective, a look at how their jobs could look if they decide to be social workers. There isn't really anything they could be hired for there on

a permanent basis because everything there takes a higher level of education.

SR: Oh. Do the girls know that? That they will not be hired?

Faith: I don't know. I hope they do. We do explain to all of them that employment is not guaranteed, but they can put all of it on their resumes and it could help them get that next job.

Here, it is clear that some of the internships are not designed to result in long-term employment, and that no matter how hard the Sistergirls work, how agreeable and reliable they are, they still are not going to get the job. This last part, however, is left out of all Job Club discussions and promotions.

This is not to say that the Job Club or job placements for the Sistergirls are negative or bad—they provide income for a short time, and the young women learn important skills in customer service or how to work cash registers—skills that may be helpful in many ways no matter what job or career they have in their adult lives. It is more that these internships are not well-aligned with what the young women aspire to in their adult lives. There are no internships in medical facilities and only one available at the Department of Human Services. Even still, the young women work hard during Job Club. They show up on time, participate in all activities, and they do everything they can to look professional, from dressing up the little clothing items they have to being creative with their hairstyles. Yet, in my conversations with the Sistergirls about Job Club, they seem unhappy with the total experience, as though it fell short of providing them with something more than some customer service skills and dos and don'ts of office attire.

In essence, the Sistergirls are looking for *more*. Maybe more means a bigger purpose in their lives beyond making money, more meaning beyond living paycheck to paycheck. They don't seem to mind working hard, or even struggling to make those ends

meet, as long as they see something larger in the process and at the end. As I interview the leaders of the Sistergirls, I note that they are trying to make sense of what this *more* is:

SR: Do you enjoy your work at the grocery store?

Amber: Yeah, of course. Because you know, like I always think that I like the job I'm doing right now at The Market. And yeah, they pay you. Yeah, you get paid but it's not enough if you don't get your education. And when you get your education, people respect you.

Although Amber enjoys working at the grocery store (a job she secured without the assistance of Empower), she knows she is missing something—respect—and she thinks that respect (from her co-workers? her boss? customers?) may come with more education. Camille is also trying to make sense of how her education and career will impact her in the future:

SR: Why is dropping out of high school not for you?

Camille: So, you can have a chance to get a job and then you think it's for your children...then your children or your child brings you homework, you can't even look through it. That would be so embarrassing. And then like, you never go to school, you just like have your high school degree and then your husband is a doctor with a PhD and then his friends come home and then they have a conversation, you can't even enter the conversation because you don't know what they're talking about. That's so embarrassing.

Here, Camille's fictitious future children and husband play a role in her current pursuit of higher education. She does not want to be embarrassed—not in front of her children if she is unable to assist them with their homework or with her husband's well-educated friends in casual conversations. Camille continues:

Camille: I want to give back...I just gonna work here and save my little money, help people who need it because there are a lot of organizations. I can be fighting for homeless [people], maybe give my money for someone—not in the streets but like in an organization. Because I'd have more people asking for money, you know. I just gonna...like, what I earn, share half of that paycheck with people who need it. Something like that. If I have a chance I want to do that.

Here, Camille expresses a sentiment shared by other Sistergirls—the desire to give back to others who are less fortunate. She mentions that she would want to share half of her paycheck with an organization, perhaps one that helps homeless people.

None of this *more* is taken up by Job Club—a bigger purpose in their lives, something larger that makes this life worth living. These aspects of what the Sistergirls are looking for, this *more*, is missing from Job Club, perhaps for good reason. It is difficult to develop self-actualization in someone else, to provide a short-term internship that provides money, concrete skills, and a higher purpose. However, the helping professions are steeped in these higher purposes—nursing, medical assistants, social workers—none of these occupations are known for their high-paying salaries. Perhaps more internships in these careers would provide the Sistergirls a temporary source of income and a glimpse into what it would be like to provide critical life services to other people for a living (and what that living would actually “look” like).

The EmoCores

While the Homeboys and Sistergirls have varying degrees of success with Job Club (from essentially no success to very little), the EmoCores have solid victories. Their placements seem to be different from the Homeboys and Sistergirls. Take Eddie, for example. Instead of building houses with Habitat or working with food at the Food

Pantry, he received an internship at the Aberdeen Community Theatre. He told me his experiences there:

SR: What kinds of things did you do at your internship?

Eddie: Well, I did all kinds of things. I mostly learned about how to do lighting and sound in theatre productions. Like, what kind of light produces different effects for the actors on stage, how to work a sound board, things like that. I also learned how to do things backstage, like the curtains and things. It was fun and interesting.

The placement at the Theatre is closely aligned with what Eddie sees himself doing in his future occupation. He is a musician, so operating a sound board and knowing the ins and outs of auditoriums would be a useful skill. In fact, after the internship he told me that he could see himself owning a theatre or live-music venue and that he was researching how much capital he would need to make that happen.

The Community Theatre is not a common Job Club partner with Empower—a staff member made a call with Eddie in mind, and the Theatre was happy to oblige in this one case. The internship ended up being very successful for Eddie, as he enjoyed the experience and the Theatre hired him for part-time work, so his education and skill-building in the theatre arts continues. This result surprised me, as Eddie is antagonistic toward authority, is not openly receptive to orders or directions, and if I'm being honest as a researcher, not very likable in some of the ways the other young people tend to be who were not hired by organizations. I can only speculate that he "showed up" for his job and presented himself in ways that differed from his usual mode in the Drop-In center.

The Job Club experience for Roxy was similar. Roxy aspires to be a graphic artist and author. She often writes poetry and stories and has several ideas for books in her head at any given moment. Roxy joined Job Club and was placed at the

Aberdeen Public Library for her internship. She filed books, helped people on the computers, and on very slow days, she read the graphic art books that surrounded her, getting more ideas about her books and story plots. This internship fitted Roxy perfectly— not just because she aspires to be in the literary arts, but because it required little physical activity (Roxy is very slight and hates physical activity) and plenty of down time for her engage in her other passions—reading and writing. The internship went so well for Roxy that the library asked her to work in the youth section on a part-time paid basis, which she did for a summer.

