YOUTH RETURNING TO SCHOOL:

IDENTITIES IMPOSED, ENACTED, RESISTED, AND EXPLORED

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ABSTRACT

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While high school attrition is a critical issue in the ongoing effort to reduce disparities in educational equity across race and class, rhetoric on the "high school dropout crisis" frequently overlooks the large number of students who reenroll in school or earn their credentials in alternative schools or GED programs. The number of youth and young adults who have returned to school in alternative education settings is growing, but we know little about these students and why they persist. This year-long study explored the experiences, expectations, and identities of nine adolescents who returned to school in a community college-based program for urban high school dropouts. Building on a tradition of ethnographic research with high school leavers (e.g., Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 1997; Rymes, 2001) and using a critical-constructivist approach, I grounded this study in a conceptual framework developed around three strands of work: post-structuralist narrative, identity and possible selves, and youth literacies. Data sources include interviews, conversation groups, observations, and document analysis.

This research offers insights into how students are positioned by assumptions and dominant narratives about urban high school students and dropouts. Via their out-of-school writing practices, their talk about experiences in the program, their narratives about high school, and their hopes and expectations for the future, participants revealed their understandings of success and failure and the ways in which they enacted and resisted identities as "dropout" and "college student." In particular, this study documents how students negotiated the positions made available to them within the program's discourse. I critically investigate how and to what extent

educators welcome students back to school, and what components of returning students'
experiences, identities and "cultural repertoires of practice" (Lee, 2007) are valued. The stories
of participants in this study offer new perspectives on high school attrition and persistence,
suggest a number of opportunities and challenges associated with critical pedagogy, and confirm
the importance of capitalizing on students' out-of-school literacy practices. This study examines
possibilities for reimagining returning students' expansive social networks, past experiences, and
home cultural practices as resources rather than risk factors.

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CHAPTER ONE

Challenging "Dropout:" Approaches to Understanding High School Attrition and Reenrollment

In October 2004 an estimated 3.8 million 16 to 24 year-olds in the United States were out of school without a high school diploma or equivalent degree (Laird, DeBell & Chapman, 2006). This estimate contributes to concerns about high school attrition, the role of schools in helping students to persist, the nature of student engagement, and the capacity of students who leave school to thrive in adulthood. The concern over the impact of dropout on the well-being of young adults and their families is an important area of inquiry in education but also in a range of related disciplines and in the on-the-ground efforts of educators. Adults who do not complete high school or earn an equivalent credential face barriers to employment and financial stability (Sherman & Sherman, 1991; U.S. Census, 2005), fare worse on measures of health and well-being (Laird et al., 2006), and are among the largest groups of people in prison (Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor, & Campbell, 1994). However, for many students, leaving high school is not a permanent decision; instead, it is well-accepted that many high school leavers[1] cycle in and out of adult education programs, often intermittently throughout much of their lives. Despite the relatively large body of scholarly work on high school attrition and ongoing efforts toward dropout prevention, surprisingly little is known about the experiences of students who leave and subsequently return to school.

Recognizing that high school non-completion is a serious issue in education research, practice, and policy, this study attempts to speak critically both to the question of why students leave school and why they return. This project focuses on adolescents and young adults between

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[1] In this study I work to avoid the term "dropout" because of the ways it obscures the role of schools in "pushing out" students, and its connotations with lack of motivation and "giving up." When possible I substitute terms like "non-completers" or "high school leavers." However for ease of language I will occasionally use the term dropout, particularly when citing others or when referring to dominant discourses.

the ages of 16 and 20, and endeavors to add the voices of former high school students to the discussion in a way that has been done infrequently in previous research on high school reenrollment. In this three-part chapter, I first outline the problem as evidenced in the literature; I then discuss the origins of the research questions for the study; finally, I detail the conceptual and research influences on the framing of the project.

Statement of the Problem

High school attrition is a critical issue in efforts to reduce disparities in educational and social access, equality, and equity across race and class. In her 2006 AERA Presidential Address, Gloria Ladson-Billings proposed that educational researchers rethink the notion of the "achievement gap" in terms of an "education debt." She identified the historical, sociopolitical, moral, and economic components of persistent disparities along the lines of race and class in the American educational system. High school attrition is clearly a symptom of the growing debt owed to poor students, English language learners, and students of color who are grossly overrepresented in the number of high school dropouts (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Laird et al., 2006; Orfield, 2004). According to 2007 data, the dropout rate for students from low-income families was ten times higher than for students from high-income families, and while white and Asian/Pacific Islander students have a high school completion rate of 93.5 percent, black students and Hispanic students complete at rates of 88.8 and 72.7 percent, respectively (Cataldi, Laird, KewelRamani & Chapman, 2009).[2]

Looking at graduation rates and dropout rates for over 10,000 schools nationally, Balfanz and Legters (2004) found that that while high school non-completion is widespread geographically, most high school dropouts are clustered in approximately 2,000 schools nationwide that graduate less than 60 percent of incoming freshmen on time. More than one-quarter of these schools are located in the metropolitan regions of Ohio, Michigan, Illinois,

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[2] Drawn from the 2007 Common Core of Data administered by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Pennsylvania and New York. For example, in 2002 in Philadelphia, 20 high schools (61 percent of high schools in the city) graduated less than one-half of the freshman class within four years. Over two-thirds of the high schools in New York City, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Cleveland graduated less than one-half of the freshman class within four years (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004).

Although graduation rates have been on the rise over the past three decades, these improvements have leveled off since the 1990s, most notably for black and low-income students. Balfanz and Legters (2004) found that the number of schools that graduate less than half of the incoming freshman class on time grew over the 1990s. Between 2003 and 2004 the number of low-income students leaving school actually increased (Laird et al., 2006). Some scholars argue that the recent increase in high stakes testing, new accountability measures linked to "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB), and high school exit examinations, like those implemented in New York, Florida, and California, put pressure on schools that may result in the intentional or unintentional "pushing out" of low-performing students. For example, a case study of the Chicago public schools indicated that graduate rates fell after the implementation of high stakes testing (Allensworth, 2004). While NCLB has a strict set of guidelines that states must use in regards to what constitutes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for attendance and test scores, little effort has been made to hold states accountable for graduation rates. Losen (2004) reviewed graduation rate accountability by state and discovered that only ten states have what he terms "a true floor for adequacy in graduation rates." At the time of this study, all other states did not use graduation rates as a measure of AYP and therefore had little incentive under the federal regulation to increase graduation rates.

As evidenced by the research cited here, a wealth of research points to the persistence of high school attrition as a significant problem, particularly in low-income communities of color; however, often left unaccounted in these studies are the large numbers of school leavers who reenroll in high school or enroll in alternative schools or GED programs. Although estimates

vary most research indicates that substantial numbers of high school dropouts return to school. For example, using the High School and Beyond dataset, Kolstad and Kaufman (1989) reported that 44 percent of school leavers attained their high school diplomas or their GED certificate within two years of their expected graduation date. Drawing on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), Berktold, Geis, and Kaufman (1998) similarly found that 42 percent of students who dropped out of school earned a diploma or equivalent credential by 1994, two years after their expected graduation date. Six years later, Hurst, Kelly, and Princiotta (2004) extended that study and found that eight years after the cohort's expected graduation date, 63 percent of dropouts had earned a high school diploma or equivalent. Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2004) discovered that 40 percent of dropouts in Baltimore had earned a high school credential by age 22. These studies of returning students only account for reenrolled students who earn a diploma or GED. Given the well-documented challenges of retention in adult education programs (Comings, Parrella & Soricone, 1999), one can extrapolate that the proportion of dropouts who return to school is far greater than the percentage who earn the credential within a fixed time period. For example, over a five year period, 31 percent of dropouts in San Bernadino Unified School District reenrolled in a district high school, although only 18 percent of them earned their diploma in the district (Berliner, Barrat, Fong & Shirk, 2009).

Although data on the total percentage of students who ever reenroll in school are sparse, research indicates that the number of 16-20 year olds in alternative schools, GED classes, and other adult education settings is growing (Flugman, Perin & Spiegel, 2003; Welch & DiTommaso, 2004). Adult education programs frequently struggle to meet the needs of the growing numbers of young students, and the literature suggests that teenage and young adult learners present particular challenges that many adult education programs feel unequipped to handle (e.g., Hayes, 1999). In response, a greater range of alternative school programs have

emerged in recent years, many designed specifically for adolescents and young adults. The numbers of young school leavers returning to alternative programs is indicative of both greater interest on the part of the young adults who return and enhanced efforts on the part of educational institutions (e.g., school districts, community colleges, and charter schools) to provide alternative pathways for individuals to earn a high school diploma.

Thus, it appears that dropout is rarely permanent, which raises the question about whether academic discourse and research on "dropouts" reflect school leavers' ongoing interest in formal education and their efforts toward persistence. The continued focus on dropout in the literature obscures a number of issues. For example, we know little about the various trajectories of youth who leave school (i.e., reenrollment in traditional schools, enrollment in alternative programs, or multiple (re)enrollments) and the extent to which these trajectories result in a high school credential. Moreover, research tells us little about the ways in which students come to be out of high school; in particular, we know little about the effect of zero tolerance policies (Skiba & Rausch, 2006) or juvenile detention (Meyer, Reppucci & Owen, 2006) in the disruption of students' high school careers. Likewise, we know little about students' attempts to participate in the growing number of opportunities for out-of-school youth, their experiences in these programs, and the extent to which these programs meet their needs differently than traditional high schools. Conventional wisdom, along with research from the field of adult literacy, suggests that these students return to find a better job, to gain a sense of pride, or to provide more opportunities for their children. Some quantitative studies have attempted to map the characteristics of students who return to education programs (e.g., Chuang, 1997; Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 2004; Goldman & Bradley, 1996; Sherman & Sherman, 1991; Wayman, 2001). Salient factors drawn from this literature indicate that dropouts who are more likely to return to school share several characteristics: they leave school later, have more work experience, score higher on standardized tests, and are of higher socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, these studies tell us little about the

lives of students between dropout and reenrollment, their evolving identities, and the ways in which the experience of being out of school has affected their sense of self and imagined possibilities for the future. This dissertation speaks to these issues by complicating traditional assumptions about "dropouts" and by closely documenting the experiences of adolescents returning to an alternative program for out-of-school youth.

Also understudied are the extent to which and the pathways through which reenrolled or reengaged students matriculate to post-secondary education. In the post-industrial economic climate, schooling beyond high school is strongly correlated with increased opportunity and earning potential over the life course (Day & Newburger, 2002). Research indicates that students who leave high school are far less likely to enroll in post-secondary institutions, even after earning their credential. According to NELS data, 43 percent of students who ever dropped out of high school enrolled in a post-secondary institution in comparison to 87 percent of traditional graduates (Hurst, Kelly & Princiotta, 2004). The importance of connecting high school leavers with post-secondary schooling opportunities is underscored by ongoing questions about the "equivalence" between the GED and a traditional diploma. Research indicates that GED holders earn less than high school graduates (Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Cao, Stromsdorfer & Weeks, 1996), but with two years of post-secondary schooling all differences in earnings disappear (Cao et al., 1996). Unfortunately, Murnane, Willett and Tyler (2000) discovered that only 11 percent of GED holders had completed one year of college by age 27. Thus, GED and alternative diploma programs will be most effective in improving the life chances of students when they offer direct pathways to post-secondary educational opportunities. This is particularly important for youth of color and poor youth who continue to encounter obstacles in accessing higher education (Massey, Charles, Lundy & Fisher, 2006). In the past decade, in large part through funding from foundations, among them the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, a number of new and innovative programs have been developed to respond to the need to connect out-of-school

youth with post-secondary education. While these programs are proliferating, the lives of students in them are largely unknown to researchers and policymakers.

A substantial corpus of research from across disciplines attempts to understand why students leave school, often with a focus on prevention (e.g., Knesting, 2008; Lehr, Clapper & Thurlow, 2005; Sherman & Sherman, 1991). Likewise, a growing body of ethnographic research has closely examined the lives of school leavers (e.g., Fine, 1991; Robinson, 2007; Smyth & Hattum, 2004). However, little attention in the research has been given to the experiences of students returning to school and their understandings of their own persistence and the significance they attach to school. Learning more about the lives of young adults who return to education programs is of great importance for two primary reasons related to research, practice, and policy. First, researchers can increase their knowledge of the issues that contributed to students' dropping out of high school. Such information can inform us about the ways that learning environments can be structured and revised to support potential school leavers, sustain their school participation, and perhaps increase graduation rates. Second, institutions may be able to use the findings of this study to improve programs for returning students. Inherent in this dissertation is an acknowledgement that school systems are inadequately serving large segments of the student population, and that adult education programs are increasingly overwhelmed by reenrolling youth. To address the enduring "education debt" in our country, we must develop a more nuanced understanding of the lives of these young people. The current project was designed to contribute to efforts to make both traditional high schools and programs for returning students more accessible, equitable, and amenable to students with a broad range of needs.

Research Questions

My interest in students returning to school evolved out of my work in adult education settings as a research assistant, tutor, and program coordinator. While I had grown to enjoy working with adult learners for many reasons, in retrospect, perhaps what attracted me to this

population was the rhetoric that suggests adult learners are more motivated than children or adolescents. Conventional wisdom implies that after years of struggles and challenges, students who come back to school as adults have discovered or realized the value of education and therefore are more determined and, in the view of many, more compliant learners. As such, it is frequently assumed that students in community-based programs and community colleges are more eager to learn than students in traditional high schools.

These assumptions were relatively unexamined until I began exploring the literature about students returning to school. As I read about the increasing number of youth enrolling in GED programs and I heard about increasing efforts to develop multiple pathways to graduation, I began to question my own ideas. For students who leave high school, is persistence something that is lost in adolescence and then regained later in life? Or might we understand the experiences of young adults who have left high school differently? In electing to work with adolescents returning to school, I have selected a "negative case" for my initial assumption. These students are not returning to school after decades of hardship enlightened them about the importance of education; instead they are returning to school just months after leaving, suggesting new ways to think about student motivation and persistence.

Adult learners and high school dropouts are frequently discussed in terms of educational deficits, and I too was guilty of using deficit thinking in my own practice. However, in my coursework I had the opportunity to read extensively about the rich literate lives of out-of-school youth and adults. In this ongoing process of reframing my own thinking about adult learners, I began to wonder specifically about the intersections of school and non-school literacies for students who were crossing the boundary between dropout and student. How are those literacies negotiated as they move back into the structure of a formal schooling environment? Likewise, I began to apply literacy frameworks to raise questions about how students returning to school

might use literacy practices to perform and negotiate multiple identities across home, school, and community contexts.

Although I have not pursued it, I had long considered teaching in a community college because of the opportunities it would afford to work with an incredibly heterogeneous group of students, many of them in need of excellent pedagogy. Over the course of my doctoral career, I conducted two small-scale research projects at a community college and I was fascinated by the persistence stories of the students, many of whom struggled with competing commitments from school, work and home, and in so doing often had to take a semester or more off from school. "Stop-outs," they were called, and the community college with its flexible enrollment plans was uniquely equipped to accommodate them. The community college as a setting intrigued me too, a huge number of instructors, a large percent of them adjunct, with a range of life experience and teaching philosophies, working to offer opportunities to the students in higher education most in need.

When I discovered there was relatively new program serving adolescent dropouts located at an urban community college, it seemed a perfect opportunity to continue my investigation of the community college context, while exploring my questions about young students returning to school. When I proposed the project, I drafted the following questions and subquestions. While collecting my data, my thinking was reframed considerably and I now see the many ways these questions are inadequate to capture the experiences of students who neither think of themselves as dropouts nor can identify any one "decision" to leave or return to school. (This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three.) Nonetheless, these questions served as my guide as I worked to understand how and why students leave school and under what circumstances they return.

1) What expectations of learning and life do high school dropouts bring with them when they return to school?

   a) How do they describe their hopes, fears, and expectations for the future?

b) What identities do they take up in their narratives of leaving and returning to school?

c) Against and within what master narratives do they frame their stories of leaving and returning to school?

2) Why do students leave school and why and how do they make the decision to return?

a) How do they talk about their experiences as high school students?

b) How do they talk about their out-of-school experiences and their decision to return?

c) What do these narratives of dropout and return reveal about the ways in which students' understandings of themselves and of education, success, and achievement have changed over time?

3) What are the experiences of returning students in a college-based program for adolescent dropouts?

a) How are students positioned and how do they position themselves in this program?

b) To what extent and in what ways do they take up and enact identities as "college student" and "dropout?"

c) What literacy practices and texts are central to the ways in which students represent their experiences and enact various identities and cultures?

Conceptual Framework and Relevant Literatures

Embedded in these questions are multiple assumptions about the experiences of high school dropouts returning to school, including the notion that narratives can yield important insights into student experiences, that students who return to school imagine a life for themselves that is of interest to practitioners and researchers, and that studying students' literacy practices offers insights into their identities. These assumptions are grounded in literature that crosses multiple domains of scholarship. This study builds on previous ethnographic research with high school dropouts and uses a conceptual framework drawing on narrative, identity and possible

selves, and youth literacies. In this section I discuss the research that informed the framing of this study and the epistemological assumptions underlying my approach.

Perspectives on "Dropout"

Psychological and survey research has long been employed in an attempt to understand why students leave school. For example, Rumberger's (2004) model of school engagement is an often-cited summary of the range of factors related to persistence in high school. Drawing on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Rumberger identifies a number of explanations for leaving school that include school-, family-, and employment-related reasons. One of his primary findings is that students cite school-related reasons (e.g., lack of academic or social engagement in school) more frequently than familial or employment reasons. Unfortunately, survey research has significant limitations for understanding the complexities of an individual's decision to leave school. This project is informed by qualitative research specifically focused on high school dropouts (e.g., Fine, 1991; Rymes, 2001) that suggests that students' decisions to leave high school are nested in a number of social and contextual factors that cannot be captured by asking students to select from a list of reasons. Instead, former students share intricate narratives that offer a nuanced picture of their schools, their self-perceptions, their peers, their families, and their communities. Rymes (2001) argues that students frame and reframe their reasons for dropping out of school depending on the context in which they are speaking and the reinforcement they receive from listeners. Her findings provoke questions about whether surveys, administered once, can effectively capture the complexities of dropping out.

Moreover, Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) point out that statistical analyses of large-scale data sets on high school leavers typically result in discussions framed around student characteristics, rather than school, community, or societal factors. Thus, the tendency, even if unintentional, is to view dropouts through a deficit lens that focuses on risk factors, motivation,

family characteristics, and disengagement. Even the concepts of self-image and self-esteem, which underpin some theories of dropout (e.g., Finn, 1989), focus on the traits of individuals and conceal institutional and social realities.

Likewise, the notion of student "resistance" to dominant norms or culture is frequently used to explain the so-called "achievement gap" (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 2000; MacLeod 2000), yet theories of resistance can also focus attention away from the schools these students leave, placing the "blame" for disengagement on the students. In general, "resistance" is under-theorized and therefore of uncertain utility as a conceptual framework (Trimbur, 2001). In their ethnography of African-Canadians' disengagement from school, Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine (1997) point out that resistance to school can take on many forms including an increased engagement in student organizations, self-education, or political efforts. Their study is useful because it signals the importance of considering race, class, gender, and culture as more than just variables, but as aspects of identity that are central to the lived experiences of adolescents who leave school.

For several decades many researchers have worked to counter these tendencies to view dropouts as one-dimensional failures. This study attempts to follow in that tradition. Several notable studies have offered an alternative lens for understanding the experiences of students who do not graduate. For example, Farrell (1990) gave voice to high schools students and dropouts by employing "at risk" students as "collaborators" who interviewed their peers about their experiences. Fine's (1991) ethnography of an urban high school spotlights the institutional forces that silence students. Her data suggest that many students who leave school exhibit a "critical consciousness" and question the ideology of meritocracy and social mobility. Similarly, in Willis' (1977) ethnography of working class British youth, the "lads" rejected middle class (and by extension school) values of individuality, obedience, social mobility, and theoretical knowledge. Willis' analysis famously posits that these youth "penetrate" dominant discourses

and critically read the social and economic realities of their situation. Blake's (2004) study of children of migrant workers and incarcerated youth revealed that some youth felt school was "useless, boring, complicated, dangerous, and even 'evil'" (p. 39). Like Willis and Fine, Blake found that the young men she observed and interviewed saw little connection between school and the realities of their lives. These studies speak not only to the failure of schools to successfully engage large groups of students, but also to the complex issues schools face given the multitude of challenges low-income youth, youth of color, and immigrant youth face in their lives outside of school.

The strength of critical qualitative work is not only its ability to create rich portraits of the lives of students who leave school, but also to point to the structural and institutional systems that in Fine's (1991) words "enable, obscure, and legitimate" high school dropout. LeCompte and Dworkin (1991) argue in their analysis of student dropout and teacher burnout that the structure of contemporary schooling is in conflict with current economic and social systems. They provide a compelling theory of alienation centered on a gap between expectations and experiences that leads to a sense of "powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness" (p. 155). Although they do not include the voices of students or teachers, their work and the work of sociologists like Bowles and Gintis (1976) delineate the relationships between economic trends, social class structure, and educational systems. It is also worth noting that a significant portion of high school dropouts leave school "involuntarily" because they are expelled or incarcerated. For these young men and women, returning to school can prove exceptionally difficult, and data suggest that a majority of adjudicated youth do not reenroll in high school after release (Brock & Keegan, 2007). Young mothers without childcare provisions, students from low-income families who feel pressure to maintain a full-time job, students with special needs that remain unmet, and students who feel unsafe or unwelcome in their schools (e.g., transgendered, gay and lesbian students,

students with disabilities, or immigrant students) may drop out for reasons that have little to do with academic achievement, aptitude, motivation, or resistance.

Drawing on this research tradition, a fundamental tenet of this study is that high school students who leave school have a variety of experiences that may not be effectively captured in the term "dropout." The data in this study indicate that students return to school with a range of experiences both in and out of high school that may not be merely reflective of "disengagement" or "resistance," but instead constitute learning, growth, and the development of identity.

Narrative

In Metzer's (1997) qualitative study of dropouts returning to school, he reports that most of the dropouts in his study returned to school after "some kind of pivotal event or realization" (p. 6). Metzer writes that while many respondents reported feeling more mature, wanting a better life, or feeling more motivated, critical incidents in the respondents' lives (i.e., the loss of a job, the birth of new baby, or the graduation of friends) were essential in precipitating the respondents' return to school. The notion of the "turning point narrative" is pervasive both in scholarship on narrative and in popular media. American culture mythologizes the former gang member who now works to prevent violence, the cut-throat businessman turned philanthropist, the drug-abuser turned motivational speaker. These archetypes embody a "redemption-sequence narrative" in which the protagonist makes a life-transition from a negative situation or experience to a positive one (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Metzer's data analysis draws on a classic redemption narrative in which former high school dropouts experience an epiphany and then begin a new section of their life. Unfortunately, Metzer presents the turning point stories narrated by the participants in his study uncritically. In his conclusion he writes of students who made the decision to return: "What is required is the critical event, the idea, perhaps from an outsider, insight that suddenly emerges and brings about the decision to return to education" (p. 30). In so doing, he presents turning point as "fact" and propagates an individualistic mythology that states

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students must experience a "critical incident" in order to make the decision to return to school. Metzer offers little analysis of what these stories tell us about the ways in which students are making sense of their world and their position in it.

Rather than focusing on a particular event that precipitated return, the present study utilizes a post-structuralist narrative lens to understand the stories of returning students in relationship to dominant narratives. Work by Bruner (1990), Labov and Waletzsky (1967) and others has laid the theoretical foundation for the use of narrative as a lens of interpretation in education and social sciences. According to Bell (2002), a narrative approach to research "rests on the epistemological assumption that we as human beings make sense of random experiences through the imposition of story structures" (p. 207). Memories, both individual and collective, as well as experiences, norms, values, thoughts, and feelings manifest in the ways in which people choose to narrate their lives. The study of narratives gives insight into how individuals make sense of experiences over time, and therefore is a particularly appropriate frame for an inquiry into the experiences of students leaving and subsequently returning to school. Summerfield (1994) argues that "[Stories] represent ways of knowing, ways of constructing our lives and values" (p. 180). Thus, an analysis of a participant's story may or may not reveal the "facts" about her experiences, but is likely to reveal the way she is positioning herself in the world. In Warriner's (2004) study of the stories of recently arrived refugees, she chose to examine the interviews through a narrative lens because, in her words, "the content of the story and the way it is told contribute to the representation, construction, and enactment of identity" (p. 282). My first research question was developed on the assumption that by studying the narratives of returning students, I could learn about dominant narrative structures available to high school dropouts and the ways in which they take up and reject these narratives in their enactment of multiple identities.

Using a post-structuralist lens, Barbara Kamler (2001) calls attention to the limitations of narratives in uncovering a single truth. She writes, "stories do not tell single truths, but rather represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it… stories are partial, they are located rather than universal" (pp. 45- 46). Kamler's discussion of narrative in relationship to critical writing pedagogy, offers a useful frame to qualitative researchers. She argues, "the narrator is a position, an angle of vision and not simply the student confessing his or her authentic feelings or truths" (p. 144). Pavlenko (2002) writes that "narratives are not purely individual constructions – they are powerfully shaped by social, cultural and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor" (p. 214). Personal narratives offer a particular representation of memories that is affected by dominant discourses, local contextual factors, and cultural conventions. This is not to say that the narratives of our participants do not offer us any "truths" about their experiences. Wortham and Gadsden (2006), for example, use narrative analysis to understand how young urban fathers position themselves in relationship to the domains of "street" and "home." I frame this study with the assumption that the analysis and interpretation of narratives can reveal important information about participants' enacted identities, implicit belief structures, and lived experiences, vis-à-vis larger structural and cultural forces. It is worth noting that I understand identity not as static or unitary, but as fluid, multiple, and dependent on local context. Julie Bettie's (2003) notion of class identity as both as a performance and performative is useful here. Bettie contends that class identity can be performed in a number of symbolic ways including through dress, makeup, and sexuality. These performances are the result of constant positioning and repositioning in relationship to local and dominant narratives.

I use the term "dominant narratives" or "master narratives" to refer to the stories that circulate in popular, political, and commercial cultures (e.g., Rappaport, 2000). Pam Gilbert (1992) argued that "the power of storying to regulate and order our cultural life should be a key

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question for educational research" (p. 211). This study speaks to this charge by looking at how returning students talk about and respond to dominant narratives about students who do not finish school (i.e., dropouts as deviant, lazy, unmotivated, or defiant). The notion of dominant narratives or master narratives is central to Kamler's (2001) discussion of a narrator's production of a story. In her description of a writing workshop with older women, Kamler reflects on the dominant narratives available to ageing women that frame them as passive, silent, and invisible. In response, she encourages writers to take up alternate narratives, and "do counternarrative work" to reimagine the identities available to them. Warriner's (2004) interviews with refugee women demonstrated that they too worked both within and against master narratives of meritocracy and opportunity. Orellana's (1999) study of elementary school Latino children investigated the way young boys and girls assumed identities in their writing. She discovered that master narratives of love, romance, and "goodness" or "badness" are evident in student writing, even as a few students subvert and invent alternative identities in their writing. Likewise, Walton, Weatherall and Jackson's (2002) analysis of pre-teen narrative writing found that the master narratives of romance circulated in popular culture limited the subject positions available to the writers.

These studies raise the question about what dominant or master narratives high school dropouts are working within or against. Stevenson and Ellsworth's (1993) interviews with white working class dropouts revealed that these former students generally accepted and internalized mass mediated images of dropouts as "incompetent" or "deviant." Interestingly, unlike the participants in Fine's (1991) study, these dropouts "self-silenced" their critiques of the school and voiced master narratives of independence, hard work, and opportunity. In Rymes' (2001) work with returning students she analyzes that common feature of the "turning point" in which the narrator distances himself or herself from a former self who was responsible for leaving school. The turning point in the storyline allows narrators to create two characters within their life story:

the first was lured into gangs or other negative behaviors; the second self rejects those influences and is on the path to success. Instead of interpreting the turning point as a necessary prerequisite for a student's return to school, Rymes analyzes these data critically and writes, "These stories become testimonials to the abandonment of a rejected self, calling upon a particular set of linguistic and indexical resources to depict the turn to a new life" (p. 74). The notion that dual identities as "dropout" and "successful student" are, in Rymes words, "mutually incompatible" raises questions about the pervasiveness of the turning point storyline. One wonders if dominant narratives of redemption or rebirth may influence students who struggle to reconcile their past and former selves within a cohesive identity.

This study presents a close examination of the narratives of returning students with an eye to what these reveal about available identities and subject positions for students who leave school. What sources of popular culture are important to students and how do they figure into the way these students narrate their lives? How do master narratives about success and failure affect students' identity constructions? In what ways are these students doing counternarrative work and seeking alternatives stories to make sense of the structures that surround them?

Possible Selves

Closely related to work on narrative constructions of self, is the theoretical notion of "possible selves" developed by Markus and Nurius (1986): "Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming" (p. 954). Born out of literature in psychology, the domain of possible selves was developed to expand understandings of self-knowledge and self-concept. Possible selves are temporally constructed ideations of future identity and are frequently categorized in research into "hoped-for selves," "feared selves," and "expected selves." Hoped-for selves might include financial stability, marriage, happiness, and health. Feared selves may include poverty and loneliness. Markus and Nurius characterize possible selves as both "individualized" and

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"distinctly social" (p. 954). That is, their framework does not define possible selves as abstract archetypes, but as facets of identity that are drawn from "past selves," personal history, and past and current social and cultural context. The work on possible selves has been influential in current understandings of the self-concept as multiple and changing, as opposed to earlier frameworks that viewed self-concept as monolithic (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

Much of the research on possible selves has focused on links between feared or expected selves and motivation or behavior. This has resulted in a substantial corpus of empirical work measuring correlations between the range of expected selves and academic performance, juvenile delinquency, and other behaviors. For example, Oyserman, Bybee, Terry and Hart-Johnson (2004) explore the ways in which "self-regulatory possible selves" can motivate current behaviors and actions when they are accompanied by self-change strategies. Using an adult development perspective, possible selves have been understood as "blueprints" (Cross & Markus, 1991) or "roadmaps" (Oyserman et al., 2004) for change and growth throughout the life course. In adolescence, positive outcomes related to academic achievement and delinquency have been associated with what Oyserman and Markus (1990) call "balanced selves" or a combination of goals and fears.

Research indicates that hoped-for and expected selves are influenced by various elements of social identities including race, class, and gender (e.g., Fryberg & Markus, 2003; Oyserman, Bybee & Terry, 2003; Yowell, 2000). Granberg (2006) characterizes theories of possible selves as similar to self-discrepancy theories. That is, individuals must work to reconcile the differences between their hoped-for selves and their current social identities and contexts. In this way, theoretical work on possible selves has been compared to Steele and Aronson's (1995) work on stereotype threat. Self-regulatory behavior, according to Oyserman, Bybee and Terry (2006), is only likely when hoped-for selves are "made to feel like 'true' selves and connected with social identity" (p. 188). Gadsden, Wortham, and Turner (2003) found that young African American

fathers' perceptions of "familial, peer, and legal systems as barriers and resources" were important to how they created their possible selves (p. 395). These findings raise questions about the ways in which high school leavers are or are not constrained as they construct hoped-for selves, expected selves and "plausible selves" (Oyserman et al., 2004). Despite its rich potential and the growing body of research on possible selves and adolescents' academic achievement and career goals (e.g., Shepard, 2000), the possible selves framework has rarely been used to investigate how youth reflect on their identities as "dropout" and "student."

One of the affordances of the possible selves framework is its implications for methodology and its connection to narrative. Although most of the early work in this area focused on patterns in large-scale data sets, recently theories of possible selves have been applied to a broad range of work representing a diversity of stances and methods. Packard and Conway (2006) categorize the literature on possible selves into two broad categories. The first views the self as "a collection of schemas" and has deep roots in the psychological literature. The second conceptualizes the self "as a story," grows out of the narrative tradition (i.e., Bruner, 1990), and is aligned with the post-structuralist theoretical stance outlined above. These theoretical differences have implications for method. Markus and Nurius' (1986) Possible Selves Questionnaire, a structured survey instrument, continues to be used in studies on possible selves; however, more recent work has employed a narrative methodology that positions the researcher not as an extractor of information, but as a co-constructor of a participant's ever-unfinished narrative. In her study on methods and possible selves Whitty (2002) argues that an open-ended narrative prompt "allows one to gather a richer portrait of the individual's life goals than would be afforded by questionnaire measures of these constructs" (p. 124).

The current study is influenced by the conceptual framing of a number of studies that combine narrative methods and theories of possible selves to uncover the ways adolescents and young adults view their present and future identities. Halverson's (2005) research explored the

possible selves of LGBTQ youth through narrative and performance. One of her central

questions – how do youth grapple with "taking on the stigmatized identity of homosexuality" (p.

71) – might be applied to youth who have left school are confronted with the possibility of taking

on the stigmatized identity of "dropout." Shepard's (2004) work with rural young women used

the possible selves framework to investigate life-career development. Her study revealed that the

participants had detailed and elaborated possible selves within the "domains of personal attributes

and relationships" (p. 85); however, they described their career possible selves in vague and

generalized terms. In her analysis Shepard connects this finding to the social, economic, and

material realities of the rural community in which she conducted her study. Similarly, Gadsden et

al. (2003) found that the young African American fathers in their study constructed possible

selves of fatherhood that were largely "undefined" because of various life experiences (including

father absence in their own lives), real and perceived obstacles, and the ways in which they

situated their identities within various contexts. In a study conducted by Hunter and her

colleagues (2006), young African American men revealed through narrative that they were aware

that they may not be able to actualize their desired selves. This research indicates that the

constructing of possible selves occurs within and against social contexts that work to restrict the

imagined futures of marginalized and stigmatized groups.

Recently, this theoretical construct has also been applied to understanding multiple,

contextual, and "continuously revised" (Giddens, 1991) identities. As indicated above,

qualitative research on students returning to school that has demonstrated the ways in which

students "reinvent themselves" (Hull, Jury, & Zacher, 2007), talk about the "turning point" which

provoked their return (Metzer, 1997), and through their discourse reveal their "abandonment of a

rejected self" (Rymes, 2001). Viewing these stories through the lens of the possible selves, offers

an additional opportunity for analysis. Halverson (2005) notes that by definition possible selves

"implies a more fluid notion of identity, one that demands the acknowledgement of both past and

future self-conceptions, and an understanding of the interplay between past, present, and future, as the way in which identity is formed" (p. 71). King and Raspin's (2004) research demonstrates this fluidity in a useful way; they asked participants to write narratives about their "current best possible self" and about a possible self that they once imagined, but that is now impossible or unattainable (a "lost possible self"). Similarly, although he does not explicitly use the possible selves framework, Farrell's (1990) analysis of the stories of high school students centers on seven current- and future-oriented "selves." He posits that the struggle to reconcile and integrate these multiple selves is a critical challenge for adolescents. This dissertation sought to understand more about how young people returning to high school create and enact narratives of changing identities. How do they describe their hoped-for, feared, lost, and expected selves?

Youth Literacies

Implicit in the central research questions driving this study is a concern with identity. In understanding more about students' narratives of dropout and return, this project works to uncover something about the way youth who have left school understand themselves as individuals, and as members of their classroom, peer group, community, and generation. The third strand of the proposed project's conceptual frame is drawn out of the expansive body of research and theory on literacy as a sociocultural practice as it relates to narrative production and identity construction. In the framing of this project I self-consciously use the term "youth literacies" to mark a particular theorization of the literacies of adolescence and young adulthood that is grounded in a youth cultures framework. Although the literacy of high school leavers is most frequently considered from a school-based deficit perspective, sociocultural studies of the literacies of youth have revealed the ways in which even "marginalized readers" (Franzak, 2006) engage in intricate literacy practices. Broadened definitions of literacy under this framework represent a sharp break from traditional notions of literacy as an autonomous set of skills used to decode and make meaning from decontextualized written text. Drawing on the early work of

Scribner and Cole (1981), Street (1984), and Heath (1983) and more recent pieces like Kress and

Van Leeuwen (2001) and Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996), this project understands literacy

practices as embedded in local context, highly complex and multimodal, instrumental in the

maintenance of power and privilege, and inextricably linked to the enactment of identity.

The scholarship on adult literacy and adult education provides a useful lens through

which to view the literate lives of young men and women leaving high school. Firstly, adult

educators have long pointed to the rich and productive lives of learners who are commonly

labeled "illiterate." For example, Lytle's (1990) four dimensions of literacy development in

adulthood – beliefs, practices, processes, and plans – offer a theoretically nuanced way of

understanding the literacies of adult learners. This framework calls attention to adult learners'

prior knowledge, current activities and strategies, and forward-looking goals and thus prompts

researchers and educators to depart from one-dimensional characterizations of students (i.e.,

functionally illiterate). Similarly, Belzer's (2002) work with adult literacy learners indicates the

importance of understanding past experiences, particularly past school experiences, of learners in

adult literacy classrooms. She demonstrates the ways in which schools' messages about literacy

have a "destructive" impact on marginalized students who come to see themselves as non-readers.

Freire (1987) challenges adult educators to recognize the ways in which learners enter classrooms

with complex ways of reading the word and the world. In Freire's model of adult literacy

education, students' questions and concerns become the central text in the classroom; through the

critical examination of these texts, students question and examine the status quo and investigate

the ways in which language upholds dominant ideologies and the ways particular discourses are

favored over others (Shor, 2005). While these principles have been applied to elementary and

middle school classrooms, their roots in political education for adults have particular relevance to

young adult learners returning to school. The critical literacy framework is useful because it

recognizes the potential for marginalized students, in this case school leavers, to become critical agents and to develop a body of political knowledge (Thompson & Gitlin, 1995).

These insights from the field adult literacy, however, have limitations for work with young adults. They fail to consider, for example, the particular circumstances of young men and young women who are transitioning to adulthood. Research under the umbrella of "adolescent literacy" represents a wide range of work, some of which considers the particular ways in which youth engage with texts to forge identities. For example, in Moje's (2000) study of the literacy practices of gang-connected youth, she reimagines literacy practices as tools. Thus, literacy is used for a purpose: "to claim a space," "to construct an identity," or "to take a social position in [the world]" (p. 651). In her case study of two high school students, Nielson (1998) notes that for these adolescents "texts hold potential as symbolic resources" which present "opportunities for trying on and taking up often multiple and conflicting roles or identities" (p. 4). For one of her focal students, the reading and rereading of *Catcher in the Rye* is an opportunity to imagine a romantic relationship with a protective figure. For another, the movie *Pulp Fiction* provides an opportunity to imitate powerful masculine archetypes. In Nielson's analysis, texts offer places for youth to harbor dreams and to imagine future selves. Finders' (1997) ethnographic study of the literacies of junior high school girls demonstrates the ways in which reading and writing practices (like magazine reading, graffiti writing, and note passing) are used to solidify group membership and jostle for status within the group. Similarly, studies of teenagers' use of fanfiction, online chat rooms, and weblogs, (e.g., Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) demonstrate how users can become part of "imagined communities." Blackburn's (2002) analysis of "literacy performances" among gay and lesbian adolescents offers an example of the ways in which youth use literacy to disrupt imposed identities and cultural expectations.

The appropriation and hybridization of textual forms is another way through which young adults subvert master narratives, resist imposed identities, and create new narratives. In one of

the most striking examples of youth appropriation of schooled literacy practices, Schultz (1996) describes a young Filipina graffiti artist who practices her tag repeatedly in a notebook as part of her initiation by a group of more experienced writers. In Wilson's (2003) ethnographic work with incarcerated youth, she finds a cartoon submitted to the Valentine's Day edition of the prison magazine captioned with this: "Nike trainers my one true love, without you I am nothing." Here a young man has appropriated trite literary conventions to express the locally specific importance of brand-name footwear. Similarly, despite their openly hostile opposition to dominant culture, the graffiti artists in Cintron's (1991) study refashion sports' team logos, brand names, and even popular folklore (i.e., the lion as "the king of the jungle") with new meanings and create what Cintron calls "a distinctive gang register." Lam (2004) profiles a Chinese American adolescent comic book fan whose fascination with Japanese comic books offers him an opportunity to situate himself within a "transnational culture" and to create a borderland discourse available to both American and Chinese peers. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) assert that adolescent development is a process of creation, authorship, and interpretation. These studies demonstrate the various ways that adolescents use multimodal texts create new discourses; take up, subvert and respond to mass-mediated texts; and enact individual and group identities.

Alvermann (2001), Elkins and Luke (1999), Moje (2002) and others point to a continued neglect of the literacies of adolescence except for a persistent interest in "struggling" or "remedial" readers. Moje challenges adolescent literacy researchers to apply a youth cultures framework to the study of adolescent literacy; she defines youth culture as the experiences and behaviors of youth as part of normed practices, behaviors, and beliefs common to people of a certain age or generation" (p. 213). This conceptualization of youth represents a departure from the notion of adolescents as "developing" or "not fully formed."   Instead, as Alvermann (2006) suggests, this framework considers youth as "knowing something that has to do with their particular situation and surroundings" (p. 40). The youth literacies framework also acknowledges

youth as valuable cultural producers. A growing body of research on in-school and out-of-school adolescent literacy practices documents the various and creative ways in which youth produce texts that represent a range of styles, genres, and media (e.g., Fisher, 2007; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mahiri, 2004). Mary Bucholtz (2000) writes that "one of the richest influences on American speech in the new millennium will certainly be youth culture" (p. 280). Youth-produced zines, fan websites, fanfiction, music, and emulative texts challenge the conventional wisdom that mass mediation has a monologic influence on youth culture. Through language and literacy use, youth cultures are sites of stylistic and linguistic innovation; these new texts, styles, and forms of speech are often, in turn, taken up and appropriated in commercial, popular, and mainstream cultures (e.g., Frank, 1997; Hebdige, 1979; Kelley, 1997). Youth literacies offers a conceptual lens for understanding the ways in which young adults manipulate and interpret a wide range of semiotic resources including locally produced and mass mediated multimodal texts in order to enact identities, narrate their lives, and take up social positions in the world.

Epistemological Assumptions

Drawing on the traditions outlined in the above sections, I approached this research using a critical-constructivist lens. This epistemological stance implies that research should be conducted to dislodge power structures and move toward social change, and that the methods for collection and analysis should be selected and employed with an eye toward avoiding practices that might silence or disempower participants.

Constructivism maintains that "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-9). Thus, knowledge is largely dependent upon the interaction between the subject and the object, and through these interactions, most often mediated by language, realities are continually constructed and reconstructed. By considering the data through a post-structuralist lens, I hoped to reject positivist claims about reality which frequently reinscribe existing power structures and

privilege the researcher's voice over the voices of the researched. In practice, this means that I veered away from positivist claims about what "caused" students to leave or return to high school and instead considered students' understandings of their own lived experiences.

Critical theorists are concerned with critiquing dominant power systems and illuminating the often invisible ideological hegemony that propagates dominance along the dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion (Giroux, 2003). Social inequity was of primary importance in my selection of the topic of this research, given the disparities in high school quality and therefore high school completion along the lines of race, class, immigrant status, and sexuality. Criticalist researchers work throughout the research process to "defamiliarize the familiar and to show power/knowledge at work" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 56). But in addition to motivating my questions, criticalism has motivated my approach. Inherent in this inquiry is the assumption that "all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relationships" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 139), and thus my epistemology assumes that the knowledge generated from this study must be considered inherently "situated, embodied, and partial" (Richardson, 1997, p. 58).

As Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) point out, "mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, gender and oppression" (p. 140). In the conceptualization of the study, in its design and execution, and in the writing of this dissertation, I endeavored to reject such practices, by keeping my process transparent, including the participants in frank discussions about my research, and giving back to the people and program who so generously hosted me for a year.

This dissertation is organized in seven chapters. Chapter Two describes the context for this research and chronicles my role as a researcher and the methods of data collection and analysis. Chapters Three through Six introduce four main themes from the data. Chapter Three focuses on participants' experiences in high school, the narratives they construct about those

experiences, and the identities they take up in those narratives. Chapter Four centers on participants' experiences in the program and in college, the positions made available to students via the program's rhetoric, and the ways in which students adopted and resisted those imposed identities. Chapter Five presents an analysis of students' imagined and expected selves and the ways in which they make sense of past experiences in relationship to their expectations for the future. Chapter Six examines students' literacy practices in order to gain further insight into students' experiences in the program and the identities they enact and explore. Finally, in Chapter Seven I summarize the findings in relationship to the three main research questions, present implications for educators, and discuss opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

An "Exchange Student" Spends a Year at Pathways

The Pathways program at the City Community College (CCC) served as the site of this research project. Pathways serves youth, ages 16 to 21, who have dropped out of school. It is a dual-enrollment program allowing students to work simultaneously toward a high school diploma and earn credits toward an associate's degree. Pathways at CCC is located in a large metropolitan region in the northeast and is funded by major foundation, the community college, and the partnering school district.

Students enter the program in cohorts of about 20. Their first semester is known as the foundation term, during which they take English, math, and a freshman seminar that focuses on study skills. These courses are taught by CCC faculty and are nearly identical to the developmental (remedial) courses required of regular CCC students who score below the cut-off on the entrance exam. During the foundation term, the cohorts are separated from the general college population. However, upon successful completion of the foundation term, Pathways students enroll independently in a variety of CCC courses depending on their missing high school credits and their educational goals. Pathways staff members include the program director, an administrative assistant, and four academic coordinators (ACs) who advise and counsel students.

I spent one year at Pathways, following a group of nine students from their first day in the program through three semesters (summer, fall, and spring). I conducted observations in classrooms, in the Pathways office, and during program-based activities; I interviewed students individually and conducted monthly conversation groups; I spoke informally with program staff; and I analyzed a wealth of documents generated by students, by the program, and by the professors.

The first half of this chapter offers the context for this research, with special attention to the story of my evolving role in the setting. In the second half of the chapter, I describe the

methods of data collection and analysis. In the final pages I explore the ways in which my positionality influenced the study and describe the actions I took to mitigate threats to validity.

Context and Setting for the Research

While initially I considered a number of possible sites for this research (GED programs, work-based programs, and alternative high schools), Pathways' unique connection to a community college captivated my interest in a way that the other sites did not. Initially I sent out letters of interest to a number of institutions and programs, but I put most of my efforts into building a relationship with Pathways with the hopes of conducting my research there.

Finding My Place at Pathways

The Pathways Program at CCC opened in the Spring of 2006. Given the relative newness and uniqueness of the program, a number of entities, ranging from city officials to local media outlets, were expressing interest in Pathways when I contacted the program director in June of 2007. Although the program director expressed interest in my research proposal, the college and the program were working to manage various requests for access. Because a reporter from a local paper was spending a semester in one of the Pathways classrooms preparing for a lengthy piece, my request was delayed for a semester. However, after a meeting with the program director, a series of emails over the course of several months, and a meeting with the dean of the college, I was granted tentative permission to conduct the research in January of 2008. I began conducting pilot observations in a foundation term English class beginning in February 2008. When my IRB application was approved and I had final approval from the dean of the community college for my study, I set up another appointment with the program director and two of the academic coordinators. I was told that two cohorts, a total of 39 students, were admitted to the program for the summer of 2008. It was agreed that I could follow either of the cohorts and attend their classes as frequently as the professors would allow; I elected to work with the morning cohort of 19 students and began formal data collection on the first day of the term in May 2008.

In her ethnographic study of high school girls, Julie Bettie (2003) writes about her "awkward status as someone without any clear institutionalized role at the school" (p. 18). I thought about Bettie often during the early days of my research. She said that she avoided teachers as much as possible until the last month of school, and I too was conscious of my relationships, and my perceived relationships, with staff and professors that summer. I wanted to earn the trust of the students, and I knew having confidential conversations with students about their experiences in the program would be more challenging if I was perceived to be aligned with the staff. During the course of my pilot observations, I learned through informal conversations that the newspaper reporter had been asked to leave one of the courses she was observing because the students found her presence to be intrusive. Although I was heartened to learn that the students were empowered to speak out when they felt they were being too closely scrutinized, this raised additional questions for me about how I would be perceived. I worried about appearing too much an outsider or intruder, and I knew it would be difficult for me to take on a meaningful role if I did not work with staff to develop one.

This role negotiation was certainly complicated, as it was for Bettie (2003), by the fact that as a white middle class former teacher who had an overwhelmingly positive high school experience, I for the most part had more in common with the staff than I did with the students. I was under no illusions that I could pass for a student or that I would convince students that I was just like them, but in the beginning I did work hard to set myself apart from the other adults. Throughout my year at Pathways, I carried a backpack, wore jeans, and whenever possible I sat with students instead of with staff. Among Pathways students, my age was a constant source of conversation and debate (with guesses ranging from 19 to 30). I was given time to introduce myself during orientation, so students who began that summer knew that I was not employed by Pathways and that I was a graduate student doing a research project. Students from other cohorts could typically tell by looking at me that I was not "one of them," but they were often confused

about my role, usually assuming that I was a CCC student who was not in Pathways. On a few occasions I was mistaken, either by a student, or more frequently by a professor or new staff member, for a Pathways student.

I was neither fully student nor fully staff, but over the course of my year my role evolved. During my first term, the summer of 2008, I was closer to and more comfortable with the students. During those first few months, the students and I worked together to make sense of the program's patterns and I spent most of my time with them, rarely speaking to professors or staff on my own. In the fall and spring semesters, my role changed, and I began to take on responsibilities in supporting the program.

Roman (1992) has pointed out that naturalistic ethnographic research, in which researchers take up roles as "intellectual tourists" or "voyeurs," can be as positivist in orientation and potentially exploitative as experimental or behaviorist methodologies. Therefore, I felt it was important for me to build a reciprocal relationship with the program in some way. I suspected that in so doing I would learn more about the program from an "insider" perspective and therefore hopefully break down the barriers naturally arise when an observer is not a participant. I had mentioned in my first meeting with the program director that I wanted to take on a supporting role in the program, but there was a change in directors in late spring. Given the director turnover and my own acclimation, it took until fall for us to co-construct a role that made sense. In September the director asked me if I would be willing to help plan the program's first prom. This new task gave me greater insights into the challenges the program faces and the rich student-staff relationships that play out in small interactions in the Pathways office.

In the third semester, I did not do classroom observations, so my only contact with the participants was in the interviews and conversation groups or in casual meetings in the Pathways office. This semester, inspired by several students in the cohort, I organized the publication of an Arts Magazine which was open to all Pathways students. I also took a supporting role in the

planning of the Pathways Male Leadership Conference. Therefore, I spent a great deal more time in the Pathways office organizing the logistics of the magazine, the conference, or the prom; talking with staff members; waiting for students to arrive for interviews; and often just hanging out. Thus, over time, I developed a greater appreciation for the rhythms of the office as well as new and deeper relationships with the program director, the academic coordinators, the administrative assistant, and students from other cohorts and from different stages in the program.

The Pathways Office

The Pathways office is located in a building at CCC that was once owned by the United States government. The block-long structure, built at the turn of the twentieth century, is majestic from the outside with Roman columns towering above the street level. The lobby and center staircase retain their original splendor with marble steps and vaulted ceilings. However, the interior of the offices housed in this building belie the building's grandeur. The Pathways office[3] is located at the end of a first floor hallway that houses primarily administrative and student support offices. The office is a cramped windowless suite, with five interior offices, each with florescent lighting, grey industrial carpeting, and walls painted a now somewhat dingy shade of white.

Each time I entered the office, I was struck by its "busyness." Beginning in their second term, students must come into the office daily to sign their AC's sign-in binder. As such, a constant stream of students enters and exits the office throughout the day. Through an arrangement with the school district, Pathways students receive weekly public transportation passes, essentially providing them free transportation to and from the program. Students were frequently crowded around the administrative assistant's counter waiting patiently for their transportation passes, signing in, filling out a required form, or waiting for an appointment with their ACs.

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[3] Pathways moved into a new larger office after I finished data collection.

The layout of the office is such that if one person is standing on the side of the administrative assistant's counter, a second person must squeeze by to access the three back offices or the copy machine. As a result, that area is a scene of constant negotiation with students struggling to wedge past, a challenge when one or more people is carrying a backpack. Outside of the director's office, five chairs are arranged facing one another in a small waiting area and this space was frequently filled with students chatting, doing homework, listening to headphones, doing hair, playing chess or checkers, or just generally hanging out. There was no rule against students congregating in the office, but staff members regularly asked them to talk more quietly. During the spring semester signs were posted around the office with the message: "Please laugh, cry, yell, talk, scream, eat, study, sit, nap or whatever! But do it softly so that others may work in peace."

Even when the office was quiet, as it sometimes was early in the morning or late in the afternoon, the general chaos of the environment remained. Almost every inch of available wall space at eye level is covered in bulletin boards. Upon these boards, ACs post their weekly appointment schedules, a number of permanent flyers with tips for college success or words of wisdom and encouragement, rotating flyers highlighting upcoming events, photos of students, student artwork, and photos of the ACs (in some cases, featuring funny poses or old photos from their adolescent days). Several large filing cabinets fill the remaining spaces in the office. Table or counter space is scant and nearly every inch is covered with sign-in binders, folders of frequently needed forms for students, flyers for upcoming events or resources, and a collection of magazines donated on a regular basis for students to read while in the office. In the winter, the program director erected a "creativity board" and invited students to post their stories and artwork. The student ambassadors, a group of selected students who serve as leaders and liaisons for the Pathways program, have a white board for their use on which they write announcements about upcoming events. Pathways provides the course books for the students free of charge, but

students must return them at the end of each semester; as a result invariably there were stacks of books on top of filing cabinets or desks and any other available space.

Even with the commotion, the office was a pleasant place for me to visit and spend time, which I did frequently, particularly during my third semester. Space was tight, but I could usually find a chair and sometimes the corner of a desk or table to write or read or just hang out. The ACs' office doors were usually open and jokes or exchanges often were shouted, either directed at students or other staff members. Occasionally everyone in the office, students and staff alike, would be called around someone's computer to watch a YouTube video or see a funny email. The administrative assistant engaged in both witty barb-filled banter and heartfelt conversations with the students who walked by her desk. In addition to congregating in the small waiting area, students would also often gather inside an AC's office, usually informally just to chat or make jokes. I witnessed a number of planned and impromptu parties, featuring food and sometimes music, commemorating a staff member's birthday, administrative assistant's day, and, in late April 2009, as a complete and welcome surprise to me, Sue Bickerstaff Appreciation Day.

Despite the genial environment, ACs did have difficult conversations with students, and occasionally this affected the atmosphere in the office. Foundation term students are required to meet weekly in one-on-one meetings with their ACs. In the second term those meetings are held every other week, and in third term and beyond, students must meet with their ACs twice each semester. Prior to those meetings, students are required to fill out a "scholarship check-in" form that shows their compliance with the program's requirements for attendance, assignments completed, and performance in their classes. ACs worked with students who were dealing with a number of home life challenges, in addition to the rigors of college-level course work. Students who fail to comply with program rules are most often put on a contract and in severe or repeated cases can be withdrawn for a semester or asked to leave the program permanently.

Attending Pathways

To be eligible to attend Pathways, a student must be between the ages of 16 and 20, have withdrawn from a public high school in the city, and either be young enough or have enough credits that he or she can earn the school district's required 23.5 credits by age 21. Upon successful completion, diplomas are issued from the high school the student last attended. Some Pathways courses, particularly taken during the first semester, only count for high school credit, but as students progress, many, if not all of their courses will count for both high school and associate degree credits. With the exception of a 20 dollar application fee and a 50 dollar fee per semester, the program is free.

The first step of enrolling in Pathways is attendance at a recruitment session. The session begins with a timed reading assessment in a large auditorium. Recruitment sessions are held every other week, and during my time at Pathways, were typically attended by about 40 applicants. When the 20 minute assessment begins, any family or friends (referred to as "supporters") who have accompanied the applicant are escorted to an adjacent room where they hear a brief presentation about the program. A student ambassador is always present to answer questions. At the conclusion of the test, the supporters are directed back into the auditorium where they and the applicants view a PowerPoint presentation that explains the program benefits and requirements. During the presentation, typically delivered by an AC or the director, additional staff members work in the adjacent room grading the reading assessments.

At the conclusion of the presentation, students are called out of the room individually. Students who score above 80 percent on the test are invited back for two additional days of testing. Students who do not meet the cut-off requirements are counseled individually about alternative GED or diploma programs in the city. Students who are on the borderline are frequently referred to the adult basic education department of CCC to enroll in a refresher

course.[4] All students are told they are welcome to reapply. In total, the application process includes three take-home essays, three days of testing, and an interview with an academic coordinator. Approximately 30 percent of students who come to a recruitment session are accepted.

Once admitted Pathways students find themselves in a hybrid position, somewhere in between high school and college. The program's main objective is to help students fulfill the school district's required 23.5 credits, yet students complete these courses on a college campus in classes taught by CCC faculty. During the foundation term, each cohort takes its classes together, but after their first term students matriculate into the general college population where they often take classes in which they are the only Pathways student. Although the program has developed good relationships with a few talented faculty members who return each semester to teach the foundation term courses, the program has little control over the content and format of the courses. This sometimes posed challenges to the director who felt that existing CCC courses and structures did not always offer the support Pathways students needed. The academic coordinators play the main role in filling that gap, and the program's requirements – daily attendance, the sign-in book, and regular reports to and meetings with their assigned AC – did set Pathways students apart from regular CCC students. Likewise, students were required to fulfill other school district requirements, including completing a senior project and taking the state standardize tests.

Pathways' rigorous admissions standards and its partnership with a community college make it unique among programs for returning high school leavers. Therefore its students, who read at a minimum of an eighth-grade level (as measured by the entrance exam), may not necessarily be representative of all students who leave high school. While this project may not speak to the experiences of a "typical" high school leaver, if such a thing exists, it does offer portraits of high school non-completers who complicate the stereotypical images of "dropouts."

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[4] After I completed data collection, Pathways began a new semester-long reading and math program for students who score in a borderline range.

Students who complete the application process, even those who are ultimately not accepted, show a sense of determination and persistence not usually attributed to students who leave high school.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

I elected to follow the cohort assigned to Ms. Bea who was the newest academic coordinator, hired just a few weeks before the summer semester began. I began observing the class on the first day, but participant selection did not begin until four weeks into the semester. In June, I asked Ms. Bea if I could make a presentation to the class about my research project and ask for volunteers to participate. She suggested that I make it during "AC time." AC time meetings, held throughout the foundation term, are designed to promote team building, foster a sense of community among the cohort, allow time to talk about issues of college preparedness, and offer the ACs opportunities to make announcements and connect to the cohort as a group on a regular basis. During the first part of their foundation term, students have AC time twice each week for 30 minutes. Later in the semester, at the AC's discretion, they may only meet weekly.

Because Ms. Bea generously offered me the entire 30 minute period, my goal was not only to recruit students, but to take the opportunity to share with them about my research and allow them to ask questions about the research process and my project. I saw this as an opportunity keep my research transparent, to speak candidly with the students about my methods, my assumptions, and the purpose of my project. I began by asking the students to put their desks in a circle as I passed out a half-sheet of paper with five questions. I instructed the group to work in pairs to jot down ideas in response to each: *(1) Write down three words you think of when you hear the word "research." (2) If you were doing research project on students who leave high school, what would you want to study? (3) If you could then present that research to someone, who would it be? (4) If you could do a life story interview with any living person, who would you choose? (5) What do you think it means to do "socially responsible research?"* The last

question was in reference to a theme the group had been discussing in English class. The topic of their first essay, which had been due the previous week, was on social responsibility.

The ensuing whole-class discussion revealed to me that the students primarily thought of research as literature searching; library use was a major theme of the early part of the conversation. When I pushed them to think about primary research, they talked mostly in terms of statistics, which offered me a good way in to talking about how qualitative research can fill the gaps that statistics often leave. I asked them if they saw a missing word that they might have expected to see. When a student finally guessed "dropout," I spoke about how many researchers and educators talk about "dropouts" as if they are all the same. I hoped to impart three messages in the session. First, I was interested in their stories. Second, I was hoping to do a socially responsible research. Third their participation was voluntary.

Before I passed around the sign-up sheet, I told the group about the time commitments and expectations. During the discussion, the class had a somewhat spirited conversation about the questionable merits of the school district's uniform policy. Because of time constraints, I cut the discussion short, but I said that the conversation groups would be similar to what they just experienced. As hard as I worked to reframe the students' preconceived notions about research that day, I overheard a comment that gave me pause. A student who did not sign up for the project asked Bart[5] "Are you going to let her do experiments on you?" To which Bart replied, "Yeah sure" (Fieldnotes, 6/5/08).

Study Participation and Attrition

On that first day, nine students signed up. A few weeks later, Dana asked me if she could participate even though she "never really went to high school," to which I enthusiastically said yes. In mid-July, I made the second announcement about the project, this time in their English class. On that day, one additional student, Brittany, told me she wanted to participate. Finally, in

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[5] All student names are pseudonyms selected by the participants.

November, Trinidad told me he always wanted to participate in the research, but he thought he would not be able to because of his work schedule. I talked to him more about the time commitments of the project and he said he would participate. In each case, I arranged a time to meet individually with each student to review the consent form. For the six students who were 17 years old, I also sent home parental opt-out forms.

In total, 12 of the 19 students in the cohort signed up. Only 11 participated; one young woman repeatedly told me that she wanted to, but her schedule was too hectic to schedule the interviews or attend the conversation groups. Over the course of the year, three of the 11 participants left the program, two during the second semester and one during the third. This dissertation focuses on data collected from the nine participants who stayed in the program into their third semester.

Attrition in Pathways was a problem, particularly during the foundation term. In the cohort I followed, a total of eight of the 19 members of the cohort left Pathways in their first year. Five students left, or were asked to leave, during that first summer semester. The one-year retention rate of the students who participated in the project (73%) is significantly higher than the retention for the cohort at one year (58%). This indicates that the students who volunteered to participate in my research were perhaps more inclined to be engaged by or connected to Pathways. Given that most of the non-participating students left during the first semester, before I had the opportunity to form strong connections with the participants, I think it is unlikely that my research had a significantly positive effect on retention, as those numbers might indicate at first glance.

Seven of the study's participants were women and four were men, which is a higher ratio of women to men than the larger cohort (11:8). The cohort included two white students, neither of whom signed up for the project. In Pathways 34 percent of students identify as white (interestingly, compared to 14 percent in the public school district). The students who

participated in the study self-identified as Black and/or African American, bi-racial, Trinidadian, and Puerto Rican. Black students comprised the majority of the group.

For the purpose of this study, the nine participants called themselves Bart, Brittany, Chanel, Cleveland, Dana, Lady, Mercedes, Talia, and Trinidad. A profile of each, including a description of how they came to be out of high school, can be found in Appendix A.

Observations

The focus of this project was on the students and their experiences, not on the effectiveness of the program or the nature of instruction or pedagogy. However, my research questions reflect that the participants in this project are situated within a particular space. Therefore, formal and informal program and classroom observations helped me understand the context in which these students returned to school. I began with observations to help me gain an understanding of the context, and also to allow me to build rapport with students in a relatively (compared to interviews and conversation groups) risk-free way. In classrooms and at various program events, I took fieldnotes on approximately 150 hours of observation.

I arranged observations with the foundation term English professor, Ms. Wilson. When I first spoke with her, I suggested that we might want to arrange a schedule for observations anticipating it might be overwhelming for her or for the students if I visited every class, but she was remarkably open, saying I was welcome to come every day. It was exceptionally instructive for me to be present in every single class because I felt part of the classroom community in a way that I didn't during previous studies where I observed once weekly. In addition, being present on the first day was invaluable, as I had access to the way in which the program and course were framed.

Carspecken (1996) writes of "building a primary record" which is a "thick" recording of in-depth and non-evaluative fieldnotes that serve as the "data anchor" throughout the study (p. 44). According to Carspecken, the primary record is complemented by a field journal that

includes journalistic-type observations and researcher thoughts, feelings, and comments. I kept both the primary record and the field journal together, differentiating my thoughts, feelings and comments from the non-evaluative notes. In the beginning I tried unsuccessfully to record everything, including content, tone and intonation of speech, body language, and physicality of the people and the environment. During the first few weeks, I also did not know which students would offer their consent to participate in the study, so I attempted to take notes on everyone. In retrospect, I also note now that I spent my early observations focusing too much on Ms. Wilson, oftentimes overlooking the ways in which students reacted (silently or verbally) to what she was saying or doing.

My observations focused on questions that included: What narratives are created about dropout and return, and what identities are enacted individually and collectively? What master narratives are circulated by students and by the teacher about school success and failure? To what extent are students positioned by the teacher as "former dropouts" and/or as "college students?" How are they positioned by instructors and staff members? How do they position themselves? How do students talk amongst themselves about the program, about their previous school experiences, and about their futures?

Because participants had different schedules after the first semester, I found it more challenging to arrange classroom observations. In the second semester, I managed to observe most of the students by going to two classes: Mr. Franklin's English class and a math class. The additional professors who I contacted either never returned my emails or stated that they did not feel comfortable having a guest in the classroom. I observed regularly in both classes in the fall, but did not attend every class. The English class I attended was comprised of mostly Pathways students, although only four of them were participants in the project. Likewise, the math class was also a mostly Pathways class. In this class, five were students in my study. This gave me the opportunity to meet and get to know students from other cohorts. During the participants' third

semester, I elected not to do classroom observations because the group shared almost no classes together. Throughout the entire year, I also did observations in the Pathways office and at various program-wide events which included workshops, special events, and the semesterly orientation sessions for continuing students.

When observing in the classrooms, I typically tried to arrive about ten minutes early. This afforded me the opportunity talk casually with the students before class and to overhear them talking before the professor arrived. Like the students, I fell into habits of sitting in particular corners of the classroom, although during the first semester I made an effort to change my seat regularly. During the second semester, I intentionally sat near the participants in the study, and in both classes those students developed the habit of sitting in a group.

The three professors I observed treated me differently. Ms. Wilson largely ignored me, and thus it was in this class where my differences from the students were least noticeable. However, during the second semester Mr. Franklin would regularly call on me to ask for my opinion or experience, particularly when he was talking about issues with which the students were unfamiliar (e.g., movies from the 1980s and what it is like to turn 21 or live on a college campus). In the math class I took on the role of the unofficial tutor. Because much of the work was done in small groups, I became part of a group of students I knew well who were struggling in the class.

At the initial orientation session and in my first sessions in each of the classes, I explained my general goals and research questions, so most students seemed to have a familiarity with my notetaking. I took notes in class, sometimes for the entire period, in the same notebook each day. I avoided taking notes before class or during the breaks, usually because I was conversing with students; however, when class resumed, I tried to capture anything that transpired. For the most part my notetaking seemed to go unnoticed, however on a handful of occasions students would ask me what I was writing or comment on my handwriting or

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notetaking skills. In Ms. Wilson's class particularly, where notetaking was encouraged and study skills were emphasized, I received a number of comments from students who said I was a "good" notetaker. When asked what I was writing, I tried to be as honest as possible.

Interviews

I used a "responsive interviewing" approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 30) in conducting four rounds of interviews with the student participants. The first round occurred in the summer, the second during the fall semester, and the third and fourth during the spring semester. With study attrition, this yielded a total of 36 interviews. Each round of interviews was around a general theme, the first was high school stories, the second literacy practices (including MySpace and web practices), the third possible selves, and the fourth was a combination of topics and member checking (See Appendix B).

The interview protocols were semi-structured, using Carspecken's (1996) protocol model as a guide. Carspecken recommends crafting a protocol with a limited number of "lead-off questions" under two or three "topic domains" (p. 157). Under each lead-off question, the interviewer crafts a number of follow-up questions by anticipating what the respondent might say. I kept a list of standard probes or prompts at the bottom of each protocol (e.g., Can you tell me more about that? What you mean by that?). Rubin and Rubin (2005) write that lead-off questions should be broad and "relatively easy to answer from the interviewee's experience" (p. 157). This was a challenge for me as I frequently wanted to start off with a question about what the students "think" about a topic or issue. As Rubin and Rubin explain, opinion questions often prompt participants to then "try to be consistent with their response, even if they later think of contradictory instances or subtleties" (p. 158). I found that experiential lead-off questions generated much richer data and were easier for the students to answer more fully.

Once I started receiving consent forms in June, I began scheduling individual interviews the students. For that first round, we typically met directly after English class in a vacant

classroom. During the fall and spring semesters, the chances of finding a vacant classroom

diminished significantly, but the staff gave me access to their additional storage/office space,

affectionately called "The Penthouse," which was located two floors above Pathways office and

was largely unused except for occasional meetings. This room had a computer with internet

access which I used for the MySpace protocol. Across the four rounds, interviews averaged

about 45 minutes per session; the longest was one hour and 10 minutes and the shortest was 32

minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded. I rarely took notes during the sessions,

feeling that it interrupted the conversational nature of the session. In previous experiences

interviewing adolescents for other studies, I found that participants notice when you do and do

not take notes and sometimes make inferences about what you think is important or interesting. I

also find it difficult to write and listen well at the same time. I would jot down "markers," during

the session, which are defined by Weiss (1994) as "passing references made by a respondent to an

important event or feeling state" (p. 77). I would return to these markers in follow-up questions

or when there was a natural break in the conversation. Immediately after the conclusion of the

interview I would write notes and reflections, trying to capture as much as I could about body

language, tone, and other notes about the interview that would not be caught on tape.

The fourth round protocol was customized for each participant and served as a member

check as I asked the students for clarification and to revisit some of the themes that came up in

previous interviews or conversation groups. The fourth round of interviews was also the first

time in our one-on-one meetings in which I did some medium- and high-inference paraphrasing,

which I had expressly avoided previously. I would articulate what I thought I heard the

participant saying and ask him or her to respond and correct me if necessary. Carspecken (1996)

writes that high inference paraphrasing can be "effective for checking out some of your

speculations about general beliefs held by the client" (p. 161). As I was interested in students'

narratives and perspectives on their experiences, interviews yielded the most valuable data for the study.

Conversation Groups

Conversation groups with participants offered the third source of data. Rymes (2001) used this method effectively with students who returned to an alternative school setting. She writes that narrators strive to "look good" and what constitutes looking good depends on the intended audience (p. 25). Telling a story in an individual interview for a researcher is very different than co-constructing a narrative for a researcher with and for one's peers. I employed this method with the assumption that when students talk about their experiences with their peers, their stories will be different than when they talk with me alone. These discrepancies illustrated the ways in which identities are enacted and co-constructed by students with similar life histories. In some cases, participants worked hard to defend their positions in the face of opposition from fellow participants, therefore offering me a richer understanding of their thinking.

The first conversation group was scheduled in early August after I had completed the first round of interviews. I then conducted the groups approximately monthly, four during the fall semester and four in the spring. Scheduling during the fall and spring became increasingly difficult as the students' class schedules became disparate and there were few times that every participant was free. Additionally, unlike during the foundation term when I had numerous opportunities to speak to the group as a whole, during the fall and spring semesters, mass communication proved difficult. All Pathways students have a CCC email address, and at the semesterly orientation sessions students are instructed by program staff to check their messages daily. However it was frequently noted by staff that email was not the best way to get in touch with students, and I had several occasions where I sent messages to students who did not check their mail. In one case a student confessed to me that she lost her password and had not checked her email for the entire semester. Therefore, both the program staff and I used the daily sign-in

books as a way to communicate with students. In advance of a scheduled interview or a conversation group, I would leave a sticky note with the pertinent information on each student's page. This worked in most cases, but particularly during the spring semester, some students found it difficult to make it to the group meetings. Attendance at the monthly groups ranged from four to eight participants with an average of six participants.

I began each conversation group with a reminder of the norms we co-constructed at our first group meeting in August (See Appendix C for norms and protocols). These included confidentiality, respect for all opinions, and self-monitoring of participation. I used the phrase "step up, step back" to remind them to step back if they found themselves talking too much or to step up in the opposite case. Each conversation group began with a prompt or activity, most typically a list of three or four questions to which they were to write silently for about five minutes. There were certainly dominant voices in the group, with some individuals most likely to speak up first and often and others only likely to talk when called on. Therefore, beginning in the October meeting, I instituted a practice of opening and closing statements which we carried throughout the rest of the year. Morgan (1988) writes "opening statements are a way of getting everyone on record with their different experiences and opinions before a consensus emerges" (p. 58). I found this to be a very effective way to ensure that even unpopular opinions were explored.

I endeavored to make the group meetings as pleasant as possible, providing food and allowing plenty of time at the beginning for informal talk. Although I never asked, I inferred that many students welcomed the opportunity to reconnect with their cohort-mates who they saw less frequently during the second and third semesters.

Documents and Artifacts

Merriam (1998) points out that interviews and observations are collected to answer the research question, yet many documents exist apart from the research design which do not "intrude upon or alter the setting in the ways that the presence of an investigator often does" (p. 112).

Over the course of my year in the program, I collected a variety of documents from a number of sources. Institutional documents produced by Pathways for recruitment and publicity purposes helped me understand more about the program. How does it promote itself? What is its mission statement? How does this program represent itself and how does it represent its students? Internal Pathways documents, like the application, required forms, orientation materials, and fliers offered an understanding, not only of the program's policies and procedures, but also what kinds of messages it sends to students.

Many of the documents I collected were from the various classes I observed. Pertinent artifacts included syllabi, assignment and homework sheets, and course texts (including articles and books). These professor-generated documents gave me a perspective on the messages students were receiving in their coursework, which interestingly was sometimes different than the messages communicated by the program. In many cases, course texts formed the basis for circulating spoken and written narratives that were taken up or resisted by students. Finally, collecting and reading the students' course materials gave me another occasion to experience the courses with the students. These texts and documents often prompted interview and conversation group questions and gave me multiple opportunities to make small talk with students before and after class.

Given my interest in the participants' literacy lives, student writing was a major source of data for this study. In the second interview I asked students to bring in a range of work to show me. Each student complied, bringing in papers written for their courses at CCC, as well as journals, poetry, drawings, short stories, and song lyrics. Each student who had a social networking page also showed me and talked to me about their page (one student used Facebook, one student had no page, the rest used MySpace). Looking at these documents and asking students to talk about them gave me a window into students' in-school and out-of-school writing,

as well as the narratives they crafted about themselves as literate beings, which appeared both in the writing and in their conversations with me.

Finally, researcher-requested documents were part of most of the conversation group and interview protocols. I typically had students write their thoughts on a few focusing questions before the session began and I collected those forms. In two cases I asked students to engage in a more extensive writing activity. The possible selves interview protocol asked students to write down their imagined, hoped-for, and feared selves. My eighth conversation group protocol asked students to create a community life space map (adapted from Shepherd, 2000) in which they situated themselves visually within their community, social and support networks. In late summer, I provided all of the participants with a disposable camera and asked them to take "self-identifying photographs" (Hungerford-Kresser, 2007), pictures of things that show who they are. These photographs served as the point of conversation during the September conversation group.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was recursive and ongoing, beginning during the summer session (see Appendix D for collection and analysis timeline). Using Erickson's (1992) stages of qualitative analysis as an overarching guide, I began by reviewing fieldnotes and transcripts holistically, and then identifying segments for closer analysis. Once selections of data were coded and analyzed in detail, as Erickson suggests, I looked across the larger data set for themes, paying special attention to discrepant cases.

Early on I read over my fieldnotes regularly and wrote analytic memos twice monthly to synthesize my thoughts and comment on themes as they emerged from the data (Glaser, 1978). In these analytic memos I speculated on possible trends and patterns in the data, noted relationships between concepts emerging from the data, and also recorded questions and topics to watch for and pursue in future collection and analysis. At the end of the summer, I systematically coded the fieldnotes using Miles and Huberman's (1994) first level coding method. These codes

were largely descriptive and "low-inference" (Carspecken, 1996). Beginning in the fall, I began applying a similar coding method to the transcripts of interviews and conversation groups, often using "in vivo codes" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the spring I began to select sections of transcripts for closer analysis and "pattern coding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Beginning in the fall, I also began meeting twice monthly with a peer debriefer, a fellow doctoral student, sharing pieces of transcripts with her and soliciting her feedback on the themes I was seeing.

For the high-inference pattern coding, I drew on two analytic traditions. Carspecken's (1996) critical methodology offered a useful and systematic method of interpretive analysis in which selections of the primary record and transcripts are analyzed for underlying objective, normative, subjective, and identity claims. Reconstructive horizon analysis, as he terms it, is grounded in Habermas' notion of the "horizon of experience" and is used to help researchers outline the breadth of possible meanings within any given speech act. First the researcher creates a "meaning field" in which all possible meanings for the utterance are stated. Then, reconstructive horizon analysis serves as a bridge from low-level to high-level codes and can help researchers validate their inferences. With its focus on uncovering tacit claims of normativity (what participants think of as normal or proper) and identity, his four-pronged approach was particularly applicable to my question about identity construction and the relevance of "master" or dominant narratives. Working with pieces of transcripts I employed this method to discover, for example, what implicit claims speakers made about what is valued and how those speakers positioned themselves in relationship to these values.

While Carspecken's mode of analysis was useful for analyzing segments of data, his framework does not attend to the interactional nature of speech and the emergent nature of meaning in discourse. To complement Carpsecken's interpretive heuristic, I also selectively utilized discourse analytic strategies from linguistic anthropology. Drawing on the Bakhtinian notions of double voicing and ventriloquation, Wortham (2001) outlines a number of narrative

analysis strategies that can be used to reveal the speaker's positioning with reference to the other people and ideas in the narrative (pp. 70-74). These cues include metapragmatic descriptors (e.g., she "lied" or she "whined"), evaluative indexicals (e.g., "presumably" intelligent), and epistemic modalization (e.g., "I think" or "the evidence proves"). By looking for patterns in pronoun usage, verb choice, and quotations, I was able to examine students' narratives and the ways in which they positioned themselves in relationship to others and to images available to them in their communities and in the mass media.

Based on my analytic memos, the pattern coding, and discourse analysis of selected transcripts, I kept a running list of codes, which at times was quite lengthy with over 30 codes. Most of these codes were emic concepts (e.g., "relatable" or "outside influences"); however many of them were also etic codes based on my research questions and conceptual frameworks. For example, I specifically coded hoped-for, feared, and imagined future selves, as well as "turning points" in students' narratives and the reasons they identified for leaving high school. Creswell (1998) writes that in the latter stages of analysis researchers should "classify, sort, combine and refine" their codes into a smaller list of about five or six. After I finished data collection and the transcription of all conversation groups and interviews, I engaged in a holistic reading of the entire data set, as Erikson (1992) suggests. After that reading I was able to combine, refine and categorize the code list into four themes; these themes became the four data chapters in this dissertation.

Reflexivity and Rigor

Bias and Reactivity

I crafted the study and collected and analyzed the data keeping in mind the two threats to validity identified by Maxwell (2005): researcher bias and reactivity. According to Maxwell, researcher bias is "the selection of data that fit in the researcher's existing theory or preconceptions" and reactivity is "the influence of the research on the setting or individuals

studied" (p. 108). Richardson (1997) writes that "postmodernist culture permits us – indeed, encourages us – to doubt that any method of knowing or telling can claim authoritative truth" (p. 168). Thus, I do not presume to eliminate bias or reactivity in pursuit of an objective reality. However, throughout the research process, from the formulation of the questions through the data collection and analysis, I worked to remain "reflexive" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), recording and writing about my own assumptions and subject positions and their effect on my interactions in the setting and my interpretations of the data. Central to my methodology was careful listening and trust-building over time. I did not expect participants would immediately tell me their stories. Nor did I expect that I would immediately understand their experiences. However, over the course of a year, I sought to collaborate with participants, privileging their voices and their experiences as I worked *with* them to understand and interpret their narratives and connect their stories to critical theory.

Because of my position as an outsider, I took seriously the need to learn from the participants in the study, and I worked hard to record my preconceived ideas. I began the project with the assumptions that larger cultural narratives are an important influence on the lives of youth; that the narratives of participants in this study would reveal complex stories of school leaving and returning that are of interest and importance to practitioners; and that hierarchical social structures, power, identity, race, class, and gender are important to the lived experiences of high school dropouts. I crafted my initial interview protocol presuming that the participants had painful and unpleasant high school experiences, that they were somehow disengaged from or failed by their schools, and that at some point they made "a decision" to leave school to pursue another option. Using Michelle Fine's (1991) landmark ethnography as a guide, I looked for the ways in which the participants exhibited a "critical consciousness" and I listened for Rymes' (2001) notion of a "rejected self." Fundamentally, I assumed that the identities of "dropout" and "college student" would be salient to the participants in the study. These assumptions were based

primarily on literature and theory, and only in small part on meaningful conversations or collaboration with young adults who have left and returned to school. As will be revealed in the following chapters, my conversations with Pathways students and the data I collected upheld some of these suppositions, but challenged and refuted many more.

I tried to pay attention to the ways in which the students were narrating my life and narrating the story of the research. These revelations surfaced in surprising ways, like when Trinidad told me that he liked doing the interviews because they were good preparation for job interviews (Fieldnotes, 4/10/09). The students had sometimes surprising, but often accurate ideas about who I was. When Dana asked me where I lived, she commented without surprise in her voice that I lived where all the white people live (Fieldnotes, 6/3/09). Students were often shocked to discover I was married, sometimes commenting that I seemed too young. In a conversation with Cleveland and Dana, Mercedes asked me when I was going to have children. When I gave a noncommittal response, a student replied, "Oh, you're going to be one of those career ladies" (Fieldnotes, 4/10/09).

Although I cannot claim my design truly involved the students as co-researchers, I did talk to them about the research and writing process as openly as possible, asking them to select their own pseudonyms and talking to them about the ways I would represent them through my writing. Beginning as early as orientation in May, I spoke to the students candidly about wanting to hear their voices and stories in a way that many research projects fail to do. The ways in which they took up that idea resurfaced repeatedly throughout the research. They would often seem to speak through me to teachers and administrators saying, "you need to tell them…" In our final conversation group, at my request, the students developed the term "high school swingers" as an alternative to "high school dropouts." (The term, its origins and various connotations will be discussed in Chapter Three.) In addition to liking the term because it captured their experiences,

they also talked about how this term would bring attention to the study, perhaps fooling readers into expecting something else entirely:

> **Trinidad**: It could build interest.
> **Dana**: It could be like that, "what they mean by that?"
> **Trinidad**: Yeah and that's why you need to read it because you want to know, what does that mean.
> **Cleveland**: You're gonna have a lot of people disappointed. (laughter)
> **Lady**: Yeah, I think that is good because it's like high school swingers, ooh, let me read that.
> **Dana**: That's how you pull them in. (CG, 4/29/09)[6]

In this example and in others, students demonstrated their ways of thinking about the purpose of my project and its intended audience.

As much as possible I tried to cast myself as a learner (Glesne, 2006, p. 94) and that role seemed to take hold. Often to my consternation, students frequently directed their comments to me during the conversation group. This had the effect of both making the conversation less fluid because the students were not communicating with each other, but also in positioning the participants as educators who had something to teach me. I saw this when the students would stop mid-sentence to define a slang term for me or when they would speak to me and use the term "we" when talking about experiences of racial oppression, poverty, or school struggles, implicitly positioning me as an outsider who needed to be educated about those issues.

The students talked about me and their understanding of my role in a number of ways. In reflecting on the process in our final conversation group, they called me "an exchange student," calling to mind a visitor who learns local cultural practices. This certainly aligns with the idea of a learner, perhaps with lesser knowledge and status; however, there were also many instances in which I was framed as an authority figure, someone with knowledge and power. In my second and third semesters in the program, the students frequently came to me asking for help or advice in their schoolwork. Lady set up a formal appointment with me during her third semester asking for advice about applying to college and for financial aid, keeping up with her workload, and

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[6] Data from conversation groups will be labeled "CG."

developing good study habits. Dana, who struggled in her English class each semester, asked me if I could help her with her papers, which I did, meeting with her weekly during the second half of the spring 2009 semester and into the summer. In my work on the Arts Magazine I took on a new role – setting deadlines, making recommendations about student work, and working out logistical and budgetary considerations, which positioned me more as a staff member than an "exchange student." Two of the participants in the study contributed to the Arts Magazine and I often wondered how they experienced our editorial meetings, which were quite different, in terms of my participation, from the conversation groups.

Students vacillated between calling me Ms. Sue and Sue, and while they would often swear or curse in my presence, they also frequently chastised one another for using inappropriate language in front of me. Only on a few occasions did I express my disapproval of student behavior, usually when someone was being picked on. Even in those cases, I attempted to keep it light, saying something like "if you don't stop being mean to her, you're going to have to deal with me." I did not observe any truly malicious behavior, so my comments were usually met with laughter. I was also privy to general roughhousing and play fighting that sometimes occurred when professors and staff members were not nearby.

Although I attempted to make each interview and conversation group setting as safe as possible, many of these conversations may have been inherently risky given my presence. Frequently, I worried about the extent to which they felt that they could be forthright with me about issues of race and class. As will be discussed later, I frequently heard discussions of race carried out in coded terms, and most frequently, the use of pronouns "we" and "they" instead of racial categories. When students talked about everyone having a fair shot in society, I could not help but wonder if they would say the same thing if I were an insider to their experiences. I noted that the students invariably blamed "rich people" not "white people" for injustices.

I think it would be unwise for me to understate the implications of a white middle class graduate student asking students of color who have left the public school system about their experiences with education and about their thoughts on success and failure. I attempted to mitigate these challenges by talking openly about my own dual agenda: making schools better for students and ensuring opportunities for students to share their stories.

Validity

Using Toma's (2006) four component framework for rigorous qualitative research, I employed a number of validation strategies in my research design and analysis to address the threats to validity and to bolster this study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. "Credibility," writes Toma, "is established if participants agree with the constructions and interpretations of the researcher" (p. 413). The fourth round interviews and the sixth and ninth conversation groups served as member checks. In these sessions I took on a slightly different role, rather than just encouraging the participants to say more, I presented some of my themes and findings and asked the participants give me their impressions and to tell me what was missing. I aimed for greater transparency in these sessions, giving the students insight into my process and my assumptions. I was pleased to see that the students did critique some of my high inference paraphrasing, clarifying what they meant or giving me suggestions for how to think the topic.

Dependability and transferability, Toma (2006) argues, can be achieved through a number of design features. He suggests that to be dependable "findings must go beyond a snapshot" (p. 416). Inherent to my theoretical framework is the assumption that narratives are constructed differently depending on the time and place of their construction. By following the focal students over 12 months, and meeting with them multiple times, I worked to identify which narrative features remained stable over time and which changed as the students progressed through the program. According to Toma, Maxwell (2005), and others, triangulation of multiple

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data sources offers another assurance that a researcher's analysis is dependable and valid.

However, Richardson (1997) argues that triangulation is an inappropriate construct for

postmodernist research because it builds on the assumption "that there is a fixed-point or object

that can be triangulated" (p. 92). As such, I worked to "crystallize" rather than triangulate,

drawing in a diverse collection of data sources over time. For example, while each protocol was

different, I returned to similar themes and experiences several times, and therefore saw how

students talked about the same events similarly and differently over time. I found that students'

stories became more detailed in later conversations, perhaps because they knew we had discussed

them before, or perhaps indicating their increasing trust in me.

Confirmability "is the concept that the data can be confirmed by someone other than the

researcher" (Toma, 2006, p. 417). The feedback and critical perspective of my peer debriefer was

invaluable in helping me see the data in new ways. I also took the opportunity to share my data

whenever possible—with fellow graduate students, with educators in a class I was teaching, at

three conferences in 2009, and with a close friend who is not an educator. Each of these

experiences refined my thinking about my coding.

The stories that follow were told to me with a generosity and openness that I could not

have anticipated on my first day at Pathways. I entered the program with countless anxieties

about the extent to which I would be (or should be) welcomed and trusted. I discovered young

adults eager to have their stories told and young adults willing to grant me the responsibility of

telling them. Richardson (1997) asserts that writing about research must be "a site of moral

responsibility" (p. 58), and I kept that caution in mind as I wrote the following chapters. My

hope is that I have told the stories of the students who I came to know and love with the same

faithfulness and reverence with which they were told to me.

CHAPTER THREE

Unwelcomed and Underestimated: Stories of Leaving High School

As discussed in Chapter One, historically research and scholarship on the issue of high school attrition has focused on the question of why students leave high school, often with the intention of contributing to dropout prevention efforts (e.g., Smink & Schargel, 2004). This body of literature has largely dichotomized factors contributing to dropout into "push" and "pull" factors. Pull factors include familial responsibilities or employment, while push factors are school-based and include school climate and culture; teacher and peer interactions; curricular content; and school suspension, expulsion, and attendance policies (Rumberger, 2004). The focus on pull factors has long been criticized both for its deficit orientation and for its implications that schools can be absolved of their responsibility for retaining students. Likewise, although research indicates that some school personnel still subscribe to deficiency-based understandings of student attrition (Patterson, Hale & Stressman, 2007), a long tradition of critical scholarship has problematized the focus on student characteristics like race, socioeconomic status, motivation, and cultural attitudes as explanatory factors for dropout and instead has argued for a focus on push factors (e.g., Knesting, 2008; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

While the notion of push and pull factors still predominates much of the academic discourse surrounding dropout, recent qualitative studies of school leavers have illuminated the intricate and complex processes by which students leave school. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) argue that the efforts to dichotomize push and pull factors have obscured a more nuanced understanding of the process of dropout. They suggest that our project should not be disentangle institutional and individual perspectives, but to recognize them as "inextricably linked and co-constructive" (p. 222). Their research suggests that dropout happens not as the result of an accumulation of risk factors; thus, while my second research question asks "why" students left school, I was not interested in compiling a list of push or pull factors. Instead this chapter looks

closely at the lived experiences of participants, the ways in which characteristics like race and class are salient in students' daily interactions, and how they narrate their lives and adopt identities given the way they are positioned by schools and dominant discourses.