It would seem that the Empower staff knew the EmoCores well. They know the EmoCores aspirations and, more than that, they seem to know what kind of personalities the EmoCores have and the kinds of jobs that fit those personalities. The EmoCores are not given placements at the Food Pantry or at Habitat—both jobs that require physical exertion and some level of manual labor. The staff are willing to engage organizations in the community that are not usual Job Club partners (Community Theatre) in order to be responsive to the aspirations of the EmoCores. Not only that, but the EmoCores have positive experiences at their placements and are offered part-time employment as a result of the internship—a primary objective of Job Club.

Conclusion

Empower's workshops and Job Club are positive attributes of the organization. For example, a key component of Job Club is that community members volunteer to conduct mock interviews for all Job Club participants. The participants prepare for days leading up to the mock interviews—they practice with each other and finalize their short resumes. By the end of the 3.5 hour session, the young participants will have engaged in

4 mock interviews with various adults who represent a diverse cross-section of occupations. It is a great session for the young participants who get to practice their interviewing skills and remove some of their fears about the process.

It is not Job Club itself (or Empower's workshops) that requires further analysis or critique, but what is done for the sake of some participants and not others. To continue the example above, at the end of the mock interview session, all volunteers debrief with Empower staff, including the executive director, in order to provide feedback and advice on how to improve Job Club training. One of the volunteers at these sessions is a middle-aged White male who works as a top executive for a local corporation. He is immaculately groomed and dressed in a navy blue pin-striped suit, blue and purple silk tie, and silver cufflinks. When the director asks the group how the youth can better their interview skills, he replies, "Some of the kids sat too close to the desk and others put their elbows on the desk. I...some people will feel intimidated by this or be turned off completely." No one in the room questioned his feelings or advice, or mentioned that all 4 of his interviewees were young Black men and women, and if this race factor could have impacted his perception of them getting too close to the desk.

While it is tempting to suggest that many of the issues the Homeboys or Sistergirls experience are due to their personal deficits, I contend that they reflect institutional deficits. To be sure, some of the participants in this study do have personal deficits. Some of them are functionally illiterate, and others have substantial mental health issues that are not addressed adequately. These issues could impact their ability to get and keep jobs. Yet, the institutional structure and agents of Empower also have deficits in their ability to adequately address and respond to the needs of the Homeboys

and Sistergirls, and they seem to be guided by misperceptions of who these young people are and who they are meant to be. I discuss this last point more in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 8

Discussion and Conclusion

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.”

-Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that at its heart, this dissertation is about homeless young people, who are Empower clients, yearning to be regarded as important, valuable people in an increasingly stratified and inequitable society. This research highlights the various ways institutions—primarily schools and Empower—fall short of providing the kinds of affirmations and support that would 1) validate the self-worth of the young men and women and 2) prepare them educationally for the increasingly credential-driven work force.

In this chapter, I return to my original research questions and provide answers—not definitive conclusions, as the stories of these young people have really only just begun—but ones that provide insight into their educational lives and how policies (institutional and federal/state) can improve their life chances. I begin with these answers, move on to a new theoretical perspective on the lives of these young men and women, and end with policy implications.

Answers(?) to Research Questions

The overarching narrative regarding education for the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and to a lesser extent, the EmoCores, is one of marginalization. Some of them have histories of severe trauma and present mental health issues, which increases their marginalization in traditional school settings. For the participants of my study, their present educational issues revolve around the issues of access, both physical and course-related.

Physical Access. The homeless young people in my study had a large problem with issues of educational access, particularly with traditional comprehensive high schools. First, there was a problem with gaining physical access to schooling in general. Because of their high mobility rates, some of the homeless participants would need to change schools several times in a school year. While the state and federal law provides accommodations for them to attend any school they want, they ran into massive roadblocks when they attempted to enroll in Aberdeen's high-ranking public high schools. For example, Jeremy dropped out of high school, but only after attempting to register in several of Aberdeen's comprehensive high schools. He shared his story:

I tried to enroll at Midway High and it did not go well. First of all, I waited forever, then they got the principal and he told me that I couldn't go there. They didn't take homeless students. So that was it. I gave up trying at that point.

On the outside looking in, it may be easy for people to view Jeremy as one-dimensional, as a former student who decided to disengage from schooling as a result of a) homelessness; b) lack of resilience; or c) fill in the blank with a myriad of other ways we make sense of their dropping out. However, based on his story, he only stopped going to school once he was turned away from its doors in such a disrespectful manner. Jeremy's story of a school principal turning him away was one well-known by Empower staff. I

asked Chelsea, Empower’s Director of Residential Services, how often her homeless clients were turned away from schools.

SR: Jeremy told me he tried to register at a school and it was not successful.

Chelsea: Yes. That is a common story. In fact, I accompanied another young man a few weeks ago to Midway High to register and the principal came out and escorted us out of the building. He said they didn’t take homeless students. Escorted us out of the building.

SR: But, isn’t that against the federal and state policy, the law?

Chelsea: Yes it is.

Chelsea shared with me the anger and embarrassment she experienced as she attempted to help enroll her homeless clients in local high schools. Here she was, a person of power in the lives of these young people, and they witnessed time and time again how powerless she was to assist them in gaining access to schooling. She could only imagine their embarrassment as well. Knowing that a great deal of her client list included the Homeboys, I asked her how many young men of color, Black and Latino, had she successfully enrolled in the local high schools. She thought for a moment and responded, “None.” When I asked her if she knew why, she hypothesized that the principals did not want the students, particularly the young men of color to a) cause disciplinary problems and b) lead to reduction in their standardized test scores.

Course Access. For the homeless young adults who remained enrolled in high school, there was a different problem of access—one of coursework and services. Other than Amber and William, none of the young people who were still in school took courses in honors or advanced work. Instead, they were relegated to the bottom tier vocational classes. In the Aberdeen community, vocational classes were in two tiers; the top tier

included classes that, once the entire sequence was taken, would result in a certificate equivalent to an associate's degree in that field. For example, the automotive, construction, and medical courses all ended with a credential that was accepted by businesses in the community for entry level employment. However, access to these courses included prerequisite coursework, a minimum GPA, and teacher recommendations. For homeless students who may be highly mobile, low achieving, or had some problems with discipline referrals in the past, gaining entrance into these courses proved impossible. Even Amber who was in many ways a model student (no discipline referrals, in advanced coursework) had difficulties gaining access to her school's highly sought after physical therapy course sequence. At the conclusion of this research she was still on the waitlist for the first course in the sequence.