In the tradition of Luttrell (1997), Robinson (2007), Smyth and Hattum (2003) and others, I worked to record the stories of participants to understand something about their self-understandings. In this way, my aim was to uncover the "storied selves" (Luttrell, 1997) of the young adults at Pathways. As Rymes (2001) demonstrated, students' stories have much to offer our understandings of the process of disengagement and exclusion from schools, and can have profound implications for school reform. In this chapter, students' stories about their high schools and about their departures from high school are explored in three sections. First, participants' stories are analyzed with attention to the range of ways in which students disengaged from schools that made them feel unwanted and undervalued. The second part of this chapter examines the various identities participants performed and enacted through these stories. Through narratives of exceptionalism, students took up identities as learners and positioned themselves as different than typical high school students and different than "traditional" high school dropouts. The final section of this chapter investigates students' understanding of the term dropout and the extent to which they embrace or reject dominant discourses about what it means to leave high school.

Students' stories about the departure from high school reveal complicated understandings about what it means to leave high school. They described the role that schools and the school system play in discouraging students from attending, and in some cases, systematically excluding students and preventing them from learning. Ultimately, these are stories of agency, resistance and persistence in which the tellers position themselves in relationship to dominant discourses that position school leavers as deviant or lazy. Unfortunately, for those seeking easy solutions to preventing dropout, the answer to the question of why students leave school is complex and

highly context-dependent, as demonstrated by the nine very different circumstances under which the participants in this study left school (see Appendix A). However, these stories, taken together, tell us much about how school leavers see themselves in the social order of schooling, how discourses about dropout shape their self understandings, and the role that schools can play in making students feel welcomed and nurtured.

Pushout Stories

Although the participants in this study had experiences that were quite diverse, their stories were similar in that they described schools that were unwelcoming and in many cases unsafe. I call them "pushout" stories because of their common focus on negative in-school conditions. Within these stories, teachers played a central role, as participants talked about their inability to find or connect with caring adults in their schools. School and district structures were implicated as systems that categorize students according to relative value and as gakekeepers, excluding students from meaningful learning. Much of the data that follows was drawn from my first round of interviews when I asked participants to give me a tour of their high schools. However, the stories of school pushout also emerged during conversation groups, subsequent interviews and in informal conversations I overheard at Pathways. Interestingly, traditional "pull" factors like home and family life were noticeably absent in students' stories about their departure from high school. The role of participants' families and dominant discourses about parental responsibility for students' school success will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Four and Five.

My Life Was Basically about Getting Back Home

According to the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, nationally six percent of high school students reported that they did not attend school at least one day out of the past month because they felt unsafe at school (Center for Disease Control, 2008). In large cities like New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Washington D.C., the percentage of students missing school

because of safety concerns is as high as 15 percent. Safety, violence, and the physical

environment were significant themes in the students' stories about their high school experiences.

Students talked about dreading school, and in some cases dreading the pathways to and from

school. As Cleveland said, "my life was basically about getting back home" (Interview, 7/16/08).

While not all students were equally affected by fear or threats of violence, almost all

students described their high schools as "wild" places that needed "more discipline." For some

students, like Cleveland, fear played a major role in their departure from school:

> Towards the end of me being there it was a lot of gang violence between two
> different streets. That was another reason why I left; every time we would come
> outside, come walk out the door, there would be loads of kids just standing there
> looking for certain people and it was just basically walking into a lion's den.
> You didn't know whether you were the target or were going to be the target.
> (Interview, 7/16/08)

Cleveland selected his high school with safety in mind. He elected to go to a school outside his

neighborhood with a JROTC program. The prospect of possibly enrolling the military influenced

his decision, but there were other considerations too: "I figured because it was the ROTC

program, the kids would act better because of the type of program that it is" (Interview, 7/16/08).

He also described his surprise at the level of violence in the school given his perceptions of the

surrounding neighborhood:

> I didn't expect it to be violent. I don't know. Because I went to [that
> neighborhood]. I used to go to there a lot because my aunt lived up there. But it
> wasn't horrible. It doesn't look like a violent place. It doesn't have that
> atmosphere. It feels like a safe place. (Interview, 7/16/08)

When Cleveland encountered violence and threats in the JROTC program, he attended his own

neighborhood school briefly, but in his words, it was "horrible." He attended for two weeks and

spent every lunch period in the counselor's office avoiding the mayhem he witnessed in the

cafeteria.

Incidents of violence, disorder, and bullying described by students were part of a larger

feeling that high school was a place that was unwelcoming, unpleasant or unsafe. Stories about

their schools' physical conditions would be sadly recognizable to anyone familiar with the crumbling infrastructure of large urban school districts:

> I used to see rats; I used literally see all kind of rats: brown, black, I saw white little mice and stuff. I used to see nasty stuff; like it used to be dirty like, like trash everywhere; I'd see condoms in the stairs and stuff. (Interview, 7/10/08)

However, beyond stories about filthy conditions, students talked more generally about the atmosphere of the school. Talia described her high school as "grey, dim, and dreary" and badly in need of "Feng Shui."

> It's like, before you walk in there's metal detectors, everybody had to go through metal detectors and take off jewelry and stuff like that as if we were going into a prison or something. I don't know. It's just you get this feeling as soon as you walk in the building like, uhhhh, like another day here. (7/14/08)

In my first interview with students, I asked them to imagine they were giving me a tour of their old high school. Each student began their tour at the metal detectors, indicating that while metal detectors are commonplace in the city's high schools, they are significant in the students' memories of their schools. In Chanel's description of an ideal school she said, "It would be like ultra comfortable. Like I think that there's something about schools with carpet. Like my middle school had carpet and it was just like awesome" (Interview, 4/30/09). Interestingly the notion of schools with carpet was raised again by another student in the fall English class I observed (Fieldnotes, 9/16/08). This idea that schools should be comfortable was also implied or stated when I asked students to describe their experiences in Pathways. Mercedes talked about the atmosphere at CCC as beneficial not only to her mental health, but her physical well-being: "And to be here it's like, I can breathe. I don't feel that sick and I want to come here" (Interview, 7/28/08). The physical and material environment of schools was a major component in students' stories about their high schools. These stories were partially crafted by me because I asked them to take me on a tour of their schools, but rarely were these tours devoid of vivid details relating to the atmosphere, described as dirty, loud, unruly and prison-like.

I Think They Should Just Have a Conversation with Us

While the physical disrepair and chaotic environment of high school made it difficult to stay in school, their experiences with seemingly uncaring teachers compounded participants' perceptions that they were unwanted and undervalued. One of the most pervasive topics of conversation, both in the interviews and in the conversation groups, was the lack of teachers who "really teach." As will be discussed in this section, students' talk reflected a desire for teachers who treated them like adults, who demonstrated care and concern, and who would be willing to engage them in conversations about their lives.

While each of the students could offer by name one or more teachers who they remembered fondly from high school as "cool," "nice," or "relatable," they spoke quite fervently about the poor teaching they witnessed:

> **Trinidad:** I think that was the worst thing I ever heard when I was in school: 'It doesn't matter if you pass or fail, I'm still getting paid.' And I heard that from most of my teachers.
> **Dana:** I heard that been said. I'm still getting paid. This is what they do, they literally shut the door or something. They sit right there, and that's why they don't teach nothing, they don't do nothing and they just sit there.
> **Trinidad:** They hand you a book.
> **Lady:** Give you a worksheet (laughter) and I'm gonna sit back here.
> **Trinidad:** Hey, I got a computer for that, somebody just invent a program and knock all y'all paychecks down. I don't need y'all. (CG, 4/29/09)

Analysis of their criticisms of teachers reveals that students crave relationships with teachers and other caring adults. Researchers have long demonstrated the importance of caring adults for healthy youth development (Tierney & Grossman, 1995) and in engaging students in school (Lee & Breen, 2007). Knesting (2008) suggests that caring adults are the most important factor in helping students persist through high school. Beyond caring, adolescents need adults who listen to their challenges (Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007) and help them develop problem solving skills (Franklin, Harris & Allen-Meares, 2008). In her study of young women leaving school, Robinson (2007) found the importance of teachers who served as

"othermothers," offering guidance and support to students outside of class time (p. 187). Likewise, participants longed for empathetic teachers with whom they could talk and be real.

The perception that many teachers worked only for the paycheck and not because they cared about students was conveyed by a number of students. This was a trait common to teachers outside high school too. In her first interview with me, Lady described the GED program she attended before coming to Pathways: "It's ridiculous because when I went there none of the teachers in the [program] actually teach. They were just there to get more money on their check" (Interview, 7/7/08). Mercedes reported that some professors at CCC were the same as high school teachers: "They here to just get their paycheck and write some stuff on the board" (CG, 11/19/08). Implicit in these claims is the assumption that teaching is more than handing out workbooks, books, or writing on the board and that teachers should come to work because they care for students, not just to earn a living.

According to participants, teachers displayed their disregard for students, not only through their poor pedagogy—e.g., "They just write a couple things on the board. Write notes or whatever and everybody in the class just writing on the board or whatever, just writing notes" (CG, 12/10/08) – but also via verbal attacks on students. Cleveland told the story about a particular teacher who talked down to students: "It was just like, it was almost like he would provoke the kids. A lot of times the teachers do provoke the kids into things" (Interview, 7/16/08). In Chanel's high school, there were a number of incidents and tensions related to unfair treatment of homosexual students. She described teachers' insensitivities in dealing with these issues in the classroom: "The teachers didn't say horrible things, but they definitely expressed their opinion which was hurtful at times, so I guess I would say it was a very negative atmosphere" (Interview, 7/23/08). More generally, Trinidad recalled "teachers yelling back and forth all day, every part of the hallway you hear teachers yelling" (CG, 12/10/08).

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Ultimately, the complaints about teachers' verbal abuse and poor pedagogy reveal students' desire for teachers to connect with them. Students repeatedly told me that good teachers are "relatable," meaning they "would actually sit there, talk and relate to the students" (CG, 12/10/08). Participants reported that good teachers talk to students about their own life experiences and engage in conversations with students about topics beyond the subject matter. Bart described his favorite high school teacher:

> He loved to talk, so he interacted with the students a lot. Like, he talk to us about sports and stuff and he used to tell us how he used to play soccer and he was probably the only teacher, I would say that he would talk to you and make sure you understand what he's teaching and talk to you about things outside of the subject. (Interview, 7/15/08)

In the conversation group cited above, Trinidad suggests that teachers who simply hand out worksheets and books might be replaced by computers. This comment not only points to the lack of personal connections he had with his high school teachers, but the feeling that he was unjustly deprived of caring teachers ("mentors," Talia called them). He implies that teachers are unfairly paid for work they are not doing and thus the solution is a computer program which would deliver the same quality teaching without the expense. This comment is interesting given Trinidad's interest in becoming a computer network engineer and his identity at Pathways as the "tech guy." I interpret here an assertion of power and agency, unlike what he was able to claim while in high school classrooms.

Participants asserted that the reason students leave high school is because they need to feel close to caring adults: "I feel like in a lot of these high schools and these middle schools [the adults] just act as disciplinarians and not as mentors. They're not really supporting and encouraging the students to actually be there" (CG, 12/10/08). Participants suggested that teachers be "talkative, like on a social level rather than be authoritative" (Interview, 4/22/09). Bart's reflection on his own experiences in high school and at Pathways supported this theory: "In [my high school] the teachers didn't really motivate me. They just give work and just expect

for you to give it back at the end of class. Here, the teachers interact with you and everything"

(Interview, 4/22/09). The implications of these statements for school reform are profound,

particularly as they relate to teachers' role in improving school quality (Darling-Hammond &

Sykes, 2003). Further implications for teachers will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

I Feel Like It's Part of the Plan to Keep us Down

Participants also referenced institutional systems as part of their high school stories. The

disparity in material resources and social capital within and across the schools in their district was

evident to students, and these inequities added to students' feelings of exclusion and disregard. In

conversations about the forces that "keep them down," participants demonstrated their knowledge

of structural inequities and their sense of a shared experience of marginalization. These themes

will be introduced in this section and then further explored and complicated via a more extended

treatment of students' perceptions of inequity across race and class in Chapter Five.

For students in this study, school pushout forces began before they entered high school.

The school choice model employed by the city created a system by which some high schools are

known to be "good" and others known to be "bad." The real and perceived quality of schools

took on important meaning for the participants in this study.

The city in which this study was conducted has three types of public high schools. The

first are neighborhood schools which are open to all of the students who attend the corresponding

feeder middle schools. Students from outside the catchment area may apply to neighborhood

schools, and admission is based on a lottery system. Students may choose to apply to a

neighborhood school because many have special programs or academic foci (e.g., health sciences,

humanities, JROTC, etc). The second are city-wide admission schools; these have application

criteria based on grades, attendance, and disciplinary history. Students who apply and meet the

eligibility requirements are entered into a lottery for admission. Finally, the city has magnet

schools, each with its own criteria for admission based on grades, test scores, and attendance.

The city's magnet schools have control over their own admissions and many are quite competitive. Among the nine students in this study, five attended neighborhood schools and four attended schools with admissions requirements.

Participants told stories of negotiating admissions to special high schools with varying outcomes and consequences. For some students, attending their neighborhood schools was never considered a realistic option given the schools' reputations. For Mercedes, knowledge about her neighborhood school came from relatives:

> 'Cause a lot of my family went to [my neighborhood school] and went nowhere.
> They either dropped out, got pregnant, a lot of violence and so I wanted to stay as
> far away from the path that everybody else walked and hopefully do better.
> (Interview, 7/28/08)

Instead, Mercedes opted to go to a special admission high school that was an hour bus ride away. Chanel was faced with the prospect of attending her neighborhood school after finding out she would not be allowed back to her special admissions high school for her tenth grade year: "So it is the second day of school and there's really nothing I can do except for go to my neighborhood school and my mom didn't want me doing that at all" (Interview, 7/23/08). Alternately, Chanel and her mom "tried to apply to about 1000 different schools;" finding no success, Chanel opted to leave high school rather than attend the neighborhood school.

Some of the students in the study did attend their neighborhood high schools, but this often represented a defeat. As Talia explained:

> I wanted to go to [a private school] for middle school but my mom couldn't
> afford it or whatever, but they had everything I wanted, like for real and I
> couldn't go there. I had to go to [a public middle school] and then go to [my
> neighborhood high school]. Because I wanted to go to [a city-wide admission
> school], but my test scores wasn't high enough, so I had to go to [my
> neighborhood school] and once I got into there I just went in whatever mode.
> (CG, 12/10/08)

In casual conversations between Pathways students, previous high schools were rarely mentioned without reference to this system in which some schools were valued more highly than others. For example, when Cleveland asked a fellow student at an Arts Magazine meeting what high school

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she attended she replied with the name of her neighborhood school and said, "It was terrible; I wanted to go to [the arts magnet school], but they didn't want me" (Fieldnotes, 2/18/09). In this brief exchange, each school's relative worth or quality is made clear, and likewise the student's relative value is expressed in this system. Thus, it is not just individual schools that send messages of unwelcome to students, it is a larger district system – with the gaping disparity between high schools – that conveys to students who is worthy and who is not.

Given that disparity in quality of elementary and middle schools across the city, the high school admissions system, while perhaps designed to offer more opportunities for all, appears to largely replicate and uphold inequities. Students who attended elementary and middle schools that served them effectively were more likely to attend special admissions schools. Because students whose grades and tests scores made them eligible to attend admissions schools largely did, by default neighborhood schools served students with more needs, ironically with fewer resources. For the students in this study, the presence of special admissions schools offered opportunities for those who could attend. At the same time, the hierarchical system of high schools prompted disillusionment and disengagement when students were forced to attend neighborhood schools.

Within-school hierarchies were noted by students as well. For students who went to schools with tracked classes, the disparity in material resources between tracks was frequently mentioned:

> I was in average and rapid classes, all below, so my classes were way different from the classes of the A.P. students because they had air-conditioning in the classrooms, it wasn't as cold as our classrooms, their teacher was much better, everything. And it was a different building too. And our teachers used to come in the class, and just write some problems and just sleep in the chair or do something else do some other paper work. (CG, 10/22/08)

Given the design of this research, what is salient here is not the extent to which specific in-school or between-school disparities reported by students are true or widespread. Instead, students'

perceptions of inequity are essential to understanding their experiences. For Cleveland, perceived disparities were a sign of uncaring:

> They're not caring about me enough to fix my classroom so the roof doesn't leak, or make sure I have the right teachers, so why should I care… Why should I care if no one's going to give me the opportunity to show that I'm actually intelligent? (CG, 10/22/08)

The hierarchical systems that divided students by standardized test scores, by neighborhood of origin, and by race and by class were interpreted by students as structures that are designed to "keep us down." Students told stories of feeling unwanted in their schools. Sometimes this feeling was generated by the discrepancy between academic tracks, as seen above, but for some students this was based other factors.

For example, Chanel's experience in high school was marked largely by her experiences as a gay teen in a high school that "had a lot of issues with sexual orientation" (Interview, 7/23/08). In addition to feeling that many teachers and students were, in her words, "strongly disagreeing with homosexuality," in Chanel's experience, the principal set a tone in the school that was unsupportive of, and in a few cases hostile toward, gay students. The Gay-Straight Alliance in the school was in constant opposition with the principal over publicity for their events. According to Chanel, the principal objected to their posters and did not respond after the club's bulletin board was vandalized. Even the physical location of the Gay-Straight Alliance's board – "in the back hallway behind the cafeteria which the only thing that that holds is the daycare and the hallway that you're not allowed to go in" (Interview, 7/23/08) – was a potent symbol of the club's status on campus. These struggles increased Chanel's feelings of isolation and discomfort in a school where she felt unwanted.

Mercedes' experience advocating for Hispanic Heritage Month celebrations at her school was similar in that she contended with a principal who was largely unsympathetic toward her cause. The special admissions school she attended was predominantly African American; in her estimation about four students in the school were Hispanic.

> I had a problem with the principal because National Hispanic Month was coming up and I'm used to going to schools where we do something. So I asked the principal and she said there isn't enough Hispanic students to celebrate it. And I said, four isn't enough? I said, one should be enough. (Interview, 7/28/08)

This incident was compounded by comments made by teachers and peers that indicated to Mercedes a profound misunderstanding of Latino/Hispanic history and culture. After an incident in which a student told her that all Hispanic people are the devil, Mercedes said she realized, "it wasn't gonna work out" (Interview, 7/28/08). Interestingly, both Chanel and Mercedes sought out the attention of school administrators and therefore made themselves visible. Research typically suggests that those who leave school are anonymous and invisible; however, as Brown and Rodriguez (2009) point out, those who make themselves visible can also be vulnerable to social isolation and alienation from the adults in the school.

At each level – district, school, classroom, and student – students interpreted messages about the relative worth of some in relationship to others. Many participants in this study understood that they were not as highly valued as students who attended more selective high schools, students in A.P. courses, or students who fit the norm of heterosexuality or the ethnic majority.

Fine (1996) writes that process of dropping out in low income communities has become "thoroughly seamless" (p. xii). For students in this study, the seamlessness of school leaving was another mark of the education system's disregard for them. Chanel's story of her seamless exclusion from her special admissions school demonstrates the power of the school system's bureaucracy. While Chanel knew that she had failed a number of classes during her freshman year, she received no notice from the school stating she would not be able to return. During the first two days of her sophomore year, she attended the school and received messages from various staff and administrators indicating that despite some problems with scheduling she would be able to return. Ultimately, however, she was told she could not attend. The confusion at the school and at the district regarding her status and the late notice of her expulsion left her with few

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options aside from her neighborhood school (which she and her mother regarded as unacceptable).

Ironically, the growing number of options for school completion served as part of a larger system in which departure from high school was normalized (Brown and Rodriguez, 2009). For example, Talia was essentially "counseled out" (Kelly, 1996) of her high school. After a long period of truancy, the vice principal recommended that she investigate alternative options like Job Corps or a GED program. Likewise, after moving back into the city, Trinidad attempted to reenroll in his neighborhood school. After waiting in the main office and observing office staff "screaming and hollering" and "ignoring you, not paying attention to anything you're saying" (Interview, 2/3/09), he decided it would be better to enroll in a GED program. While these programs offer students a greater number of options, Kelly (1996) indicates that given their position within districts, alterative programs tend to be "second rate," particularly when they serve as a safety valve for over-burdened and under-resourced high schools (p. 119). Just as traditional high schools in the city are implicitly assigned value, alternative options have unspoken worth too. Simultaneously, the existence of such safety valve programs, Pathways included, allows the district to shift its focus away from ensuring that traditional high schools are caring, welcoming places for all students.

<div align="center">**Stories of Exceptionalism**</div>

A central objective of this project was to uncover something about the multiple performed identities of students who leave and subsequently return to school. Of interest is the extent to which participants embrace identities as "dropout," "student" or "college student" and how they think about their past, present and future selves. Narratives offer rich insights into enacted identities (e.g., Wortham, 2001), and personal stories represent "ongoing negotiations among historical conceptions and contradictory discourses of the self, family and community"

(Hesford, 1999, p. 17). Thus, while their stories tell us much about the experiences of students in the city's high schools, there is much to learn about the participants beyond the stories' content.

Rymes (2001) writes that in a narrative telling "one's life emerges not as a smattering of unrelated experiences, but more as a linear quest" (p. 24). In other words, the temporal nature of narratives offer insights into the storyteller's emerging and evolving sense of self, yet within the framework of a coherent identity or set of identities. Yet narratives are not merely the self-representation of existing identities. Instead storytelling and self-definition are mutually constitutive. As Luttrell (1997) explains "how a story is told and how people define and defend their selves and identities promote each other" (p. 8). Pathways students' stories reveal the ways in which they understand past experiences and the ways in which they are asserting their identities in the context of the program.

In the pushout stories above, schools are constructed as uncaring, unwelcoming places. Of interest is how the narrators position themselves in their recollections of those settings. Their stories of pushout are stories of resistance, both in their critiques of the school, but also in the ways in which the storytellers refuse to embrace the subjectivities imposed on them by school and society. I term the stories in this section "narratives of exceptionalism," because the focus is on how participants defied expectations in terms of their moral values, innate talents, maturity, and desire to learn. These narratives of exceptionalism reveal much about the work of Pathways students to reject dominant cultural narratives about youth and specifically about dropouts. However, as will be explored in this section and the next, these rejections occur within discursive systems in which individually constructed counternarratives of exceptionalism ultimately uphold and reify the very images of dropout they work to deconstruct.

They Would Say, You're Too Smart to Be in this Gang

As will be explored in Chapter Four, these narratives of exceptionalism were crucial to participants' identities at Pathways and were part of a larger discourse about rigor and privilege

within the program. However, the idea that they had always been smart and talented and had always valued education was central to their stories about previous school experiences too.   In most cases, students' identities as intelligent and hardworking were co-constructed with family, friends, or teachers.

Central to students' commentaries about their own talent were critiques of school. For example, Talia's ambivalence about school stood in sharp contrast to her certainty about her devotion to reading and learning: "I mean I always always been interested in learning, because like I'm a book worm. I read to go to sleep. Really I do. But, it's just, I don't know. School, I don't know" (CG, 12/10/08). Likewise, in students' bad school narratives they made claims about their innate talents and intelligence: "Something about school growing up that never brought the talent out of me that I've had" (Interview, 7/7/08).

As participants reflected on their expectations and experiences entering Pathways, identity claims related to intelligence and a love of learning were frequent:

> So when I came [to Pathways], it was like hey I'm back to me. I got myself
> back. Like, I always loved to go to school, so when I dropped out I felt dumb,
> like, how did I lose something that I love for what someone else is doing.
> (Interview, 7/9/08)

In these stories, participants portrayed success in school as normative, and their recent problems in school as an aberration. Pathways was reported as a way to get "back to normal." Most participants reported being honor roll or "A/B" students in elementary and middle school. However, their initial experiences in Pathways also proved to be a disruption to many students' view of themselves as smart (and, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, as "good writers"). Lady reflected on her first semester in the program:

> My worst experience was realizing how rusty I was. Like, that was the worst
> because I feel like when I was in school it was given. Not as far as academically,
> the challenges, but the fact that I was smart. I came here I was a complete idiot.
> (CG, 8/14/08)

Claiming innate intelligence was an important part of how participants told the story of their own departures from high school and their stories of return. High school departure was routinely explained in terms of "slacking off," rather than a lack of ability: "And I was very bright. I'm still very bright. The only thing I did that wasn't so bright was I never did homework" (Interview, 7/7/08). Likewise, return was expected for most students because those talents should not be wasted. Mercedes recounted the advice she received from her grandmother: "She's like you're not cut out for doing nothing. You have to go to school, you're smart" (7/28/08). A number of related emic concepts emerged repeatedly in these narratives of exceptionalism. These included "being a nerd." Many students claimed that early in school they were nerds either because they enjoyed reading and learning, they were frequently the teacher's pet, or they did not engage in the same type of negative behavior as their peers. Likewise, the idea that intelligence and artistic skills "came naturally" was cited frequently.

There's No Room for Learning

Students also talked about their high schools as places where little learning took place, and in so doing further constructed identities as exceptional. In a number of ways, participants expressed their desire to learn and to be educated by describing institutions that, in their view, routinely denied them a chance to do so. Strict uniform policies, ineffective instruction, and lack of enrichment opportunities were some of the characteristics that made high schools places that will "get you nowhere" (Interview, 7/15/08). In these stories, students implicitly made claims that they hoped and expected to go somewhere with their lives and expressed dismay over schools in which policies and low expectations precluded real education.

Uniform policies were a major source of discussion in my conversations with students about their high schools. While it might be expected that adolescents would bristle at policies that restrict their style of dress, uniform policies were largely discussed as a distraction and barrier to learning:

They'll like yell at the kids and like send them home just for having a hat on in school and they can't wear hoodies in school, like sometimes it be cold, like why not? How does that, how does them wearing hoodies affect them getting an education? And that's why, I was really getting mad at that like, it's so stupid because y'all making all these restrictions, all these rules and regulations or whatever, but it don't apply to the education, at all. (CG, 10/22/08)

In this excerpt Talia emphasizes that schools should be focused on education and voices frustration over what she see as a distraction from that purpose. This sentiment was echoed in Lady's story about being asked to leave school for customizing her uniform. She reflects: "I wasn't doing anything wrong. I didn't disturb the class or anything. You know what I mean. I'm just coming here trying to do what I have to do for myself" (Interview, 7/7/08). As indicated in that quote, participants' comparisons between uniform violations and other punishable offenses that *actually* disrupt the classroom environment indicate their understanding that high school should have been a place for learning.

Conversations about how easy high school was were frequent and similarly indicated that students were disappointed in the quality of the education they were receiving. During their first semester at Pathways, students often commented on how this was the first time they were asked to write a paper, read an entire book, type an essay, or complete a group project (Fieldnotes, 7/14/08). Chanel attended a special admissions high school and was surprised by how easy the assignments were there: "Well I think that the academics in the school, I just never felt that they were that great" (Interview, 7/23/08). The metaphor of high school as babysitter was employed frequently: "It's like having another parent, you know what I mean, babysitting you or something like that and you come in there to get educated and most of the time you not even doing it" (CG, 12/10/08).

These students' experiences appear to be similar to what Brown and Rodriguez (2009) describe as the "intellectual castration" of students in high school where they are "not learning anything" (p. 231). As they point out, a school's institutional power over students positions it as the "gatekeeper to the curriculum" (p. 237), able to grant access or deny students the opportunity

to learn. Brown and Rodriguez conducted their study in a high school and systematically documented adults denying students opportunity to learn (e.g., not allowing them to make up missed work). In this current study, I cannot uncover the extent to which such episodes took place or what opportunities to learn were *offered*. However, these stories reveal the ways in which students positioned themselves as people trying to "get educated" in an environment which they perceived denied them the opportunity to do so.

Students' frustration with schools as babysitters also indicates an expectation that schools should treat students as adults rather than children. Indeed, maturity was a theme that emerged in participants' narratives of exceptionalism. Lady, who had lived on her own in an apartment, had little patience for school policies that treated her like a child. Likewise, Mercedes felt out of place in high school, particularly given the hardships she had faced in her life:

> I did life already. I know how it is, I know how it's going to be. I know what the outcome is like. I always say high school is not a musical. It's not all that singing and dancing. I know what real life is like and [high school] is definitely not nothing like it. (Interview, 7/28/08)

Mercedes' reference here to the popular movie *High School Musical* is reminiscent of comments made by students on several occasions about "California high schools." Trinidad attended high school briefly in a local middle class suburb and described his experience with that metaphor. In addition to indicating the power of images of high school life popularized by television shows like *90210* and the *O.C.*, Mercedes comment implies that idealized images of high school belie the realities of life beyond the school walls. In her view, schools that attempt to replicate *High School Musical,* in which dances, sports, and social cliques hold great importance are failing to prepare students for challenges of adulthood.

According to participants, high schools should be places where students have the opportunity to prepare for adulthood by experiencing a wide array of opportunities that reflect real life. When I asked students to describe an ideal high school, they focused on extra-curricular

activities because they "keep the kids interested in coming" (CG, 11/22/08), but also because they

impart "life lessons." As Mercedes explained:

> Because I know I never really been out of where I'm at. I'm in [my
> neighborhood], that's where I stay. I never really experienced life anywhere else,
> but if you teach kids how to be in the real world, they know you got rent, you go
> jobs, this is what happens over here. (CG, 11/19/08)

In that conversation, internships and fieldtrips were emphasized; at other times, participants

reported that career counseling was missing from their high school experiences. Trinidad spoke

about how he never considered college or his current goal of being a computer network engineer:

> Basically high schools around this area just don't prepare people enough to be
> able to decide what they want or let them explore different things. It just seem
> like they work and try to keep security. That's all it seems to be. There's not
> really any preparation for the future it seems like besides getting your diploma.
> (Interview, 3/4/09)

In their discussions of high schools as places that babysit and fail to prepare students for the real

world, students reveal their own subject positions as mature young adults who have experienced

real life.

     However, the tensions inherent in taking up these positions are demonstrated by the two

seemingly contradictory statements by Mercedes above. In the first she states that high school is

nothing like "real life" which she has experienced already. In the second, she suggests that high

schools have the responsibility to show students life by taking them out of their neighborhoods.

Taken together, these comments emphasize the need for high school to increase its relevance and

utility by recognizing the life experiences of its students, but also providing meaningful

opportunities for students to build on and expand their range of knowledge. In these high school

stories, participants reveal their disappointment with institutions that failed to recognize them as

learners, as mature young adults with life experiences, and as students who could meet high

expectations and want to prepare for a better future.

In High School, I Guess I was the Different One

Narratives of exceptionalism operate as counternarratives to dominant discourses about

dropouts as less intelligent or less motivated than their peers. Pathways students resisted such

positioning vigorously and in so doing employed descriptions of other or "typical" high school

students. Indeed, it was through their stories about other students and other dropouts that the

students framed their exceptional identities as "different" from typical high school students. As

will be explored in the third section of this chapter, these attempts at counternarrative work speak

to the power of discourses about "inner city" high school students and dropouts; for in

participants' descriptions of self as exceptional, other high school students were portrayed as

unmotivated, deviant, and unintelligent.

Dana's story provides the most explicit example of Pathways student positioning vis-à-

vis typical high school students. Although she only went to high school for one day, her

experience made a powerful impression on her. This was an incident she recounted several times:

> And the students wouldn't care in the world, like they would yell outside of
> classes while they're teaching saying f-u this. I'm like, what? They cussing in
> the middle of while the teacher's talking. And then I was the awkward one
> because everybody there felt like they didn't want to be there on the first day.
> They're like I don't want to be here, I don't want to be here. Everybody's asking
> questions like what you want to do with your future when you're done. I'm
> talking about going to college. I'm talking about this and everybody like, what?
> (CG, 12/10/08)

In this brief excerpt, Dana displays her disbelief that students would curse in the presence of a

teacher, and portrays other students' disbelief about her plans to attend college. Just as

participants expressed frustration about their inability to "get educated" above, Dana expresses

frustration about being the only student who wanted to be there.

Many participants' stories were similar to Dana's, portraying fellow students as rude and

disrespectful, like Lady's description of the students in her GED program:

> So they come in all late, looking a mess, just you know, being all rude and
> disrespectful because they know it takes nothing to get the grade there. All you

gotta do is show up. So, yeah, that's the type of kids that were there. (Interview, 7/7/08)

Note that in this except Lady implicates the school in promoting this behavior because "it takes nothing to get a grade there." However, later in the same interview she clearly differentiates her behavior from the other students: "I've always been respectful, so that was never an issue for me, but I also, I've never been ignorant or rude." Talia differentiated herself from other students – "I don't walk around and act all loud and stuff like how these girls do" (Interview, 7/14/08) – employing the trope of "loud black girls" (Fordham, 1993). In these stories, respectfulness was highly prioritized, even in the face of schools and teachers that did not offer adequate learning opportunities.

Likewise, many participants' identities as "smart" were upheld by their positioning in relationship to other students in their high school. For example, Mercedes differentiated herself from other students in her ability to understand the references of her favorite high school teacher: "Like there was this one English teacher like we could talk about stuff and half the kids in class would not understand" (CG, 8/14/08). Other participants made similar comparisons related to their reading and writing practices (e.g., not reading "street novels" like other girls or encouraging friends to keep journals).

Not every participant portrayed him or herself as smarter or more well-behaved than other students in high school, but these narratives persisted even in stories about trouble making and defiance. For example, although Chanel described herself as a "bad student" and "a rebel" in high school, she still used comparisons with other students to highlight her early life experiences with literature:

> When I was younger, I guess because my mom was like an English major or whatever, she just always made it a point read like outlandish stuff to me, like at a really young age. So I just kind of grew up like being like six and just like talking about Shakespeare and all types of nonsense that other six year olds are like, what? (Interview, 4/30/09)

Statements and stories like these in which students set themselves apart from their fellow students were also evident when students described their place in their high schools' social environments. Seven of the nine participants described themselves as "loners," "outcasts," or as students who were not able to form close relationships in their high schools.

Brittany's high school story was quite different from many of her Pathways peers'. She attended one of the top magnet high schools in the city, which she admitted was more well-resourced than most. When I asked her to complete the sentence, "In high school I was a…," she replied "exceller." The school held students to high expectations, was well-run, and Brittany was a top student there until a severe eating disorder derailed her planned graduation and application to a competitive local university. Yet while Brittany did not tell the same school pushout stories that her fellow students did, she did describe similar feelings of isolation and loneliness. Like many participants, the transition from middle school to high school represented a significant change in her social relationships:

> But with my high school I found that most of my relationships, like friendship wise, they were just an inside the school type of thing. I really didn't talk to them outside too much. My friend, we would text or sometimes get together. But it just didn't compare to my middle school life where I had a best friend and she came over my house, if not every week, every other week, so it got kind of lonesome. And I understand because the school's so big and also because the friends that I did have they didn't particularly live close to me. (Interview, 4/4/09)

Here Brittany attributes two factors to her struggle to develop close friendships in high school. The first is the size of the school, which was echoed by other participants and is supported by literature that suggests that students can feel easily overwhelmed and disconnected in large schools (e.g., Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995; Knesting, 2008). In another interview, this was an idea Brittany developed more fully: "And [my middle school] was really small, personable environment, you knew everybody, you knew all the teachers. So different from [my high school] where you're just like a number. You're just a student. You're not really known" (Interview, 8/11/08). The second part of her explanation is the large geographic area from which

the school draws. Indeed this challenge was echoed by Mercedes who also attended a special admissions school. As will be explored in Chapter Four, close friendships at Pathways were similarly complicated by the wide range of neighborhoods students represented.

Like Brittany, other participants reported feeling apart from their peers in high school. Bart responded to the "In high school I was" prompt this way: "I was a probably an odd person because during the beginning of the year I attended all my classes, but toward the end I got caught up with the wrong crowd" (Interview, 7/15/08). Bart transferred to his neighborhood school from a school in the south when he moved to the city during his ninth grade year. During the second part of his tenth grade year he felt less like an outcast when he spent more time out of class and at the park with his new friends. I asked Dana, who did not have much experience in high school to describe herself in middle school: "Outcast. I didn't always fit in the in-crowd because the in-crowd liked to do stuff that I didn't approve, wouldn't think of doing" (7/30/08). These comments draw attention to the challenges of peer relations during the important identity building adolescent years. Noteworthy in Bart and Dana's stories is a sense of discomfort with their exceptionalism.

Although Talia attended a neighborhood school, her high school social experience was similar to Brittany's in that she did not have close friends, but instead had who she called "associates." When asked she replied, "In high school I was a loner. Not really, but in an emotional sense. I didn't really let people get too close to me like, even now, I only have one close best friend (Interview, 7/14/08). Many students used the term "associates" to refer to classmates, both in high school and at Pathways (as will be discussed in Chapter Four). Lady described a similar experience differently: "I was the universal" (Interview, 7/7/08) she said, explaining that she got along well with everyone, but didn't fit in anywhere.

While feelings of isolation were hurtful for many students, in our conversations the identity as "the different one" was in many cases a source of pride, particularly as it related to

intelligence or maturity. For example, central to participants' critiques of high school were their

stories about being positioned by teachers and by schools as "just like all the other kids." Lady

explained: "In high school you are assumed to be a statistic, you know, you're a dropout, you're

no good" (Interview, 7/7/08). Similarly, Cleveland recounted a frustrating experience with a

teacher: "He talked down to the students; he treated everybody the same, not in a good way. As

in, everybody was bad, everybody was doing wrong. And it really wasn't a good thing, because I

wouldn't be doing something wrong" (Interview, 7/16/08). Participants' stories about being

lumped together with other students have implications for two themes discussed above. These

narratives demonstrate students' desire to be held to high expectations and also their regret that

their teachers did not form relationships with them as individuals.

For some students, the solution to these frustrations was a better system of separating

students according to ability or behavior. Dana was adamant in her support of tracking, partly

based on her positive experience in honors classes in middle school. In a conversation group she

explained her position:

> **Dana:** Also, it might seem wrong, but certain schools they let, you know how
> you might be on a different level than other people, but you gotta be in with the
> in-crowd.
> **Mercedes:** So you're saying they should be separated by our level of smartness
> and whatnot.
> **Dana:** Yeah, just give equal topic. Because it's like this. You might go faster
> than other people.
> **Mercedes:** You don't want them to be held back by people.
> **Dana:** Who might have to take it a little slower. I think it should be stuff like
> that. Because if you're good, then you keep going on, but if you need more time
> to work on your stuff, like Cleveland said. (CG, 11/19/08)

Others regularly endorsed "weeding out" students who misbehave or disrupt the classroom. In

the above conversation no one challenged Dana's position on tracking, although interestingly one

month prior the same students engaged in a vigorous critique of A.P. classes (partially excerpted

earlier in this chapter). These contradictions indicated the complexity with which students

understood themselves and their place in the structures of schooling. Because students saw

themselves to be learners in an ongoing effort to be recognized for their intelligence, they critiqued existing systems that relegated them to inferior classes with fewer resources and less caring teachers. However, when asked to design their ideal school system, they readily proposed excluding students who would hold them back or distract them from their studies. In both cases, barriers to learning (either lack of resources or distracting peers) are presented as the problem, even when the proposed solutions seem contradictory.

Hesford (1999) writes that autobiographical acts should be examined "as social signifying practices shaped by and enacted within particular institutional contexts and their histories" (p. xxiii). Thus, the context for these conversations, a college campus, cannot be overlooked. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, narratives of exceptionalism were shaped by participants' status as Pathways students and their adopted subject positions were part of larger discourses at Pathways in which students were framed as an elite group who overcame struggles and challenges to find success. Likewise, it should be noted that these identities were performed to varying degrees depending on conversational context.

Nonetheless, participants' narratives of exceptionalism were prevalent, and these stories in which they adopted identities as mature, smart, life-long learners shed further light on the circumstances under which students disengage from or are excluded from high schools. These stories raise questions about how schools can operate more effectively to become places that engage students in challenging learning opportunities, prepare students for adulthood, and foster positive connections between peers. Simultaneously, the data presented in this section speak to the fierce grip of dominant discourses about adolescents as lazy and anti-intellectual. While the narratives of exceptionalism contrast sharply with images of dropouts with poor academic self-concept and low self-esteem, they also reveal an uncertainty among participants about their place in a world in which students like them are "statistics." The tensions in these narratives,

particularly their pride and confidence in contrast with their feelings of isolation and exclusion, speak to the construction of deviance as a norm for youth.

Dropout Stories

In my conversations with students about their experiences in high school and the circumstances under which they left school, a theme that emerged was the complicated relationship the participants had with the term "dropout." As indicated in Chapter One and in this chapter's opening, dropout is a term that has been contentious in the research literature for three decades. At issue is what the term means and what it implies. Dominant cultural narratives about dropout tend to place the onus for school departure on the individual who leaves school. Lee and Breen (2007) argue that these images of students as lazy, deviant, or underachievers legitimate schools' exclusionary practices (p. 331). Likewise, the term implies a moment of decision in which the student elects to leave; however, research has demonstrated that the process of school leaving is far more complex (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Rymes, 2001). Given this context and my own predispositions to reject the term, it was with great interest that I listened to students define and discuss "dropouts."

In this section, I draw on the participants' stories cited above and some additional data to discuss the ways participants simultaneously rejected and embraced the term and in so doing simultaneously endorsed and challenged dominant discourses about dropouts. Interestingly, in some cases, their rejection of a dropout identity was part of their endorsement of dominant cultural narratives about dropouts. These dropout stories offer perspectives on the myriad of ways in which high schoolers come to be out of school, and they also speak to the power of normative cultural images of high schools and high school students.

To Me I Look Like a College Student. I Don't Know What a Dropout Looks Like.

Participants were quick to tell me that the term "dropout" did not apply to them. While initially I assumed that they would prefer the term "pushout" based on their stories about their

high schools, I came to understand that many objected to the term for a different reason. Students understood themselves to be students, not dropouts, partially because they never intended to leave high school and partially because by enrolling in Pathways they were demonstrating their commitment to finish. As Dana asked, "Okay, we're all in college now; we all some type of dropout so do we look like dropouts? I think we look like education people trying to do something" (CG, 3/4/09). The term dropout was inappropriate, not only because of its connotations with failure, but also because in the minds of many participants in this study, they had never really left school.

Trinidad often explained that he was not a dropout because he was never really out of school. In point of fact, Trinidad, like all of the students in the study was out of school for a few months. However, as he explains this was due to a bureaucratic mix-up during his efforts to transfer his enrollment from his high school to a local GED program:

> I never actually dropped out of high school. The only reason I dropped out is because I had to wait two months to get signed up in the [GED] program. The reason that it took so long is because I had to get a passport because I'm an American citizen, but I wasn't born in the United States. (Interview, 2/3/09)

Likewise, Dana, who opted not to enroll in high school because she was two grades behind, did not identify with the term dropout. She was out of school periodically because of frequent family moves and crises, but she always planned to finish. Similarly, Brittany, who withdrew from school during her junior year because of an eating disorder, opted to enroll in Pathways because she did not want to graduate a year behind in her school. For Brittany, the opportunity to earn college credits at Pathways alleviated her anxieties about falling behind her peers.

In these stories, the dropout identity is rejected in part because of participants' current status as college students, but also because of their intentions. For example, Bart's mother withdrew him from the roster at his high school when she learned about Pathways because she was concerned about the violence at his school as well as his slipping grades and attendance. Pathways requires students to be out of school for six months before applying to discourage this

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type of "transferring." Thus, while Bart was out of school for six months, he dropped out with the intention to reenroll.

Students also positioned themselves as different from those dropouts who leave school because of involvement in the wrong crowd or their inability to do well in school. In this way, their dropout stories were extensions of their exceptionalism narratives. One of my questions in the first interview asked participants to speculate about the reasons so many students in the city leave school. While some students, like Talia, gave answers reflective of their own experiences – "I would say like the environment that some of the schools are in and not only that, but it's the students. They don't feel, like I said, like they're going anywhere" (Interview, 7/14/08) – others gave answers reflective of mainstream discourses about dropout. Answers ranged from "Because they weren't properly prepared" (Interview, 7/16/08) to "problems at home" (Interview, 2/3/09) to "lack of support" (8/11/08). In most cases, participants saw their own stories as different and more complex than their imagined story of a typical dropout.

Even when acknowledging that their own narrative was similar to that of a "traditional dropout," participants distinguished themselves. Chanel, who left school because she was unable to return to her special admissions high school after her first year explained:

> I felt like even if I wouldn't have slacked off and failed I feel like I would have
> left anyway, because the issues were becoming so overwhelming and I was
> becoming so increasingly upset with the school and feelings of alienation were
> just like overwhelming. So I felt untraditional in the sense of I would have left
> for those reasons if I wasn't asked to leave. (Interview, 7/23/08)

Here Chanel acknowledges that while she "slacked off and failed," reasons students typically leave school, she would have left the school anyway because of feelings of alienation – implying that alienation is not a traditional reason for leaving high school.

For other students, leaving high school was part of an effort to find a better learning environment. For them, dropout did not effectively capture this quest. For these students, high

school represented something ultimately contrary to who they thought of themselves to be.