Unfortunately, there is little to no success to share for the Homeboys and Sistergirls involved in this study. Amber and William are succeeding in school *despite* the institutions, not because of them. Teachers and administrators had been a part of the problem for these homeless students instead of the solution. They deny access, limit course offerings, and provide little to no assistance to help these young people achieve their educational goals. While they have the greatest reasons to be anti-school, these young men and women are not. The Homeboys and Sistergirls are not against traditional schooling, high school diplomas, or any other type of educational credentialing. It is when they attempt to register and access schooling, and are turned away time and time again, that they quit school or disengage. And when they do find success at enrolling, such as Nathan, their course options are limited so severely (as a reminder, Nathan took

Culinary Arts I three separate times) that they often do not see the point of continuing, as what they are learning is detached from their occupational aspirations.

The way these young homeless men and women imagined their futures had a lot to do with their peer group affiliation. The Homeboys know the importance of education credentials and higher education, but they did not acknowledge its importance in their lives. They do not think that traditional routes of schooling will help them in their occupational aspirations. They desire to be hip hop stars and rap moguls, making millions of dollars performing across the globe and doing something they love. All of their free time is devoted to fine-tuning their craft, writing songs, and practicing the art of the hip hop performance. Because they put everything they have into achieving this singular dream and never falter in their allegiance to it, they are very confident that they will be successful.

Although the majority of the Homeboys were born and raised in this study's community, a small suburb located outside of a large metropolitan area, they all identify the most with the media-backed personifications of urban Black maleness that dominates the airwaves and television screens—one of the prison pipeline and societal mistrust on one hand, and unharnessed creativity, musical innovation, and unsurpassed athleticism on the other hand. Of course, these profiles of Black and Latino men are one-dimensional and/ or narrow, seen as resourceful representations of the athletic of performing body, not via the mind or intellect. But it is these males that the Homeboys view as more “real” than the Barack Obamas and Robert Johnsons of the world. If the Homeboys look at their ecological surroundings, Black and Latino males inhabit very specific spaces, and none of the ones they shared with me included major success stories that resulted from

traditional schooling pathways. None of them had men of color as their teachers (There is a dearth of Black and Latino K-12 teachers in general, and they are found more often in secondary schools; for more information see Lewis, 2006; Marsiglio, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2012). None of their parents attended a four-year higher education institution. The men in their communities who they argue have “made it” have done so through illegal or unconventional means. Interestingly, none of the Homeboys could point to a single person in their community who had successfully broken into the music business, but that did not matter to them—each one of them thought he would be the first to do so.

It is important to acknowledge that the Homeboys are not the only young adults who are fond of the urban male-focused hip hop culture that is most often promoted through media outlets. Youth of all races and economic backgrounds are attracted to various aspects of the hip hop lifestyle (Rozie-Battle, 2002). However, the Homeboys emulate this specific culture with such intensity that they face negative repercussions that other more socially or economically privileged youth do not face. They steal and resort to violence in order to afford the cultural “markers” of rap stars—the clothes, jewelry, and shoes. Perhaps most unfortunate, several of the Homeboys have embraced misogyny as a way of life that is acceptable and one that is promoted by the hip hop artists they admire⁹,

⁹ The scholarly work on this point is extensive (see Trapp, 2005; Miller-Young, 2008; Armstrong, 2001; Rebollo-Gil & Moras, 2012). The point I am making in this section is best supported by Michael Eric Dyson in *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. He writes: “Not only are women blamed for the harm that befalls men, but they are blamed for the limitation that male society imposes on them. This is best exemplified by the self-serving justifications commonly offered for the exploitative placement of women in rap videos: ‘Nobody is making these women appear in the videos; therefore, they must like it and want to do it.’ But that’s like making early black actors the heavies when their only choice in movies was between stereotypical roles. It’s not fair to blame them for the white supremacist practices that limited their roles in the first place. Instead of men saying, ‘We have limited the roles that black women can play in videos to dime piece, hoochie mama, video vixen, eye candy, arm pleasure, sexy dancer, and more variations of the same,’ we blame women for accepting the crumbs from our sexist table and trying to eat

some of them already accumulating a history of abuse towards young women, including assault and domestic battery. The intersection of their race, gender, and homeless status create a unique situation where they imagine their futures to be open and bright, as long as they keep their eye on the rap mogul prize and their hustle and flow ideology. It is nearly impossible for them to imagine their future lives in any other way.

In comparison to the Homeboys, the Sistergirls are beacons of rationality and sensibility—perhaps too much. They do not aspire to lofty occupations, or even upper-middle income professions. Some of them could most certainly be lawyers, doctors, or computer programmers based on their academic potential and internal drive to succeed. However, almost all of the Sistergirls desire to be in one of the helping professions—nursing, social work, therapy, or other jobs where helping people is a primary component and the entry pay is on the lower middle income range.

These occupations are directly related to the Sistergirls social identities. As Black women who happen to be homeless, their dreams seem to emulate the Black women they see in their surroundings who are successful. They talk to the Black nurses in the Aberdeen Free Health Clinic. Most of them have the same Black woman serving as their Human Services Case Worker (new Sistergirls often ask for her by name when they go in for services the first time). Even Amber, who has the most academic potential to attend a four-year institution in the major of her choice, looks to a fictional Black woman on television to aspire to her physical therapy future. Like the Homeboys, these young women lack family or teacher-based examples to draw from in terms of possible

off of our patriarchal leftovers, as self-destructive and spiritually undernourishing as that may be...Men just find it easier to blame women for the limited choices *we* leave them with while ignoring the economic and social constraints on young black women who seek a toehold in the world of hip hop culture and rap videos” (pgs. 108-109).

occupations, but, unlike the Homeboys, they do have Black women in their immediate community circle from which to draw influence.

The Sistergirls imagine their occupational futures in many different ways—and they are fine with any of the options working out. They are optimistic that they can become a nurse, or at least a nurse’s assistant; optimistic that they can be a social worker, or at least a social worker’s administrative assistant. What is most at stake for them is to have secured housing, economic stability, and to be able to take care of their families and their chosen communities in the ways that are important for them. For that, a high-income paycheck is not necessary, but higher education is a must, and they know that to achieve their rational, sensible dreams, they must have postsecondary credentials.