Mercedes explained it this way:

> I guess one thing I can stress about high school is that people make it too much than what it is. People hype it up and they make it their whole life and I guess I just wasn't one of the people who made high school my whole life. I kind of knew from the beginning I wasn't gonna be a high school person. (Interview, 7/28/08)

In a later interview, she recalled crying at her middle school graduation because she did not want to go to high school. Likewise, Dana did not want to go to high school. She imagined it would be an extension of her negative experiences in middle school:

> I experienced people just don't care in middle school and you get that, it gets bigger in violence and everything once you get higher in high school. It does start out in middle school to tell you the truth. Those people go to high school and the caring goes less, not wanting to do something goes less. (Interview, 7/30/08)

For these students, high school represented a place that they never fit in or never wanted to attend. Therefore, under these circumstances, dropout is not an indication of failure but rather an attempt to find another setting more conducive to learning.

Another way that participants positioned themselves differently from traditional dropouts was in their stance toward the GED. Almost universally, participants – even those formerly enrolled in GED programs –expressed that they never really wanted a GED. For many students, like Chanel, the fact that Pathways grants high school diplomas was a major factor in selecting it:

> I saw this program in the high school diploma section [instead of the GED section] which I was really looking for because in some odd way I felt like I wasn't a traditional dropout, you know. (Interview, 7/23/08)

This was a sentiment echoed by other students like Brittany who never enrolled in a GED program, but also by students like Dana who did attend a GED program:

> To me I see GED is the second way out for people that did something in life, something happened and they can't and there's no other way out. They waited too late to get it. Like you can be any age to get your GED. (Interview, 7/30/08)

Dana explained that she simply enrolled in the GED program to "keep my head in school" while applying to Pathways.

For other students, the GED was seen as an option of last resort, not ideal, but better than returning to high school: "I didn't want my GED if I didn't have to get it. I still wanted my high school diploma and I knew me personally, high school, going back to high school, really wasn't an option in this city" (CG, 4/29/09). This is a reality Chanel faced when she was placed on probation during the fall semester. There was no guarantee she would be readmitted to Pathways. She recalls her orientation at a local GED program she attended while on probation in the fall:

> They're like, who here wants their GED and everybody's like raising their hand and I'm like, I don't want a GED. I'm not going to raise my hand and pretend to be excited. I just need to do something for three months to get back into the school that I like. (Interview, 3/5/09)

Given that I knew the students did not readily accept the term "dropout" to describe their experiences, I asked them to develop a different term that would be more representative of students like them. After the proposal of a few names that did not generate much response from their peers (e.g., "drop-ins"), the conversation evolved like this:

> **Dana:** I never dropped out.
> **Trinidad:** I was in a different program.
> **Lady:** I just went to different programs. What about high school swingers? (laughter) I would say that, the reason I say that is because a lot of us that made it to this program kind of bounced around from program to program. So that's what I would call us. Swing over here to this program, swing over there to that program. Just dancing around, dancing around high schools. I mean that's really the case a lot of people bounce from school to school, from program to program.
> **Trinidad:** Yeah, that's true because I been to 19 schools.
> **Lady:** But never really stopped going. (CG, 4/29/09)

The term High School Swingers, proposed by Lady here, was largely endorsed by the other participants, both because it captured their experiences of cycling through multiple schools and programs and because of the double entendre it suggested, which consistently provoked laughter. As discussed in Chapter One, participants liked that the term might increase interest in their experiences among potential readers of this study,

even if readers were disappointed once they understood the meaning of the term "swingers" in this context.

It is true that many of the participants, along with other students I got to know at Pathways, attended more than one high school or programs. Even those students who did not, like Chanel, engaged in a struggle to find a school or program that seemed right: "And then I tried to apply to about 1000 different schools, but all of the charter schools were full and all of the parochial schools were full" (Interview, 7/23/08). The range of options explored by students was wide. Mercedes and Cleveland were both homeschooled for a short time; many students talked about considering Job Corps, schools outside the city, and a wide variety of schools and programs with various foci. In this way students' dropout stories resemble narratives of persistence rather than narratives of failure. As protagonists in these stories, students portray themselves with agency and power, problem solving their way to a high school diploma.

Dropping Out of High School Isn't Funny

Interestingly, just as students distanced themselves from conventional definitions of "dropout" and challenged dominant discourses of what it means to leave school, they demonstrated complex understandings of their own positions as youth returning to school. While schools were criticized for their lack of care for students, participants still frequently represented leaving high school as a mistake – as something that was not to be taken lightly, as something that isn't "funny." In this way, their differentiation from "typical" dropouts was an indictment of those who leave high schools for traditional reasons, thus often implicitly relieving schools of their responsibility to retain students. While dominant discourses about dropout were challenged in participants' personal stories, larger discourses about school completion were frequently upheld.

Talia demonstrated some of these inherent tensions. Talia was among the most vocal and articulate critics of city high schools with a number of concrete ideas about how schools could be

improved to retain students. She stated quite bluntly, "I believe the way the public schools are set up is the cause for many students dropping out" (CG, 12/10/08). Yet, in an interview she spoke about her desire for her younger sister to complete high school: "She don't go [to school] everyday, but she go. I tell her, don't mess up like me. Do not mess up, just like, yo, these years gonna go by so quick. Just don't mess up" (Interview, 7/14/08). In this second quote, Talia represents the completion of high school as inherently moral and she conveys an interesting nostalgia for high school with the cliché about time passing quickly. This nostalgia – "these years gonna go by so quick" – is particularly confounding in light of how Talia spoke about dreading attending her high school each day. The contradictions speak to the power of dominant narratives about what high school should be, and how students should experience it.

Throughout the year, various participants made implicit and explicit normative claims about how students "should" complete high school via the customary pathway. In the following example, a participant (who left the program in the fall) voices her discomfort with the suggestion that programs like Pathways could replace traditional high schools. She recounts a conversation about Pathways during which her sister said, "with that program, you don't even need high school."

> This program is good, but it's not good like, you shouldn't drop out of high school to come to this program. You shouldn't like go to high school for a semester, drop out, like I'm going to [Pathways]. No, so it's funny to me, but it wasn't funny. (SB: And why do you think that is?) Because dropping out of high school isn't funny. (Interview, 7/9/08)

Students' narratives frequently included talk about their own disappointment, and in some cases shame, about leaving their high schools. Lady described the high expectations her family held for her and their disappointment when she was out of school:

> When I was young, they were all like you're going to be first female president and all this other stuff… [When I left school] my sister and my grandmother and my other sister and everyone else outside of my home was like what are you doing? You should go to school. (Interview, 7/7/08)

Indeed, alongside their school pushout stories and their narratives of exceptionalism participants conveyed their own sense of responsibility for failing to complete school. Chanel described her mother's reaction when she was unable to return to her school after ninth grade:

> Well, I think she was just really disappointed because me getting into [that school] alone was like, it was a gift really. Because I didn't even apply there it was like a surprise, this amazing thing. And then I went and completely messed it up. (Interview, 7/23/08)

By using the term "gift" in this excerpt Chanel endorses the hierarchical high school system in the city and apparently puts aside her own experiences with discrimination, isolation and alienation at the school. Thus, her critiques of the school as unsupportive of gay students are somehow less valid than the accepted worth of this institution which is publicly deemed a "good school." Notably, like Talia, she takes responsibility for her departure from the school, claiming that she "messed up."

In investigating how school leavers think about high school and the phenomenon of dropout, two perspectives from the literature come to mind. The first is from Fine (1991) who found that recent dropouts exhibited a "critical consciousness" about the economic opportunities available to them, the value of the education they were receiving at their school, and ultimately about the utility of a high school diploma. The second perspective comes from Stevenson and Ellsworth (1993) who found that the school leavers in their study generally accepted and internalized mass mediated images of dropouts as "incompetent" or "deviant." Pathways students' talk about dropout raises questions about the extent to which these two perspectives are dichotomous. These recent dropouts have not self-silenced their critiques of their high schools, but through their narratives of exceptionalism and self-representation as atypical dropouts they endorse images of dropouts as deviant. Participants' unwillingness to let go of shameful dropout narratives, even in the face of their experiences being pushed out of school suggests a sad commentary on the strength and pervasiveness of dominant cultural discourses that oversimplify the dropout problem and in so doing equate dropping out to failure.

Summary

The findings of this chapter support previous empirical research that has found students leave school because of uncaring teachers, low standards, and an unengaging curriculum (Hondo, Gardiner & Sapien, 2008; Marquez-Zenkov et al., 2007; Smyth & Hattum, 2003). However, unlike some participants in other studies who engage in alternative, often illicit, activities to find acceptance and intellectual stimulation, participants in this project embarked on a quest to find an appropriate school setting to complete their degree. For some students, like Brittany, Pathways was their first alternative. Most students explored, applied to, and attended several programs before applying to Pathways. What accounts for the persistence of these "high school swingers" in the face of bureaucratic obstacles and complicated application processes? In some cases, supportive parents and family members played a role but, not every participant reported satisfaction with his or her support network (see Chapter Four). Ironically, narratives of exceptionalism, which are used to explain participants' departure from high school, also position them as persisters, unwilling to give up until they find a program that recognizes their potential.

Interestingly, despite their range of experiences in district schools and programs and their critical commentary on high schools that failed to engage them, participants largely did not to "penetrate" (Willis, 1977) dominant discourses about high school completion. Instead, their narratives of exceptionalism allowed them to craft identities as untraditional dropouts, and thus cultural narratives about what it means to be a dropout were unchallenged. In the coming chapters, the implications for students' adopting subject positions as exceptional are further explored, particularly as they relate to discourses of success, failure, and perseverance within Pathways.

Rymes (2001) writes of narrative creation among the participants in her study: "identity is coauthored by other students, by an institution, and even, in this case, by me, the researcher" (p. 174). Such is the case here, as students' stories were frequently crafted in response to my

prompts in the company of fellow Pathways students in the context of a college-based program.

Yet, students' narratives tell us much about how high schools and school districts are structured

to communicate that some students more valuable than others. Participants had an astute

awareness that they were largely disposable within the high school system. Brown and

Rodriquez (2009) write that the departures of the students in their study were "profoundly

inconsequential… No alarms were sounded, no specialists were called in and no reports were

written" (p. 240). The swingers cycled through schools and programs that were considerably

easier to leave than to enter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Negotiating Multiple Messages: What Counts as College?

As indicated in the third research question (What are the experiences of returning students in a college-based program for adolescent dropouts?), central to my inquiry into the experiences of participants was the nature of Pathways as a hybrid program that is neither fully high school nor fully college. Pathways represents a sub-community within the college; students are subject to regulations and guidelines as conditions for their participation in the program and they receive intensive support from Pathways staff. At the same time, Pathways is located on the community college campus, students take classes taught by community college faculty, and for most of their classes they earn dual high school and college credits.

The community college, a relatively new arrival in the postsecondary world, is perhaps the most important component of the American higher education system today. As of January 2006, there were over 1,100 community colleges in the United States with over 11 million students enrolled (American Association of Community Colleges, 2006). According to the American Association of Community Colleges, this number represents 45 percent of all U.S. undergraduates. In 2009 in an editorial in the Washington Post, President Obama pledged 12 billion in grants and supports for community colleges as part of an effort to lead "the world in college degrees by 2020" (Obama, 2009). With average annual tuition rates of just over 2,000 dollars and open access admission policies, the community college has been called "democracy's college." However, longstanding questions about the purpose of community colleges – to grant terminal vocational degrees or to prepare students for transfer to four year institutions – and debates over whether they effectively do either have prompted some scholars to suggest that community colleges do more to uphold the ideology of meritocracy than they do to break the cycle of social reproduction (Brint & Karabel, 2000; Clarke, 1960; Dougherty, 1994).

While scholars, educators, and policy makers generally agree there is room for improvement at community colleges, their important role as access-granting institutions should not be understated. Research has shown that even one year of college has a significant impact has on the life-chances and earning potential of students (Day & Newburger, 2002). Likewise, intentional efforts to connect high school leavers with post-secondary options is essential, particularly given that the GED has been shown to have little significant impact on the earnings or outcomes for youth of color (Tyler, Murname & Willett, 2000).

Literature has long documented the challenges faced by low income students, students of color, and first-generation college students at two-year and four-year institutions (e.g., Astin, 1993; Jehangir, 2009; Law, 1995; Villalpando, 1996). A sense of inclusion and belonging are considered important to retention and success in post-secondary education; however, many students from non-dominant backgrounds experience marginalization, alienation, and isolation in college (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996). Moreover, dominant cultural narratives about options available to youth of color, along with educators' persistently low expectations, have been associated with poor academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and an under-developed academic and collegiate identity (Howard, 2003).

Given the importance of connecting out-of-school youth with post-secondary opportunities, the Pathways program holds great potential to make a difference in the lives of its students, many of whom will face significant challenges on the community college campus. This chapter explores Pathways in greater detail, with special attention to the ways in which the program positions itself and its students. In this chapter I pay close attention to the messages communicated by Pathways faculty and staff, the ways in which those messages often imposed identities on students, and the extent to which students took up and resisted those identities in various ways.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section discusses the rhetoric about the program's rigor and the hard work and diligence needed to succeed in it. In the second I investigate the way Pathways positions students as college students, with special attention to participants' tenuous and often conflicting attachments to collegiate identities. In the third section programmatic discourses about "outsiders" are explored along with participants' relationships with friends, family members, and peers both inside and outside the program.

College is Hard

It is Monday morning of the third week of classes during the foundation term and the late May weather is starting to feel like summer. The Pathways classroom is crowded and rowdy at 8:55am with students chatting, roughousing, and trying to catch up on homework before class begins. Students are comparing notes from the weekend. Bart went to a local amusement park with Brittany and two other students. Lady exclaims that she wanted to go too and a cheerful argument ensues about whether or not she was invited. Another student is opening up a new USB drive asking if anyone can go to the computer lab with her after class to show her how to use it. Much of the conversation revolves around the final draft of their first English essay, which is due today. A few students, including Dana and Cleveland, do not have their final drafts. Cleveland, who had never used email until he enrolled in Pathways had trouble retrieving his rough draft from his account. Another student forgot that it was due today. When Professor Wilson enters, several students approach her desk to give their reasons for their missing work. She dismisses them quickly. Overhearing their reasons, Mercedes asks Dana, "Why didn't you email her?" Dana says, "I emailed it twice." The professor says, "Well, I didn't get it; you must have done something wrong." As Professor Wilson circulates through the class to collect their essays, Trinidad explains that he did not get the comments back on his rough draft until last night. "Whose fault is that?" she asks. "Mine," he says. After Ms. Wilson finishes collecting the essays, a student walks in and breathlessly asks, "I was late today, how many points do I lose off my essay?" The professor states, "one," referring to the rule that essays are due at 9am. The girl sits down and then raises her hand to clarify, "so I could get a 99?" "No, your essays are graded out of 20, so you will start with a 19." (Fieldnotes, 5/28/2008)

The transition for students into this program was universally acknowledged to be difficult by staff, faculty, and students. Expectations in the foundation term were high, and students, many of whom who had rarely written essays for school, and some of whom had never typed an essay on a computer before, struggled to adjust. An essay, either a rough or final draft was due almost weekly. Over the course of the summer semester, two books and several short stories and articles

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were assigned; some students admitted this was the first time they ever completed book.

Professor Wilson had little tolerance for excuses and a strict policy for late and missing papers and homework. Pop quizzes on reading assignments were common. Each assignment she gave, including in-class notetaking, was checked and tabulated as part of their final grade. In the cohort I observed, only five of the 19 students successfully passed the class and moved on to English 100. Six students left or were asked to leave the program and eight received the final grade "Making Progress" which does not designate a failure, but means the class must be repeated because the student is deemed unprepared for English 100. The two other foundation term courses, math and freshman seminar, have higher rates of passing, but students struggled with the demands of those classes as well.

At the end of class during that third week in the term, Ms. Wilson closed the class with a warning. After collecting the essays, she had administered an unexpected quiz on the assigned reading, which many students admitted to failing. As students began to pack up their bags, she said in a voice that silenced the room: "Don't fall further behind. I told you at the beginning you cannot fall behind, the work will keep coming. Some of you did not believe me. Nothing we do is difficult, but you have to do it." (Fieldnotes, 5/28/2008). Thus was the message conveyed by Pathways staff and the foundation term faculty: this program requires hard work.

They Give You Work; Do the Work; You'll Make the Grade

The messages about hard work resulted in the construction of a particular understanding of schooling, one in which following directions, exerting effort, and earning high grades were of primary importance. The hard work message was conveyed in many different ways in the English classroom, but it was also a major point in presentations about Pathways to new and prospective students. Staff members often compared the program to other educational options in the city like GED programs, and in so doing represented the program as challenging and unique. Over the course of their first weeks in the program, students hear repeatedly that they should

expect three to four hours of homework each night, that they should expect to seek out tutoring if they are struggling, and that they will need to study to succeed. As an academic coordinator stated at a recruitment session: "This program is not for everyone. It's not fast; it's not easy; but it's the best way to get a college degree" (Fieldnotes, 4/22/08). At orientation, the central message was that this is not like other programs in the city "where you show up and leave with no homework." Instead this program will help students "learn how to think differently, but it will be a "struggle and a challenge" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). As will be discussed in the other sections of this chapter, these discourses about the challenges of the program were closely related to the ways in which Pathways was framed as college, not high school and the ways in which adults at Pathways warned students about "outside influences."

The students I spoke with readily took up this discourse about the challenges of the program. During their first semester, when I asked them to describe the program, invariably they would allude to the hard work expected of them. Dana explained, "That's what I expected college to be. It was hard; it was nothing else but that" (CG, 8/14/08). When the students talked about the program's rigor and high expectations, they typically did so with pride, as Talia did here:

> You know what, I like to be in a program where it's kind of disciplined. So um, it's tough. [Pathways] is tough. But I like that because it's making me work harder. And um, yeah, and I know anything that comes easy, it's not worth it. (Interview, 7/14/08)

Here, Talia's use of the phrase "not worth it" is reminiscent of the ways in which she and other students talked about high schools as places with low expectations and few opportunities for learning. By contrast, students described Pathways as a place where working hard was "worth it." Students who were successful in the program relished the program's challenges. During his third semester, Trinidad reflected back:

> You know and I couldn't believe it my first semester I was actually proud of myself because I would write down all my assignments and all the times I had to study. And I would actually put a check mark next to every one, and I looked, I

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flipped back through the book and I looked at the end of semester. I did every assignment and that was the first time I actually did all my homework. (Interview, 2/3/09)

This discourse about diligence was seen most explicitly during the foundation term when students met with their academic coordinators regularly, had professors with close relationships to the Pathways office, and were initiated into the program over the course of several recruitment and orientation events.

Interestingly, the talk about the program's toughness was almost exclusively related to the quantity of the work, rather than the intelligence needed to perform the task. Comments from the faculty and the students focused on the time needed to complete the homework. This idea is evidenced above where their English professor says "Nothing we do is difficult." This statement was consistent with the comments from Pathways staff in orientation about every student having the ability to succeed in the program: "We've hand-selected you; no one gets in by accident; if you are here it's because we know you can do it" (Fieldnotes, 5/7/08).

In part because applicants participated in a battery of screening assessments and in part because of the focus on the effort the program required, success and failure in Pathways were almost never talked about in terms of academic unpreparedness or lack of ability. Instead, the focus was on whether or not students were putting in the time necessary to be successful. Even those students who were mandated to attend tutoring because they scored in the low range on the entrance exam were deemed "smart enough" to do the work by their academic coordinators and professors. It was expected they would spend more time in tutoring and seek extra help as needed. On the first day of class, Professor Wilson told them "the challenge is not going to be the work for most of you; it's going to be handing things in on time, studying and keeping up with the work" (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). In her conversations with me during the semester, Professor Wilson revealed her belief that the students in the cohort were all capable of completing the work. For example, after class during the fourth week of the semester, I asked if there were any students

she might want me to work with as a writing tutor (this was something I proposed when I began my fieldwork as a way of giving back to the program). As we walked to her office, she confided in me that there were three students she was worried about, "but mostly it is the effort." She told me that this cohort was among the strongest in terms of skills, but not all of them are handing in the work (Fieldnotes, 6/2/08).

In fact, rarely did students complain that the work was too difficult. This was exemplified in my first conversation group with the students at the end of their first semester.

> **Talia**: I don't know, to me college was everything I expected. I knew it was going to be hard and it was hard. Well, I wouldn't say hard, because everything wasn't hard.
> **Dana**: No, not really.
> **Talia**: It was challenging because it was a lot. It was a lot of work that had to be done and whatever.
> **Lady**: I expected college to be impossible, like everybody else. I found that it is possible. It's very possible.
> **Dana**: It takes some time.
> **Lady**: It just takes determination and
> **Talia**: Can't procrastinate
> **Lady**: You have to do what you're told. It's just that simple. If you do what's asked of you, you will be successful. It's just really. College is all about – they give you work, do the work, you'll make the grade.
> **Talia**: Requires a lot of self-discipline. It really do. (CG, 8/14/08)

In this exchange, Lady boils down success in college to doing "what you're told" and demonstrates her understanding of what college is about – doing the work. I interpret this talk among students, faculty and staff about completing assigned work, making the grade, and earning the degree as part of a larger societal discourse which equates higher education with credentialing (Labaree, 1997). By focusing on the "exchange value" of the degree, other conceptions about purpose of college – i.e., the opportunities it affords for exploring new ideas, developing a critical or questioning stance, and experimenting with identities – are obscured. This will be developed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

This focus on the quantity of work rather than on the difficulty of the assigned tasks was part of a method of encouraging students and setting up expectations for success. This is

something Professor Wilson talked about explicitly in a class conversation about the education of students of color in the United States: "Standards are not high where we come from in our school district. That's why I am so hard on you in this class" (Fieldnotes, 7/21/08). The academic coordinators were quick to say that "everyone can be successful here" (Fieldnotes, 5/7/08) and most participants felt that the Pathways staff really did believe in them. Mercedes' comment was echoed by others throughout the year: "But they really want you to succeed. You can tell. Maybe they give you all this work because they know you can do it" (Interview, 7/28/08).

Yet, the focus on completing the work also created an environment where legitimate struggling with the material was rarely discussed as a serious problem and where students' failure to hand in work was often described as a lack of effort or diligence, rather than a sign that support was needed. Chanel, who failed math and English during her foundation term and was subsequently put on a semester-long probation, reflected on this issue a year later:

> 'Cause sometimes it's like you're not ready for the class and it's just like you're just really overwhelmed. So it's like, you might not have necessarily earned like an MP [Making Progress], but it's like not because you didn't try your best. It's just because you were too overwhelmed in a way to even hand in this paper to show that you tried or do whatever. (Interview, 4/10/09)

Here Chanel raises questions about what it means for students to try their best. This was an issue the program director attempted to address during the spring semester when she tried to implement a coaching initiative that would have provided mandatory small group tutoring focused specifically on organizational and study skills to students in their foundation term. The proposed coaching initiative challenged the rhetoric that the primary reason students struggle in the program was a lack of effort, but ultimately it was never realized because of college union rules.

While the rhetoric coming from staff and foundation term faculty was that the program was difficult, I noted that I heard the students repeat those messages about the program requiring hard work less frequently after their first term. This was likely due to the range of classes they took (some difficult, some not), their decreased contact with the Pathways office, and the

important role foundation term professors played in perpetuating those messages about diligence for success in college. In fact, after the foundation term, it was not uncommon for students to complain that their classes were easy. The cohort I followed was assigned foundation term professors who have a long history with Pathways and with developmental education at CCC. After their first term, participants were subject to a wide range of professors with an equally varied array of teaching philosophies and approaches.

The Pathways Scholarship is a Privilege, Not a Right

Within the hard work discourse was a message about earning one's place at Pathways. The standard PowerPoint presentation that was displayed at recruitment and orientation events prominently featured these two programmatic principles: "We believe all students have the capacity for academic success. We also believe that the [Pathways] scholarship is a **privilege**, not a right" (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08, original emphasis).

Framing continued enrollment as a privilege that could be revoked was important to enforcing student compliance with the program's rules and regulations, as evidenced in the various violations that could result in a revocation of a student's scholarship. These included failing to sign-in or contact an academic coordinator for three consecutive days, missing deadlines for important forms or the semesterly fee, failing to turn in textbooks at the conclusion of each semester, and failing to attend required one-on-one appointments with the academic coordinators (Fieldnotes, 8/25/08). Students were told at orientation that they must "earn [their] scholarship each week" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). During the foundation term, students are required to fill out a weekly "scholarship check-in" form on which they record the various ways they did or did not successfully comply with the program's expectations (e.g., attendance, assignments completed, reporting to required tutoring). The last line of the form asks students, "Do you believe you earned your scholarship over the past week?" and leaves space for students to explain why or why not.

A part of this discourse about participation in the program as a privilege was talk about the advantages the program affords. CCC's amenities and services, including the gym, library, computer labs, clubs, activities, and sports were frequently highlighted to new and prospective students. Less tangibly, staff members also talked about what it feels like to be a college student. A student ambassador (a more advanced Pathways student) speaking at a recruitment session echoed the staff members' sentiments saying, "I have a feeling of dignity that comes from walking around saying 'I'm a college student'" (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08).

This notion that students must earn their place at Pathways indicates both the ways in which staff attempted to hold students to high standards for success and the ways in which students were positioned as potential failures. Unlike privileged students, many of whom likely see post-secondary education and its associated amenities as a fundamental right, Pathways students' place in higher education was tenuous.

Like the 'hard work' messages, privilege messages could be heard echoed by students as well.

> **Lady**: I think a lot of people didn't think about the fact that this is a scholarship. This is a scholarship.
> **Dana**: You could be paying thousands.
> **Lady**: What else can you say? What do you mean you don't feel like coming to school? If you don't go to school - you know what I mean. That's one think that stuck out in my mind. It's free, like free!
> **Cleveland**: Where else can you get that type of opportunity?
> **Lady**: That's an opportunity that you do not – you cannot pass something up like that. That just be really really idiotic. (CG, 8/14/08)

Here and elsewhere, the program is framed as a valuable opportunity that should not be wasted. At orientation, an academic coordinator outlined the average cost for one year at CCC ($3,912) and compared that to the $120 Pathways students pay ($20 enrollment and $50 per semester fees) (Fieldnotes, 5/7/08). Students who wanted to earn their associate's degree were well aware of how many credits they would earn for free by being part of Pathways. Students, like Dana, who came in with few or no high school credits were advantaged because they were able to earn

almost enough credits for an associate's degree while in Pathways. On the other hand, students with only a few missing high school credits, like Brittany who completed Pathways in one year, accumulated fewer free college credits. Early in my fieldwork, a student on the verge of graduating told me he was trying to devise ways to stay in Pathways longer so he could accumulate more college credits (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08).

The framing of this program as a college scholarship had different effects for students and staff. The emphasis on the scholarship allowed staff to develop compliance structures for attendance and grades with serious consequences, the most serious being probation or expulsion. For students who were successful, however, it facilitated the development of an elite identity. It was understood that not all applicants were admitted to the program and that not all students would stay. The admission rates were highlighted at orientation in conjunction with the high expectations the program would hold for students. The semester the participants entered Pathways, the program had received over 130 applications for only 39 slots.

Participants also had first-hand knowledge of the program's competitiveness based on their own application experiences. Dana, Talia, and Bart were not accepted the first time they applied to Pathways; these three students in particular talked about how fortunate they felt to be in the program. As Talia explained, "Then again, I think about, it took me two chances just to be here, and I'm not giving that up" (CG, 8/14/08). Students who were accepted on their first application attempt also knew that admissions were rigorous. When I asked Cleveland about the application process he said, "I got in the first time, which I was proud of after hearing people having to try out several times. So, it was pretty flattering" (Interview, 7/16/08).

About six weeks in to their foundation term, four of the cohort members left the program. As Mercedes explained several weeks later in our interview, this sent a significant message for the fifteen students who remained:

> After losing a couple of people we kind of realized that this is serious and we
> didn't want to lose anybody else. Because the odds are that they said half of us

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won't make it, and we kind of wanted to make sure most of us made it. (Interview, 7/28/08)

It was made clear in a number of ways that many students typically do not make it through the foundation term. Professor Wilson stated on the first day of class that in the past she has finished the semester with only half of the class (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). During a panel discussion with current students as a part of orientation, current students said "I saw so many people leave because they didn't do their work" (Fieldnotes, 5/7/08). In response to a question after the panel, the academic coordinators cited 70 percent as rate for successful completion of the foundation term.

Students' departures from Pathways were rarely discussed as resulting from a lack of programmatic support. Among participants, students who left were discussed as those who did not make it, either because they "didn't take it serious" (CG, 8/14/08), because "they don't want to do the work" (CG, 4/29/09), or because they "had other influences telling them they couldn't do it" (Interview, 7/28/08). Sometimes staff and faculty talked about students who left in similar ways. For example, at a recruitment session an academic coordinator said, "it's sad to lose students, but if they find it too strenuous they will leave" (Fieldnotes, 4/22/08).

Staff and professors often talked to me about the program as "not the right fit" for students who left. Because this program was portrayed as rigorous and unique in its college-based approach, it was considered understandable if some students opted to leave for another alternative. In a conversation with me about students who left, an academic coordinator told me that because the program is so challenging it is often not a good fit for students with a hectic or difficult home situation (Fieldnotes, 5/6/09). On several occasions I heard stories about students who left the program and went on to successfully earn their GED. This idea of program fit is related to the Pathways principle quoted from the program's slide show: "the scholarship is a privilege, not a right." While all students may have a right to a high school diploma – or to pay

their way through college – the Pathways scholarship is reserved for an elite group of hard working students.

As Cleveland reflected on his first semester, he recalled his uncertainty about whether or not he could be successful in this environment: "Because I felt like I was gonna leave because I felt like I wasn't smart enough, but what I realized was that I wasn't stupid, it's just that I wasn't applying myself" (CG, 8/14/08). This excerpt demonstrates the ways in which working hard (applying oneself) was understood to be paramount to success in Pathways. Likewise, Cleveland's comments indicate the ways in which students' identities as "smart" (as explored in Chapter Three) were encouraged and facilitated by the programmatic rhetoric of hard work and privilege.

Real College Students

As demonstrated above, the fact that Pathways is a college-based program is central to the way it is portrayed to students in terms the privileges college life affords and the challenges students will face. Program staff members make clear that Pathways students are "real" college students at recruitment and orientation sessions. At orientation in May, one of the academic coordinators opened the morning stating "You are college students now. You aren't high school dropouts anymore. That part of your life is over" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). Messages like these likely contributed to the rejection of the dropout identity, discussed in Chapter Three. However, despite the consistent messages from staff and faculty, students took up the college student identity tentatively in many cases, sometimes questioning the extent to which they measured up to community and larger cultural discourses about who counts as "real" college students. Often times their reluctance to fully embrace a collegiate identity was related to the ambiguity of their imagined future selves and the extent to which they had been encouraged by others to take up an academic identity.

I'm So Excited! We're in College!

The "college, not high school" rhetoric was one I saw reiterated again and again in presentations to the students by the staff and in small quiet interactions between students and staff. The orientation packet included a handout entitled "High School vs. College" which included comparisons in categories such as "Homework," "Class Time" and "Teaching Style." CCC student identification cards were often discussed as important markers of identity, with staff members holding up their own cards during orientation and recruitment sessions and talking about the privileges they confer. In a recruitment session I attended the program director emphasized, "We don't give you a Pathways badge, no one will know you are not a regular CCC student" (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08). During my last week of data collection one year later, I overheard an academic coordinator encouraging a student in her office: "Don't let anybody tell you that you're a high school dropout. You know the truth, which is that you are 19 years old and you are a college student" (Fieldnotes, 4/30/09).

The students took up these discourses readily in some cases, as evidenced by a comment I overheard during the first week "I'm so excited! We're in college" (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). As discussed in Chapter Three, the college-based nature of the program was important to the way they positioned themselves as different from other youth. In some cases, I heard them echoing the messages Pathways staff: "First of all, this is not high school. And that's one of the things that they highlighted in the first orientation" (Interview, 7/7/08).

The fact that this program is not high school was universally understood to be a good thing. College represented many things that high school did not including maturity, freedom, high expectations. Lady explained:

> High school to me is like being at home. Like you're being, you're still being brought up. You're still being raised. You're still being babysat for lack of better words. And here, I'm allowed to be that adult that I am. (Interview, 7/7/08)

The participants valued the freedom Pathways afforded: "After being here you can't go back to high school. Because it's just like such a step back from having all this freedom" (Interview, 3/5/08). Indeed, while Pathways has strict guidelines, students did experience more freedom than high school. In the 10 minute breaks between classes they could go outside to visit the food trucks, smoke on the steps outside the building, or do anything college students usually do on campus. Their classes during that first semester were condensed into about three hours, so they found themselves with considerably more out-of-class time than a typical high school student

In addition to the feelings of freedom, students commented on how the college environment prompted them to take school more seriously. For Talia, the change was significant during her first semester: "Like in high school when I had a test coming up, so? (laughs) Alright, whatever, but like in college it's like, I want to try harder and I want to like be successful in college" (CG, 8/14/08). The atmosphere of the college campus had other benefits that the students discussed. Cleveland enjoyed the contrast to his high school where he feared violence: "It feels good; it feels safe and secure because there's nobody standing on the corner necessarily doing bad things. Nobody's fighting" (Interview, 7/16/08). Other students enjoyed seeing people on campus wearing suits and carrying briefcases and being "surrounded by adults" (Interview, 7/14/08).

In his qualitative study with African American students in urban high schools, Howard (2003) uncovered the important role teachers and counselors play in the development of a positive academic identity. At Pathways, these data demonstrate the explicit work faculty and staff engage in to cultivate collegiate identities that may not have been encouraged in the students' high schools. In the students' own words, those messages, the physical environment of the community college campus and the increased expectations, responsibility and freedom did reframe their academic identities and foster their sense of themselves as college students.

The Professor is King

As will be discussed later in this section, ensuring students truly embraced and took up identities as "real" college students was difficult. Through their discourse, faculty and staff worked in a number of ways to position students as typical college students, rather than high school dropouts or participants in a special program. One of the main ways Pathways staff communicated these message was in their talk about professors. Professors were represented as entities separate and apart from Pathways, as significantly different from high school teachers, and as wise and powerful authorities to be admired and respected.

College professors were talked about significantly during orientation sessions and in meetings between academic coordinators and students. Professors were represented as having high expectations, and also expectations that were different from what students might have been used to in high school. A student ambassador explained it this way at a recruitment session: "Coming out of high school, these classes are a lot harder. Professors won't badger you; they'll just kick you out" (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08). Professors were largely portrayed as teachers who would have little tolerance for "high school attitudes and high school behaviors" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08) and as only interested in "teaching people who really want to learn" (Fieldnotes, 3/18/08). Students were warned that not only would professors not "deal with disciplinary issues," but if a student missed too many classes professors would "just delete you from the roster without asking questions" (Fieldnotes, 1/15/09).

Talk about professors in this way set up Pathways and its staff members as separate and apart from the college. Pathways staff members' use of third person constructions about professors ("they'll just kick you out"), rather than talk about "our" collective expectations, facilitated this idea that students were regular college students "who just happened to be finishing up some high school business" (Fieldnotes, 5/7/08). This talk might be perceived as disingenuous during the foundation term when foundation term professors meet biweekly with academic

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coordinators to discuss individual student progress. However, once students move into their second term and beyond, they take an increasing number of non-Pathways courses and Pathways staff members were right to distinguish between the office and the norms of college classrooms. Beyond the second term, academic coordinators have fewer connections with the professors and fewer opportunities talk with professors to align their expectations or fully understand their syllabi or teaching style. Beginning in the third term, students may be the only Pathways student the class, and thus his or her academic experiences may be quite similar to a "real" college student.

Once participants moved into their second and third terms, they talked with even more confidence about their identity as college students: "I feel like, there's no such thing as [Pathways] to me anymore 'cause I'm like so close to finishing. I'm just a [CCC] student" (Interview, 4/10/09). The transition from foundation term English and math classes (which counted for high school credit only) to college credit classes like English 100 was a significant marker in the program. Anticipation of "real" college courses was spurred on by the ways in which the foundation term professors regularly referenced the expectations of the college level courses. The foundation term was regularly framed as preparation for college; as Professor Wilson explained: "I'm trying to break you out of bad habits; other instructors here will not want to see [them]" (Fieldnotes, 5/19/08). Throughout the semester, she rationalized her choices in terms of what would be expected of them in future courses: "This is what will happen in all of your college classes; professors will expect you to be able to read and internalize the information and then be able to bring something to the table" (Fieldnotes, 6/2/08).

Pathways staff members have fewer opportunities to support their students in classes beyond the foundation term. As discussed above, students encounter a wide range of professors with a variety of approaches to teaching. As such, academic coordinators advised students to expect anything in the classroom. This was exemplified in the comments at orientation like "It is

the professor's world in the classroom" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). In the Pathways office, I frequently

heard students complaining to their academic coordinators about their professors, with objections

that ranged from boredom to unfair rules.

After their first term, students talked to me frequently about frustrating experiences in

college courses over which the Pathways office had little control. In a conversation group

midway through the fall semester, students reflected on their struggles. For Cleveland and

Mercedes, one of the challenges of the semester was adapting to teachers whose teaching style

was not compatible with their preferences:

> **Cleveland**: They will come into class and won't teach exactly. They'll expect
> you to go out and find the information and get what you need, and I realize that
> more than ever this semester.
> **Mercedes**: I think college now is learning to be flexible and learning to have a
> little bit more patience. I think now, I know I need way more patience because
> some of these classes, I be ready to go off and pull out a sword and (laughter) be
> carried out in handcuffs and stuff, like I hate this school. I don't know, I think
> more patience. (CG, 11/19/08)

In the above excerpt, Mercedes offers her interpretation of what it means to be a college student.

Her assessment that college requires flexibility and patience echoes Lady's comments cited above

that college is about following directions. In both cases, the emphasis is on the professor's

authority and in neither case is the student's agency or learning experience emphasized.

In the same conversation, Bart reflected on the importance of ensuring that Ms. Bea (their

academic coordinator) communicated with their professors:

> **Bart**: I have advice to like the students transitioning. I would tell them like, they
> need to make that connection between the academic coordinator and their
> teachers because what I did is I asked Ms. Bea could she email [my English
> professor] and find out about her grading system and stuff like that.
> **Dana**: The only advice I have for that; it's like the connection with the teacher,
> like he said. Because we had to do a stand-alone class and we don't even have
> contact with [the professor]. So like, if we don't have contact with him, how we
> supposed to talk with, how we supposed to ask Ms. Bea? (CG, 11/19/08)

In her comments Dana is referring to the professor for a stand-alone English class (i.e., she and

Cleveland were the only Pathways students in the course) who did not regularly use email and

was difficult to contact outside of class time. She and Cleveland struggled with this professor all semester and reflected on him in our last conversation group:

> **Dana**: hahaha! Mr. G. he was hilarious.
> **Cleveland**: He wasn't a good teacher.
> **Dana**: He's not a good teacher. I really don't think he was a professor to tell you the truth (laughter). I think he was a person they just hired. (CG, 4/29/09)

Academic coordinators may have been sympathetic to students' negative experiences in some college classrooms, but ultimately their responses reflected their powerlessness over these less-than-optimal classroom situations. For example, a student's complaint about a professor who did not allow students to drink from water bottles in class elicited a typical response from an academic coordinator: "That's their domain; that's their castle; the professor is the king" (Fieldnotes, 3/6/09). Academic coordinators did reach out to professors when students asked them to or if they felt like they could mediate a problem or advocate for the student in some way. As Bart reported, Ms. Bea talked to an English professor to clarify a confusing grading policy. Students in stand-alone courses were also required to have their professors complete two academic progress reports each semester. The progress reports offered space for professors to write about the student's effort and attitude, academic progress, and attendance and invited the professor to indicate if he or she wanted to be contacted by a Pathways staff member.

For the most part, however, once students were enrolled in non-Pathways courses, they navigated professors' styles and demands on their own. Although some students, like Bart and Dana, found ways to advocate for themselves in the classroom by calling on their academic coordinators for help, the primary lesson students appeared to learn from the messages they received from staff and faculty was that a professor's authority was paramount. Responses from staff members to students' complaints appeared to be part of an approach to coach students to adapt to a variety of classroom situations in preparation for life beyond Pathways as real college students.

I've Been Told I Don't Look Like a College Student

Despite the rhetoric around the college-based nature of this program, some participants had an uneasy relationship with the idea that they were real college students. This uneasiness came from a number of sources, including students' perceptions of college, media images of "real" college students, and comments from family, friends, and professors. Chanel was the first person I heard vocalize this idea. About six weeks into the first semester, Professor Wilson asked them to do an in-class writing assignment on the differences between high school and college. Chanel said that she was unable to answer the question because she didn't know what college was like. In our interview later in the summer I asked her what she meant by that.

> I feel like since I got here everybody's just been drilling college, college, college and it's like I don't feel like I'm in college. I'm still completely undecided about my major. About my career, about my life. I'm really here to get my high school diploma and I think that the associate's degree is awesome and I really don't take for granted that part, but it's like I'm trying to go one step at time. (Interview, 7/23/08)

Chanel was unwilling to embrace wholeheartedly the message that she is truly a college student because she is focusing on "one thing at a time." In this excerpt she reveals an attitude toward the high school diploma that Pathways staff members actively worked to discourage. Additionally, implicit in this statement is the idea that college students should have a major and should be in school working toward a career goal. This was an idea that I heard spoken by other students who expressed anxiety about their futures. In March, well into her third semester, Talia told me that she was having trouble focusing on her classes and maintaining her motivation to complete her work: "I be slacking sometimes. That's because, like I said, I'm unsure if that's the right career path for me" (Interview, 3/27/09). This uncertainty was affecting her, despite the fact that her classes were requirements for her high school diploma and prerequisites for any major she might eventually select. Talia's conflict here suggests both an embrace of the college identity (in her anxiety about her future major, rather than a myopic view of her high school credits), and a sense of uncertainty if college will be worthwhile if she cannot decide on her career.

But the questions about participants' status as college students did not just come from their own indecision about their futures. Dominant narratives, drawn from the media, about what counts as real college and who college students should be, as well as questions and comments from professors and others affected participants' abilities to fully embrace their own status as college students. This was something that Lady struggled with on two fronts. Firstly, she reported hearing messages from people in her life about Pathways and whether or not it was "real college." She told me once that her friends were quick to say, "you're not in college, you're in a program." This was an idea she expanded on in a conversation group:

> And we're under a program that kind of makes us feel like, yeah we go to community college, but we're not taking all the same classes [as regular students]. And even after you move up, you still feel like you're not in college because you have to report back to the office. (CG, 3/4/09)

While students beyond their first term did take non-Pathways classes, and this contributed to the nature of their 'real' college experience, there remained programmatic structures that contributed to this feeling of "being in a program."

For example, the program's textbook policy compromised students' identities as college students. Course textbooks were purchased by Pathways and therefore property of the program. As a condition of their scholarship, students had to return their books to the office at the end of each semester, thus writing in the books was strictly prohibited. In two courses I observed, this became a problem when professors wanted students to annotate in their books. During the fall semester, when Mr. Franklin discovered that students were not allowed to write in their books he protested, "I've never heard of a class where students aren't allowed to write in their books! You can even sell back textbooks that are written in" (Fieldnotes, 9/23/08). Mr. Franklin confided with me later that this was a source of frustration for him. The prohibition on writing in books was, in his eyes, "something they do in high school, not college" (Fieldnotes, 10/2/08). Despite the efforts by staff to convey the college, not high school message, in reality Pathways students were aware of the position they occupied as, in Bart's words, "semi-college" students.

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In addition to feeling like she was "in a program," Lady's challenges with embracing her

status as a college student were also a result of messages she received from Pathways faculty and

staff. Lady was notorious for her sense of fashion, her penchant for high heels, and her tendency

to wear outfits that left her stomach exposed. During the warm summer months she frequently

came to school in heels, short shorts, and revealing shirts. Her style was distinctly different than

any other student I saw in Pathways, but it was not until I overheard her conversation with

another student during the fall semester that I discovered faculty and staff had been talking to her

about her wardrobe choices. Later in the week, I asked Lady about it in an interview.