The young people comprising the EmoCores group presented a different gaze for the aspirations of homeless young people and the role of social identities in that. The EmoCores are an all-White, mixed gender group. They live in the same or similar neighborhoods to the Homeboys and Sistergirls—abuse, neglect, and housing instability are commonalities in all of their histories. Their educational and occupational aspirations vary, from being in the music business (producing and performing Emo music) to authoring science fiction graphic novels. Like the Homeboys, they see little ways that traditional schooling can assist them in these dreams—schools have “stifled” Eddie and “disenchanted” Roxy. The EmoCores feel that these art-focused occupations need persistence, creativity, and dedication, not credentials.

Identifying as White does have an impact on how the EmoCores view their educational and occupational futures, and this impact is most likely unnoticed by them. Because they have similar backgrounds and live in the same communities or hideouts as

the Homeboys and Sistergirls, the EmoCores view themselves as the “same” as them. As such, they see the disparities that arise in terms of experiences with institutions or with disparities in educational opportunities as a result of individual motivation, aptitude, or attitude, not structural factors acting upon underrepresented populations in negative, reproductive ways. For example, Eddie blames the Homeboys’ ignorance and “not knowing their place” as the reason why they will not be successful—both in the music business and their internship placements. He fails to acknowledge that the Empower staff goes above and beyond to find him a suitable internship—they do not do this for the Homeboys. Empower grants him leadership opportunities that are not offered to the Homeboys. Teachers give him multiple chances to succeed and hold high expectations for his academic success. These are not experiences common to the Homeboys or Sistergirls.

Eddie does not seem to understand that, because he has certain privileges that accompany his White male identity, that he is able to dream...almost *anything*. There are people that look like him in all sectors of the occupation spectrum. The entire Emo culture to which he belongs is White. He can change his mind day to day about his aspirations and not worry that he will have to pave a way alone to make it a reality (he may *think* he does, but that is more a function of his teenage Emo mind). His ascribed economic status is an obstacle, but one that the institution of Empower seems to be assisting him with overcoming.

We have spoken at length at various times in this dissertation about how schooling institutions are obstacles, not supports, to the aspirations of the homeless young people in my study. Even the White EmoCores, who have various privileges despite their

homeless status, are still poorly served by the schools they attend. The Sistergirls are most apt to capitalize on the offerings of traditional schooling, but most of them are not encouraged to stay in school or provided institutional support to continue schooling past the secondary (neither by teachers, counselors, or administrators). There are other institutions working in the lives of these young people, and they serve these young people differently based on differences in race and the intersection of race and gender. Sometimes the governing paradigms which have structured the lives of nonprofit staff and education-based staff are so powerful that they think they are doing progressive work, such as empowering youth and working alongside marginalized communities to dismantle the structures of various oppressions, when in fact they are reinforcing the paradigms. This is Empower.

While it is supposed to be a positive, constant supporter of the homeless young men and women who come to its doors, Empower more often ends up being another contributor to social reproduction based on social identities. The organization's workshops are based on trite stereotypes for the Homeboys and they often ignore the needs and skill-building of the Sistergirls. The young men of color receive institutional-supported practice time for their rap dreams and little else. They are encouraged to pursue these dreams to a fault—there are no substitute options presented just in case—there is no additional counseling pushing them to enroll in the music engineering program at the local community college. They are pushed to take the GED, even when they have enough credits to continue in one of the local traditional schools. And they are offered short-term paid internships in organization that use them for manual labor and provide little skill-development and no continued employment. The young Black women receive sexual and

reproductive health counseling and anger management tools. They are provided with internships that are stereotypical “women’s work”, offers little skill-development, and few opportunities for continued paid employment. They are encouraged to continue their higher education at community college once they have subsidized housing and a minimum-wage job that requires long hours and no benefits. In contrast, the EmoCores are afforded leadership skill building within the organization and well-matched short-term internships that more often result in continued employment.

As such, Empower, perhaps unintentionally, shapes the aspirations and anticipates the futures of the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and EmoCores in very different ways. Empower staff members are most often the only stable adults in these young peoples’ lives. They are well-educated and respected in the community, and they are young—they have achieved what is for some the unachievable—a four-year college degree (and at times a masters degree) and a successful career before they are 25 years old. The homeless young people who visit Empower trust them, confide in them, and look to them for not only their basic survival necessities, but affirmations of larger significance. They offer unconditional support and encouragement for the Homeboys’ rap dreams, and as a result, the Homeboys consider no other occupational options. They offer no assistance to the Sistergirls in terms of their future occupational aspirations, but focus more on changing their attitudes and behaviors, leaving the young women to believe that their lack of success is the result of personal deficits. They get to know the EmoCores on a deeper level and respond to their aspirations with concrete support—tailored leadership and internship opportunities.

If the institutions serve as obstacles or delimiters to the Homeboys and Sistergirls' future aspirations, what serves as supports? For these two groups, their peer group serves as the biggest source of support for their future occupational dreams. The Homeboys support each other in their rap dreams wholeheartedly. They support each other by writing rap songs collectively, putting together beats as a group, and showing up to every Rhapsody and Rhyme night in order to practice and show solidarity. They take responsibility for each other—both on the streets and in fine-tuning their musical craft. The Sistergirls support each other in similar ways. The ones still enrolled in school or with advanced academic skills assist the other Sistergirls in filling out job or school applications. They encourage each other to stay in school or to pursue higher education. And they celebrate the small and big accomplishments of their Sisters. It is the peer group support that keeps these two groups encouraged to push forward.

A Theoretical Consideration

Based on the findings of my study, I find that a framework that did not assist in conceptualizing my work is helpful in understanding the lives of these young people, and may provide more insight into why they may have such different occupational aspirations and, as such, disparate outcomes. When marginalized young people recognize, consciously or not, that there are structural constraints on *their* social mobility and the inequitable distribution of desirable social rewards for themselves and others who are like them (based on either/or/and race, gender, class, homeless status), they are more likely to interpret their life chances as limited. This is the life chances theory.