> **Lady**: About seven people have approached me and said something to me about
> my choice of dress.
> **SB**: Is it staff or faculty?
> **Lady**: Staff, faculty, students everybody. Everybody in the [Pathways] office
> except for [two people]. Two of my professors and then just other people like the
> guy that works in the kitchen. Some security guards, you know what I mean.
> (Interview, 10/7/08)

As Lady discussed her experiences with various adults recommending she dress differently, it

became clear that her identity as a college student was in question. She explained:

> And I'll never forget, last semester, my math professor told me I don't dress like
> a college student. So how does a college student dress? Sweatpants, a hoodie,
> and sneakers. First of all, I don't even own sneakers. (laughs). You know what I
> mean, like, so does that make me not a college student? (Interview, 10/7/08)

Here and in other cases, dominant cultural narratives about what a college student should look

like arose, like when Dana explained that people assume that college students should carry

backpacks instead of purses (CG, 3/4/09) and when students referenced movies like *Animal

House* to describe the typical college experience. When I asked students to talk about what

images of college students they saw in the media Cleveland stated: "It's usually that white male

with jeans and a t-shirt who goes to the sorority and he parties all the time" (CG, 3/4/09). In that

same conversation, Lady drew on a movie portrayal of an African American college student, but

her example seemed to speak to her own experiences at CCC:

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> In *Drumline* it is so funny because image was one of the main topics that was touched in the movie because the kid that came to school his image was like hoodrat: braids, baggy pants, you know whatever, how he felt he wanted to dress. But when he came to the school, they tried to change him. They basically coerced him to believe that this is how you should look as a college student, you should be preppy and you should be clean cut and comfortable looking. (CG, 3/4/09)

The comments about her clothing were something that visibly upset Lady. Normally cheerful and upbeat, Lady spoke fervently about her confusion over faculty and staff comments when there was no written policy about a dress code. In our conversation about it, she referred back to her experiences in high school where she felt confined by the school's uniform policy. She explained that entering CCC she expected something different: "I never think there's anything wrong with any of my clothes being as though I'm in college. Isn't this where you're supposed to express yourself quote unquote?" (Interview, 10/7/08). Here Lady reveals her preconceived notions about what college should – a place to express yourself.

Lady's experiences reveal much about the experiences of students in academic institutions when they do not meet white middle class normative expectations for expression. When colleges do not offer permission for students to "engage in their learning authentically as their full selves" (Jehangir, 2009, p. 49), what may already be a difficult transition from home to school becomes even more challenged (e.g., Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1996). Issues of race, class and gender are bound up in Lady's critique, as she demonstrates when she asks, "What if I was goth and I wore black nail polish and crazy makeup and colors all in my hair, big clothes, would they tell me that that's inappropriate?" (Interview, 10/7/08). Thus, certain types of non-normative expression are tolerated within the college's informal and unwritten dress code. In a later conversation group, the expectation that college students wear sweatpants and sneakers was deconstructed as part of the image of college students as privileged dorm-dwellers who look like "they just got out of bed" (CG, 3/4/09).

These inconsistent messages – "appropriate" attire versus college as a place for self-expression – appear to be part of a larger conflict related to the purpose of college for low-income students or students of color versus the purpose of college for privileged students. Participants' constant concerns about selecting a major and the faculty and staff's emphasis on respecting the professor's authority and "doing what you are told," contrasted sharply with my own undergraduate experience at an elite university. In my experience, college was about investigating and exploring opportunities, being undecided during freshman year was a mark of open-mindedness, and questioning and critiquing were signs of intelligence. I read Lady's disappointment and confusion as a reaction to various circulating images and discourses about the purpose of college and who goes to college.

Students were also not immune to ideas about community college as less rigorous or prestigious than four-year institutions. As demonstrated by the following exchange between Brittany and Lady, there was awareness among students about the place of community colleges in the landscape of higher education.

> **Lady**: Then in another incidence is that it's community college and a lot of people already identify community college with high school and make it seem like it's high school work.
> **Brittany**: Thirteenth grade
> **Lady**: And they say it's thirteenth grade and it's like not that deep, you know what I mean. (CG, 3/4/09)

"Thirteenth grade" was a familiar term for students and they were quick to make the distinction between a community college and a four-year institution: "I think the difference is a university and college. It's like they both are colleges, but around like community college, like where everybody from a neighborhood can go" (CG, 3/4/09). In this quote from Dana, the egalitarianism of community college is highlighted as well as its local nature. Community college was understood to be a place designed for older students, students with jobs, and poorer students.

Along with this, I frequently saw students' apprehension about their ability to move on to or fit into a four-year school. Townsend and Wilson (2009) and others have shown that the transition from community college to a bachelor's degree granting institution is challenging. The data suggest that participants' collegiate identities, which the Pathways staff worked so hard to foster, did not necessarily translate as they tried to imagine themselves in a university. Just has Howard (2003) found that some high school students did not think of themselves as "college material," some Pathways students were uncertain if they were "university material." For example, Cleveland's dream school was a private university that specializes in gaming and multimedia. He explained: "And I really want to go there; that's one of the things that I don't feel is attainable because it's so expensive and so far away. I don't know; I think that's just going to be a complicated process" (Interview, 2/13/09). Fears about costs and the application process were common. Dana explained her fears revolved around money for college:

> Like I said, I know I can get scholarships if I have the grades to prove it and I can
> get grants, but I know that not all scholarships gonna get everything. And not all
> grants gonna cover everything and I don't want to have to take, I know you gotta
> take out loans sometimes, but I don't want to take out 50 thousand loans cause
> everybody tells me they still paying it off until their forties. (Interview, 3/18/09)

In addition to financial concerns, students talked about their general uncertainty about continuing in school when they were still undecided about their career paths. Chanel told me, "I want to continue to go to school [for a bachelor's degree], but it's like with no career goal, what do you go to school for? I know I want to continue to go to school, but for what I have no idea" (Interview, 3/5/09). Bart was similarly undecided:

> I'm not sure what four year college I would transfer to, but that was kind of my
> plan was to do at least one year here and then transfer. If not just do two years
> and then go to a four year college. Depends on like, I think it's like more of an
> at-that-time decision, so I'm not really sure. (Interview, 2/20/09)

An analysis of participants' possible selves will be explored more fully in Chapter Five, yet their uncertainty about matriculating to a four year school offers a window into the ambiguity of some students' academic future selves. These data point to the ways in which possible selves are

closely tied to past experiences and present context (Markus and Wurf, 1987) and the ways that

educational aspirations are shaped by family, community and school experiences (Hubbard,

1999) as well as stereotypes and perceptions of group identity (Kao, 2000).

Despite their uncertainties, many students found the idea of a four-year institution,

particularly an opportunity to live on campus, alluring. In a spring conversation group,

participants discussed the stresses of attending a commuter school: "But at a university it's a lot

less to worry about. I don't have to worry about the trolleys breaking up… It's a lot less things

on your mind when you live right there" (CG, 3/4/09). Living on campus was appealing because

of the shorter commute and the safety of a campus environment. Cleveland explained:

> And though there are a lot of, now, common cases of violence on campus and
> stuff it's not as bad because you won't have to go through a war zone to go to
> school and I would just love to because I could devote more time to sleeping
> because I only need like five minutes to wake up and get across the campus.
> (CG, 3/4/09)

While all of the group participants could see the appeal of on-campus living, not everyone

considered it a feasible option. Dana cited the high costs of living on campus. Brittany thought

she would feel less comfortable living away from home:

> Like people come from different backgrounds and different lifestyles, so I don't
> know if I would be amenable to that. Have to share a bathroom and then not
> knowing what kind of roommate you're going to have and I don't know; I'm a
> homebody. (CG, 3/4/09)

Academic coordinators worked closely with students who were in their last semester at Pathways

to help them make plans for further education and to navigate financial aid and application

procedures. Nonetheless, I heard similar messages from staff members about the challenges of

going to four-year institutions far from home. An academic coordinator told a group of parents

and friends at a recruitment session that it is in the best interest of Pathways graduates to finish up

their associates degree at CCC before transferring. In an anecdote about a student who wanted to

go to a university far from home he said, "once she looks into the cost of the program (or any out-

of-state university) she will realize that it's better to stay here" (Fieldnotes, 4/22/08). Stories like these contributed to students' uncertainty about their futures at four-year institutions.

Thus, despite the strong messages put out by Pathways about the program as "college, not high school," students received numerous messages from other sources – from professors, media portrayals of college students, and outsiders – that put their identities as college students in question. This, compounded with their uncertainty about transferring to four-year universities, made for a complicated picture of their self-image as college students. Yet, in the conversation groups, students were quick to cheer each other on when self-doubts arose. Dana concluded our group in March with a monologue that prompted laughter, applause and shouts of "preach it!"

> I'm doing what I gotta do and I'm taking college courses even though it transfers for high school. It doesn't matter, I still am taking what any other regular college student have to take to get that degree they want. So that's what I figure. I figure that if people do not like what I'm doing now then it doesn't matter what they think. Like Lady was saying, people from the outside, key word: outside of schooling. What are they doing? That's how you gotta look at it. What are they doing? They're not doing what I'm doing and they're not trying to pursue education. (CG, 3/4/09)

Outside Influences and Support Networks

As Pathways staff and professors advised students on how to be successful in the program, one of the central messages they conveyed was related to students' social and support networks. Support networks were recognized as important elements of student experiences in the program. During recruitment sessions, friends and family members (termed "supporters" by the program) were invited to participate and were offered a special presentation during the students' testing session. After orientation for new students, the program held a "Friends and Family Night" event which featured dinner and presentations about the program. At this event staff presented ways friends and family could help their new Pathways student be successful in the program. Likewise, students were encouraged to work cooperatively with each other and support each other. A major philosophy of the cohort model was its potential for team building. "You will need each other" Ms. Wilson said on the first day class (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). Implicit in

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much of the Pathways staff and faculty's talk about support networks were assumptions about who counts as a supporter, what types of support networks students may or may not have outside the program, and the opportunities the cohort model afforded for retention.

Research has long explored the importance of family and peer support networks for college persistence (e.g., Austin & McDermott, 2004; Buell, 1999). Dating back to Tinto's (1975) theory of retention, social interactions have been posited as a major component of students' integration into the college life. Thus, on-campus clubs and activities, affinity groups, and social events are largely understood to be essential to retaining students and incorporating them into the institutional culture. Critiques of Tinto's model have pointed to its assimilationist tendencies (e.g., Tierney, 1992) and a significant number of researchers have demonstrated that the project of integrating into campus life is far more challenging for students from non-dominant backgrounds (e.g., Bean & Metzner, 1985; Guffrida, 2006; Jehangir, 2009). In addition to the work students must do to navigate unfamiliar "unwritten rules and expectations implicit to academia" (Jehangir, p. 33), first-generation college goers may find their families have a limited understanding of college life and therefore can offer limited or inadequate support (e.g., Law, 1995; Rendon, 1994). The data explored in this section confirm, extend, and complicate previous research on the challenges faced by low-income, first generation college students of color.

This final section explores the nuances of Pathways students' support networks, both inside and outside the walls of City Community College. The messages communicated by Pathways largely conform to broad patterns in the research literature that point to the lack of supports many students face outside of school and the role programs like Pathways can play in ensuring that support networks are fostered within the institution. In many ways, the data presented in this section support this conventional wisdom about first-generation college students; however, this section also reveals that students' experiences are far more complex than represented in the messages Pathways sends.

Everyone Can't Be in Your Front Row

It was communicated by staff and faculty that some people in students' lives would not support them in their endeavor to go back to school, and particularly to enroll in a college-based program. A college administrator told the group at orientation: "You will have family who don't understand what you are doing and you will have friends who think you are a sellout" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). Staff and faculty advised students to "drop" people who want to pull them away from their studies. As part of an orientation handout called "College Survival Tips" students were advised to practice the phrase "No… I'm sorry but I have to attend class today." An academic coordinator warned the group that this will be something they will have to say to their boss, their family, their friends and people "who don't value the same things you value" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08).

The message that some outsiders might not be supportive of their college goals was communicated in a number of ways. On their College Survival Tip handout, students were advised to "Think about staying on campus for as long as you can." In addition to touting the resources available (computer lab, professors, tutoring programs), the sheet advised "As soon as you leave campus there are a million distractions that can easily pull you away from your goal" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). At Pathways' Male Leadership Conference, one of the adult mentors distributed a sheet entitled "Everyone Can't Be in Your Front Row." It begins with the following sentence: "Life is a theater – invite your audience carefully. Not everyone is spiritually healthy and mature enough to have a front row seat in our lives" (Fieldnotes, 4/20/09).

Foundation term professors reiterated this message about friends and family pulling students away from their studies. Ms. Wilson told them "there are things that may be happening outside of school that may try to take over your goals" (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). She advised students to rely on each other for support and avoid distractions and influences that might pull them away. The students' freshman seminar professor told the students stories about his life

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growing up in a poor section of the city and the struggles he faced resisting temptation and avoiding distractions in college. He shared with them his catch phrase in college—"The party doesn't start until [I] get there"—which he used to explain why he was always fashionably late to parties, which he would only attend after finishing his schoolwork. He said, "I had to put aside high school friends and college friends to make time for myself. Give yourself two hours a day to get your work done" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08). In an interview, Trinidad later told me other similar techniques this professor shared with them in class: "He would be like, you just gotta take that two hours and be like, I'm going over Helen's. And Helen is basically the library; he just named it Helen so his friends would be like, oh okay" (Interview, 4/10/09).

Overall, professors and staff warned students about the dangers of "outside influences" that might distract them from their studies, and people in their life who might not understand the challenges of college or might not value their attempts to get their degree. Embedded in this advice is the assumption that there were people in students' family or social networks who would not want to or would not be able to support them in their schooling.

In my conversations with students, I saw quite a bit of evidence of their taking up the discourses of the staff and faculty's warnings about distractions and cutting off negative influences. Early in the foundation term, Talia told me that she was trying to avoid some of her old friends: "The ones I mainly hung out with were the ones that lived in my neighborhood and them were the ones that got me into trouble" (Interview, 7/14/08). Bart reported that after leaving high school, "I felt like I needed to hang around a more positive influence so I mostly stayed home and when I did go out it was like to look for a job or something like that" (Interview, 7/15/08). Participants talked about the importance of doing their work on campus: "Because if I go home then it's a possible chance that I ain't gonna get anything done because I have so many distractions in my house" (CG, 8/14/08). Cleveland fantasized about the benefits of living on

campus at a four-year institution: "Because though you still have to worry about what's going on at home, you're basically away from the family distractions" (Interview, 3/4/09).

Students talked about outside influences much the way faculty and staff did, particularly when talking about students who left the program. Mercedes told me about a cohort member who left: "She had other influences telling her that she can't, that she couldn't do it" (Interview, 7/28/08). Cleveland talked more generally about students who are not successful at Pathways: "It's hard for them to turn away from the things that they're used to - outside influences" (Interview, 7/16/08). The idea that the cohort was an important source of support was also echoed by students talking about those who left. At the end of the foundation term, Chanel reflected on the closeness of the cohort and the ways in which they encouraged and supported one another: "Most people really dropped out before we really got close in the class" (CG, 8/14/08). In talking about other students this way, students echoed the warnings of faculty and staff and also created two important categories: insiders and outsiders. In this discourse Pathways was a safe place to do work and to seek help, whereas the outside held potential for danger and distraction.

Discourses about the power of the cohort and the danger of outside influences were important in the ways in which faculty, staff and students talked about success and failure in the program. These discourses were based on the belief that students needed people to support them and that insiders (fellow students) were best equipped to do so while outsiders (families, friends and neighbors) may not be willing or able. However, despite the relative simplicity of the inside/outside categorization and the ways in which students' took up program discourses, careful examination of students' stories and experiences over the course of the year reveal a more complex portrait of how students cultivated and relied on support networks comprised of good influences, bad influences, true friends, and "associates."

The Only Other Stress I Really Have is My Family

Just as predicted by staff and faculty, family, friends, and other outsiders were sources of stress and distraction for many of the participants in this program. Many of the students I spoke with had challenging home lives that took their focus away from school. Some students reported that the primary source of stress in their lives was their family. Dana, whose school life was interrupted on a number of occasions because of illness, death, or instability in her family talked about her challenges in school this way:

> I always liked school actually. I really have and I've always wanted to achieve more and go to college and everything. It's been hard not having that success with my family always involved with my life. Always making problems for me, and they don't believe they're making problems for me. (Interview, 4/24/09)

Dana's parents died while she was a child and her aunt, who served as her guardian, died when she was sixteen. In the time since, Dana had lived with her sister and then with her cousin and had encountered difficulties in both settings, primarily related to both women's children, the expectations that she would help care for them, and the ways in which she felt she was not respected by them.

Trinidad also identified family conflicts as the primary source of stress and distraction in his life. His mother's constant relocating during his high school year resulted in his attending four schools, but it was her four month incarceration that had the biggest impact: "My mom got arrested and I was at home by myself for about like four months, so you know that's most of the problems that I had" (Interview, 2/3/09). During his second semester at Pathways, he and his mom encountered problems in their relationship:

> It was getting so stressful that I was starting to do bad in my schoolwork and I knew once I already set my goals, I couldn't let anything prevent that so I thought the best move was to just leave my mom's house, get some peace and go to my grandmom's." (Interview, 4/10/09)

Trinidad reported that after moving in with his grandmother, he was able to focus more on his school work and his grades improved because of it.

Students reported that, in addition to conflicts, their homes were filled with distractions. The most frequently reported distraction was the presence of children. Bart said, "My house is crazy 'cause like I got two nieces that's under three, right, so they just running around screaming all day" (CG, 8/14/08). For Mercedes the main distraction was "drama." She reported she preferred to stay at CCC because "I live in a house where it's so chaotic, where like every moment is just like, what's about to happen today?" (CG, 8/14/08). Lady's description of the sources of stress in her life was typical:

> My loved ones and their health and my little brother – someone's trying kill him
> – and my mom had to move, a whole bunch of stuff. My dad is sick and my
> godkids, they're crazy and it's just like, it's a mess. (CG, 4/1/09).

It was in these descriptions of home life, that students frequently extolled the virtues of staying on campus to complete their work.

Pathways staff warned students that there would be friends and family member who would not understand the demands of the program. Students complained about incidents with outsiders that reflected this problem. During their foundation term, many cohort members would stay on campus after their classes ended to do homework together or just hang out. Mercedes complained that her family expressed skepticism about how she spent her afternoon hours: "Then there started being issues like, 'Why are you coming home at five?'" (CG, 8/14/08). Similarly Dana reported that her cousin and sister suspected that she was with her boyfriend.

As Chanel reflected back on her difficult first semester in the program, she attributed some of her struggles to her relationship with her girlfriend, "If I had homework to do, I'd be like, I can't do this right now I have homework to do, whatever she just didn't take it seriously enough or understand how much it was" (Interview, 4/30/09). Here Chanel relates an incident remarkably similar to the scenarios predicted by Pathways staff. She characterizes her girlfriend as simultaneously misunderstanding and failing to take seriously the nature of the program.

Similarly, Talia talked to me on several occasions about the ways in which she wished her family would support her educational and career-oriented endeavors.

> My family, like, my mom, she proud of me, but mmm, and she support me, like when it comes to when I don't have carfare and stuff like that, like she'll help me get here or whatever. But she don't really ask me like oh, how was your day, or stuff like that, what you learn and stuff like that… So she is supportive in a way, but not the way that I want her to support me. (Interview, 7/14/08)

Here Talia makes clear that her mother does provide financial assistance, but that she desires a different kind of relationship with her mother where they talk more about her schooling. Talia perceived that her siblings "act kind of jealous" around her, so she had few people at home to whom she could talk about her in school experiences. Other participants also had few people with whom they shared aspects of their school lives. Bart stated that he spoke with his mom about school, but with others he was more reserved:

> **Bart**: I don't really talk about what I do in here. (laughter)
> **Lady**: It's a secret. He don't want his gansta friends to know.
> **Bart**: It's not like that, it's just like, the only people that really ask me about what I do in school is my mom. (CG, 3/4/09)

Although Bart rejects the suggestion that he is keeping his school life a secret from his friends, he does imply here that he does not employ his friends as a source of support for his school endeavors. Likewise, Mercedes differentiated between her dad's side of the family, where she didn't talk about school at all and her mom's side where the topic was more likely to come up. Still, by the end of the first semester, she told me that the support from her mom was less evident: "Before in the beginning you could see the support and now it's just like I don't really see it" (Interview, 7/28/08). Unlike some other students, Lady reported that she talked about her school experiences with everyone in her life. However, she told the group that she did not always get the response she wanted or expected: "It has a lot to do with people being haters and just being like, oh she's moving on up and I'm still not" (CG, 3/4/09).

The tensions students felt between home and school life were evident in these comments and also in the ways that they talked about adopting different personas at home and school. Dana first raised this issue in a conversation group:

> When I come to school it's my like my business corporate, my career. Working at school, some people who might see me here who knows me from home life to school life, might say I'm acting fake. (CG, 2/6/09)

This comment provoked a spirited discussion among participants with some, like Trinidad, claiming their persona and behavior was not different across home and school contexts. Others, like Cleveland, identified with Dana's statement. In later interviews, this issue came up again, as it did with Bart in our final meeting:

> Something about being here it's like a switch that turns on in my body that just make me focus and when I'm like outside of here I'm just carefree. I guess it goes back to the atmosphere. It's like a learning kind of atmosphere, so I feel I gotta be like more professional, and when I'm not here I just kind of slouchy. (Interview, 4/22/09)

Bart's descriptors of his demeanor outside of class, "carefree" and "slouchy" offer an indication of the ambivalence some students felt in adopting their new "professional" identities within this college context. Attendance at CCC was a source of pride for all students, even as that pride was complicated by mediatized images of "real" college students and the jealousy and discomfort of family and friends.

The data presented in this section indicate that for many participants navigating between home and school context was challenging. In a reflection on her experience as a first generation college student, Clark/Keefe (2006) writes:

> I had no way of knowing just how many selves I would meet on my own journey through higher education. Nor did I understand how complicated it would be to live with, in, and between the ambiguous contradictions that arose and continue to arise between my fragmented identification with both the working and middle class. (p. 1192)

In this passage she captures liminal position students describe – caught between full acceptance at school and full acceptance at home. Participants' experiences suggest that Pathways is right to

emphasize coping strategies like staying on campus and practicing phrases like, "Sorry, I have to attend class today." On the other hand, as will be demonstrated in the following section, Pathways discourses about outside influences and internal supports failed to capture the nuances in students' support networks.

I Haven't Had to Cut Anybody Out of My Life

As they talked about their lives, participants demonstrated the complexity of the relationships between the outsiders in their lives and their school-based experiences. Often times the same individuals who were the greatest sources of stress and distraction were also the greatest source of support and encouragement. The programmatic rhetoric about moving difficult people out of "your front row" glossed over the importance of family relationships, even when those relationships were complicated by stress. Participants' largely refuted the claim made by staff that they might have to "cut someone out" of their life.

For example, Dana, who cited her family as the major source of stress in her life, also talked quite extensively about the ways in which her family supported her. When she described a photo of her cousins, she said: "Those are two people that is most important people in my life right now because they took me in… they're gonna help me get this far and keep going on. They want more from me" (CG, 9/15/08). Throughout the year, Dana cited ways that her family members provided financial and emotional support. One of the most important ways that her cousin supported her school was by allowing her to stay rent-free:

> That's why I said they don't stress me about working or nothing. They just like school, because they never had it. They feel like they want their children to have it, why should they hinder anybody else's children to have it? And they's like you gonna go to school and get that degree. (CG, 4/1/09)

Dana's family members did not encourage her to get a job, so she was able to focus on school full-time. Dana also talked to me about the ways in which her cousin, who was married and in her late twenties, served as a role model for her: "She's one of the very few people in our family that own their own home, so I'm like, I will look to her to get that advice how to go about that"

(Interview, 3/18/09). Dana's story reveals the complexity of the relationships participants had with family and friends. While she talked at length about the frustrations of having to babysit for young relatives, her lack of personal space, her family's role in pulling her out of high school, and her ongoing disputes about household matters with both her sister and her cousin, it was evident that Dana's family was her primary source of emotional and financial support. Their expectations that she would finish college, their pride in her, and their willingness to let her put her school work ahead of part-time employment were important sources of motivation and support despite the day-to-day challenges of Dana's relationships with them.

Similarly, Lady's discussion of the various places where she drew encouragement reveal the ways in which rhetoric about outside influences over-simplified most students' experiences. As discussed above, Lady acknowledged that her mother's financial troubles, her brother's involvement with a tough crowd, and the fact that many of her friends were "haters" made school difficult. However, she reflected on the multiple forms of support in her life:

> Everyone, when they hear about [my school] they're like, 'you're still doing that? That's what's up. Keep doing it.' I mean I get a text message every other day like, 'How was class or did you go to school today?' And my girlfriends are asking me how was school and my mom and everybody. So for me it's just whoever knows that I'm doing it, they may not know where I'm at in it, but they know that I'm doing it and they'll say one or two little words that are supportive to me. (CG, 4/1/09)

For Lady, support comes in various forms, ranging from a text message inquiring about class to more explicit messages of encouragement. The same people she cites as "haters" above (her girlfriends) also serve as supporters when they ask her about school. These examples demonstrate the ways in which overgeneralizations about friends who consider you "sellout" or family members who "don't understand" were insufficient to capture the roles outsiders played in the lives of participants.

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After hearing these stories from students about their sources of support, I asked them to reflect on the statement made by Pathways staff that some friends or family might need to be "dropped."

> **Lady**: I just believe that's an unresearched statement. I mean I think a lot of things have to change in order for anything to happen, but it doesn't necessarily have to be people that you surround yourself with… Ultimately it's about whatever you do, whatever you want to do. No one can make you do anything that you don't want to do and if you put your mind to it and you know how to separate priority from fun then you be cool.
> **Brittany**: Yeah, I think I agree with Lady it just depends on how strong your will is and if you can succumb to outside pressure and everything on the other side. Or if you're just an individual and you follow your own heart, your own voice, your own conscience. Like me for example, I haven't had to cut anybody out of my life. (CG, 4/1/09)

These responses suggest that their success in the program was dependent on a far larger constellation of factors than just the outsiders in their lives. Lady's commentary on the statement indicated her belief that success in Pathways required a wide range of personal changes. Evident in both quotations above is the firm belief in the power of personal drive and determination. (This theme will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Five.) Like Dana, who found both support and stress in her family, Brittany cited her long-term boyfriend (who was out of school) as both a source of emotional stability and instability. Brittany felt that her will to succeed, which she described as constant, was far more important than any external stressors, which changed depending on the circumstances of her relationship.

An important component of participants' social lives and kinship networks outside of the program which was unfortunately overlooked in the outside influences discourse was the fact that Pathways students were a source of pride and motivation for their family members. While many students may have associated with people deemed bad influences, the ways that students were good influences on their friends and family members were also important. The focus in the rhetoric about support networks was on the ways in which students were drawing support from others, and the ways in which students were providing support for others were often ignored.

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Students universally shared stories about the pride their family members took in their accomplishments, even when those same family members failed to provide the type of support students desired. Trinidad reported that his younger cousins now wanted to attend college because they heard that he was enrolled. Lady and Talia shared that they were role models for girlfriends who were thinking of enrolling in school. Students spoke with me frequently about trying to convince their other friends to apply to Pathways and about their newfound position within their family and community:

> People look at you different. You feel like you're a lot more grown up and you, you say, like I'm a college student, I'm not in high school no more. They believe you more. They put all this trust in you because you're a college student because they believe you're more mature than a high school student. (CG, 8/14/08)

While students may have made less time for friends who distracted them from school, they largely reported that they did not cut anyone out of their lives. Instead, over the course of the year, I saw them navigate their evolving relationships with outsiders and insiders, in often unexpected ways.

For the Most Part, I'm Rolling With Myself

Just as the nature of students' supports and stresses outside the program was far more complex than presented in the rhetoric, their relationships with insider peers played out in complex ways too. During the foundation term, the cohort was of primary importance. Students took all of their classes with their cohort-mates. They met as a group at least once weekly with their academic coordinator for a range of activities that including team and trust building. Each cohort came up with their own name and the program incentivized the cohorts to work together to meet certain benchmarks (perfect attendance and homework completion). This model of community and trust building among a peer-network aligns with research demonstrating the importance of learning communities and peer group involvement for college persistence (Jehangir, 2009). The cohort was cited as an important factor for students during the foundation term; however, over the course of the year, participants' relationships with their cohort-mates and

with other Pathways and CCC students changed and evolved in surprising ways and in their third

semester many participants preferred to be "rolling" alone.

During the foundation term, the fact that the cohort was close was discussed frequently

by the group and was evident to me as an observer. They referred to themselves as "family,"

spent time together outside of class, and reflected on the numerous traits and life experiences they

had in common. At the conclusion the foundation term, Talia reflected:

> My best experience this semester was meeting everybody. And especially like
> during our projects, we really got to know each other, personally, like in depth
> and whatever. And I seen that we all had so much in common from all the
> experience we went through within in our lives and whatever. Like we had a lot
> in common. And I felt a connection to everybody from that. (CG, 8/14/08)

Lady further explained:

> My experience is exactly the same, like meeting everybody. It's like we came
> here all blind, all, you know, kind of timid and nervous and to ourselves, but then
> we realized—like she said—that we all have so much in common. And now you
> can't see just one or two of us on campus. We're three deep, no less. (CG,
> 8/14/08)

Students attributed their success in the foundation term to the relationships they formed with their

cohort-mates. In reflecting on the students who did not complete the foundation term, Chanel

said, "I feel like they didn't really realize that they could have been part of this like, cute little

rainbow family" (CG, 8/14/08). Aside from their feelings of camaraderie, the cohort also

provided important supports and accountability checks. It was not uncommon for students to call

or text whoever was missing from class. If someone was absent, I could usually find out why by

asking any member of the class.

Talk of the importance of their friendships was at its most intense during the transition

from their foundation term to their second semester. At continuing student orientation at the

beginning of the fall semester, participants talked about their cohort's superiority over other

cohorts and expressed their displeasure that multiple cohorts were being honored at a pizza party.

"They're just letting them come because they don't want anyone to feel bad. Everyone knows

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we're the best" (Fieldnotes, 8/25/08). During their second semester, the cohort was split between three English classes, two math classes and a variety of other electives. At the beginning of the term, I saw students relish chance meetings in the hallway and cluster together in class. Brittany described her relationship with her cohort-mates: "This [term] has given me the opportunity, making me closer to the people [in my cohort] and stuff. Like I don't know, I just gravitate toward them, just friendlier towards them and stuff" (CG, 9/15/08).

However, the intensity with which students talked about relationships with their foundation term cohort members faded steadily throughout the semester. By their third term, some participants did not have class with anyone else from their original cohort and many only shared one class. While during the foundation term, it was a regular occurrence for me to run into four or five members of the cohort walking together on campus or going to or coming from the computer lab ("three deep," to use Lady's term), it was rare for me to see cohort members exchange more than a hello or quick hug with one another during their third semester. In our last interview, Brittany told me that she no longer "feels that closeness like from the foundation term" (Interview, 4/4/09).

When I asked students about the change, they attributed it to their schedules; no one mentioned any arguments or problems:

> So everyone that's there [in the foundation term] is in it together and it's like once we move on to another semester and we have that freedom to do what we want and go where we want. It's kind of like we divert away from each other. (CG, 4/29/09)

This diversion was part of a larger shift I saw in which Pathways and CCC friendships became less important to participants. It appeared to me that as the students drifted apart from their cohort-mates, many did not find replacements at CCC. Instead, students shared stories with me about their feelings of isolation from their classmates and the importance of friends from their neighborhoods.

In late fall and during their third semester, students began talking to me about the importance of their independence, their social relationships outside Pathways, and the challenges they faced in maintaining their CCC friendships. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five, participants' valued their independence and their ability to succeed as individuals. In her third term, Lady explained:

> Here I don't feel like I have to be connected. Here I feel like, it's all for one, one for all, but I feel like, I gotta do it by myself. Ultimately when I get my test grades, I get them for myself… While I'm here, I feel like I'm on the move, I'm by myself, I came by myself, I'm leaving by myself and that's really it. (Interview, 4/10/09)

Similarly, in the spring, Chanel suggested that the close relationships she had during her foundation term were part of the reason she failed her classes.

> I think it's sort of odd, it's like I always find like a really good friend and usually that person brings me down. But it's like I'll get so worried about hanging around with them or doing whatever that I won't really do what I have to do. (Interview, 3/5/09)

Chanel said that in the spring term she was "still talking to people here and there," but for the most part she described her social status as "rolling with myself" (Interview, 3/5/09).

For some students outside influences, or old friends and family members who were not in school, offered more authentic relationships than could be achieved at Pathways. This is something Talia talked about quite extensively during her third term. She explained, "Because some of the people here like, I feel like they don't feel what I feel. I talk to some people or whatever and some people just, they'll just don't understand me" (Interview, 3/27/09). As a result, she was connected to few people on campus:

> I just keep my friends from home that I been knew that I'm totally comfortable with. I tried to make more friends while I was in, like outside of the Pathways and more in school, but I had a friend and he had to drop out because his mom got sick so he had to take care of her. Everybody else it's just 'hi and bye,' we're just associates. (Interview, 3/27/09)

The term "associates" came up frequently in discussions with students, both of their high school experiences and college experiences. Just as participants felt like loners in high school, that same

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feeling of isolation was discussed by students in their third term. Brittany called the social dynamic in high school and at Pathways comparable: "I'm just cool with people… it just wasn't as much as middle school where I was just so used to staying in touch with my friends" (Interview, 4/4/09).

Like Talia, students reported a closeness with or nostalgia for their high school or childhood friends. Bart said that he often missed his high school and lamented that CCC was on a different calendar than the public school system, "So our breaks are like off, so we be like the only people out of school… so I be kind of bored" (Interview, 4/22/09). It appears that for some students the process of adopting a new collegiate identity can be lonely and painful. Participants' feelings of disconnection from their college peers echo the literature on the divide between home and school (e.g., Phelan et al., 1998), but also point to the important role outsiders play in the lives of Pathways students.

It was evident from students' comments and my observations that the cohort model largely did not extend close relationships beyond the first term. As was discussed in the first two sections of this chapter, the evolution of students' relationships were driven in part by the diversity of their experiences after the foundation term. As students' schedules became more divergent, they spent less time together. But despite this expected separation, students' talk about independence and their inability to connect with fellow students came as a surprise to me, particularly after seeing their closeness during the foundation term.

Pathways worked to promote in-group relationships across semesters and cohorts in a number of ways. Ms. Bea hosted a "family reunion" at the beginning of the spring semester to bring together all of the students from her various cohorts for an afternoon of food and games. The program sponsored a few social events including a trip to a local haunted house in September, an ice skating trip in December, a chess club, a group for girls called "Promise," and an event akin to a prom called "A Night on the Red Carpet" in June of 2009. My own volunteer

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work for the program, coordinating the Arts Magazine, was part of these efforts to bring

Pathways students together outside of classes around issues or events that interested them. It was

well established by staff, however, that encouraging students to attend events like these presented

a major challenge. Each of the events mentioned above was under-attended. Despite being well-

advertised, the ice skating trip only attracted four students (although many more signed up).

Even the semi-formal dance, which was an idea generated by students and was largely planned by

students, was almost canceled for flagging ticket sales. Trinidad's game day, which featured

video games on a big screen, was considered relatively successful with about 12 attendees out of

over 100 enrolled students.

When I asked students about the lack of participation in events like this, they cited busy

schedules and the inability to stay on campus after class. Students in Pathways lived all over the

sprawling metropolis and it wasn't uncommon for students to have to commute from long

distances to get to school, and therefore they were unlikely to return in the evening for an event or

come to school on a day when they did not have class. Just as Brittany cited the challenges of

maintaining friendships in her city-wide admission high school, students in Pathways were also

unlikely to see each other off campus if they lived in different neighborhoods.

Participants' experiences over the course of their first year at CCC indicate that their

relationships with friends and family members are protective, even when they are also a source of

stress and distraction. Likewise, without ongoing and intentional programmatic efforts in

maintaining the cohort's closeness beyond the first term, it appears that the camaraderie among

cohort-mates quickly fades. The literature on student experiences in higher education has long

indicated that peer-relationships with fellow students are an essential component of student

retention, and programs have long sought to facilitate peer relationships through the development

of on-campus activities and student life. Pathways students' experiences align with previous

findings about the challenges of low income students of color integrating into campus life, yet in

their own words they complicate oversimplified rhetoric about the benefits of inside support and the dangers of outside influences.

Summary

In a meeting at the end of my data collection, the program director talked to me about her concerns with what she called the "rah-rah-college" message that students receive as they enter the program. She questioned how students who flounder in courses interpret that rhetoric, and if the staff's emphasis on the challenges of college come at the expense of providing adequate support for students who struggle. She wondered what happens if they have just been hearing "college, college, college since they got here" (Fieldnotes, 5/19/09).

The director's term, "rah-rah-college," does capture something about the overarching messages coming from Pathways staff and faculty and their attempts to encourage students to take up collegiate identities. In their warnings about the effort required in college, the differences between high school and college, and the potential problems of outside influences, the staff adopted a cheerleading role – explicating the obstacles and challenging students to meet them. Yet, as the director noted, something was obscured in the boostering and the hype of "this is not high school" and "college is hard." As the data demonstrate, despite adopting the language of these messages, students experienced a life at Pathways that was far more complex than the rah-rah-college rhetoric implied. As such, they often resisted the collegiate identities staff attempted to impose on them.

Underlying the cheerleading were implied messages about the purpose of college (following the directions of professors) and about who succeeds in college (hard workers). Unfortunately, this discourse failed to make space for alternative visions of what college could be. Likewise, while the "hard work" messages served as a form of encouragement in that it upheld students' identities as "smart" and "exceptional," it also perpetuated a deficit view of students when they did not succeed. As a result of this cheerleading, Pathways students worked

to adopt the identity of "real" college students, but their uncertainty in fully doing so speaks to the challenges of border-crossing and the strength of the messages students received from other sources. Likewise, the data point to the ways in which Pathways' hybridity – not fully college, not fully high school – was a lived reality for many participants.

In exploring their identities as college students, many students experienced pain and isolation as they navigated relationships on both sides of the home-school divide. The data in this chapter point to the importance of providing ample support to students within the school, in addition to prompting conversations with students about their outside of school networks. In particular, participants might have benefited from a more nuanced conversation about the ways in which they serve as mentors in their communities, the ways in which close family and friends are simultaneously sources of stress and support, and the ways in which a college student identity might be adopted while maintaining the richness of their out-of-school lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meritocracy, Optimism, and Hoped-for Selves

Given the intricate ways in which participants responded to dominant cultural narratives about college and college success and the complexity with which they took up and resisted college student identities, it was with great interest that I engaged students in conversations about their imagined future selves. During my third semester at Pathways, I conducted interviews with all participants in which I asked them to imagine their lives in 10 years. The interview protocol was designed to uncover how participants envisioned their futures, how they understood the pathways between their current position and their idealized selves, and the barriers they anticipated along the way.

Literature on the possible selves has demonstrated that future selves can be hoped-for but not expected and that youth often lack a "blueprint for action" (Shepard, 2004) to achieve their hoped-for selves. Marginalized youth and youth of color may be particularly vulnerable to what Osyerman and her colleagues (2006) call "implausible" selves—that is, possible selves that lack associated strategies and plans to achieve them. Just as participants found it difficult to imagine themselves on living on a university campus, literature has shown that youth may find visions of their futures "constrained" (Yowell, 2000), if they feel that some images of success are too unrealistic given their current realities.

While in some cases the data confirmed previous findings about those constraints, overwhelmingly the data indicate that participants are both optimistic about their futures and confident that they will achieve their aspirations. Pathways students talked not only about the plausibility of their imagined future selves but also about the resources they intended to employ to attain them. Despite past hardships and current challenges, participants expressed resolute hope for a bright future. Interestingly and unexpectedly, these data also revealed much about

participants' conceptions of what counts as success, who has the capability to achieve success, and what influence societal structures have on an individual's ability to reach his or her dreams.

This chapter begins with an overview of the range of hoped-for and feared selves identified by participants. In particular, this section focuses on the Pathways students' expectations for the future and the extent to which they expressed confidence and doubt. The second section explores participants' optimism for the future, and specifically what might be considered their paradoxical hope in the face of previous and current hardships. Finally, this chapter ends with an exploration of participants' endorsements of the ideology of meritocracy, the importance of my own subjectivities in the analysis of these data, and the implications of these data for teachers and pedagogy.

Possible and Expected Selves

Using Shepard and Marshall's (1997) possible selves mapping exercise (see Appendix B), I asked participants to write down a number of hoped-for and feared future selves. Our conversations about those future selves revealed a range of hopes, fears, and expectations across a number of domains including school, work, relationships, and family. It was in these conversations that I came to understand more about how participants envisioned success, what actions they planned to take to achieve that success, and what apprehensions and doubts they harbored.

Ten Years From Now, That's a Long Time

I began by asking participants to imagine their lives ten years in the future; for most, this would make them about 28 years old. As participants talked about their future selves, a picture of what counts as success emerged that featured financial, emotional, and physical security. Hochschild (1995) would classify their definitions of success as "absolute" rather than "relative" or "competitive" (pp. 16-17), as they rarely mentioned their aspirations in relationship to others'. Instead, Pathways students imagined a future for themselves in which they would be happy, safe,

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fulfilled, and proud. Their understandings of how they would achieve these dreams ranged in

specificity and certainty and spanned across the domains of education, work, and relationships.

Each participant included an education-related future self in their map of hoped-for

selves. Their goals related to education ranged from completing the credits for their high school

diploma at Pathways to obtaining their doctorate (Lady hoped for a doctorate in an area that

would prepare her to become a motivational speaker, Dana in physical therapy). Brittany imaged

a bachelor's degree in journalism from a local competitive university. As discussed in Chapter

Four, Cleveland researched a college that specialized in animation, graphics, and game design.

Talia aspired to a bachelor degree in the arts.

For some students, these hoped-for selves were very well-defined, like for Trinidad who

imagined he would obtain his master's degree in computer engineering from a local private

university. Other participants, like Bart, had less well-defined future selves in relationship to

education:

> When I get my high school diploma, I want to kind of like work a little bit, just to
> save up some money so I can pay for my college… I'm not sure about the major
> yet, but I had a couple of majors that I was thinking about like business
> management and stuff like that. (Interview, 2/20/09)

In all cases, participants talked about the security and satisfaction they expected as a result of

achieving these goals. Dana talked about the appeal of the doctorate for personal reasons: "I so

want that. That doctorate sounds so big and so huge, I don't know why, it's like, it sounds like

you're on the top" (Interview, 3/18/09). Others, like Lady, talked about their educational

aspirations in relationship to financial goals:

> I definitely want to get my mother out of debt, that's one of the main things that I
> want to do. It's like as important as getting a doctorate, but it's like first you get
> the doctorate, then you get her out of debt. (Interview, 2/11/09)

In my conversations with them, education was intimately linked to a variety of other personal and

professional goals. Cleveland ranked "finishing college" as his most important hoped-for self:

Because I feel like a lot of the other ones aren't able, will not happen if I don't finish college. Because I won't be able to provide money for myself or others and emotionally or financially to make the other things happen, so finishing college is the most important. (Interview, 2/13/09)

Participants' career-related future selves demonstrated a similar range in interests and specificity. I asked each participant to "walk me through a typical day in their lives ten years in the future." Talia responded:

Alright, seriously I can picture myself being a producer and like maybe like a record company in New York, I'm living in Manhattan or something like that in a little condo or something and my schedule's flexible, you know, it's good. I arrive at work and everybody's like hey, what's up, you know some warm stuff or whatever, and I get straight to work. (Interview, 3/27/09)

Talia's description of her hoped-for future reveals much more than her goal to be a music producer. She imagines working in a friendly and flexible environment in which she is respected by her peers. Likewise, other participants talked with me about the characteristics of their ideal jobs which included opportunities to interact with people, a good balance of desk-time and time on their feet, a sense of responsibility, outlets to express their creativity, and ample time off to spend with family and friends. Even participants with less certain hoped-for selves, had some well-formed ideas about the type of professional life they wanted to lead. As Chanel described, "Something where you make good money, enjoy yourself, and don't have to look really preppy everyday" (Interview, 3/5/09).

Each participant talked in detail about a variety of personal or interpersonal hoped-for selves related to friends, family members, partners, children, and living arrangements. None of the participants in the study were parents, and imagined future children were mentioned in almost all of the possible selves maps (men and women alike). Most imagined that in ten years they would have one or two children. Only Dana, who lived with her cousin's young children and who has been a caregiver to younger relatives for much of her life, expressed uncertainty about having children, "I don't want no kids. If I have a kid, it's going to be like when I'm 30" (Interview, 7/30/08). Likewise, marriage was an important theme for many, but not all,

participants. Chanel imagined a future where she could get married: "Okay, be married, be like really married in [this city]. Cause like gay people can't get married in here, so I want to be like really married, like legally married and not have to go to like Canada or something" (Interview, 3/5/09).

Many participants imagined moving out of the city. Dana and Bart wanted to move back down south. Cleveland imagined living in the city, but in a neighborhood downtown:

> I always dream of stepping out on my front steps and looking up at the city at twelve o'clock at night just (sighs). Don't have to worry about necessarily getting shot, because it's still a city, it's a world, you can die anywhere, but it's like it's not as much. Um, it's quiet, it's very suburban without being outside the city. (Interview, 2/13/09)

Others imagined life in the suburbs or as Brittany described it: "An environment that's conducive for raising kids, that, you know, I don't really have to worry about my safety" (Interview, 3/3/09). Home ownership was mentioned by most participants as a dream associated with a number of benefits. As Dana explained, "Owning your own home is better than renting all the time because now you call something your own and you don't have to worry about somebody telling you do this, do that to your own stuff" (Interview, 3/18/09). Likewise, participants imagined their future selves in relationship to their family members. Moving out and being self-sufficient, purchasing a home for their parents, and assisting other family members with their financial troubles were all cited as important parts of their hoped-for futures.

I asked participants to rank their hoped-for and feared selves in order of importance. Most commonly, the first ranked hoped-for self was a desire to be content and secure. As Talia explained: "The first one, I put 'a secure position in the world and happiness.' Because I think as long as I'm secure and I'm comfortable and I'm happy and I'm good with my life, point blank period, I'll be okay" (Interview, 3/27/09). Other less highly ranked general visions of future happiness included ideas about lifestyle, like Chanel's hope to become "a pretentious middle class woman" with a "small dog and a flat screen TV" (Interview, 3/5/09), Cleveland's hope to

someday own a Great Dane, and Dana, Lady, and Trinidad's hopes to "travel the world" (Interview, 2/11/09).

Participants' feared selves were often the inverse of their hoped-for selves. For example, many identified as fears not finishing college, not finding a career, not having a life partner, and being unhappy or unfulfilled. Students expressed specific fears related to their educational goals that were typically related to money. As discussed in Chapter Four, student loans were frequently cited as a source of stress and uncertainty, particularly as many students reported knowing little about the process of applying for grants and aid. Students' feared selves also included bankruptcy, depending on parents and family members for financial support, being homeless, and living in a "ghetto neighborhood" (Interview, 3/3/09).

Students talked to me about their fears about loss. Lady explained one of her fears: "It's just losing all my loved ones" (Interview, 2/11/09). Similarly, Bart and Trinidad expressed fears about the death of family and friends or the loss of family members due to divorce or estrangement. Trinidad, Cleveland, and Dana also worried about their own deaths. Cleveland stated: "I hope I'm still alive. Um, cause [it's] crazy in the city so every day you could lose your life. Especially in the neighborhood I live in" (Interview 2/13/09). Cleveland, Talia and Lady also talked at length about their goals for personal development. Lady worried: "I don't want to be a bad person" (Interview, 2/11/09). Cleveland feared losing his creativity, failing to make himself proud, and becoming "self-absorbed" (Interview, 2/13/09). Talia stated that she hoped for more self-assurance and self-confidence.

In her study of adolescent mothers, Klaw (2008) refers to her participants' dreams of educational attainment, professional career status, traditional nuclear family, and financial stability as "idealized middle class selves" (p. 449). Likewise, these data point to selves largely similar to the American Dream rhetoric of professional status, homeownership, and material wealth (McNamee & Miller, 2004). Few Pathways students constructed future selves that

challenged these normalized images of success, although several participants emphasized contentment and happiness over specific career, educational, or family choices. Pathways students largely imagined these middle class dreams not as unrealistic, but as expected and anticipated future selves.

I'm Resolute About It; I Feel Confident That It Will Come True

In my interviews with participants I asked them to make the distinction between what they hoped or feared for their future and what they expected. In accordance with the mapping exercise outlined by Shepard and Marshall (1997), I asked them to place a star on the hope and fear that they most expected to come true. Most students complied, although some stated they wanted to star more than one hope (and Brittany refused to star any of her fears). As students talked about their expectations, they revealed that they felt confident in their ability to attain most or all of their hoped-for selves and likewise avoid the majority of their feared selves. When I asked Trinidad if there was anything that could derail his plans to attain his hoped-for selves, he stated:

> I say there are only pretty much two things. That's accident causing health problems and death. That's the only thing pretty much can stop me. I pretty much basically set this as a, you know, a goal that I want to complete. (Interview, 3/4/09)

Similarly, other students expressed a confidence in their ability to achieve their dreams: "I don't see any reason why I wouldn't" (Interview, 2/13/09). As Dana talked about her plan to attain a doctorate in physical therapy she acknowledged the challenges even as she expressed her determination: "I know it's going to be a struggle getting there… but I still want it even though, like I said, it might take time" (Interview, 3/18/09).

Only two students' talk about their expected selves was marked by more uncertainty. Talia and Chanel spoke about their lack of confidence in envisioning a clear future. As Talia remarked:

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Yeah, it's hazy when I think about it. 'Cause like I said, I'm unsure. I don't know if that's what I was meant to be in life. I don't know if I was meant to be a singer or a song producer, if I was meant to do something else because I got a lot of talents and I got different interests. (Interview, 3/27/09)

Likewise, Chanel's lack of assuredness stemmed from her uncertainty about her future career goals.

I've taken like a million, trillion things and surveys and whatever that tells me that all of my personalities are this and that. I'm enterprising, I'm artistic, and I'm social and I've had a myriad of careers that are supposed to fit with that, but none of them do. (Interview, 3/5/09)

Pathways students were required to take two classes in which job readiness and career counseling were emphasized. Talia also mentioned the interest surveys administered as part of those classes as she debated potential careers: "Well in counseling class we looked at our personality types. I'm an INFP, and because I'm introverted, it doesn't say [musician] on the list and… I felt kind of let down by that one" (Interview, 3/27/09). Chanel and Talia's comments here are similar to the excerpts discussed in Chapter Four in which they expressed uncertainty about their collegiate identities and their future college plans.

Interestingly, Chanel and Talia were outliers among participants. They and Bart (who was similarly undecided about his future, but expressed less anxiety) were the only students who mentioned the interest surveys as relevant to determining their expected selves. The majority of participants displayed a sense of certainty, agency, and optimism about their hoped-for selves.

Although I began the exercise by telling them to write down any hope or fear, no matter how likely or unlikely, participants primarily told me that they chose to write down only dreams that seemed possible. As Cleveland commented, "I think they're very possible, I don't see why not" (Interview, 2/13/09). Chanel compared the hoped-for selves she selected with what she might have written a few years ago:

I think I just had more outlandish dreams when I was younger. Like three years ago I probably wanted to like be a millionaire (laughs). And there's still so many people that have those dreams. And that's great, but I'm very comfortable with

my middle class dream. I think that's very attainable and I like it.   (Interview, 3/5/09)

One of the effects of framing their hopes in relationship to, what Chanel describes as "more outlandish dreams" is that participants were largely optimistic that they would achieve their hoped-for selves. Extreme wealth and fame were rejected as hoped-for selves by many participants as unpractical. Cleveland who hoped to publish a book of poetry was clear that he did not aspire to become a famous author: "I don't necessarily want to be followed around by paparazzi all day because I'm that big, I don't want that. I just want to be secure in myself" (Interview, 2/13/09). Lady, who hoped to get a record deal in addition to pursuing a career as a motivational speaker, emphasized that singing would be a secondary pursuit:

> I think to just have the mindset, like 'I'm gonna be a singer.' No, you're an idiot, you know what I mean…. Nobody's just gonna wake up and be successful. So my plan is to finish school. If singing has to be over here, it will be over there. (Interview, 2/11/09)

Here Lady acknowledges that a successful singing career might be an unrealistic dream. By contrast, she and her cohort-mates largely agreed that finishing school, securing a well-paying job, purchasing a home, and finding a life partner are realistic and achievable.

Participants conveyed their optimism and certainty about their future selves in a number of ways. Some students found benefits in writing down and talking about their hoped-for selves: "I do know and I say that something good is going to happen because I believe that I can speak it into existence" (Interview, 4/10/09). This idea of speaking positive things into existence, as expressed by Lady here, was an emic concept I heard from many participants. Brittany also invoked that phrase when I noted that she did not write down a relapse in her eating disorder as one of her feared selves: "Yeah, because I don't see that, I really don't. I really don't. That's not even something I speak into existence" (Interview, 3/3/09). Dana preferred not to think about the back-up plan she developed in case physical therapy did not work out: "I do have a little back-up plan, but I do try not to think about that as an excuse or a reason to fail of any kind" (Interview,

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3/18/09). Brittany went on to say of her hoped-for selves: "I'm resolute about it. Like I feel confident that it will come true so I'm optimistic about that" (Interview, 3/3/09).

Optimism and Hope

Klaw (2008) comments on the paradox of marginalized youth of color imagining hopeful futures in light of their lived realities and the daily obstacles they face. This section explores a similar paradox found in these data. Not only did Pathways students imagine a bright future, they expressed in numerous ways (as demonstrated above) confidence that their dreams would come true.

Participants offered eloquent critiques of the schools they attended, the school district's structures which systematically excluded them from the city's few well-resourced schools, and larger social and institutional factors including poverty, racism, and a lack of employment and advancement opportunities in their communities. Like many students who leave high school, participants also shared stories of family, sexual, and community violence; mental and physical illness; incarceration and death of loved ones; and a range of other personal tragedies.

Yet despite participants' past personal experiences with hardship, exclusion, and oppression, they exhibited almost unwavering optimism as they imagined their future expected selves. Their optimism was evident in the way they talked about their future selves, but also as an important part of their identities. As Lady explained:

> I'm optimistic about everything and I feel like because I'm optimistic about everything it gets me through my days. If I was worried about everything and if I was like, this isn't going to work or there's like, that type of energy, it's going to prevent me from moving forward. (Interview, 4/10/09)

Close analysis of students' talk about their pasts and futures reveal various ways in which participants reconcile this paradox – hope for the future despite histories of exclusion, obstacles, and struggle.

I Grew To Be Very Strong

One of the ways in which participants talked about their expectations for future success was through descriptions of obstacles they had overcome in the past. Participants told a genre of story I term "hardship narratives" in which they described the luxuries and/or necessities they lacked and the strength they derived from that pain and adversity.

> My mom used to struggle every day. She used to get up six, seven. I remember every time we get up for school she be up already trying to get us ready and struggling. She go out there work day dawn from dawn to dusk. (Dana, CG, 10/22/08)

> We didn't have lights, we didn't have heat, we didn't have a phone for months. I mean it was so bad like to the point where my neighbor brought us a little grill because like my mother didn't have any money. She brought us a grill to cook our food on. She brought us an icebox and that's where we'd store our cold food. (Lady, Interview, 7/7/08)

> When I first moved here, my mom like, we was living with my grandma. My mom moved out, she like entered this housing program and like. When she got a job working at TWC as a social worker, they kicked us out the program because they said she made too much when we was barely paying the rent. (Bart, CG, 10/22/08)

I also documented these types of stories about past struggle in my observations of classes and other program-wide events. For example, in response to a section of the book *There Are No Children Here* in which one of the characters has his first birthday party at the age of eleven, Professor Wilson asked the class about their memories of their childhood birthday parties (Fieldnotes, 7/30/08). Talia said that her birthday falls right after Christmas when no one has any money so she never received presents or a party. Lady stated that similarly her birthday falls on the Fourth of July when no one is thinking about her. Trinidad shared that since his birthday is in September his mother would spend too much money on back-to-school shopping and would have nothing left over for him. Dana said that she had not celebrated her birthday since her mother died. Cleveland stated that he doesn't receive presents on his birthday because his mother tells him that the things she buys for him throughout the year are his presents. These stories of

hardship were almost always told in past tense and often told in what I perceived to be a spirit of "one-upmanship."

The emic term "obstacles" was used frequently by participants to describe poverty, racism, unfair government and school policies, family struggles, illness, and the loss of loved ones. These obstacles and the ways in which participants had survived or overcome them were offered as evidence that they would achieve success in the future. As Mercedes explained:

> You know, obstacles are what make people stronger, but I don't think, if I didn't have any obstacles in life, I couldn't be as strong as I was today, because to go through life and have it easy, you never live life in the first place. If everything is handed to you, you don't know how to live life. (CG, 10/22/08)

Obstacles and hardships were understood as presenting opportunities for learning and development, like for Chanel who saw the benefits of her painful and isolated childhood: "Growing up like I was just like alone a lot. I was really a loner… which worked out better in life, but it also helped me be really independent" (Interview, 4/30/09). Likewise, Mercedes looked back on her gang involvement as an important part of her journey of growth and development:

> And I think being in a gang taught me a lot. A lot of people take that as a bad experience. I think it was a really good one because I saw how the real world works… And so I already, I guess I've grown up for the most part, but all these bad things led up to something good because I think I turned out pretty well. (Interview, 7/28/08)

In addition to developing knowledge and strength, hardships were also understood to be a source of motivation and determination, particularly for Brittany:

> I saw that I could conquer challenges, just getting over an eating disorder, that was just the biggest feeling for me. I just thought to myself, you know we have obstacles, but we battle them and if you persevere, and if you just continue to stay optimistic and keep your eye on the prize and just continue to think big and everything, like it's possible to get through it. (Interview, 3/3/09)

Likewise, Dana stated that the deaths of both of her parents in elementary school "made me more determined to do something with my life" (Interview, 7/30/08). In this way stories about hardships explained both their trajectory back into school: "I learned from it and I grew from it" (Interview 7/7/08) and their potential for future success: "I just learned that my will will allow me

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to achieve the positive things I want in my life" (Interview, 3/3/09). Students questioned the extent to which they would be as mature, as worldly, or as dedicated to their current educational goals without those negative past experiences.

I Just Want This To Be My Destiny

Another way in which students talked about past negative experiences was by alluding to fate or destiny, particularly as they explained past struggles and accounted for how life circumstances brought them to Pathways. For example, Mercedes talked about how writing as something was supposed to be part of her future: "I know people say it's destiny. My grandma used to say, well it's a gift from god. You're supposed to, you know, words is your thing" (Interview 10/1/08). Here destiny is used as an explanation for Mercedes' positive imagined future self. She understands her path as set toward success because of an outside force. Fate, and sometimes god, were invoked by students as a source of comfort and optimism: "I try to keep my hope alive, believing there's a reason for everything" (Interview, 9/30/09).

In this way, dropping out of high school and other past difficulties were not understood as predictors of future school problems, but rather as part of the path leading them to this program which poised them for success. As Lady explained, her failure to gain admission to a magnet high school likely led to her dropping out of the poorly managed comprehensive high school she attended. However, in retrospect this was understood to be fortuitous: "I had a D on my report card so I couldn't get into [the magnet school]. So I kind of was upset… but I believe everything happens for a reason. If I would have went to that school, I probably wouldn't be here" (Interview, 4/10/09). Similarly, Trinidad, who was recruited for Pathways from his GED program saw his departure from high school as an essential part of his journey: "Basically if I would have never went to [that program], I would never have met [that Pathways staff member] so that made that significant" (Interview, 4/10/09).

When she returned to Pathways after being on probation in the fall semester, Chanel described her high school departure and the mistakes she made during the foundation term as essential to her current success: "Because if it wasn't for the fact that I dropped out and even for the fact that I got kicked out of [Pathways] already, I probably wouldn't be so dedicated [now]" (Interview, 3/5/09). Like Lady and Trinidad, Chanel saw her departure from high school as part of her journey to Pathways. Even her struggles during the foundation term were reframed as learning experiences, without which she would not be as dedicated.

Just as past hardships were understood to provide the strength, negative experiences were described as sources of motivation. Bart reflected on his past negative experiences cutting school and getting caught up in the wrong crowd: "I say, I'm motivated by my past too" (CG, 4/1/09). Brittany said, "I just, I've had experiences… Out of bad came a good and I realized that I don't want to be in that place again so it's propelling me forward it's telling me that you can't go back" (Interview, 3/3/09).

Students' invocations of destiny, god, and fate might be understood as passivity – a way for students to relieve themselves of their responsibility for past actions. Taken in the larger context of their talk about their expected selves though, this talk about a journey to success can be understood as an expression of agency. For example, Trinidad frames his enrollment in the GED program – an event that happened after he observed a screaming match between parents and staff at his local high school – as an important and positive personal decision. By reframing seemingly negative events as part of a larger narrative with a happy ending, participants position themselves as active and as protagonists, rather than as recipients of bad luck and difficult circumstances.

I Usually Depend on Myself More Than Anything

As part of these stories about past experiences and their journeys along a path to success, participants also highlighted their own will, independence, and ability to persevere. Narratives of

self-reliance offered hope for the future because they demonstrated the ways in which participants could make changes and improve their situations without the support of others.

When Cleveland told me about the confidence he gained and his growth and development since high school, I asked him about the influences in his life that helped him change:

> Um, I think it was me, myself. That's one thing that I'm proud of. I don't want to say I did it on my own or anything, 'cause I know there are other people that I probably didn't think about that helped me along the way, but I changed a lot of what I needed to change on my own. (Interview, 2/13/09)

This self-reliance was a theme throughout my conversations with Cleveland as he talked about his feelings of isolation and his strong sense that others would not be able to help him make changes in his life:

> And one of the things that my doctor has been telling me is that you cannot do it on your own. You have to talk to somebody, but a lot of times, I feel like you can talk to me all you want, but I still have to go home and deal with situations. I still have to deal with it on my own. (Interview, 4/6/09)

Cleveland was not the only student who talked about making changes on his own. This was discussed by many participants, both in terms of their past achievements and in terms of their current experiences at Pathways. Talia talked to me about avoiding Ms. Bea, even when she was struggling in her classes:

> And another reason is because I don't, I don't want to be disapproved and I just feel like I want to improve on my own. So that's mainly the reason why I haven't been seeing her or whatever, so I want to see if I can do it by myself. (Interview, 3/27/09)

Talia and Cleveland both acknowledged that this tendency to want to do it alone had drawbacks. Talia struggled significantly during the spring semester of 2009 and she reflected that it might have been easier if she had gone to Ms. Bea earlier. Despite their ambivalence, these stories were an important part of the way they talked about how they had achieved success in the past and how they anticipated future achievement.

Implicit in many of the past-tense narratives of self-reliance are critiques of support networks and the social and educational structures that failed them. As Chanel explained, "I

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wasn't really ever like really dependent, because I just knew that if things were going to get done, I had to do them myself" (Interview, 3/5/09). Students who found few sources of motivation, inspiration, or support in their surroundings indicated that they had to find that support internally. Lady asserted: "Ultimately it depends on the person and what you have inside of you is basically what's going to become of your future" (CG, 4/1/09). As students looked to the future, they anticipated that achieving their goals would be possible because, as Brittany explained: "I know my drive will get me there" (Interview, 3/3/09).

Since I Got Into Pathways, I Started Being More Optimistic.

In seeking to understand students' optimism in the face of past negative experiences, I looked for turning point stories, as seen by Rymes (2001) and others in their studies of high school dropouts returning to school. I wondered if "the abandonment of a rejected self" (Rymes, 2001, p. 74) would be employed by participants as part of the way they talked about their hopefulness for the future in light of past challenges. I found that this was true for some students, as they attributed their optimism to their new selves and their new positions as college students at Pathways. Interestingly however, as will be discussed below, in other cases students' narratives emphasized continuity in identity rather than a rejected self.

For a few of the students in this study turning point stories were central to the way they talked about leaving and returning to school, and in some cases students were explicit about the existence of a former self: "After break, like my old self kicked in. I was like, it was so hard for me, like motivating myself" (CG, 8/14/08). Cleveland was able to pinpoint one turning point in his life when he began to gain more confidence and, in his words, stopped "destroying myself emotionally, ripping myself apart" (Interview, 2/13/09). He described the incident, which happened several months before he entered Pathways, this way:

> I think the one moment that I really know I changed a lot was when I heard a
> song called *Just Fine* by Mary J. Blige. And I would listen to it all night, sit next
> to the radio, go on radio station after radio station and when *Just Fine* came on I
> was so happy because it's such an inspirational song. And it was a lot of things

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that I knew I needed to stop worrying about, and you know life could be worse. A lot worse and um, I've been through a lot worse, and at that point I was better off than I was before so. I think that was one of the biggest things because it made me realize what I had and what I didn't have wasn't so important. (Interview, 2/13/09)

Unlike the students in Rymes' study, Cleveland was not abandoning a self who was involved in violence or misbehavior. Instead, his rejected self was one who engaged in destructive and anxious thoughts. The fact that he had changed his behavior was a source of hope for him looking forward.

In Trinidad's turning point story, the self he abandoned was one with few plans or goals for the future:

Basically I have goals that I'm working towards, and before I just lived day to day, whatever. Now I actually know exactly what I want to do, and I'm not sure exactly how I want to do it, but I pretty much have how I'm going to do it. (Interview, 3/4/09)

Just like the students in Rymes' study, Trinidad uses the word "now" to differentiate his new self from his old self. For Trinidad, Pathways played the central role in the development of this new goal-oriented self.

[The counseling teacher] was almost like a mentor. He gave us different ideas, put different things in our heads to you know, make us think about what we actually want to do with our lives and basically between that and the [other] counseling class I found exactly what career I wanted to pursue. Before it was just like, I just want to do computers. But they asked me, what do you want to do? Now I found exactly what I want to do and it helped me get into a computer field so I can get some experience. (Interview, 3/4/09)

Here two Pathways courses and one particularly influential teacher are instrumental in the development of his goals. His old self who "just wanted to do computers" is portrayed as naïve and unprepared in light of his new self who is more certain about his career (as a network engineer), is gaining experience in the field with an internship, and has a stronger sense of how to reach his goals.

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Similarly, Bart saw his admission to the program as a major turning point in his life. In our final interview, I asked each participant to write down a few incidents in their lives that have made them the person they are today. Bart told me:

> The second thing that I wrote down was being accepted into the [Pathways] program because I feel that was a huge step in my life. I really wouldn't, I don't think I would be doing anything in my life if I wouldn't have been accepted to this program. So it like kind of changed the whole direction of where I was headed. So I wrote that because it was a huge turning point in my life because I was like going completely in the wrong direction and it kind of brought me back. (Interview, 4/22/09)

Here Bart uses the metaphor of the wrong direction to describe the actions of his old self and he attributes his success to his participation in the program.

Interestingly, these turning point stories were told in tandem with participants' narratives of exceptionalism (see Chapter Three) in which they portrayed themselves as smart, willing to learn, and unlike their peers who left school for traditional reasons. For example, in the excerpt from Bart's story, he finishes his thought with the word "back," indicating that his transformation into a person headed in the right direction is actually a reversion to his natural state. Even as he takes responsibility for his behavior, Bart's use of "back" in this way indicates that this incident is part of his larger narrative of exceptionalism in which he portrays himself as different from the peers who pressured him to cut school.

In this way narratives of Pathways youth were just as likely to reflect continuity in identity as a turning point, yet in both types of narratives students expressed optimism for the future. It was within the context of a stable and exceptional identity as intelligent or as a learner that some participants talked about their growth and development. Lady's description of her evolving relationship with her older sister (a college graduate) illustrates that dualism:

> My role model is my sister. And really it's so funny because growing up I hated her. I hated, not her but her accomplishments because I never ever thought that I'd be here, ever in my life, walking on anybody's college campus, ever. I mean I've always been smart, you know I got the brains to do it, but I never really thought that I'd go to college. (CG, 4/1/09)

So while Lady grew up resenting her sister – a fact that has changed now that she is enrolled in

Pathways – her identity as a person smart enough to succeed was never in question. Now, as she

sees her sister as a role model, one who has finished college, her own ability to finish college is

more certain.

Likewise, Brittany's story complicated the traditional turning point narrative because she

viewed her departure from school as a major aberration:

> Yeah, just I never expected to have to be in this program. Or just any program. I
> mean I expected that I would graduate with the rest of my peers at [my high
> school]. That you know, I'd be able to have like handled all the work that was
> thrown at me. (Interview, 8/11/08)

King and Raspin (2004) write about "lost possible selves" which are former dreams of

the future that have been abandoned because of changes in life circumstances. For

Brittany, Pathways offered her an opportunity to regain a possible self that was lost when

she left high school. Of Pathways and the opportunity it gave her to earn college credits

and catch up with her peers, she said: "But just to know that I'm not behind. That's the

biggest thing for me" (Interview, 4/4/09).

In their stories about past mistakes, transgressions were seen as anomalies, lost possible

selves were regained, and in some cases past selves were rejected because of Pathways'

influence. In all cases, participants saw themselves as poised for a hopeful future because their

exceptional identity (with their new, improved, or regained self) was capable of achievement and

success.

Meritocracy

As I listened to students talk about their optimism for the future and their confidence in

their ability to succeed, I saw an implicit endorsement of the master narrative of the American

Dream, or what some call the myth of meritocracy. According to Hoschchild (1995), the

American Dream narrative is based on the belief that each individual in the United States has

"reasonable anticipation of success" and that success comes through hard work, or "actions under

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one's individual control" (p. 27). McNamee and Miller (2004) suggest that within this narrative

success is attributed to some combination of an individual's hard work, innate ability, attitude,

and moral character. The myth of meritocracy has been linked to the rise of "color-blind racism"

in the latter half of the twentieth century and offers a rationalization for inequities by drawing the

focus away from systems and structures of racial and economic oppression (Akom, 2008;

Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Within the narrative of the American Dream, inheritance, unearned social

and cultural capital, and luck are minimized or ignored.

Empirical studies demonstrate that Americans, regardless of race or class,

overwhelmingly report their faith in the American Dream (e.g., Hochschild, 1995; Longoria,

2009), and research has shown this narrative's prominence in the media (Jefferies, 2009) and in

schools (McGinnis, 2009). Likewise, I saw evidence in the data that Pathways students held fast

to the notion that anyone can achieve if he or she displays enough motivation and determination.

Participants' narratives of exceptionalism, hard work, self-reliance, and optimism revealed their

belief that hard work, attitude, moral character, and ability were essential to (and perhaps

guaranteed their) success.

Given my own subjectivities – which include my commitments to critical theory – my

inclination was to view these data with dismay as I worried that participants were not aware of

larger issues of race, class, and various other institutional barriers to equity in the United States.

This final section of this chapter explores the ways in which participants talked about meritocracy

and my own evolving understanding of their perspectives on success, failure, and oppression.

Everybody Seems to Have a Good Opportunity to Get What They Want

Participants often indicated their belief that anyone with a good work ethic had a

"reasonable anticipation of success" (Hochschild, 1995). In a conversation group discussion

about whether or not obstacles are insurmountable, Mercedes refuted another student's claim that

some people get "trapped" by their circumstances:

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> I don't know about that. I mean some people are trapped because you have to have the will and the determination to not be trapped… Either you stay stuck or you do something to not be stuck and if you don't do anything and it's kind of, my way I feel like if you're complaining about being stuck then do something about it. (CG, 10/22/08)

Brittany agreed that internal characteristics like motivation and drive were more important than external forces: "You have control over your destiny, you know. Everybody's born into circumstances, but you just have to persevere" (CG, 10/22/08). In these commentaries Mercedes and Brittany acknowledge that difficult "circumstances" exist but express their belief that they should not be a source of complaint or an excuse for negative outcomes.

Dominant cultural narratives, akin to the Horatio Alger tales, served as a source of motivation and an explanation for students' belief that everyone has the opportunity to succeed through hard work. In the second conversation group, I asked the participants to take pictures of things in their life that would show me who they are. Talia included a photograph of a poster of the rapper Jay-Z. When asked why, she explained:

> Because Jay-Z came from nothing to something. He was raised in the streets of Brooklyn, whatever he was hustling and all that, but he still made it to the top of his game, of his field, of his chosen craft. And you know, everybody respects him for that and that's where I want to be in my future so that's why I took this picture of Jay-Z. (CG, 9/15/08)

Likewise, other participants referenced similar celebrity success stories. Brittany stated:

> The odds can be stacked against a person, but just because there are more odds, that doesn't mean they won't achieve or they won't get to that level they want to get to. They'll just have to work that much harder…. It's your drive at the end of the day. It really is. Because you can achieve, it's like a rags to riches story. Not everybody starts off at the top. Some people have had to work their way up. And just like certain moguls, like P. Diddy and everything like that. (Interview, 4/4/09)

These cultural narratives about success appear to be an important part of the ways in which participants think optimistically about their own futures. So despite what they identify as "obstacles" or "odds," they draw on these stories as evidence that they will achieve their hoped-for selves. As Bart explained:

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> I don't think that nothing can stop you, like it depends how determined you are and like how outgoing you are. Because it don't really matter how poor you are because most of the people that actually are successful now they probably came from somewhere poor. (Interview, 4/22/09)

Here, Bart highlights poverty as a particular obstacle to be surmounted, but asserts that most successful people have overcome that obstacle via their determination. Here his reference to "most of the people that are successful now" is similar to Brittany's comment above about "everyone" being born into circumstances. The idea that hardships are widespread gave credence to the notion that success is possible in the face of them.

Participants' also talked about the importance of their own internal and mental status in ensuring future success. For example, when I asked Cleveland to imagine a scenario in which he might not achieve his hopes he said, "pretty much just slacking off" (Interview, 2/13/09). Likewise, Talia imagined that a loss of her drive or motivation could prevent her from graduating: "I think the greatest obstacle would be if I give up" (Interview, 3/27/09). Many participants stated that their focus and determination were of primary importance. For example, Bart talked about needing moral support to maintain his motivation:

> You just have to have people like encouraging you like to keep your spirits and stuff, that way you won't just regress because you're depressed and stuff. So, but, like I don't really need like financial support. I mean you might need it in certain, like depending on what your dream is, but I don't think it's necessary for all dreams. (Interview, 2/20/09)

Here Bart suggests that while financial resources might be helpful in some cases, moral support and encouragement is most essential. These comments contribute to students' overall discourse about internal characteristics like motivation, drive, and determination and are closely related the complex ways in which students talked about self-reliance.

As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, participants frequently framed their own identities in relationship to their peers – "traditional" dropouts, "typical" high school students, and those who left Pathways. In this talk about others, motivation was also frequently discussed as the defining characteristic separating those who are successful and those who are not. This

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was true when participants talked about individuals they knew and when talking more abstractly about why some people fail and others succeed. I asked Bart to surmise why he thought some of his cohort-mates left Pathways before completing their foundation term.

> I was trying to encourage them, but they wasn't really sure of themselves, so I thought that they wasn't going to make it, and plus they was like kind of getting behind so, I would feel that they don't make it. Because it's not because they can't, but because they haven't found the motivation that drives them, like to work extra hard to take that extra step. (Interview, 7/15/08)

Here Bart dispels the notion of innate ability ("it's not because they can't"), a third component of the meritocratic ideal according to McNamee and Miller (2004). Instead he emphasizes that the issues are hard work and motivation. Interestingly, this tendency to downplay innate ability was also evident in the programmatic discourses about everyone having the potential to succeed (see Chapter Four). It was only in participants' narratives of exceptionalism (e.g., "I was always talented") that innate ability was highlighted consistently.

In the final conversation group, I asked participants to respond to a fictional scenario in which an adolescent drops out of school. In her analysis, Lady stated: "You could say it was his mother's fault, evidently she was not making sure that at that age he was doing his work" (CG, 4/29/09). However, Trinidad rejected this idea that parents are responsible for their children's behavior. He drew on his own experience when he argued, "Not even that, my mom used to ask me every day, 'You do your homework?'" He and Dana suggested that only the adolescent himself was to blame for his decision to leave school. External factors like poverty, school environments, neighborhood conditions were often conspicuously absent in conversations about motivation, drive, and hard work. Later in the conversation Cleveland finally suggested:

> I think the only other place it could fall is on the school system if they didn't do anything right. The school, the parents, and the child themselves. It could be all three, it could be two, it could be one. (CG, 4/29/09)

This excerpt is representative of the ways in which participants frequently talked about success in school, presenting critiques of institutions and systems as an afterthought. As Brittany explained,

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schools play an important role in student success, but in her understanding they were not the only factor:

> I don't necessarily believe like, okay, you change the school system, like it would make things better, it's more resources, but I think it's within the individual. You have to be motivated, like, sometimes you have to deal with like humble circumstances and just to move on to bigger and better things. (CG, 12/10/09)

While sometimes participants were ambivalent in their analysis of how and why others were not successful (like in Cleveland's identification of three potential problems: the school, parents, and the student), other times they used unambiguous language: "There's always going to be stress so I figure that anybody who lets one problem keep them back from doing what they need to do is just weak-minded sometimes" (CG, 4/1/09).

In an attempt to understand participants' thinking about motivation, personal responsibility, and the rags-to-riches cultural narrative, I asked participants explicitly if they anticipated facing any obstacles on their journey to achieve their hoped-for selves. As explored above, participants were likely to say that their own focus and drive might waver (e.g., "The only thing that can hold me back is me." Interview, 2/20/09). In some cases I asked more pointedly about if they thought they had a "fair chance" to achieve their dreams and if they saw any external obstacles or "social forces" that could prevent them from those achievements. In their responses, participants were likely to say that Pathways mitigated any forces that might hold them back:

> I feel like anybody who comes to [Pathways] has a fair shot at this point because, I mean no matter what you dealt with early in life, once you really get an education, no matter where you are from or what you do, you have an advantage. (Chanel, Interview, 3/5/08)

Participants were largely optimistic that social forces would not play a role in their futures:

> I haven't thought that deep. No, I don't think race would hold me back, I don't think gender would, I don't think sexuality would because I don't tell everybody my business and it's not like they know. Um, more than that, I don't think, the only thing is if I don't get out of [this city]. (Cleveland, Interview, 2/13/09)

Things seem to be pretty much, diverse I want to say. Like you know it seem like everybody seem to have a good opportunity to get what they want, they just gotta work towards it. I don't know if diverse was really the word I was looking for, but it seem like everybody got a fair opportunity to make it. They just gotta try hard enough and try to do better than the next person. (Trinidad, Interview, 3/4/09)

I don't know, the field I want to get in, women, they're becoming more respected, gaining more status, you know, journalism. It was a mainly male dominated industry, but women are gaining influence so I don't really see myself having too much of an issue being a female going into the industry because society is changing women are making a name for themselves. I mean, I guess that would help me rather than pull me down, so, I can't really think of anything else. (Brittany, Interview, 3/3/09)

These four excerpts demonstrate the ways in which Pathways students acknowledged institutional barriers and simultaneously rejected them in favor of the American Dream narrative. For example, Chanel concedes that some people are disadvantaged, but suggests that education levels the playing field. Cleveland, who talked at length about the problems with violence in his neighborhood and the lack of employment opportunities for his mother, admits that staying in the city might be an obstacle for success. Yet at the same time he dispels the idea that race, gender or sexuality will be a barrier. Likewise, Trinidad's statement that one must "try and do better than the next person" seems to contradict the idea that *everybody* has a "fair opportunity to make it." Finally, Brittany's analysis of the news industry focuses exclusively on gender, which she acknowledges may be a barrier, but eventually hypothesizes that it may be a benefit in a male dominated industry.

These comments by four youth of color fueled my discomfort and raised a range of questions. For example, how did these assessments of their own life chances fit in with critiques of their schools, of the school district, and other systems (particularly those highlighted in Chapter Three)? What do comments like these, in which institutional racism is severely downplayed or ignored, indicate about participants' knowledge about past and current manifestations of race and privilege? What are the implications for critical pedagogy? Finally, I

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wondered about the ways in which my subjectivity as a middle class white woman influenced participants' responses to my questions and my own understanding of these data.

Because of Where You Come From, You May Only Be Able to Go But So Far

Participants' talk about success through hard work, their endorsements of the American Dream narrative, and their belief that internal characteristics were essential to achievement, were prevalent throughout the dataset. Unquestionably these themes are essential to understanding something about the worldview of Pathways students. However, in some circumstances, students articulated doubt about a meritocratic ideal. These doubts were expressed less frequently in interviews and only once, in October, did they prompt a sustained discussion in a conversation group. An exploration of these "discrepant data" complicates the analysis presented above, illustrates my biases in understanding these data, and reveals much about the connections between participants' optimism and their faith in meritocracy.

The prompt for the October conversation group was a handout with the lyrics from the Kanye West song "We Don't Care" from his album *College Dropout* (See Appendix C). While I selected the song for its content, I also knew that West was a popular artist among the participants. The lyrics chronicle the hardships of urban life; the chorus includes the line: "We wasn't supposed to make it past 25, but the joke's on you we still alive." The discussion of the lyrics that ensued was passionate and emotionally charged for many participants. It was the first and only time I heard participants tell hardship narratives in the present and future tense, and it was the only time they engaged in a sustained conversation about the relationship between structural inequities and their own life-chances.

Of all the participants Lady was the most likely to articulate a critique of systems of oppression. This was true in our interviews and in her classes. During the fourth week of the foundation term, she provoked nervous laughter and confusion when she said, "They want us to kill ourselves and they want us to kill off our race and imprison ourselves" (Fieldnotes, 6/2/08).

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Her tendency to speak candidly about race and racism made her unique among the students in the cohort. In an interview when I asked Lady if there were any social forces that might prevent her from achieving her dreams, she gave a response that contrasted sharply with other participants: "First of all, I'm black, so that's a strike against me in America. I mean, I don't know, Obama's president now, but whatever. You know what I mean, I'm not an idiot so I see what's going on" (Interview, 2/11/09). In the October conversation group, Lady was noticeably dominant. While the participants were usually very good about following my suggestion that they monitor their own participation and the participation of others ("step up, step back"), in this session Lady spoke twice as often as any other student.

In October participants universally agreed that they related to West's lyrics as they looked back on their childhoods (e.g., layaway, lottery tickets, welfare). It was in this session that a number of the hardship narratives cited earlier in this chapter were told. However, participants also speculated on their expected selves in this session. Lady suggested that someone of her background might be restricted:

> So I mean, it's definitely possible for someone of this background to get somewhere. Me, I could probably sing my way to the top, but I probably couldn't become a doctor, you know what I mean. Because I would have to go through so much, and some of that stuff is deadly. Some people can't take it. (CG, 10/22/08)

Here Lady suggests that people of her background (this went undefined during this exchange, but later participants embraced the label "lower middle class") can achieve, but only if they select a career that is acceptable. By way of example, Lady talked about her aunt who was struggling to become a psychiatrist and the obstacles she faces that a rich white girl would not face if pursing the same career.

This talk about restrictions was taken up by other students in various ways, either by sharing past hardships or by pointing to unequal opportunities in education and employment. For example, Cleveland pointed to the government's responsibility in caring for the poor:

And that's what I was thinking about a lot with the presidential election. It's one thing that I hear a lot is middle class, middle class, middle class, but then it's like okay, why isn't anybody talking about the lower class? (CG, 10/22/08)

The conversation also focused on problems with the school district and welfare systems that "keep you trapped." However, when Mercedes suggested that those who were trapped just need more determination (quoted in the previous section), Talia responded:

> I disagree. I think, in my opinion, it seems like it's always an obstacle. No matter how hard you try. Like, um, when I try to get to school last week. I had got paid, my check or whatever and the bank overdraft me by $230. They took my whole check you might as well say, left me with $20, and I had to spend that $20 on something else. So I struggle just trying to get to school, you know what I mean. I go to school so maybe I can gain education, get me a degree or whatever, but it's seems like it's something that's always making it hard. Something always holding you back. (CG, 10/22/08)

Here, Talia explicitly challenges the notion that hard work alone can overcome any struggle and reveals some uncertainty about her own ability to persevere in the face of hardship. This is notably different from other student talk about obstacles making people stronger and therefore making success more likely.

It was in this conversation group that I also first heard questions raised about the value of a college degree. Bart told a story about his mother which precipitated the following exchange:

> **Bart**: My mom, she got two degrees. She got her associate's and her bachelor's degrees, but where she worked in her last two jobs she got laid off because I guess it's economical or something like that.
> **Lady**: And then the people that they lay off, you gotta look at it like that too. They don't just layoff anybody. They lay off the people that are on the bottom. So your mom was on the bottom of whatever their scale was and that's another thing. From where we come from we can still get degrees, whoopee, that's not gonna]
> **Cleveland**: [It doesn't guarantee us. (CG, 10/22/08)

In contrast to students' claims that a college degree would eliminate other obstacles (see Chanel's statement above) and Pathways rhetoric that "college equals opportunities" (Fieldnotes, 4/22/08), in this exchange participants "penetrate" (Willis, 1977) the promise that a college degree will free graduates of their burdens and guarantee financial stability and success.

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Rather than the jovial banter that usually preceded and followed our group meetings, the October conversation group ended soberly with the students filing out talking in hushed tones. I caught up with Talia and Bart in the hallway to debrief with them. Bart joked that he thought everyone was going to "start crying in there" and Talia said more seriously that talking about these issues left her overwhelmed "thinking about all the stuff I got to do" (Fieldnotes, 10/22/08). I was feeling pretty overwhelmed at that point too. Due to time constraints the session ended more hastily than I would have wanted with no formal time to reflect on the process. Weighing heavily on my mind that afternoon were my thoughts about Pathways student retention and my perception that each student's relationship with the program was tenuous. Students I did not know well left the program abruptly all the time for reasons that were mysterious for me. I imagined that the themes of this conversation group might persuade a student that there was no use continuing in Pathways since oppressive systems were so powerful and pervasive. I called Lady and Cleveland later that day to check in with them, but had to leave a voicemail. I worried that we had not found a way to return to optimism and hope at the end of the group.

In retrospect, it seems ironic that I was disturbed by this conversation—which penetrated the myth of the meritocracy and color-blind racism in nuanced ways—when students' unwavering optimism that seemingly denied the existence of structural barriers and inequities was also upsetting to me. I became so worried about the tone of the October group that I actually intervened toward the end with the rather poorly placed, poorly worded question "Is there any hope in this song?" At the time I did not make the connection that students' belief in the meritocracy, which permeated the rest of the data, was in fact one of their sources of hope.

That it took so long for me to grasp that connection between optimism and meritocracy speaks to my positionality as a privileged middle class white person. My education – about institutional racism, historically rooted systems of oppression, structures of poverty, and issues related to race, class, sexuality and gender – inspired me to take action, resulted in the selection of

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my college major, and gave me a sense that my life could have purpose. Dispelling the myth of the meritocracy had little if any negative impact on my possible and expected selves. Any personal impact was positive, as greater understanding about issues of inequity gave me a sense of purpose and inspired me to pursue higher education. I have also experienced profound sadness, white guilt, and feelings that the problems are too vast to address, but these emotions actually have little impact on how I see my ability to create a successful life.

Embedded in my concern about the ways in which students' articulated their belief in the American Dream were the assumptions that participants did not have knowledge of systems of oppression and that education about those systems would be unproblematic. The October conversation group demonstrated that students had a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which race and poverty affect an individual's life chances. That conversation group also illustrated the ways in which issues, that for me were largely learned about in the abstract, are far more fraught when they are discussed by the individuals who may be negatively affected by them.

These understandings came to me slowly over the course of the second and third semesters. In interviews I talked to students about my confusion and my assumptions, and they talked to me about their double consciousness. As Lady explained:

> I fear this conversation because you never want to really admit reality especially when your reality is not good. My reality is that I'll be poor. Forever. Because of the circumstances and the structure of life for a person like me, I have to go through so much to become successful and lord knows if I can do it. We rarely ever talk about it…. We don't sit down like when we're together and we're away from those rich people. We don't sit down and we're not like, oh man, we're just enslaved and we ain't never gonna be able to get to the top. We don't do that. Because it's like, what's the point? If anything, we're trying to encourage each other to do something. (Interview, 4/10/09)

Here Lady suggests that putting aside knowledge of inequities is a helpful coping mechanism. Focusing on the dream of success rather than oppression is one of her strategies for achieving her hoped-for selves. This idea that optimism is an end unto itself came up with other students as

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well. Trinidad acknowledged that he chooses not think about what he knows to be true about obstacles:

> Different things at home, different obstacles come in your life where you just can't prevent it and you just can't fix all the time. So you know, most, I can't really say most of the time, but it is possible. So you could use that as a comfort almost; boost your spirits with confidence a little bit to try to get you to work harder and be successful. But it's not always possible, but if you keep that positive attitude it does help a lot. (Interview, 4/10/09)

Trinidad suggests here that ignoring the obstacles and embracing the rags to riches narrative results in increased confidence and motivation, and therefore an increased likelihood of success.

As I work to make sense of and understand how participants think about success, failure, and their own life chances, it is important to note my reactivity in this project. The extent to which my positionality affected student responses is difficult to see, but there is evidence that some students may have felt uncomfortable talking about race with me. Only Lady talked about race overtly in our interviews and conversation groups. Other participants rarely or never used racial markers in our conversations. Aside from Lady's comments, I could only identify a handful of times that race was brought up explicitly in any of the nine conversation groups and 36 interviews. When race was mentioned in my presence, it was typically followed by jokes, laughter, or discomfort. For example, toward the end of the September conversation group, the conversation became quite informal, with participants talking about their favorite songs. The student who speaks first is a young woman who left the program midway through the fall semester.

> **Student**: I have to dance to Rihanna's "Disturbia"
> **Mercedes**: How do you dance to that?
> **Talia**: I know.
> **Student**: You have to go crazy.
> **Talia**: (softly) Like a white girl
> **Mercedes**: Ummm, Sue's a white girl. That was… (CG, 9/15/08)

Mercedes final comment here was stated dramatically for effect as she gestured and implied with her tone "you all are so rude." This was followed by laughter from the group and overlapping

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talk about having a Pathways dance party and questions directed at me about whether I liked to

dance. This exchange is representative of the ways in which conversations could become

awkward when race was invoked. A similar incident took place during a break between classes

when I was sitting a few feet away from two black students:

> A female student calls over to a male student and in so doing mispronounces his
> name. He corrects her and they proceed to talk about various pronunciations of
> his name and then her name. She says that for some reason a lot of white people
> have trouble saying black people's names. She elaborates: "No, did you ever
> notice that white people can't say ghetto names. Like, I don't want to sound
> racist, and my name isn't ghetto, but teachers always mess up my name." I am
> listening to this conversation, but looking away not wanting to stare or make
> them feel like they're being listened to. My tactic doesn't work because the male
> student gestures toward me and says to the girl, "Look at her face, she's thinking,
> why are we saying stuff about white people." (Fieldnotes, 5/21/08)

These two examples demonstrate the ways in which students were often uncertain about if and

how they could talk about race in my presence and that, unsurprisingly, my whiteness was highly

visible to them.