The concept of life chances is most apt to discuss what is happening with the three groups of young people at Empower because it places the primary onus of

aspiration creation and accomplishment on the structural level, not the individual. I'll explain this using the three groups as examples. First, the Homeboys all aspire to be rappers or hip hop artists. If I ask Nathan or John or William to explain why they choose this occupation, they may say "because I'm good at it," or because "it is my passion." To them, they willingly chose this occupation from an infinite list of other careers they could have chosen based on their past performances or other life choices. However, from a life chances theory viewpoint, society (media outlets, institutions, policymakers, etc.) presented these young men with certain occupational choices based on their social locations or positions— as young men of color from ascribed low-income households who happen to be experiencing periods of homelessness. The institutions in their lives simply perpetuated these options as "choices" and helped to strengthen the ligatures or social connections that would also perpetuate these "choices". The Homeboys did not "choose" to be rappers as much as they were given the option of being a rapper among a list of other a) highly improbable or b) highly undesirable options.

This plays out differently for the Sistergirls, but with equally tragic and damaging results. The Sistergirls desire to be in the helping professions and if you ask them, they choose that line of career options because they a) care about people and want to give back or b) think they will be good at the jobs based on their inherent nurturing behavior or c) another reason that puts them in control of their options and choices. However, none of them chose medical doctor, which is another helping profession. None of them chose psychologist or lawyer, all careers where people help others who are in need. The professions they aspire to are limited options presented to them in various ways— visibility in their communities, the media portrayals of Black women, and societal

expectations for what are appropriate female occupations. Based on them being Black women from ascribed low-income backgrounds, who are also experiencing periods of homelessness, the options they are given remain in the bounds of gendered and racial expectations for who and what society says Black women are and should aspire to be.

Finally, the EmoCores have the largest amount of occupational options available to them than the other two groups. This is possible even though they disengage in traditional schooling and have similar backgrounds to the Homeboys and Sistergirls. Their social positions or social locations are different—they identify as White adolescents who happen to live in a White-dominated society, which comes with some privileges although they are marginalized in other ways. They are poor, but they are provided with opportunities to learn new and applicable skills through internships. They are provided space and time to “find themselves” by the institutions in their lives, and are supported with resources and guidance in whatever space they find themselves at any given time. Their options are more open—they can aspire to be musical artists, business owners, or anything in between that requires little or no credentialing.

According to Dahrendorf (1996), and indeed illustrated by the participants of my research, life chances are never distributed equally. Dahrendorf notes, “The unequal distribution of life chances is a result of structures of power. Some are in a position to lay down the law by which the standing of others is measured” (p. 27). While schooling institutions, its agents, and Empower may not be the entities that define or lay down the law, they do perpetuate the rules and measure the homeless young people by their propensity to adhere to the laws. In this theory, and indeed in my research findings, there

is little individual agency the young adults possess in order to change their life chances for the better.

Another Theoretical Consideration

I would be remiss if I failed to bring back the ethic of care and its importance to this study. If I have neglected to state this earlier, let me do so now: I believe that schools and organizations whose missions are to assist young people in bettering their lives should care about them. They should care about them and for them when the young people are high achieving, low achieving, compliant to authority, rebellious to a fault, entrepreneurial, apathetic, Black, White, male, female, rich, poor, and all that falls between these. All of the young people in my study, the ones who I came into contact with but failed to interview, and the ones who I often saw on the streets of Aberdeen but never set foot inside Empower, are all worthy and deserving of high levels of care. I do not believe these to be radical viewpoints, or ones that are unrealistic given the state of our education system. All of our nation's children deserve such care.

This dissertation study proves that care “looks different” and is applied inconsistently in the lives of a group of marginalized, vulnerable, and capable young people. As evidenced through the empirical chapters, the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and EmoCores are cared for and about in different ways by schooling agents and Empower staff members, and it is this inequity that contributes to the reproduction of status inequality particularly social class. I return here to some examples.

The Homeboys are cared about in gendered and racialized ways that result in a soft pandering of their aspirations, glimpses of economic progress in short-term internships, and no real investment in their education. Empower supports their musical

ambitions by promoting Rhapsody and Rhyme evenings and by investing time and resources into purchasing state-of-the-art music engineering equipment. Both of these endeavors are designed to increase the Homeboys' performance skills and give them an end-product—a demo cd that they can share with community members and music producers. The organization falls short, however, of investing time and resources into community outreach that may have positive consequences for the Homeboys' musical ambitions—specifically, their lack of contact with the legitimate recording company located five minutes from the drop-in center. If the Homeboys had to create a list of skills they achieved through these organizational resources, they would be hard pressed to come up with any that are valued by employers. Regardless of the end result, Empower is indeed showcasing a type of authentic care for these young men and their occupational futures.

The racialized and gendered care that is extended to the Sistergirls is different from that received by the Homeboys, but produces detrimental results as well. Although the Sistergirls have great potential for economic and social growth, Empower seems to primarily care about their reproductive and sexual health and provides workshops to educate the young women on these topics. This is authentic caring—Empower staff know that these young women face increased victimization and want to equip them with the tools to protect themselves. The organization also cares about the Sistergirls' ability to secure work in the hospitality business—several of the young women have jobs at fast food restaurants or internships at low-paying retailers. These manifestations of care, however, stop short of providing the young women with applicable skills related to their chosen occupational fields. There are no health field internships. There are no workshops

on how to apply to nursing programs or the prerequisites involved. There is little attention given to the Sistergirls' ability to access the local community college or financial aid. The organization's employees spend little time getting to know the young women in depth, a type of knowing that could help them assist the young women in pursuing their dreams. As a result of this type of care, the Sistergirls' experiences and aspirations are often reduced to racialized and gendered stereotypes in that it orients them to work that is traditionally low paying and female-dominated. In the end the girls are left to pull themselves out of poverty through any means possible.

The EmoCores, who are the most resistant to authority and traditional routes of economic success, are given the best internships, supported through leadership opportunities, and are not checked for their explicit prejudicial beliefs and attitudes. Empower staff know the EmoCores' likes and dislikes, enough to design personalized internships for them in spaces where they know the EmoCores will be successful. The organization allows these young people to take leadership roles during the summer music festival, teaching them management, marketing, and audio engineering skills in the process. These experiences are individualized, pointed in purpose, and can be turned into desirable attributes on resumes as these young people search for future employment. In contrast to the authentic care received by the Sistergirls—which is focused unilaterally on their physical and sexual bodies—the authentic care the EmoCores received was more likely to support their efforts to improve their economic and social conditions.

Given the examples above, it is not my conclusion that Empower and the schooling institutions in the young peoples' lives care about them in *more or less* terms, but in *different, inequitable* ways. All of these adolescents face a long and arduous uphill

battle to transcend their difficult backgrounds and achieve their dreams. I argue that the care the three groups received, particularly from Empower, impacts their life chances in different ways and makes that uphill battle easier or shorter for some more than others. For all of the youth, this care difference has real consequences for their social mobility and ability to gain housing stability: the EmoCores are poised to improve their economic condition while the Homeboys and Sistergirls are more likely to reproduce their social class without some other intervention.

It is clear from my analyses and findings that authentic (or what is commonly referred to as interpersonal) caring is not enough for these homeless young adults. While Noddings, Valenzuela, and other scholars note the importance (and indeed, the primacy) of authentic caring, I argue that aesthetic care is just as important if not more so than authentic caring. Aesthetic care (commonly referred to as institutional care) is concerned with things and ideas. In schools, aesthetic care focuses on technical aspects, such as grades, knowledge, and behaviors of students. At Empower, aesthetic care focuses on adherence to procedures, organizational-based outcomes, and behaviors of clients. While this type of care is typically concerned with conformity or rudimentary processes, it also has the potential to be substantial, as evidenced by the aesthetic care provided to the EmoCores. The organization's Job Club and annual music festival were aesthetic caring programs (grant funded, focused on organizational outcomes), but they went beyond that by providing much needed leadership and skill-building for the EmoCores, particularly Roxy and Eddie. It would benefit all of the youth of Empower if the aesthetic care given to the EmoCores were distributed equitably across all the groups.

Aesthetic care does not rely on the development of interpersonal relationships in order for the young people to receive much-needed resources—it is enhanced by it. Equitable care begins at the institutional level. Indeed, at times authentic (or interpersonal) caring is prevented because of the lack of institutional care—the Empower staff hid behind institutional policies of “non-intervention” and “no-touch” when Kim was attacked in front of the Drop-In. I maintain that the organization needs an ethic of care that cares for all clients or participants in equitable ways, in both process and outcomes.

It is also important to discuss some of the reasons why Empower staff in particular were compromised in displaying or evidencing equitable care practices. It is my contention that the EmoCores received more authentic and aesthetic displays of care because the Empower staff may have seen a little of themselves in the EmoCores. Most of the staff members are White, and sharing this racial identity (yet having little else in common) may have made it easier for them to connect with the EmoCores and design useful interventions for their economic and social futures. On the contrary, staff members have less in common with the Homeboys and Sistergirls, and their ideas of what constitutes a realistic, viable future for these young people may depend much more on internal biases, stereotypes, or prejudices. For example, Eddie learned how to use audio engineering at his uniquely designed internship, yet the Homeboys were encouraged to only perform their rap and hip hop music during Rhapsody and Rhyme nights. This mimics the societal stereotype that the producers of music are mostly White, while the performers and entertainers are predominately people of color. It is counterintuitive to have staff members who claim to care—and indeed, I believe they do to some extent—

but they are unable to exhibit and act upon that care in equitable ways that produces equitable outcomes because of internal biases or prejudices and the lack of equity-focused institutional policies.

Policy Implications

Homeless and unaccompanied young people face many challenges in their personal home lives and in schools. Their educational experiences are varied and complicated. Federal policy has attempted to intervene in the lives of these school-aged adolescents in the form of the McKinney-Vento Act (defined and summarized in Chapter 2). McKinney-Vento outlines the rights of homeless students and the responsibilities of the school systems that are in charge of the education of these students. McKinney-Vento serves as an example of the affordances and limitations of federal and state policy implementation designed to be implemented at the local levels.

As evidenced by the educational experiences of the Homeboys, Sistergirls, and EmoCores, as well as the interviews with the Empower staff, the policy is implemented in some schools and school systems to a degree. However, the difference in implementation and the effectiveness of the policy was dependent upon multiple factors. For example, some students were able to enroll in schools and continue their education without being accompanied by a parent and without vital records (birth certificate, social security card, etc.). Others, particularly the young Latino and Black men, were turned away at the door by administrators who either a) failed to know the law or b) blatantly disregarded the law for prejudicial reasons. While the policy addresses formal factors of access, school or staff resources, and travel or mobility concerns, the policy can do little to address informal concerns, such as staff or teacher perceptions of homelessness how

homelessness may intersect with other notable issues of educational inequities regarding race, gender, and class.

Another example of the implementation of McKinney-Vento is in its provision for a homeless liaison. Every school district that receives funding for homeless students must designate a homeless liaison to be a first-line advocate for these students. Aberdeen did have a homeless liaison at the district level and at individual school levels. The district level liaison was responsible for reporting and managing the district budget for its homeless student allocation. The school level liaisons reported to the district employee with names of homeless students and what resources they were providing to those students. Unfortunately, most of these liaisons were teachers appointed to the post by the principal and, according to the district liaison, knew little about homelessness in general or in particular regarding the complexity of homeless student needs. In addition, the district liaison reported during our interview that she had no power to enforce the McKinney-Vento, and that any reporting, resources or advocacy she committed on behalf of the students often went unheard, unmarked, and ignored. She quit the position shortly before our interview in search of more fulfilling work.

There are leverage points in the policy where real improvement can be made for the benefit of homeless students. First, all families should be made aware of the policy and the benefits it provides to students if the need arises. Several of the homeless young people in my study had never heard of McKinney-Vento and after I explained the provisions they noted that it might have been helpful to their persistence in school if they knew about their rights and entitlements before disengaging, particularly the transportation provision. Second, homeless liaisons should be trained for the position, and

they should be the first line of entrance into schools, not the principals. While this may not prevent all students from being turned away at the door, it may decrease the numbers to have a teacher or other staff member who may be more concerned with the well-being of the student than the schools' average standardized test scores.