The absence of race-talk in the data was likely exacerbated by my own discomfort with

and uncertainty about the appropriateness about bringing race into our conversations. For

example, in the prompt in the previous section, I asked students if any "social forces" or

"obstacles" might prevent them from achieving their dream. I kept the wording deliberately

ambiguous to avoid leading students, thinking that their responses might be more authentic if I

kept it open. Now, in retrospect, as I look at the dearth of conversations about race, I realize that

it would have been appropriate to bring it up directly. Given that cross-racial conversations are

often difficult, that I held particular power and privilege in this context, and that there are risks

for people of color who talk about race in the presence of whites, I wish I had put race on the

table in a more deliberate way.

Often it seemed as though social class was a more comfortable topic than race.

Participants talked frequently about issues of class and seemed at ease talking about rich people.

For example, when I asked the students about Kanye West's intended audience, they suggested,

"I think his audience was the rich people that don't know, that have no clue what we go through" (CG, 10/22/09). In that conversation rather than framing the issues of inequity in terms of race, they did so in terms of class. For example, Brittany outlined her struggles: "Because I know I come from a lower middle class family and I live in a single parent household my mom is struggling paycheck to paycheck and I just want our future to be so much better than that" (CG, 10/22/09). Above, Lady references class when she says "when we're away from those rich people." Later in that interview, when I asked her who she meant by "we," she clarified: "Us ones that are in it. I mean black, white, Puerto Rican, or Asian, somebody that's struggling" (Interview, 4/10/09). Even here Lady, who often spoke candidly about race, deemphasizes race as a factor in identifying who struggles.

There's Tons of Statistics, So There's Already Somebody Telling You You're Not Gonna Succeed

These findings raise questions about what role pedagogy and teachers should play in the development of students' critical consciousness. When the articulation of meritocratic ideals appears to be an important source of optimism for students, how can or should teachers respond? In the two English classes I observed, the professors introduced discussion topics and readings that dealt explicitly with racial and class-based injustices. Their efforts were taken up eagerly in some cases and resisted in others. These professors' efforts revealed to me that critical pedagogy and social justice education with students disadvantaged by the systems under inquiry must be approached with care and deliberation. How can we educate students about systems of oppression in ways that are positive and productive and not depressing and disempowering?

In Professor Wilson's class students read the non-fiction book *There are No Children Here*, a journalistic portrayal of two young boys growing up in a predominantly African American housing project in Chicago in the 1980s. Professor Franklin built the curriculum in his class around the book *Class Matters*, a collection of essays on socioeconomic class. Both

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professors' efforts were defined by the tensions outlined above. Students alternately expressed

their belief in class and race-based hierarchies and rejected those hierarchies as social

determinism.

The rejection or questioning of facts and data was common in these classes. For

example, this was frequently an issue in Professor Franklin's class because *Class Matters*

contained a number of references to sociological studies on social mobility and disparities in

health and education outcomes associated with wealth and poverty. In the following excerpt from

my fieldnotes, a student explicitly rejects the data presented in the course text:

> After someone reads aloud statistics about low-income students' graduation rates
> and high-income students' graduation rates, a student says, "I hate statistics."
> She continues, "They make you feel like something's going to happen, but it
> doesn't have to." She says that when they tell you to look to your left and look to
> your right and only one of you will graduate – they just say that so you'll work
> harder. Professor Franklin says, "But isn't that a good thing, people should work
> hard?" She protests, "It's just scare tactics, because everyone *could* graduate."
> Professor Franklin agrees that everyone could graduate, "but it just hasn't
> happened yet." (Fieldnotes, 9/16/08)

Difficult data related to outcomes were often presented in these classes. For example, during

Professor Wilson's class, in the context of a discussion about high rates of incarceration, she cited

the statistic, "if your father did time in jail then you are likely to do time too." Trinidad

responded audibly, "not me," as the professor continued on, "and most likely you will do time for

the same crime your father did." In the context of her talk about this topic, Trinidad said two

more times, "not me" (Fieldnotes, 7/28/08). In another instance, Professor Franklin highlighted

the section of the course text that indicates that it can take five generations to achieve class

mobility. He went on by way of illustration: "That means the work you are doing in this class

will pay off in 100 years" (Fieldnotes, 10/14/08). In this case there was no audible reaction from

students, but I wondered how students made sense of the personalizing of the statistics,

particularly given that both professors used the second person "you" in describing the findings.

While the data in the previous sections reveal that students have personal and formal knowledge about systems of oppression, these conversations in class often also resulted in new learning for students. In Professor Franklin's class, one student shared that she had never heard that children of alumni were more likely to be admitted to college than other applicants:

> **Student 1**: Two students both have straight As, but one's parents went to Harvard or Yale or one of those colleges where the rich kids go, then that student will get to go there.
> **Professor Franklin**: So you are talking about legacies – if your dad went to Harvard then you'll be more likely to get into Harvard
> **Student 2**: So wait, dumb people can get into Harvard if their dad went there? (Fieldnotes, 9/23/08)

Likewise, another student responded with a similar tone of surprise and incredulity in a different conversation later in the semester.

> Professor Franklin asks for reactions to the title of the chapter on health disparities: "Life at the Top in America Isn't Just Better, It's Longer." A student interjects, "Wait, is that true? I mean, is it proven, they really live longer?" Several people including Trinidad, Lady and others call out "Yeah, it's a fact. It's true." (Fieldnotes, 11/11/08)

The use of sociological statistically-based studies correlating characteristics to outcomes did have the effect of framing the data as deterministic.

As an outsider I imagined that these revelations and the associated discussions might be painful and/or discouraging. In my final interview with students, I asked them what they thought of these conversations and texts like *Class Matters* and *There Are No Children Here*. While Dana told me that she was tired of reading about poverty all of the time, many students, like Brittany, told me that they enjoyed both classes and both books:

> It wasn't depressing for me. I mean, I understand like the environment. And I just, I don't know, it's an encouragement just to look at that situation and know that you don't want to be there, because I'm sure that book was eye-opening for some people, me as well. That I just want to build a great life for myself. It's like a wake-up call. If you're not aware of something sometimes, or if you don't have something to look back to and say, okay, well, I definitely know I don't want to be there. It's just really motivating and inspiring. (Interview, 4/4/09)

Just as Lady explained that she chooses not to think about the realities to keep herself motivated, Brittany was able to view these images of poverty and struggle as a source of motivation. While Brittany characterized the book as inspiring in retrospect, I saw numerous examples of student resistance to and discomfort with the way issues were presented.

Just as the student above questioned the validity of statistics for predicting outcomes, other students worked to distance themselves from the data or to depersonalize it. For example, in discussions of poverty, students used examples from "third world countries" rather than examples of similar disparities at home. Likewise, just as Trinidad audibly rejected that his family would experience intergenerational incarceration, students pointed out the ways they were exceptions to the trends noted in these texts.

> A student says that disparities in health insurance coverage are not true for everyone. She says her family doesn't have a lot of money, but she has the "best, best health insurance" because her dad works at a local hospital. Lady points out that she has "connections" at that hospital, which she says is one of the things listed in the book which determines your health outcomes. Professor Franklin concedes that is true and says that good health outcomes *disproportionately* go to those in higher classes. (Fieldnotes, 11/11/08)

Here Professor Franklin maintains the claim that disparities exist, but allows for exceptions by adding the qualifier "disproportionately." I saw examples like these as evidence that students were resistant to this approach to talk about social inequity and systems of oppression. Statistics about trends and patterns seemed incompatible with students' optimism and left little room for students to assert agency over their own futures.

While the issues were similar, Professors Wilson and Franklin dealt with in-class conversations differently. In part, these differences were due to their own backgrounds. Professor Wilson frequently told stories about her own history growing up as an African American in an impoverished section of the city. Professor Franklin also identified himself as coming from working class roots, but he relied on hardship stories far less in his teaching, which may have been related to his identity as a white man from outside the city. Both professors often

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took a didactic approach when students resisted or rejected their claims. However, Professor Wilson was more likely to draw on examples from her own experience rather than textbooks or other data. For example, after soliciting opinions from the class on affirmative action and discovering that the class was about evenly split between supporters and detractors, she explained the ways in which affirmative action is "absolutely fair and necessary." In response to students' comments that affirmative action policies seem unfair, she told a story from her own experience about her freshman year at a local private university (Fieldnotes, 7/21/08).

Just as frequently as they presented experiences and data that pointed to inequalities, however, professors and program staff cited the mantra of "hard work" as they relayed their expectations to students. Professor Wilson in particular used examples from her own life to demonstrate the power of hard work and determination. She had attended a high school that students acknowledged was one of the worst in the city, but went on to earn her bachelors and masters, and began investing in properties in her early twenties. Often the juxtaposition between the discussion of barriers to success and success through hard work was ironic:

> Professor Franklin officially stops the activity and writes the homework on the board. Trinidad says (referring to their upcoming essay), "Don't we have enough to do?" Franklin says with a friendly smile on his face, "No – I'm going to double it." I hear several audible groans from the class. Trinidad says, "We're working class people here." As Professor Franklin writes the assignment on the board, he says, "Aren't we all?" (Fieldnotes, 9/30/08)

In what I perceived to be a very clever commentary on that day's class discussion about the struggles working class students face in college, Trinidad calls attention to the mixed messages the students receive. On one hand, the content of the course text positions them as less likely to succeed via statistics on college success rates for working class students. The professor supports these statistics by prompting a discussion about the historical and economic barriers to success. Yet on the other hand, students receive messages that they can each achieve success through hard work. I personally empathized with Professor Franklin as I tried to imagine how I would have responded to Trinidad's complaint, "We're working class people here." Unlike Professor Wilson

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who frequently used her own life as an example of someone who "overcame obstacles" through hard work, Professor Franklin had less in common with Pathways students and those differences seemed most acute in exchanges like this.

These data raise further questions about the roles available to teachers in classroom discussions about inequity, the appropriateness of statistics and sociological data in critical pedagogy, and the ways in which teachers can enlighten students about social realities while maintaining high standards for student success. Chapter Seven will further explore the implications of these data for teaching and pedagogy.

Summary

The ideology of meritocracy has been critiqued by scholars who point to its role in the maintenance of white supremacy (Akom, 2008), the persistence of victim blaming, the privileging of only particular kinds of "hard work" (McNamee & Miller, 2004), and the longstanding failure to effectively address and redress social inequities. This ideology has been implicated in the failure of schools to offer students meaningful support (McGinnis, 2009). McGinnis found that discourses of hard work and resilience in afterschool and summer programs for urban Khmer youth had the effect of placing blame on students who could not effectively "cope" and obscuring poverty, racism, and the complexities of the students' lives. Likewise, the discourses of hard work at Pathways left little room for program-wide conversations about systems of oppression. When historical or social science data were presented in the classroom, as they were by Professors Wilson and Franklin, it was difficult to sustain meaningful discussions about how they related to students' lives and experiences because they sharply contradicted the programmatic discourses that endorsed the American Dream.

However, during my time with at Pathways, I have come to understand the important role the meritocratic ideal plays in the participants' optimism. Research on possible selves demonstrates the connection between expected selves and an individual's choices and behaviors

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(Osyerman et al., 2006). Therefore, the utility of the American Dream ideology should not be understated. These findings are not unique in the research literature. In what Hochschild calls the American Dream "quandary," she found that African Americans are more likely than whites to doubt the American Dream in general, even while they express optimism in their own ability to achieve that dream. A meritocractic worldview has been documented as a protective factor from the effects of perceived discrimination (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien & McCoy, 2007). In a study of post-secondary students previously labeled "learning disabled," Brown (2009) found that participants "read meritocracy as an active response to oppressive structural barriers" (p. 93).

Ultimately though, to borrow Park's (2008) analysis of the myth of the model minority, an uncritical embrace of the American Dream "limits avenues for progressive social change" (p. 136). Research has demonstrated that youth of color are most successful when they exhibit an understanding of social inequities and view education as a path to resistance (e.g., Lee, 2005; Phelan et al., 1996). When individuals can see their successes and struggles as a combination of their own effort and their starting point in society, they are likely to have a fuller personal understanding of societal structures and the action required to dismantle those structures. Unfortunately, the data presented in this chapter do not tell us much about how Pathways students' worldviews influence the way they understand their setbacks. If success is understood to be linked to hard work, ability, and motivation, how are unplanned outcomes perceived? By focusing almost exclusively on the importance of personal responsibility, the program rhetoric offers little to students whose progress in Pathways is somehow derailed.

While the data indicate that participants have a greater understanding of systems of oppression than their talk about their imagined futures might suggest, the data also suggest ample opportunities for both professors and staff to help students build on that personal knowledge. As will be discussed in Chapter Seven, the data in this chapter point to the complexity of employing critical pedagogy in the classroom and also its tremendous possibilities.

CHAPTER SIX

Readers and Writers Return to School: Literate Subjectivities in Flux

In the previous chapters I have explored the various ways in which participants narrated their past experiences in high school, responded to how they were positioned by program faculty and staff, and imagined the possibilities for their future selves. This exploration of the "storied selves" of students has revealed much about their various subjectivities in relationship to their high schools, Pathways, college, and dominant cultural narratives about success and failure. This final data chapter revisits this inquiry into participants' storied selves using literacy practices as its theoretical and methodological focus.

Barton and Hamilton (2000) define literacy practices as "cultural ways of utilizing written language" (p. 7). Literacy practices are associated with ideologies, situated in cultural contexts, linked to social goals, and tied to the enactment of identities. Thus, the study of literacy practices is more than a recording of activities involving reading and writing. It involves uncovering not only the purposes of various literacy events and the social rules mediating them, but also the ways in which those events are used to enact and perform identities. In this chapter a close look at participants' literacy practices, as well as the literacy practices valued in Pathways, uncovers more about the ways in which participants take up a range of identities, including identities as capable learners and students. What insights do students' literacy practices offer into their understandings of past school experiences, the identities they enact at Pathways, and their expectations for the future?

A second question explored in this chapter relates to the multiple and evolving "literacy identities" enacted by participants. Specifically, how do participants see themselves as readers and writers? Using the term "literacy-in-persons" (cf. Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998), Johnson and Cowles (2009) demonstrate the ways in which "individuals are always forming as literate beings as they hone their literacy repertoires throughout their lives" (p. 411). Thus,

literacy identities are fluid, multiple, and shaped by context. Although schools are one important context in which literacy identities are developed or imposed, research has shown that students may have alternate literacy identities in home, community, or afterschool contexts (e.g., Haddix, 2009; Rogers, 2004).

As discussed in Chapter One, sociocultural studies of adolescent literacies have long documented the richness of adolescents' out-of-school literacy lives (e.g., Knobel, 1999; Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2002). These out-of-school practices (also variously known as vernacular, unofficial, or unsanctioned literacies) are a primary resource for youth as they work to frame their identities in relationship to their peers, institutions, and larger discourse communities (Grote, 2006). Tensions between in-school and out-of-school practices (a false distinction because youth frequently blur these boundaries – e.g., Grote, 2006; Schultz, 1996) have also been explored, but we know less about how students returning to school reconcile the demands of schooled literacy with their "literate subjectivities" (Rogers, 2004).

During my year at Pathways, I paid close attention to students' literacy practices and their talk about those practices in class and in other Pathways contexts. I also conducted one interview with participants focused explicitly on their literate lives. Not surprisingly, I found that talking to students about their identities as readers and writers and about their reading and writing practices illuminated much about their past experiences in high school and about the possibilities they envisioned for their futures. I also found it essential to pay close attention to how the program, particularly the English professors, talked about literacy. Just as Pathways faculty and staff positioned students via their messages about college, similar types of messages about literacy – in particular about what counts as reading and writing in college – had an effect on participants' literacy practices and identities.

The data reveal that students have rich literate lives, and for many students the development of their literacy identities occurred outside of (and in some cases in spite of) their

experiences with literacy in school. In the first section of this chapter, I explore participants' literacy identities and their range of out-of-school practices. This section explores the ways in which their reading and writing lives were both inherently social – offering them an opportunity to connect with others – and inherently introspective – allowing them to explore imagined futures and possible selves. The second section of the chapter offers contextual information about the English classes I observed, including the ways in which literacy was talked about in class by professors and students. In this section the participants' experiences of returning to school and their impact on their literacy practices and literacy identities are explored.

Social Goals and Enacted Identities

The participants in this study engaged in a range of literacy activities, both in the context of their school work for Pathways and in their out-of-school lives. Over the course of my year with them, I saw new practices emerge and existing practices evolve. During the second round of interviews, which were held during the early part of the participants' second semester, I began by asking the students to tell me their literacy autobiographies (See Appendix B). In the interview prompt I tried to define literacy broadly for the students: "Literacy includes papers and books for school, but it also includes MySpace pages, a doodle on the side of a notebook, song lyrics, and text messages to friends." I asked each participant to bring with them some writing they would be willing to share with me. Specifically I asked them to bring at least one school writing sample and I encouraged them to bring any and all writing that they did outside of school (journals, poems, drawings, etc). Through these interviews, I learned much about participants' out-of-school literacy practices, the purposes those practices served in their lives, and the ways in which participants saw themselves as literate beings. The data indicate that students' literacy practices are used to make social connections, experiment with identities, and explore possible selves.

The ways in which participants represented and enacted their literacy identities were quite varied. Some participants, particularly Mercedes, Cleveland, Talia, and Lady, strongly

identified as writers, whereas others, like Dana, firmly did not. Every participant except Brittany had a MySpace[7] page, and some participants used their pages to express themselves creatively through writing and design. Others only used MySpace to send messages to friends. Brittany and Chanel listed off titles of several books they read recently that were meaningful to them, while Trinidad claimed to only have read three books in his entire life.

Other out-of-school writing practices included writing in journals or diaries (Bart, Brittany, Talia and Lady), writing short stories and fan-fiction (Mercedes and Cleveland), poetry and song lyrics (Mercedes, Cleveland, Lady, and Talia), and writing and drawing ideas for new video games (Bart and Cleveland). When I asked participants to show me samples of their out-of-school writing during our interviews, I saw that much of their work was kept in journals or notebooks, but about half of the participants also published songs, stories, and poems on their MySpace pages. In addition to reading and writing for class assignments, all students engaged in various forms of text-based communication including email, text messaging, and online messaging. Cohort members and classmates communicated with one another outside of class over MySpace and other sites with chat capabilities. Some mornings students blearily complained that they had stayed up too late chatting with one another online (Fieldnotes, 8/4/08, 10/14/08).

Students identified a range of purposes associated with their literacy practices including stress management, coping, self-reflection, and escapism. Talia said she enjoyed reading for an opportunity to escape from her physical world: "I started liking to read because, I don't know, because I like being in my imagination. I'm an introverted person so I spend a lot of time in my mind" (Interview, 9/30/08). Bart, who only started writing outside of school after coming to Pathways, explained that he had recently started writing in the evening about his day: "I think it just clears my mind. Because after I write I feel relieved" (Interview, 4/22/09). Lady talked

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[7] One year after I completed data collection, most participants use and prefer Facebook.

about letters she wrote to ex-boyfriends and others who hurt her: "I did that a lot 'cause I'm non-confrontational. That's why I write really, that's one of the reasons why I write. So I'll talk about, I'll talk to a person through my writing but they'll never see it" (Interview, 10/7/08). For Mercedes and Cleveland, writing poetry and short stories had a cathartic effect. As Mercedes explained, the stress and trauma of her childhood served as her inspiration to write: "I think all the bad experiences were like for the most part the driving force for why I was writing, like to get all my anger out or to tell my story like all the bad things" (Interview, 10/0/08). Just as Lady wrote letters to express her anger productively, Cleveland found that poetry writing served as a healthy outlet: "It lets me get the evil out without being evil… It's basically getting that emotion out of myself and not letting it sit there and fester and grow into something worse" (Interview, 10/9/08).

Participants reported a range of authentic purposes for reading and writing outside of school – escaping from reality, coping with stress, and self-reflection. As the following sections demonstrate, students' literacy practices also allowed them to experiment with identities, imagine possible selves, and connect to friends, family, as well as other real and imagined audiences.

I Started Writing Poetry Because of My Friend

The literacy lives of individuals are intimately tied to social relationships with family members, friends, and members of real, virtual, and imagined discourse communities. Johnson and Cowles (2009) write that "literate practice emerges from individuals' biographies and the histories of communities, local or global" (p. 410). In particular, families, including extended kin-networks, play a role in how individuals understand and value literacy and how they frame their identities as literate beings (Gadsden, 1998, 1999). Gadsden (1998) writes that across generations, "family cultures" of literacy and learning "connect the cumulative life experience of an individual family member with the life goals of the family" (p. 39).

Not surprisingly participants' stories of their literacy lives frequently included friends and family members who had an important impact on their development as readers and writers. Often times they spoke about a literacy role model, someone who they admired as a reader or a writer. For example, when I asked Lady to tell me about her earliest literacy memories, she highlighted the influence of a number of role models in her family:

> My mother is a writer. I would watch her and see some of the things she write…
> And my grandfather always reads. He reads, he reads the bible every time he
> leaves his house and he comes back. It's just sitting by the door… My great-
> grandmother and my grandmother do the same. So literacy has always been a
> really, it's always been utilized in my family. Everybody uses it some way shape
> or form. And that just fell on me. And I just started writing at a young age and
> never stopped. (Interview, 10/7/08).

Here Lady highlights a multigenerational legacy of literacy within her family's culture (Gadsden, 1998). Her own literate identity as a writer follows in the footsteps of her mother's identity as a writer.

Mothers were frequently mentioned in participants' childhood memories. Chanel cited her mother as the source of her interest in Shakespeare and classic literature: "I guess because my mom was an English major or whatever, she just always made it a point read like outlandish stuff to me" (Interview, 4/30/09). Mercedes, who remembered her mother purchasing books at book fairs when she was a young child, reminisced: "My favorite reading moment was reading with my mom and my brother and we would sit up and she would read us the story" (Interview, 10/1/08). Other participants talked about the influence of others on their reading practices. For example, Dana, who struggled to find books she enjoyed, said that asking friends for recommendations was the best way to find interesting books: "Because if they heard of it or they liked it, I would read it. That's how I build my reading thing" (Interview, 10/21/08). Likewise, Brittany, who was an avid reader, reported looking to her grandmother as a literacy role model. Her grandmother's subscriptions to particular magazines prompted her own reading habits, and Brittany aspired to match her grandmother's expansive vocabulary.

In addition to reflecting on the importance of literacy role models, many students talked about the importance of sharing their work with a receptive audience. Some found an audience with their Pathways peers, others shared their work with friends, and many enjoyed posting their work online. For example, Mercedes shared much of her writing with her cohort-mates. In talking about the first part of a futuristic short story she was writing she said:

> I showed it to Cleveland, Chanel, like pretty much everybody from the [cohort]. And they were like, well what happened? And I'm like, well I have to keep writing and then they gave me suggestions like, I want to know what happens to um like Donald Trump and Rosie O'Donnell. Are they cool now? I'm like, I'm gonna write that down and um, like Cleveland said you should make Microsoft and Apple combine together. I'm like, okay, I should write that down. I'm taking everybody's suggestions. (Interview, 10/1/08)

Mercedes' peers served not only as an audience for her work but as collaborators. Cleveland and Mercedes had a close relationship which appeared to be built, to some extent, on their shared interest in writing. Cleveland reported that Mercedes first prompted him to try writing poetry:

> I started writing my poetry because of [Mercedes] and she writes some, writes beautiful stories. I read her stories and it really made me feel something because she expressed herself so well. And I read some of her poetry and one night I just sat down and I felt some type of way and I just wrote the poetry and I was amazed at what it was and I fell in love with the poetry. (Interview, 10/9/08)

Cleveland told me that when he first started writing (shortly before enrolling in Pathways) he felt uncomfortable sharing his writing: "At first I was very self-conscious; I did not want to show anybody anything. But then I was so confident. I was like man I want somebody to see this. I want someone to hear this storyline" (Interview, 10/9/08). Over the course of my year at Pathways, I saw Cleveland's desire for an audience grow. In his third term, the director put up a "Creativity Board" in the office and Cleveland typed, printed, and posted several of his poems to it. When I started the Arts Magazine, an opportunity for Pathways students to publish writing and art, Cleveland joined the editorial board and faithfully contributed new work each issue.

Lady and Talia, who wrote and performed songs, talked about their desire to share their work with an audience. Talia posted her songs on MySpace and Lady performed one of hers on

"A Piece of Me Day" which Ms. Bea hosted for the cohort at the end of the foundation term. At our interview, Lady showed me three composition books filled with poems, drawings, and other writing from her time in high school. These were books that she shared with friends at the time:

> Other people would write in my book. When I have books like this… a lot of people, they see my poems and stuff and they're encouraged to write something. I have a lot of stuff in here, all my books, from other people. Like this poem from some guy, and this is from a girlfriend. (Interview, 10/7/08)

Unlike Mercedes who took suggestions from her peers, but then continued as the sole author of her story, Lady invited others to write their own words in her book. Lady's composition books, while not electronic, serve as an example of the type of multimodal collaborative writing that was facilitated by social networking sites. Lady's book served as a repository for both her work and the work of close friends. MySpace, the social networking website of choice for the participants at the time of the study, had a similar quality. Users craft and customize their own page (according to Mercedes, the ability to creatively design one's page made MySpace preferable to Facebook), but friends could also write on or add to the page in the form of "comments."

In her research with high school students, Weinstein (2007) found that writing and performing rap and offered adolescents membership into the large and complex hip-hop discourse community. In describing a student she writes, "The imaginative way he carries out the project demonstrates the pleasure he takes from in-group textual play that, by definition, only participants in the rap Discourse can fully appreciate" (p. 276). Likewise, in addition to allowing them to connect to friends, participants' literacy practices offered them membership into "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991). For example, Mercedes used the writing, design, and networking capabilities on her MySpace page to connect with a community of music lovers she could not find in her home and school life: "They have a lot of music for bands who wouldn't, who aren't mainstream. I'm not really a fan of what's mainstream, so I get to listen to like bands who aren't really popular" (Interview, 10/1/08).

Pathways students' work also drew heavily on intertextual references to popular culture and mass mediated texts. The stylings of Anime heavily influenced Cleveland's work. Mercedes and Talia both drew on musical influences in their writing: "If I hear a beat, then I'll be like, oh that sounds cool, and I'll write a song" (Interview, 10/1/08). Mercedes had written the script for an episode of the television show *Cold Case*, integrating a number of local landmarks into her story. Cleveland's first foray into out-of-school writing was when he began designing improvements to his favorite characters on Cartoon Network: "That's how I get some of my characters. I don't exactly, just like okay this is mine now, steal it. I make it my own" (Interview, 10/9/08). Here Cleveland points to the ways in which he and his peers create new texts from appropriated mediatized images. Images from popular culture served as a source of inspiration for their work, but also connected them to larger communities of fans.

Many students shared examples of ways in which they used their writing to connect with, inform, or persuade their audiences. For example, Mercedes talked about the potential of her writing to affect her imagined audience: "I just really like writing and I like words because words have a lot of power… Like you can say something to somebody and that totally alters someone's life or how they view things" (Interview, 10/1/08). In her journal Lady had examples of persuasive writing she had done for an authentic audience. To her dismay when she was 14 years old, her family stopped celebrating holidays for religious reasons. She explained her elaborate, but ultimately unsuccessful campaign:

> And I was pissed off. So I wanted to have, I wrote this poem, and it basically speaks on all the views and stuff and what happened and then I had a speech to say before the poem. I made like little greeting cards that was talking about a family and passed them out. (Interview, 10/7/08)

These data demonstrate that participants' literacy lives were built around experiences with other people, largely outside of school settings. Students crafted literacy identities as readers and writers in the image of various role models. Their memories of reading were connected to people who read with them or who recommended what they read. Their writing autobiographies

were also littered with mentors, collaborators, and audience members who encouraged or inspired them.

It's Kind Of What I Think the World Should Be Like

Students' literacy practices connected them to others and their literacy identities and practices were influenced and defined via their relationships with role models, co-authors, and readers. Participants' literacy practices were also deeply introspective, as demonstrated above by the ways in which writing and reading served to relieve stress, cope, and foster personal growth and development. In particular, analysis reveals that students' literacy practices afforded opportunities to imagine what the world could or should be like – to experiment with multiple identities and explore a range of hoped-for future selves. A closer look at the content of the out-of-school writing students shared with me indicated that despite the diversity of topics and genres, some themes were common across authors and media. Specifically, students' writing was future oriented and filled with possibilities for alternate visions of selfhood.

In Chapter Five I explored the various ways participants told narratives which connected past obstacles to their optimism for the future. The tension and relationship between hardship and hope were also important themes in their out-of-school writing. Analysis of student writing reveals the similar and different ways participants made sense of past struggle and envisioned a successful future. Much like in their oral narratives, past suffering and future success or happiness were held in tension, particularly in their poetry. For example, in an interview, Cleveland talked about his proclivity for the dark and light imagery in his writing: "A lot of the times I write more of the good things or the bad things or transformation between the two" (Interview, 10/9/08). In a poem entitled "Unsure Heroes Soon to Be Villains" he wrote: "*Eyes scarred by the light, see no light. So by working through the darkness the eyes are restored. A villain is laid to rest and a hero is reborn.*" The juxtaposing images of heroes, villains, darkness

and light in this piece highlight the relationships – salient in much of Cleveland's work – between affliction and hope.

While some participants used writing primarily as a way to document past struggles, even the most dire pieces of student work contained references to a hopeful future. Mercedes' autobiographical poem, "Diary of a Fallen Angel," chronicles her experiences with isolation, betrayal and illness:

> *Steadily trying to make my way in this life/ Seems like no matter what I do I get blindsided by strife/ Hoping one day I grow up to be someone's mother and wife*

In this section, in the midst of describing the challenges she has faced and continues to face, Mercedes records one hoped-for self – to become "someone's mother and wife."

In another poem by Mercedes entitled "Floating," she writes: *"I wonder how far this river goes and will it lead me out to sea."* Here, as she describes floating on a river, she indicates that despite her uncertainty about where she is headed, she senses that life is leading her in a positive direction: *"Not really sure how I got here, but I'm sure it's for good reason."* Fate and destiny were frequently invoked in student poetry as an explanation for past struggles. Talia crafted a remarkably similar line conveying the same sentiment: *"I try to keep my hope alive, believing there's a reason for everything."* In Talia's line, the idea that "everything happens for a reason" is a source of comfort when hope is dwindling. In Mercedes poem, the idea of destiny offers comfort when the future is uncertain.

A poem by Talia entitled "Life Thus Far" includes similar themes:

> *I feel like I'm blessed and at peace with myself/ But first had to go through hell/ First, lost in my very own entity/ Didn't know which way to go/ But as the years have passed me by, grown older, much wiser*

Just as in students' self-reliance narratives, in which hardships fostered motivation, strength and independence, in this selection, going through hell is presented as prerequisite for obtaining wisdom, maturity, and a sense of peace. In this way struggle is intimately linked to current and future success. Students' writing offers a new perspective on the themes of optimism and hope

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explored in Chapter Five. It is worth noting that much of the data in the last chapter was from interviews. Much of the writing presented in this section was published on MySpace and therefore intended for a wider audience. Narratives of exceptionalism, in which students positioned themselves as different from other students or dropouts, were largely absent from student writing, although those narratives were central to how students talked to me about their optimism for the future. Instead, in their writing participants were more likely to allude to fate and their difficult life journeys. This discrepancy calls attention to the various ways in which students construct contextually-dependent identities via the narrative work they do on paper, online, and in formal and informal conversations.

Part Of Me That I Don't Necessarily Show To People

In the interview data presented in Chapter Five, participants shared their hoped-for and feared future selves in response to my prompting. In student writing I also saw evidence of students trying on and experimenting with identities as they wrote toward a hopeful future. In some cases, these written versions of self were different than the identities they enacted in face-to-face interactions. In their theorization of literacy practices, Barton and Hamilton (2000) write that literacies are located within individual histories. That is, "people use literacy to make changes in their lives" and "literacy changes people" (p. 14). New identities can be enacted and performed via interactions with written texts. For example, Bruce (2003) found that despite students' traditional gender performances, invitations to write in a high school women's studies course "served to interrupt 'appropriate' expectations for gendered behavior and enable women's studies students to script possible alternative position for their lives" (p. 114). Just as Kamler (2001) found that writing offered workshop participants the opportunity to do counternarrative work, Bruce writes that through their writing students were able to "consider a wider array of gender performance options" (p. 16). Likewise, Pathways students' literacy practices afford opportunities for experimentation, exploration, and investigation of alternate identities.

For some students, writing appeared to offer a particular opportunity explore a range of hoped-for selves. For example, Cleveland, who kept a notebook full of ideas for new characters for his favorite television shows and video games, described his writing this way: "I think all of the characters are parts of my personality. The crazy side of me. The person that I would like to be. The person I'm not, but people see me as" (Interview, 10/9/08). Cleveland's notebook of characters served as a collecting place for his various and multiple ideations of self. However, it was also through his writing that he played with alternate possibilities for his future. In describing a short story he wrote about a battle between angels in heaven and on earth, he reflected on how his writing was an opportunity to express hope: "Just my desire to be free. Cause I see myself with those wings and flying and so I just was seeing the character with the wings, me with the wings" (Interview, 10/9/08). Through his writing and drawing, Cleveland imagines a more powerful, spontaneous, and autonomous version of self. The angel protagonist in the short story is fighting a battle on behalf of his father (as Cleveland reflected: "My expressing for wanting my father there") and is a victorious leader of an army (perhaps related to Cleveland's hope that his newfound confidence will continue to grow).

Other students also found opportunities to explore and imagine possibilities for themselves in their writing. For example, Lady said that her out-of-school writing was rarely about past or current life experiences:

> I always wrote poems and nine times out of 10, my poems weren't about me.
> They were just general poems. I was 14 writing a poem about a married woman
> who's unhappy and it's like what are you writing about that for, how could you
> possibly know? (Interview, 10/7/08)

Similarly, Talia identified that she had always written beyond her experiences, thinking toward a future she could only imagine:

> My first song I ever wrote, I was in the fifth grade. It was like so not on my
> level, because I was only 10 at the time and the song was just talking about
> relationships and cheating and stuff like that and I never even been though that.
> (Interview, 9/30/08)

While for both Talia and Lady these examples of writing toward the future are not hopeful, they are similar to the examples above in that they are experimental. By taking on characters who are "not on their level" they have the opportunity to play with the future and enact a possible self.

MySpace offered a particularly appropriate venue for participants to try on and enact multiple identities through writing, layout, and design. As mentioned, with the exception of Brittany, every participant had a MySpace page, although their reported usage patterns were quite varied. As part of an interview with the students, I asked them to show me their page, read pertinent selections of it aloud to me, and tell me about it, including the decisions they made designing it. While inherently multimodal (allowing the incorporation of pictures, video, and audio files), MySpace is a text-heavy medium; a user's page is formatted with a number of prompts like "About Me," "Who I'd Like to Meet," and spaces to write about various "favorites." Each page also comes equipped with a blog that allows for longer and more extensive writing. MySpace is also inherently dynamic, pages change constantly through the addition of friends' "comments." In addition, users can edit their profile design at any time. Thus, the MySpace pages I saw during my interviews with the students may have looked quite different a few days or even hours later. This serves as a poignant reminder of a methodological issue that is inherent in all qualitative data collection; we are constantly renarrating our lives and reinterpreting our experiences. The stories and portraits throughout this dissertation represent just one snapshot in time.

Participants talked with me both in our interviews and in a subsequent conversation group about the affordances of MySpace as a place to adopt new and different identities. For example, Lady shared the example of a person she met on MySpace whose profile suggested wealth and success. When she met him in real life she was surprised to learn that he lived at home with his parents. She explained, "On MySpace, they got 3 trillion billion friends, but when you go back home they're just a regular person that probably doesn't go to school, probably

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chillin' at home watching SpongeBob or something" (CG, 2/6/09). It was understood that

adopting new personas on MySpace was possible in part because, in Dana's words, in "the real

world" identities could not be so fluid: "You can't change back time. You can't say one minute

you want to be this and one minute be that without no consequences" (CG, 2/6/09). For Brittany,

the possibility of deception was one of the reasons she avoided social networking sites: "Because

you just don't know how people are. They could present themselves one way, but it doesn't

mean that's really how they are. It's hard to trust people nowadays" (Interview, 10/15/08).

However, some participants employed MySpace to experiment with identities that might be risky

in the real world.

Most strikingly, Cleveland's page included multiple representations of an aspect of his

identity which he did not reveal at Pathways. At the time of our interview, his page featured a

very large and prominently displayed picture of a scantily clad man. The text on his page

included Cleveland's own writing about several of his favorite actors, several of whom he

identified to me as homosexual. In one case he explained: "That's a clip of a famous gay actor

that I'm in love with. And I feel like he's a stand-up guy, he represents gay people in a good

way" (Interview, 10/9/08). Cleveland's self representation on MySpace came as a surprise to me

given that I never heard him mention his sexuality in his conversations with friends or peers in or

out of class. Although he stated that he left high school in part because classmates threatened him

with violence once they "suspected my sexuality" (Interview, 7/16/08), in our interviews, he

never identified as straight or gay. However, by writing about famous gay role models and

posting sexualized images of men on his page, Cleveland was able to participate in an imagined

community tolerant of and welcoming to homosexual men.

Cleveland's profile surprised me further when I saw that his classmates at Pathways were

his friends on MySpace. Even in classroom contexts when Chanel talked openly about her

identity as a lesbian, Cleveland remained quiet. This apparent discrepancy highlights the ways in

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which MySpace's removal from the "real world" allows for exploration and experimentation. However, Cleveland did not see his page as a representation of a fanciful or unreal self. When I asked him to talk about his page he said, "It's for the public to see who I am and to just basically get an understanding of me. And I feel like if you read this, you know me" (Interview, 10/9/08).

In addition to writing about themselves and about their favorites, Cleveland, Mercedes, Talia, and Lady used their MySpace pages as a place to publish their poetry and song lyrics. Mercedes represented a typically hidden side of herself in the poetry she published on her MySpace blog. This was an idea she talked about after reading aloud one of the poems on her blog which includes references to depression, abuse, and illness. She explained that her friends were always surprised to read such dark themes in her writing: "I think people didn't know I had that in me because I'm always like the really funny one who tells all the jokes" (Interview, 10/1/08). Mercedes reflected that her MySpace page allowed for representations of multiple aspects of self:

> I think they would see both sides, because when you look at my MySpace page, you see all this funny stuff and you think this must be like this real funny person because I have some crazy wack behind things on there… But then you can kind of like read some of my poems and a lot of them seem like really happy or you know mostly about love, and then you read that one and it's like, 'Where did this come from?' (Interview, 10/1/08)

The identity Mercedes enacted in school was related to an imagined hoped-for self: "What I let people see is what I wish I was. I wish I was happy all the time. I wish I had a great life." By contrast, in her writing she felt she could reveal a fuller range of realities: "I think in my writing I show more of my true self" (Interview, 10/1/08).

In Rogers' (2004) study of literate identities of adult learners she writes that "subjectivities are a continually evolving framework that both shapes and is shaped by activity settings" (p. 277). For Pathways students, literacy practices connect them with peers and mentors and serve as mirror for introspection and reflection. Simultaneously, through their literacy practices students (often literally) *wrote* their identities as friends, daughters, sons, artists,

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scholars, writers, and students. Bruce (2003) found that high school writers in a women's studies course engaged in "performative utterances" (p. 148) that enabled change for the future. Likewise, Pathways students engaged in performative writing which allowed for identity exploration and experimentation. Students' literacy practices afforded opportunities to recursively write and revise new subjectivites.

I Was Fine, But Academically I Was Terrible

Implicit in their talk about how and why they read and write outside of school were commentaries on school and school-based literacy practices. In their literacy autobiographies, students also talked explicitly about their school experiences and the impact school had on their development as readers and writers. Among sociocultural literacy scholars, the term "schooled literacy" is used to mark particular literacy practices which are valued over others in schools and other locations of power. As Street and Street (1991) note, "Nonschool literacies have come to be seen as inferior attempts at the real thing, to be compensated for by enhanced schooling" (p. 143). Scholars have examined historical trends, both in colonized and colonizing countries and have found that what has been popularly conceived as "real" literacy is merely a social construction tied to power, culture, ethnocentrism, and ideology (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Street & Street, 1991). Students' literacy identities are frequently tied to their performance on schooled literacy tasks, often in spite of their out-of-school literacy lives (Haddix, 2009). Schooled literacy practices may include, among other things, reading and responding to short decontextualized passages, timed writing exercises in response to prompts, answering multiple choice questions, and practicing handwriting and spelling.

School was an important feature of the literacy autobiographies of many Pathways students. Some, like Lady, Talia, and Mercedes pursued reading and writing outside of school high school and thus developed literate identities apart from the demands of schooled literacy. Their narratives reveal their ambivalence about schooled literacy. As Lady explained, "I never

related my writing to school because in school, something about school growing up that never brought the talent out of me that I've had." She went on to say that although success in writing and reading were not an issue – "I may do good on papers and get As, but I didn't relate it or connect it to my personal writing" (Interview, 10/7/08) – it was in her "personal writing" that her identity as a writer thrived. Similarly, Mercedes reported pride that a poem she wrote in seventh grade was published in a book, but at the same time recalled the process as not particularly meaningful: "I won an award for it and it was crazy because it wasn't even nothing I put any effort to" (Interview, 10/1/08). By contrast Mercedes felt that her short story writing gave her an opportunity to reveal things that were deeply personal: "This is me and if you [read this] and don't get it then it's like oh my god they don't get me" (Interview, 10/1/08).

For these students, memories of schooled literacy were framed in conjunction with their narratives of exceptionalism. This is evident in Lady's comment above about her school's failure to capitalize on her reading and writing talents. When I asked Talia about the influence of school on her poetry and song writing practices, she downplayed the role of school: "It probably came from like when I was younger and writing little Haikus in school and stuff like that. But other than that, I don't know. It was just a natural thing" (Interview, 9/30/08). Likewise, Mercedes understood her facility with language as an innate talent: "My grandma used to say well it's a gift from god… This is your gift. So I think it was just something I was born to do" (Interview, 10/1/08). In these narratives about the development of their literacy lives, school played a minimal role.

Other students, most notably Dana, had memorable negative experiences in school that precluded any development of a positive literacy identity. Dana told me several times, "I'm not a writer." She recalled her negative school memories connected to the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of a speech problem:

> When I was younger, I couldn't stay in class because people would pick on me
> and stuff. And then I had to go to the special class they had offered for speech

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problems because when we had to read or something, I couldn't read it without messing everything up… I just, I really had a hard time comprehending things. (Interview, 10/21/08)

When Dana talked to me about her writing practices, she focused on her struggles with mechanics: "Grammar is the reason why I don't like writing basically… I'm not a good speller… I don't like spelling, period" (Interview, 10/21/08). Although Dana felt confident her ideas were compelling: "I bet you if they could just take it out my mouth and write it down – somebody else write it down as I go, I bet you I have an A paper" (Interview, 10/21/08), she was unable to separate her struggle with conventions and writing's potential for self-expression. Even in this example, her use of the term "A paper" contrasts starkly with the way and others talked about writing for personal reflection, stress relief, and growth.

Dana had similar negative associations with reading in school: "School taught me how to read but I had so many problems with people in my school. Like I had so many problems in school period that it seem like I couldn't focus" (Interview, 10/21/08). She also had difficulty reading aloud, which stemmed from her speech diagnosis; however, she talked about wanting to find books she enjoyed and seeking out recommendations from friends for good books to read. As part of her self-described middle school identity as an "outcast," she reported reading to stay out of trouble: "You get in trouble for that, it be on your permanent record saying you're a fighter… I'm a book worm. I don't feel that I need to fight with you" (Interview, 7/30/08).

Cleveland also had memorable negative school experiences that affected his identity as a reader and writer. In particular, he felt that he did not receive the help and support he needed to become a competent speller:

> I was just being passed along through the grades or whatever and I remember in fifth grade, we would have spelling tests and everything and I would constantly get them back and they'd be horrible. And I remember going to my graduation from fifth grade to go to middle school and I remember crying and everyone thinking I was crying because I was happy and excited to go to middle school. It wasn't because of that. I was crying because I didn't feel like deserved it. (Interview, 10/9/08)

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Again, Cleveland reveals a particular understanding of schooled literacy here which he associates with spelling correctly rather than other forms of communicative competence. Although he gained confidence in his writing over time, Cleveland confided that his spelling still haunted him: "I think that's one of my biggest demons in my closet is my spelling isn't perfect" (Interview, 10/9/08). Cleveland's writing life began to develop while he was out of school, presumably in part because he was free to express himself with less fear about the implications of misspellings. As he explained, "I have pretty good things to say, it's just making sure they're said right" (Interview, 10/9/08). Through his out-of-school literacy practices, in which he focused more on what he wanted to say, and less on "saying them right," Cleveland's writerly identity flourished.