Finally, McKinney-Vento alone cannot tackle the various urgent needs of the homeless student population. Numerous agencies, institutions, policies, and people must come together in collaboration to thoroughly address the needs of this sub-population of homeless students. It is in the best interest of educational institutions serving homeless students to develop significant and lasting relationships (more than just referrals) with agencies that provide housing, mental/physical health, and life skills training to populations of homeless youth, as well as juvenile criminal justice institutions. Schools alone do not have the capacity to take on such a task. However, collaborating with local, state, and federal institutions may help to fill gaps that currently exist in schools and other institutions unaccompanied homeless young people come upon, to promote positive educational and life outcomes for this group of students.

A Final Note

It is important to note that, in the end, neither Empower nor schools will be the primary reason why the Homeboys do not succeed in making their rap mogul aspirations come true. It will not be the fault of Empower alone that the Sistergirls get caught in a cycle of poverty as they work full-time minimum wage jobs while trying to support their families. However, it may be entirely the result of Empower's programming that the EmoCores gain jobs that increases their ability to move out of poverty and homelessness. It is the work they do, and how they do it differently for different groups of young

people, that enables these disparities to show in explicit and implicit ways. It is also how these institutions position the young people; while the Homeboys and Sistergirls are positioned as “lost” youth who resist help that could lead to the distant shore, the EmoCores are positioned as “wandering,” which implies that they are purposeful in their winding journeys and will happily reach their finish lines with some clear markers and limited guidance.

At the research level, we have attempted to understand the invisible or hidden norms at work that create boundaries where homeless young people are relegated to the margins of society. Unfortunately, when socially-subordinated groups are lumped together as monolithic groups, oppression begins to look like a uniform, one-dimensional problem, which neglects the varying and complex contexts of the different groups. For example, policymakers lump all homeless students together under the McKinney-Vento Act, causing the problems of homeless students to look uniform across all subgroups. This research shows, however, that Black and Latino youth, particularly the young men, face significant access problems that are not there for in the same way for White young adults. It is only when we investigate within and across subgroups that we are able to see how policies impact groups differently.

Conclusion: The Young People of Empower

If Kübler-Ross’s quote at the beginning of this chapter is correct and beautiful people are born out of defeat, suffering, and struggle, then the young participants in my study are among the most beautiful in the world. Indeed, they are empathetic, compassionate, caring. They love to tell jokes, laugh, and have fun with their friends. They are young, resilient, resistant, and not at fault for the lives the luck of birth has

begotten them. The truly lucky ones find their way out of the depths, usually on their own, and they will hopefully go on to assist others who come after them in facing hardships and adversities. Unfortunately, the factual statistics and anecdotes tell us the same story; the factors that propel these young people toward homelessness are the same ones that may keep them there: extreme poverty, mental illness, lack of quality education, and in the case of those who identify as sexual minorities, bigoted beliefs and intolerant social structures.

The purpose of this dissertation was three-fold. First, I sought to address some limitations in the existing scholarly research regarding homeless students and how we study their educational experiences, particularly the experiences of young homeless people of color. Second, I desired to provide a space for the young people to tell their stories, to put their life experiences, in their words, at the center of the research design, analysis, and findings, not relegate them to the margins. Finally, the ultimate purpose of this study, and indeed all of my scholarly work, is to change the world for the better.

While I'm able to say that I addressed the first two goals successfully, the third purpose is still a work in progress.

Recap: This Study

The existing literature on educational and occupational aspirations for youth at large shows a conceptual and empirical link between future orientations or ambition and 1) demographic and personal background factors (Yowell, 2000; Cook et al., 1996); and 2) educational experiences (Flowers, Milner, & Moore; 2003; Museus, Harper, & Nicols, 2010). Building off of this existing model of understanding, I qualitatively examined the lives and experiences of homeless young people to better understand factors influencing

the aspirations of an often invisible marginalized subgroup of school-aged adolescents. As a result, I discovered the crucial role of sub-culture formation when young people became homeless as shaping both their educational experiences and their occupational aspirations. The homeless young people formed three distinct subcultures based on their aspirations, social identities, and past experiences, and these subcultures provided (non-dominant and unvalued) social capital and a sense of belonging. I also found that school members (via youth and staff renderings) and non-profit staff interacted with these three subcultures in significantly different ways, essentially shaping the educational and occupational goals of homeless adolescents through formal and informal means. These institutions encouraged the idealistic ambitions of Black boys; they tempered and diminished the realistic and economically viable ambitions of the Black girls. And they bolstered the pragmatic aspirations of the White participants. Because of the precarious social positioning and the intersection of the multiple marginalized identities of these homeless young people, the Black boys and Black girls are most positioned to obtain occupations that reproduce their ascribed social status, while the White young adults are poised to improve their socioeconomic conditions.

Limitations

This research has limitations, some of which are inherent in all qualitative studies that are focused on depth more than breadth. First, some of the questions asked of participants required them to be retrospective and recall educational experiences that, even in their original space and time, were complex and often emotionally difficult. Therefore, the perspectives and experiences they share are the truths they are currently living with, not definitive realities. Second, for the sake of convenience and safety, I only

interviewed homeless youth who were formally involved with the Empower Drop-In. While this was a design of the research and not explicitly a limitation, the voice of homeless school-aged adolescents who, for many reasons, do not receive structured assistance in meeting their day-to-day needs is missing. It is my hope that future research attends to this regrettable dearth. Finally, the findings of this research are not generalizable to other homeless populations, and should be instead relied upon as a much-needed empirical contribution of understanding, as portraits in young adult homelessness, for this often invisible and marginalized group.

Future Research

There were several significant themes present in this data that I was unable to attend to in this dissertation study that I recommend taking up in future research. One of these will include the educational experiences and aspirations of Black and Latino homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender young adults. Their unique social positioning as sexual minorities led to different educational experiences and occupational aspirations. I will explore the distinct challenges these young people face in navigating school and nonprofit environments in future work. I will also take up issues of social, cultural, and human capital with homeless adolescents more substantially than was possible in this dissertation. All three of the groups I studied had various types of capital that afforded them privileges in some contexts, and disadvantages in others.

Finally, in the tradition of Jay MacLeod and his seminal work *Ain't No Makin' It*, there is a great deal we can learn from these young people as they make the transition from teenager to young adult. Following up with them as they make critical life decisions may assist us in gaining knowledge about where levers for change are in their lives or

where further ligatures emerge. Finally, a separate line of my research will explore the differences in preparation for non-profit organization youth workers and preservice teachers, and how these two similar but disparate fields can potentially speak to or learn from each other in order to positively impact students' experiences and outcomes in formal educational settings.

The Importance of Being *In the Space*

I often thought of the importance of this research as I designed the study. My excitement grew as I thought of building new theory or adding to the scholarly literature on such an invisible population of school-aged young adults. What I failed to consider, however, was how important *I* would be in the research space of Empower. I am an African American lesbian who hails from low-income, rural beginnings and will be obtaining a doctoral degree. The homeless young people I came into contact with were amazed that I was paid a sizable income to read, write, and think. They had never met anyone like me—I looked like a lot of them, I enjoyed their company and listened intently to their dreams and, unfortunately, was privy to their nightmares. I think I made a difference, even a small one, by being a living, breathing example of what is possible in their futures.

Appendix A

Homeless Youth Interview Protocol

Thank you for joining me today for this interview. I am excited to hear about your educational experiences and future goals. This interview is going to take place in sort of two parts. One, I want to know as much as you feel comfortable telling me about your educational experiences, from elementary school to the present grade. Two, I want you to feel free to also talk about what was happening in your personal life during these educational experiences. Please, only share with me as much as you are willing to—I will keep everything we talk about during these interviews confidential. If I ask a question that you're uncomfortable answering, just let me know you do not want to answer and we will move on. You may stop this interview at any time and you will not be penalized in any way if you do so. Do you have any questions or concerns? Please let me know at any time if you do and I will be more than happy to stop and answer your questions.

Demographic Icebreaker: I want to begin by getting to know you a little better so that I can have some context to the stories you will tell me. Can you tell how old you are, what grade you're in, and what school you attend?

[At this point, probe about grade if it doesn't correspond to the typical age; also probe about school if it is outside of the district; i.e., did you attend this school before periods of homelessness.]

Elementary School: Tell me about your elementary school—where did you go, and did you enjoy your experience there? Why or why not?

[Further probes: What type of student were you? Do you remember what your personality was like in elementary school, i.e. shy, extroverted, discipline problem, excited about learning, etc; In what ways was the elementary school good, and in what ways was it not so good?]

Who was your favorite teacher in elementary school, and why was she/he your favorite?

[Look for care or the descriptions of care here. Further probes: what race is the teacher? What subject did he/ she teach? Was this your favorite subject as well? Did your parents/ guardians know she/ he was your favorite teacher?]

What was going on in your personal life during the year when you had this teacher?

[Further probes: Did this teacher know about your personal life issues/ problems?
Was she involved with your parents/ guardians?]

Middle School/ Junior High: Let's move up to junior high or middle school. Where did you go for junior high? What was it like moving from elementary to junior high?

Did you enjoy junior high? Why or why not?

[Further probes: What type of student were you? What kind of grades did you receive? Do you remember what your personality was like as you moved to junior high school, i.e. shy, extroverted, discipline problem, excited about learning, etc; In what ways was the junior high school good, and in what ways was it not so good?]

Who was your favorite teacher in middle school, and why was she/he your favorite?

[Care descriptions may come forth during this answer, or the next. Ask probes if care isn't fore-fronted. Further probes: what race is the teacher and what subject did he/ she teach? Was this your favorite subject as well? Did your parents/ guardians know she/ he was your favorite teacher?]

What was going on in your personal life during the year when you had this teacher?

[Further probes: Did this teacher know about your personal life issues/ problems?
Was she involved with your parents/ guardians?]

Would you say by this point that you enjoyed going to school? Why or why not?

[Further probes: What made school enjoyable?]

High School: Now let's move to the more recent, present day. What was it like going from junior high to high school?

What type of student are you?

[If student doesn't understand question, rephrase; Probes: look for key adjectives like studious, serious, slacker, etc.]

What is your school like?

[Further probes: what's the student body like? What clubs/organizations do you take part? Do you have a lot of friends?]

Who is currently your favorite teacher and why is she/he your favorite?

[Further probes: teacher race? what subject does he/ she teach? Is this your favorite subject as well? Do your parents/ guardians know she/ he was your favorite teacher?]

Who is your least favorite teacher and why?

[Look for the lack of care in the description/ stories of this teacher. Further probes: what subject does he/ she teach? Do you like the subject matter? Does this teacher know about your homeless status? What does this teacher lack that your favorite teacher has?]

What is your personal life like these days?

[Further probes: what does your typical day entail? Which aspects of your personal life are you happy with/ unhappy with and why? What role does school and/or your teachers play in your personal life?]

What are your hobbies? What is something you enjoy doing?

Conclusion Questions: I'd like to finish today's interview with some questions about your thoughts and future goals.

Have you ever thought about dropping out of school? If yes, what was happening in your life when you thought about it? If no, what or who influences you to stay in the game?

Throughout your personal/ family life and experiences, when do you think you needed school/ teachers the most? Did the teachers/ school come through for you? Why or why not?

[Further probes: If school and/or teachers were not there for you, who was? Empower staff? Other family or community members?]

What are your future goals? Do they include college or post-secondary education?

[Further probes: Why are these your goals? Do you think you are limited due to your race/ gender/ class/ homeless status? Where did these educational goals come from—family, friends, teachers, organizational staff?]

Thanks again for your time and your willingness to answer my questions.

Appendix B

Empower Staff Interview Protocol

1. Demographic icebreaker [how long have you been working in this agency? What is your formal role?]
2. What is the agency's mission in regards to public education and the youth that it serves?
3. What challenges do you think the youth in the agency have in regards to receiving a quality secondary education?
4. What additional challenges, if any, do these youth face because of their racial identities (African American, Latino, or White)?
5. Can you give me an example of something positive that a teacher or group of teachers have done in order to help one of the youth using the agency's services? [Why do you think they did this or Why do you think something notable hasn't been done?]
6. Do you think the teachers and educators you come into contact with know about the challenges that the youth your agency serves? Why or why not?
7. What role do individual teachers play in the success of the students you serve?
8. How do the youth using the services of this agency describe their schools or classrooms (positively or negatively)? Do the students talk to you about issues surrounding race and school climate/ teacher relationships?
9. What is the goal of this agency in terms of the future or the long-term aspirations of the youth?
10. If you could provide advice, or even training, for local teachers regarding unaccompanied and homeless youth, what would the advice or training include?

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