Among the participants, Brittany was unique in the way that she talked about her literacy practices in preparation for school-based success. Even though participants shared much about their memories of school and their current school literacy experiences, when talking about *why* they write or read, participants rarely made connections between their personal literacy lives and the demands of school based literacy. Talia talked about reading to improve her writing skills, but she did so in terms of her poetry and song writing. For Brittany, however, school achievement was intimately connected to her out-of-school literacy practices. For example, in response to a prompt about if and how writing has been important in life, Brittany stated: "I did advanced English classes [in high school] so writing was important then. Um, just for tests writing has been important. You know, especially with essay questions and critical thinking questions and everything" (Interview, 10/15/08). Similarly, in reflecting on her early memories of reading, Brittany talked about reading at home to improve her success in school:

> I was just very open-minded from a young age about reading. And I've just had cultivated in me like a strong work ethic from a young age, so just like knowing that I would be required to read in school and everything like that. Like I know it would be a heads up for me if I just pursued reading different materials. (Interview, 10/15/08)

Here Brittany demonstrates how the boundaries between in-school and out-of-school literacies are, in Grote's (2006) words, "subject to transgression" (p. 478). Her out-of-school reading and writing life was connected intimately to her desire to achieve in school.

It is worth noting that Brittany was also unique in that she attended a highly selective high school and earned very high grades there until her hospitalization. Although I hesitate to make generalizations based on her experience, the contrast between Brittany's out-of-school literacy life and that of her peers raises several questions about the role of schools in shaping the literacy lives of participants. Brittany's high school had high standards and expectations for its students and she experienced relatively "smooth transitions" (Phelan et al., 1996) between her home and school life. Perhaps relatedly, Brittany's home literacy practices mirrored the expectations for school. Brittany identified as a writer, but unlike some of her peers, she did not write short stories or poetry. With the exception of her short stint in journal writing, Brittany wrote for school.

Conversely, Talia, Lady, Cleveland, and Mercedes identified as writers, but with completely different relationships to school. Each had negative experiences in high school (most commonly characterized by low expectations for student achievement and unsafe environments) and their out-of-school writing looked quite different from the writing that was assigned in school. Unlike Brittany, they identified a range of purposes for out-of-school writing unrelated to academic success. It appears that their writerly identities developed apart from their experiences with literacy in school. Dana's negative schooled literacy experiences were related to her identity as a non-writer, but interestingly her self-identification as a "bookworm" seems to have been developed *in spite of* her negative experiences with reading in school.

Worthman (2009) writes that schooled literacy (what he calls "essayist literacy") is "unique to school and often only encountered by youth after they enroll in school." Out-of-school literacy, he argues, "is typically part of larger social practices… where students not only

feel they have a need but also a right to speak" (p. 3). In students' talk about the deep meaning associated with their out-of-school literacy practices in comparison to their experiences in high school, this distinction and its implications are evident. That some Pathways students were able to develop identities as writers and readers despite negative school experiences and despite societal associations with "dropout" indicates the importance of the literacy mentors in their lives and their participation in various literacy discourse communities – imagined, online, and in-person.

Literacy for College

As evidenced by the previous sections in this chapter, participants reenrolled in school with a variety of literacy histories and practices that were shaped by a range of out-of-school experiences and that served a number of social and introspective purposes. The data presented thus far affirm several decades of research which has shown the richness of adolescents' out-of-school literacy practices and the ways in which those practices are often disconnected from or incongruent with schooled literacy (e.g., Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Worthman, 2009). Although the field of youth literacies has demonstrated much about the authentic purposes and social nature of adolescents' out-of-school literacy practices, the role of those practices in the enactment of identity, and the failure of many schools and teachers to capitalize on students' existing linguistic and literacy resources, less is known about the literacy experiences of out-of-school youth returning to school contexts. There is less evidence in the literature about how alternative schools for returning students foster or constrain students' readerly and writerly identities and the extent to which they invite, not only students' current out-of-school literacy practices, but the fullness of their literacy identities as shaped by their experiences in and out of high school. Likewise, little is known about the ways in which students' literacy identities are affected by their transition back to school.

The data in this section offer new perspectives on these questions. I spent time in two English classrooms at Pathways. In these classroom contexts I was able to see how students took up, responded to, and resisted the types of literacy practices valued and expected by their professors. Just as Chapters Three and Four explored students' changing and complex enactment of identities as "dropout" and "student," this section similarly explores their evolving relationship with the identities of "reader" and "writer" over the course of their time in this program. Attention to students' responses to the demands of schooled literacy in their English courses reveals the ways in which they adopted and resisted the particular definitions of reading and writing valued by their professors. Observational and interview data indicate that the return to school resulted in a destabilizing of the literacy identities of many participants.

The literacy demands at Pathways were rigorous, particularly in comparison to what had been expected at most participants' high schools. As a result many participants reported reading and writing at Pathways more than they ever had before. During the foundation term, students took Ms. Wilson's developmental reading and writing course, English 90. This class met twice each week for three hours and I attended almost every meeting. This course was required of all students entering Pathways and was worth one high school credit. Ms. Wilson's course served as a prerequisite to English 100, which was a writing course taught by Professor Franklin during the students' second semester. English 100 counted for both high school and college credit and Mr. Franklin's class was composed of students from a variety of Pathways cohorts, as well as a few non-Pathways students. It met twice a week for ninety minutes and I attended at least once each week. Four participants – Mercedes, Trinidad, Lady and Brittany - successfully passed Ms. Wilson's class and moved on to Professor Franklin's. Bart, Talia, Cleveland, and Dana earned a "Making Progress" during the foundation term and were reenrolled in English 90 with different instructors. Chanel was put on probation during her second semester and retook and passed English 90 during her third semester.

As was discussed in Chapter Five, Ms. Wilson and Mr. Franklin had very different personalities and pedagogical styles, but there were some commonalities between their courses. Both emphasized the importance of ongoing revision and drafting in writing and both required students to peer conference every paper they wrote. The students worked in small groups for assignments almost daily in each class. In Ms. Wilson's class their groups were permanent and assigned heterogeneously based on her assessment of their writing ability. In Mr. Franklin's course, students were allowed to pick their groups each class, and invariably Mercedes, Brittany and Lady opted to work together. On the few occasions Mr. Franklin tried to split them up they whined good-naturedly about "separation anxiety." Trinidad sometimes opted to work with them, but often worked with students from other cohorts.

Grading in both classes was based on performance on five take-home essays, a smaller number of in-class essays, homework and quizzes, attendance, and a self-reflective portfolio. Ms. Wilson also gave tests on the assigned readings and assigned a group project that culminated in a skit. Both professors asked students to hand in their notebooks twice each semester. Essays in Ms. Wilson's class were graded using a rubric with four dimensions: organization, focus, style, and conventions. Students were responsible for self-evaluation and peer evaluation using the rubric's scale before handing in a final copy. Mr. Franklin handed out an individualized rubric for each assigned essay. Assigned essays in English 90 included a process essay, a compare and contrast essay, and an argument essay. Mr. Franklin's assignments were more varied in structure and included a letter to the editor and a letter of complaint as well as several expository essays.

The conventions of standard English were part of the curricula of both courses. A significant portion of Ms. Wilson's class was spent on learning and applying grammatical rules. In Professor Franklin's class, grammar was less central, but still a significant component of the curriculum. Both courses had a writing textbook that covered a number of mechanical issues in writing, including grammar. During the first half of Professor Wilson's course, students spent

time in class and at home taking notes on each textbook chapter and working on the practice exercises in groups. For a few class sessions in Professor Franklin's class, students worked independently and in groups on the "twenty most common errors." This section of his course concluded with a quiz.

Students had a fierce loyalty to and love for Ms. Wilson, although many reported being afraid of her at the beginning of the first semester. Lady and others said that at times they found taking notes on the grammatical rules to be boring, but that they understood her motivation. They also appreciated her extensive feedback on their writing; something Bart, Talia, Dana, and Cleveland said was lacking their second time in English 90. Aside from Mercedes, students enjoyed Mr. Franklin's class too. Lady, in particular, reported to me that she appreciated his intellectual style and his ability to "burn you without you even knowing you got burned" (Fieldnotes, 10/21/08).

Collegiate reading and writing courses, particularly at the introductory, developmental, or remedial level, have long been criticized for their tendency towards a narrow focus on decontextualized skills and a deficit orientation toward students (e.g., Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2002; Bartholomae, 1993; Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005; Weiner, 2002). Lea and Street (2002) suggest that introductory collegiate courses have traditionally endeavored to provide a set of reading, writing, and study skills and to socialize students into the academic discourse community. They and others (Rose, 2006; Rose & McClafferty, 2001) propose a broader conception of the literacies necessary for college success that accounts for issues of academic and scholarly identity, epistemological differences between and among disciplines (Chiseri-Strater, 1991), and the power structures inherent in academic contexts. Thus, reading and writing are not merely understood as consuming and presenting knowledge, but as "essential to the very existence of certain kinds of knowledge" (Rose, 2006, p. 190).

Unfortunately, under a study-skills or academic socialization model, students' life experiences outside the academy and their out-of-school literacy practices are rarely seen as resources for learning in college. For example, Adler-Kassner and Harringon (2002) found that students' sophisticated understandings of what it meant to be a writer were devalued in basic writing courses. Leung and Safford's (2005) data indicate that non-traditional college students come to school with a wealth of previous experiences assimilating to new contexts and engaging with academic discourses, but these are frequently overlooked in developmental English classes. As will be explored in this section, the courses offered at Pathways shared many characteristics with developmental English classes documented in the literature. The following analysis of the literacy practices in Ms. Wilson and Mr. Franklin's class is not intended as a critique of either professor, as both are working within a larger institutional context that includes expectations for what and how instructors should teach and for the outcomes equated with successful course completion. Far more important than evaluating individual instructors or institutions, is the investigation of how students respond, cope, and adapt to the endorsed literacy practices.

College Is About Learning Something New

In their talk about "good" reading and writing, Professors Franklin and Wilson emphasized practices and standards that would garner success in college courses. Interestingly, they frequently talked about college in the future tense (e.g., what professors *will* expect from them). These practices – what I term "literacy for college success" – include writing expository essays, notetaking, researching, and reading critically. In their talk about the literacies necessary for college, the professors contributed to the construction of a particular type of college experience. Students could expect not only to work hard in college, but also to abandon old ways of thinking, develop entirely new literacy practices, and experience and encounter new ideas. As a result of this way of talking about college expectations, other purposes for literacy, like reading for pleasure or writing for creative expression, were usually ignored and often devalued.

In her role as the cohort's foundation term professor, Ms. Wilson talked quite extensively about what types of reading and writing are required in college. At the beginning of the semester, she spent significant time focusing explicitly on expectations for college writing which ranged from the mechanics of essay formatting (e.g., typed, double-spaced, and indented paragraphs) to stylistic elements of writing (e.g., no contractions and third-person constructions only). This was also true of the way that reading was discussed. For example, after issuing a pop-quiz on an assigned reading, she explained "This is what will happen in all of your college classes. Professors will expect you to be able to read and internalize the information and then be able to bring something to the table" (Fieldnotes, 6/2/08). In Ms. Wilson's class, a sharp dichotomy was created between college writing and non-college writing. For example, on the first day of class Professor Wilson stated that many of her students have a number of creative ideas in their writing. However, she said that often times those good ideas are not communicated appropriately: "It's my job to help you write in standard English" (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08). Creative writing was invoked other times during the semester as well as a way of contrasting it to college-writing. During a lesson on embedded questions, Ms. Wilson stated, "A lot of students, especially creative writing students, ask a lot of questions, but do not know how to punctuate them correctly." Other authentic literacy practices, like text messaging, writing informal emails to friends, and poetry, were discussed by both professors to emphasize the contrast between college and non-college literacies.

This discourse of college preparation was also evident both in Professor Franklin's course. For example, one of the ways Professor Franklin talked about the literacies necessary to succeed in college was in his discussion with the class about annotating in the margins of their books. After an open-book pop-quiz on an assigned article, Franklin explained, "That's why you should be taking notes in the margins – so you can go back and easily find it" (Fieldnotes, 9/23/08). As was discussed in Chapter Four, the fact that students were not allowed to write in

their books came as a major surprise to Mr. Franklin who saw this as inherently contrary to the type of literacy work students should be doing in college: "I've never heard of a college class where the students couldn't write in the books" (Fieldnotes, 9/23/08). He also shared with students a strategy for reading selectively, a technique he called "previewing" which involved reading the first paragraph of the article, the last paragraph and the first sentence of every paragraph in between. He explained that he used this technique in graduate school: "It's is more efficient, especially when you have a huge stack of reading" (Fieldnotes, 9/11/08).

Both professors talked about literacy for college success in their response to students' requests to select their own writing topics. An ongoing theme in students' talk in and about their English classes was about the extent to which essay topics and assigned readings were "relatable." In our interviews, Talia and Mercedes both shared examples of essays they felt were not as good because they could not relate to the topic. Students frequently asked permission to select their topics, but this was rarely allowed. Their professors responded to students' frequent complaints and critiques by explaining that literacy for college success required writing about topics selected by the professor. Professor Wilson affirmed that this was an important skill: "Don't expect to write about things you choose. You have to get over that real quick. In college you mostly will not be choosing your own topic" (Fieldnotes, 8/11/08). The same issue arose in Professor Franklin's class when a student asked if they would ever get to pick their own topic for an essay. After saying no, Mr. Franklin invoked the expectations for college writing: "Why would you come to college to learn about things you already know about? College is about learning something new" (Fieldnotes, 10/28/08).

Talk about literacy for college success set up a sharp binary between schooled literacy and other literacy practices. Students echoed the professors' distinctions between writing for college and personal writing, and there was little evidence that they saw overlap between the in-school and out-of-school spheres. Participants made distinctions between their out of class

writing – which was intended to "get the emotion out" and was likely to be "more radical" – and their in-class writing which was "in the lines" and "more grammatical." When I asked Talia if she was using any of the rules or techniques they learned in class in her out-of-school writing, she said no: "Even though I should actually, it would give me more practice so when I do have to write serious papers, you know, I would know what to do and be more effective" (Interview, 9/30/08). Interestingly, she frames this response in relationship to improving her performance in school rather than indicating that what she learns in school might be relevant to her out-of-school writing life.

How Can I Write an Essay That's Not My Opinion?

According to Professors Franklin and Wilson, there were several characteristics of the type of writing necessary for college success. These included writing in standard English, writing multiple drafts, employing powerful vocabulary, and organizing essays effectively. One of the most contentious aspects of collegiate writing, as evidenced by students' ongoing questions and complaints, was the prohibition of personal experience, opinion, and first person forms. This idea was first introduced by Professor Wilson during the second week of the foundation term:

> After a student finishes reading aloud from the textbook, Professor Wilson says, "I want to point out to you that it says not to use phrases like 'in my opinion.'" She goes on to say that students should not use "I" at all in their writing. She explains "the topic is generally not about you in academic writing." Lady raises her hand and asks, "What if we are writing about ourselves?" Wilson responds, "You won't be in this class." Another student calls out, "So you can't state your opinion?" Ms. Wilson says, "No, you state your opinion, but you don't say, 'in my opinion.'" Mumbling and sidebar conversations erupt and Wilson calls out, "Do you want an example?" Several voices say, "yes!" Professor Wilson smiles and says, "Let me think, what are some of my opinions?" After a long moment and another smile that I interpret to be mischievous, she says "New York is a dirty, over-priced, over-rated city." In response, students laugh and call out shouts of agreement and disagreement. (Fieldnotes, 5/19/08)

The questions raised here were the first of many in an ongoing semester-long conversation about when and why first and second person forms were not appropriate in collegiate writing. While other college expectations for writing appeared to be accepted and adapted more seamlessly,

questions and protestations about using "I," "you," and personal opinions persisted well into the participants' second semester.

One of the reasons that students continually asked about using "I" was because there were examples of first person writing in their textbook. A student noted that discrepancy while looking in the book at examples of persuasive language. He asked, "Is this supposed to be throwing us off, because [the author] uses 'I'?" Ms. Wilson responded, "Well, he is writing about his personal experience, which we will never do" (Fieldnotes, 5/19/08).

When Ms. Wilson handed back graded essays, errors in style and conventions were circled and labeled with things like "subject-verb agreement," "wordiness," or "tense shift." Students were responsible for tracking these errors on a "running record" form, which asked how many times each error appeared in the paper, what an example of the error looked like, and how they would fix it. First and second person constructions were marked with the error "voice." Students often complained about voice errors and Ms. Wilson lamented them. After writing the first draft for their second assignment, a "process" essay in which they were to describe sequential steps in a process, a student asked "Can we use 'I'?" When Ms. Wilson said no, there was much grumbling. A student called out, "I just followed the example in the book." Chanel asked, "We can use 'we,' right?" Professor Wilson quieted the class and said: "I tell you the rules, but they just go right over your head." Firmly, she continued, "You cannot use first or second person" (Fieldnotes, 6/2/08). About halfway through the semester, Professor Wilson told the class that she would "run [them] over with the bus" for the voice errors (Fieldnotes, 7/7/08).

In our interviews, students talked about the challenges they faced in remembering to avoid first person. For most students, this was a new way of writing and one they associated with college. Dana's description of her previous writing experiences was similar to many students': "I was used to writing 'I' and that. I just write what I thought, basically" (Interview, 9/30/08). Talia's explanation of her struggles with remembering to avoid first person were associated with

her identity as a writer: "That's how I write, as if I'm telling the story from my perspective" (Interview, 9/30/08). Here the students demonstrate the wealth of literacy experiences they brought to Pathways. Their ongoing resistance to Ms. Wilson's rules about first person suggests their unwillingness to abandon their own conceptions of literacy which were shaped in part by the writing they were engaged in outside of school.

Despite the opposition during the foundation term, by the time they reached their second semester, students showed signs that they had fully internalized the idea that first person was inappropriate in college writing. Professor Franklin had a slightly more lenient policy than Professor Wilson, but still discouraged the use of "I." In particular he encouraged and often required students to write about topics without drawing on their personal experience. Forms of evidence were prioritized in Professor Franklin's writing rubrics and he made clear that he expected more evidence than what students think or feel: "An opinion without evidence is nothing" (Fieldnotes, 9/16/08).

Just as the prohibition on "I" was a point of resistance in the foundation term, students struggled with the distinction Professor Franklin made between personal experience and forms of evidence. For example, when he explained that he did not want any personal opinions or experience in an assigned essay, a student complained that there was no way to write the essay without stating an opinion (Fieldnotes, 11/20/08). Schroeder's (2001) analysis of composition textbooks indicates their tendency to make similar distinctions between "facts" and "statements of personal belief" which he notes is a distinction that "is to a large degree, contextual and rhetorical" (p. 53). Students' constant questioning demonstrated their, perhaps implicit, understanding that the boundaries between "facts" and "opinions" were not as clear as often implied.

Repeatedly throughout the semester, Professor Franklin tried to explain the difference between opinions substantiated with facts and personal opinions. Twice in response to students' questions, he used this example:

> As the class works independently and Professor Franklin circulates, a student asks if the paper is supposed to be an opinion. Professor Franklin says it's not just an opinion, but in informed opinion. He says, "Let's say you have a pain in your chest. You come to me and I say, 'In my opinion it's heartburn.' Then you go to a cardiovascular surgeon and he says, 'In my opinion, you are having a heart attack.'" Professor Franklin asks the student, "Who are you going to believe." After the student says that she would believe the heart doctor, Professor Franklin cries out, "But I have a right to my opinion!" Franklin goes on to say to the whole class, "In this paper you can't just have an opinion, it must be supported with facts." (Fieldnotes, 11/20/08)

In both courses, the professors communicated in various ways that personal experience's role in college writing was tenuous at best. This was not exclusively true, for Ms. Wilson allowed first person and invited students to write about their lives in brief in-class assignments called "fast writes" in which she would give them prompts like "What do you do to relieve stress?" or "Taking summer classes makes me..." One of the writing assignments for Professor Franklin's class was a letter of complaint in which students were instructed to draw on a real experience of poor customer service. Yet, overall both courses' formal writing assignments and the ways in which they were graded indicated that writing for college was different than personal writing and that college writing required particular stylistic elements and particular forms of evidence.

In his commentary on the ideological nature of academic discourse, Schroeder (2001) writes, "The versions of who is to be inscribed within the academic discourse(s) are not only defined internally, but also in relation to opposing discourse, such as the discourses of pop culture" (p. 67). At Pathways academic literacies were largely defined both in terms of internal standards and in opposition to "cultural ways of utilizing language" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7) that were familiar to students (e.g., writing about personal experience, texting, journaling and poetry). Similarly, like many developmental writing courses, these classes rarely, if ever, made

reference to the wide range of "ways of knowing" within the academy. Instead, literacy for college success was defined singularly, and represented as "measurable in neutral and objective ways" (Burke & Hermerschmidt, 2005, p. 348).

I Wrote My First Essay Here and I Saw All The Red Everywhere

As the participants made the transition back into school, many talked extensively, in classes and in sessions with me, about how their writerly identities were called into question. In some cases, students were shocked by the poor grades they received on their papers. In other cases, students reported experiencing a loss of creativity due to new demands on their time or new expectations for what counts as "good writing." Schroeder (2001) writes that while resistance to academic literacies in school contexts is costly, assimilation is as well. Research has shown that students are capable of adapting quickly to narrowed literacy demands in school, even when their previous literacy practices were more expansive (Wells, 1995). The societal value of schooled literacy exerts a powerful influence over students' ideas about what counts as "good writing" (Worthman, 2009). It appears that participants did eventually adjust to the new expectations for literacy for college success, but in some cases this may have been associated with a disruption to their literate identities.

Students like Lady who had strong identities as writers outside of school reported that they experienced a loss of creativity as a result of Pathways' expectations:

> When I came here it was a really really really really hard struggle for me to get back on my feet. I would write a paper and get this horrible grade… and be like, 'What is that?' And it's so funny because when I started here I used to be like I'm a writer, I'm a writer, I'm so great, I'm a writer. And then I get these papers back like, 'No you're not. If you were a writer you wouldn't have gotten this grade.' So, it changed a lot, basically it's more technical now. (Interview, 10/7/08)

Many participants who had strong identities as exceptional students in their high schools, found their academic abilities called into question at Pathways. Dana, Talia, Lady, and Mercedes all reported that they had received As on their papers in high school. With the exception of Brittany,

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no student consistently earned As in Ms. Wilson's class. Students reported that after seeing the technical errors in their writing they started to wonder if their high school teachers even read their essays. Lady reported: "It has really opened my eyes to what it should be and what I missed. I missed a lot of this in high school" (Interview, 10/7/08).

Beyond the effect that her mediocre grades had on her identity as a writer, Lady also experienced a decline in her desire to produce creative pieces. Unlike Talia, who stated in an excerpt above that she made few changes to her out-of-school writing based on what she learned in class, Lady found that learning a new "technical" style of writing stifled her creativity. Students' evolving understanding of writing for college appears to mirror Worthman's (2009) findings that students see schooled literacy as "mechanical, grammatical and orthographic (rather than communicative)" (p. 1). For some students, this focus on the technical narrowed their writing repertoire.

In addition to citing her newfound technical style as a factor in the decline of her creative writing, Lady talked about the limitations of time:

> I wrote about three songs since I started here, but it's never, it's not as strong as it used to be and I'm kind of sorry about that. I don't really know what it was. I think it's that my creative mind has not had the opportunity to be creative. I don't have time to be creative right now… I don't really have that time that I had as a young girl to just sit in my room and think about things. (10/7/08)

Chanel also cited her busy schedule in the decline in her out-of-school reading habits: "I find it really hard to read for school and then read for myself, so I sort of fell behind in my personal reading" (Interview, 4/30/09). Although she did not strongly identify as a writer, Chanel stated that she used to do more artwork and poetry during elementary and middle school: "I don't know, it seems like the older I get the less creative I get" (Interview, 4/30/09).

This issue of free time raises the question about whether being out-of-school, and the associated leisure time, actually cultivated the literacy lives of the participants in this study. Mercedes, Talia, Lady, and Brittany all reported that they spent significant time writing and

reading while out of school. Without the influence of narrowly defined schooled-literacy and the time demands of attending school, it appears that for some participants time out of school was essential to the development of their literacy identities. Even Talia, who was considering majoring in music and becoming a song writer, wrote less once she enrolled in Pathways. She reported: "I don't know, right now I'm in a slump. I don't really have no inspiration right now" (Interview, 9/30/08). In response to these conversations, I developed the Arts Magazine to offer an opportunity for students to publish their work, yet I noticed a trend of students submitting old work for the magazine – pieces from their journals sometimes written two or three years before. This was true for Talia and many others. I encouraged students to create and submit new work and held workshops for students to share and develop their ideas, but many students reported that given the demands of their coursework and out-of-school responsibilities, they were not able to find the time.

In sharp contrast to the decline in out-of-school writing experienced by some students, Cleveland's poetry and short story writing thrived at Pathways. His friendship with Mercedes, which developed early in the foundation term and that lasted well beyond when she left the program, served as a major inspiration for his poetry and short story writing. While he had been drawing and developing characters for video games while he was out of school, Mercedes inspired him to expand his literacy life:

> I read her stories and it really made me feel something because she expressed
> herself so well. And I read some of her poetry and one night I just sat down and I
> felt some type of way and I just wrote the poetry and I was amazed at what it
> was. (Interview, 10/1/08)

However, even Cleveland reported a slump in his out-of-school writing during his time in the program. Cleveland and Dana were the two participants who earned "Making Progress" in English 90 twice, and thus retook the course for a third time (and passed) in their third semester. Cleveland found that his struggle with his English coursework had an impact on his work on his primary project – a short story about an angel:

> It was very slow because I didn't believe that I could do it because I just failed English 90 and that wasn't going too well and just the overall mechanics of putting the story together. It can be really hard if you don't go into detail enough. (Interview, 10/1/08)

Here Cleveland, like Lady, makes connections between his schooled literacy life and his out-of-school writing. While he worked to apply what he learned in class, "including details," into his fiction writing, he was also discouraged that he "failed" (technically a "making progress" does not count as a failure on the student's transcript) English 90. Cleveland's experience taking and retaking this developmental English class seriously called into question his emerging identity as a writer.

However, as indicated in the previous sections, many Pathways students found friends to collaborate or share with at Pathways. The required peer conferences in Ms. Wilson and Mr. Franklin's courses fostered these reciprocal relationships. Brittany did not have an active out-of-school writing life, but she reported that her relationship with a classmate was among her most significant at Pathways: "We consult with one another, read each other's essays or papers and evaluate them… That's been really helpful for me" (Interview, 10/15/08).

Bart's literacy life grew at Pathways as well. On the last day of Ms. Wilson's class, Bart was recognized as the student who had grown the most during the semester. Bart reported that he had never wrote in a journal outside of class before coming to Pathways:

> Recently [Ms. Wilson] she really helped me improve my writing and now I feel good about writing to express myself. Before I never wrote to express myself because I wasn't a good writer, but after taking her class I write a lot more than I ever did. (Interview, 10/14/08)

Interestingly, while some students found that literacy for college success constrained their ability to write expressively, Bart discovered the possibilities for writing in Ms. Wilson's class. In the above quote, he states that the success he found in Ms. Wilson's class allowed him to see himself as a "good" writer, an identity that was precluded by previous school experiences. Here Bart's

story appears to differ from Cleveland, Dana, and others' who adopted literate identities outside of school in spite of negative high school experiences.

Nonetheless, most participants, particularly those with active out-of-school literacy lives and strong identities as readers and writers, found their literacy identities destabilized by their experiences in English 90 and 100. Not only did the developmental English program position them as remedial students, but when they earned poor or mediocre grades their past identities as exceptional students were called into question. Despite their resistance to some classroom demands, ultimately it appeared that the narrow definitions of literacy promoted in class undermined many students' sense of themselves as readers and writers.

They Want Your Interpretation of Things, But There's Sort of a Right Answer

Just as students experienced tensions when they encountered the expectations for writing in their courses, the expectations related to textual interpretation, critical thinking, and the purposes for reading often served a point of contention as well. English 90 is course that focuses on both reading and writing. Students were required to read two books (one fiction, one non-fiction) during the semester as well as a number of short stories and articles. In addition to assigning essays in response to the readings, Ms. Wilson also gave a number of quizzes and tests. English 100 is designed as a writing course, but students did read one text, a collection of *New York Times* essays on social class. Ms. Wilson assigned and collected journal entries for each reading assignment. Mr. Franklin frequently gave pop-quizzes on the assigned reading. A significant portion of both classes consisted of lively and sometimes heated discussions on the readings.

Most students reported enjoying in class conversations about the readings; however for some students the connection to English class was unclear. Mercedes complained of Mr. Franklin: "He's talking about the economy, and class, and Obama, and I'm like, this is English class this isn't economics class" (CG, 11/19/08). Bart, Talia, and Dana also similarly lamented

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the lengthy and sometimes boring conversations they had in their second semester English classes. Bart described his second term English teacher: "I guess she thought she was a history teacher, because she always talk about foreign countries, and like their pasts. Her favorite country to talk about is China" (CG, 11/19/08). In these complaints students revealed their expectations that English class should be focused on the technical aspects of writing and reading comprehension – i.e., "what I did wrong on my paper" (CG, 11/19/08).

In some cases, their negative reactions to more free-flowing classroom conversations appeared to be related to participants' expectations for what counts as schooled literacy. Previous research has demonstrated the value associated with particular schooled literacy practices (i.e., decontextualized skill-based instruction) among adolescent and adult learners in U.S. and international contexts (Belzer, 1993; Power, 1990; Rogers & Uddin, 2005). This value is seen in students' commentaries on what English class "should" be like. By contrast, Ms. Wilson and Mr. Franklin were very reluctant to feed students "the right answer" in response to the readings. In classroom activities and conversations, Professor Wilson often purposefully took on the role of a facilitator rather than a lecturer or teacher. Even when students reviewed grammatical exercises, Ms. Wilson allowed for discussion and debate. During an activity on the second day of class, a number of students and groups repeatedly asked her to check their work or assist them, but she declined telling them to work together to figure it out. As they worked, she told me "I love the tension. They're so used to 'give me the answer, give me the answer'" (Fieldnotes, 5/14/08).

Reading and thinking critically were major organizing principles of Professor Wilson's class and this was evident in the ways in which she talked about literacy for success in college. At the opening of the semester she explained to them:

> You won't have a single multiple choice test in this class. I want you to be thinkers, not just absorb information but think critically about it. Don't just accept everything I say because I am a professor. Don't do that to yourself; you're smarter than that. (Fieldnotes, 5/12/08)

In sharp contrast to the ways in which students were expected to rigorously avoid bringing their personal experiences into their essay writing, Ms. Wilson expected students to read critically through the lens of their own life histories. Their reading journal assignments included prompts about how the reading related to their lives. Professor Wilson explained her philosophy, "I don't want you to have just my thoughts about the reading. You cannot discount your own experiences that you bring to the reading" (Fieldnotes, 8/11/08).

Students' out-of-school reading practices informed their response to the reading expectations at Pathways. Although some students, like Trinidad, did not identify many out-of-school reading practices, many students did report reading outside of school for a variety of purposes. For example, some students read in pursuit of knowledge and information. Bart reported being interested in books when they provided information on a new topic. One of his significant literacy memories was of a high school teacher who recommended texts on famous African Americans who he had never heard of before (Fieldnotes, 10/14/08). Likewise, Brittany talked about the importance of reading to "learn about new things" and to learn new words: "Reading I come across words that I'm unfamiliar with so I get to enhance my vocabulary a little bit" (Interview, 10/15/08). Talia's recent reading experiences had been related to her professional interest in music and songwriting:

> It's some book that I got at the library and it was just basically because I had writer's block at the time and I was just looking for books about that… It was just giving me little ideas on how I could come up with things and how to be a better writer basically, how to be a better song writer. (Interview, 9/30/08)

While Lady had fewer specific interests in personal or professional learning, she also valued reading in pursuit of knowledge. In discussing the books she enjoyed, Lady contrasted her reading practices with her peers:

> I'm not interested in quote-unquote street novels. As a young young girl, teenager, adolescent what have you, I read them because that's what I thought was cool to read. Then I came to the realization that they were all fairy tales and they were interfering with my growth. (Interview, 10/7/08)

In Lady's analysis, "street novels," which she identified as books by Zane, Terry Woods, or other "African American writers [who] write about crazy stuff because they know what's gonna sell, basically," did not give her the opportunity to develop as a reader or as an adult. Instead she described a book she read recently about the yellow fever epidemic which she valued because it gave her "new information."

While students probably found that the readings assigned in class did expose them to new things and ideas, their task in reading them was rarely to "gather information." Instead they were instructed to critically analyze and interpret what they read, a process that was new to many students. Some students, including Cleveland, experienced tension related to this idea of critical interpretation:

> They want your understanding of things, but yet there's sort of a right and wrong answer. So it was kind of hard for me to interpret my own interpretation but then there still be guidelines. So I found that kind of hard and I think that's what it was with those books. Because I failed the tests, most of them, on those because of the interpretation parts of it. (Interview, 10/9/08)

Here, Cleveland reveals his own understandings of textual interpretation – something that cannot be evaluated as right or wrong.

In talking about their out-of-school reading habits, many participants highlighted the importance of texts being "relatable." The emic term "relatable" came up frequently across contexts at Pathways, primarily in conversations about assignments, books and teachers. Relatable books and people connected to participants' lives, circumstances and experiences. For example, *There Are No Children Here,* a book assigned in Professor Wilson's class, was almost universally deemed relatable by students because it dealt with poverty, crime and violence in an urban context. Conversely, the series of short stories they read by Kate Chopin about relationships in the late nineteenth century were less likely to be endorsed as relatable.

When students talked about wanting to read relatable books, they talked about reading as a task that had the potential to be either enjoyable or difficult. As Trinidad explained: "I hate to

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read, so when a book doesn't relate to a subject, or something in my life, it's very difficult" (CG, 4/29/09). Mercedes had a similar perspective:

> I don't think I realized it was meaningful being in school because they always giving you what they want you to read and a lot of times I can't really relate to it, so I already walk into trying to read something I don't like. And I know I can't relate to it so I don't want to put any effort into it. (Interview, 10/1/08)

While at first I understood the term relatable to mean that the book reflected the student's life experiences, I found that I was oversimplifying the concept. Talia explained that she could read a book with new information in it and it would still be relatable. In talking about her song writing books, she explained that relatable books are about a "topic I'm interested in; something I care about" (Interview, 9/30/08). Relatable books could still offer new information, but only if the new information seemed purposeful or connected to the participants' goals and experiences. Thus, relatable books served not just as a "mirror" into students' own experiences, but also as a "window" onto the lives of others (Galda, 1996).

Interestingly, however, many of the class readings for both courses were not deemed relatable by students, even by those students who reported that they read to learn new things and gather new information outside of school. Likewise, not all students reported liking the assigned books that were clearly endorsed as relatable. For example, Cleveland, who mostly read fantasy and Japanese Manga outside of school, preferred books that could serve as a means of escape:

> I read a book that was relatable and it took me back to places I didn't want to be at. So then again I don't want books that are related to me because you putting me back in a bad situation. (CG, 4/29/09)

This was an issue that came up for some students while reading *There Are No Children Here.* Lady, Trinidad and others reported that although they liked the book, they found it difficult and distressing. Lady reported that the book was bringing up "bad memories" from her childhood (Fieldnotes, 7/23/08) and Trinidad said that he got depressed while reading it. At the end of my time at Pathways in a tutoring session with Dana she complained emphatically she was tired of reading about poverty (Fieldnotes, 6/3/09).

These data about participants' reactions to the reading and writing demands in Pathways raise a number of questions about how students, particularly returning students, can best be served in college preparatory English classes. For example, the data on relatable readings raises questions about how texts are selected and presented in classrooms. Just as previous research suggests a need for further transparency about the range of academic discourses found in collegiate contexts (Lea & Street, 2002), participants' classroom experiences suggest that the range of purposes for reading are not always apparent to students. Students enter the classroom with a variety of literacy beliefs and practices, in this case developed both while enrolled in school and while out of school. The question of how teachers can invite those experiences into the classroom and capitalize on them will be explored in Chapter Seven.

Summary

It is worth noting again that the participants in this study would generally be classified as high school dropouts and many would have been deemed "failures" in their high school English classes. Yet even in the face of dominant ideologies about dropouts and youth of color (Haddix, 2009), many Pathways students adopted identities as readers and writers as they engaged in expansive out-of-school literacy practices which connected them with local and global communities and offered opportunities for identity exploration. As this chapter demonstrates, close examination of those practices offers new perspectives on students' experiences leaving and returning to school. The complexity of their literacy practices and the value they assigned to their out-of-school literacy lives are significant. Worthman's (2009) research with high school returners found that students often could not identify their out-of-school writing practices, and when they could they frequently devalued them. Conversely, several participants in this study took immense pride in their writing outside of school and attempted to maintain those practices, even when faced with "technical" literacy for college.

In their ethnographic study of remedial writing courses at a community college, Callahan and Chumney (2009) analyze the ways in which students are positioned by programs and instructors as high school students in need of remediation. This chapter explores how students take up that positioning by variously adopting and internalizing the demands of the particular brand of schooled literacy endorsed in developmental English classes and/or resisting and questioning practices that conflict with the literacy beliefs they have developed out-of-school.

The data in this chapter demonstrate the ways in which students' identities as readers and writers were "socially situated" (Gee, 1999), with students adopting identities as writers, readers, nonwriters, and nonreaders depending on the context and the positions made available to them by those in power (Moje & Dillon, 2006). Even in spite of their robust literate identities, participants experienced tensions and conflicts during their year at Pathways. Almost universally they reported fewer opportunities to engage in the type of reading and writing they did while they were out of school. Perhaps more disturbing were the disruptions to students' literate identities that occurred when they performed poorly in class. Likewise, the "chasm" (Worthman, 2009) that was constructed between literacy for college success and other literacy practices resulted in students focusing on the mechanical and grammatical aspects of their writing rather than its communicative purposes.

On the other hand, it is clear from Cleveland, Bart, and Mercedes' stories that school settings have enormous potential to positively impact students' literate subjectivities. It was in Pathways that Cleveland was first introduced to a community of writers and his friendship with Mercedes was the impetus for his poetry and short-story writing. Likewise, at Pathways Mercedes found an audience for her work. Bart's success in Ms. Wilson's class inspired him to see himself as a writer for the first time. Chapter Seven will explore the implications of these data for teachers, high schools, alternative schools and researchers working with youth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions and Implications: Disrupting Assumptions About Youth Returning to School

In April 2006 *Time Magazine's* cover story entitled "Dropout Nation" (Thornburgh, 2006) profiled a small working class town in Indiana in which only two-thirds of students are graduating from high school on time. Despite its sensationalist title, the article paints a nuanced picture of the issue of dropout, and includes portraits of students who were counseled out of high school and who have found alternative options to earn a GED or diploma. Yet, despite its attention to several structural and often unexamined issues related to high school non-completion (e.g., rigid high school curricula and inflexible accountability measures), the article reveals the challenges of writing critically about high school dropout. For example, this small town is highlighted because it seems like an "unlikely battleground in the war on dropouts." Serious poverty and violent crime are rare in this town; the pictured students in the article are white. Unfortunately, the characterization of this town as an "unlikely" setting for dropouts, may inadvertently uphold normative images of dropouts as students of color from violent inner cities. The term "dropout" is unquestioned, even as the article profiles a student who left high school with the intention of enrolling in an online diploma program and a student who fought to reenroll in school after a stint in the juvenile justice system. And after demonstrating the wide range of circumstances in which students find themselves out-of-school, the article closes with the profile of an enrolled student whose circle of friends have largely left school. The author writes that this student "is serious about not becoming part of their dropout nation" – implying a dropout experience that is uniform and based on individual choice.

The discourse surrounding high school dropout is as complex as the problem itself, and throughout this dissertation I have struggled with language in my representation of both the dropout issue and the stories of the nine participants. In the framing of the problem in Chapter One, I drew on many of the statistics that fuel talk about the "dropout crisis" even as my

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dissertation is intended to trouble the ways in which dropout is pathologized. However, as I call attention to the ways in which students' school departure is rarely permanent and demonstrate the strengths and resiliency of students who have left school, I do not want to understate the challenges faced by students who do not complete high school via traditional pathways. Given the racial and economic disparities associated with dropout and the low rates of post-secondary schooling among GED holders, romanticizing dropouts is irresponsible too.

In the four preceding data chapters, I have tried to offer enough detail about the lives of the students' profiled in this study to avoid the large-scale rhetoric of either crisis or mythology. What I hope these chapters show are the complexities and nuances of the experiences of leaving and returning to school and the ways in which hardship and struggle co-exist with persistence and determination. In this final chapter, as I make the move toward generalized implications, conclusions, and recommendations, it becomes more difficult to avoid the pitfalls faced by the author of "Dropout Nation." Glesne (2006) reminds her readers that the writing of a research report is a political act. The politics of research implications seem particularly profound as we extrapolate from the lives of individuals onto the larger canvases of pedagogy and policy. Yet, there is much to be learned from the Pathways students and to imply that nothing in their stories is transferable (Toma, 2006) to other contexts violates their trust that I would share their stories for the benefit of others.

This chapter returns to the three main research questions I posed at the outset of the study to summarize and synthesize the findings presented in Chapters Three through Six. The second half of the chapter discusses implications for teachers and schools and possibilities for future research.

Summary of Findings

At the outset of this project I posed three research questions, along with a number of subquestions, which served as a guiding framework throughout my data collection and analysis.

As mentioned in Chapter One, these questions reflect my thinking before I began collecting data and thus reflect some assumptions that have since been challenged by the stories of Pathways students. However, revisiting them here provides a useful structure for summarizing the themes that emerged in this study. While many questions remain unanswered, the data collected in this study tell us much about the complexities of high school departure, the lives of students reenrolling in school, the ways in which the participants understand their pasts and imagine their futures, and how they navigated the transition to college within this program.

What expectations of learning and life do high school dropouts bring with them when they return to school?

Although it appears in this research question, from the outset of the study I interrogated the term "dropout" for its limitations in capturing the range of ways in which students come to leave high school. The title of the proposal for this study was "Challenging Dropout" and in it I wrote that terms like "pushout" might be more reflective of the experiences of students whose departures from high school are made seamless by systems that fail to provide adequate educational opportunities. When I presented this research to the Pathways students for the first time, I called attention to the term "dropout" and explained that I personally suspected that it failed to reflect accurately how and why many students come to be out of school. Yet, ultimately "dropout" remained in this first research question because I saw it as a convenient catch-all description of the condition of Pathways students.

Throughout my data collection, however, I found that participants did not identify as dropouts, and not necessarily for the reasons I assumed. While students may have agreed that they were pushed out of school, what they found most inappropriate about the term was that it implied a sense of finality. In order to be a dropout or a pushout a person must be *out* of school, something that certainly was not the case for the participants in this study. Their identities as students were far more salient than their identities as dropouts, pushouts, or even former

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dropouts/pushouts. This finding is significant not only in the ways that it challenges the assumptions underlying this question, but also in the insight it offers in helping to answer this question.

Participants' sense of themselves as students in an elite college-based program was related to their expectations of learning and life. The program's expectations for them were high, and thus students had high expectations for themselves. Beginning in recruitment sessions, before potential Pathways students even applied for the program, staff members made clear that this program was unlike other alternative options in the city. The application process itself heightened participants' expectations as they knew that only a fraction of applicants were admitted. Some participants, like Talia and Bart, had to apply more than once before they were admitted, and those who were admitted on their first try had heard stories of those who applied multiple times.

Thus, within this context, students returned to school with a great sense of hope, pride, and optimism for their futures. Echoing the language of program staff and faculty, students talked about feeling like they were starting a new chapter in their lives. This talk about optimism was closely related to talk about hard work. As discussed in Chapter Five, participants indicated that they could achieve their dreams if they displayed motivation, determination and effort. Less frequently students also referenced their fears for the future and their worries about finances and other challenges. Sometimes these worries were talked about in conjunction with talk about racism and the struggles and stresses of working class people. However, most students were quick to point out that given the opportunities available to them at Pathways, they were certain of their own ability to succeed.

Participants enrolled in this program with a range of experiences both in and out of school that shaped their expectations of learning at Pathways. Despite the fact that they did not complete traditional high school, many participants returned to school with an identity as a

successful student because they had performed well in middle school or had been identified by teachers or family members as smart. Other participants returned to school with a sense of uncertainty because they had been away from formal education for so long. All participants returned to school with a sense of themselves as learners related to their roles and relationships outside of school. They had identities as readers, as writers, as smart, and as successful that were fostered by friends, family members and a range of out-of-school experiences. In particular, participants brought their out-of-school literacy identities as readers, lyricists, poets, and bloggers with them when they enrolled in Pathways.

Because I began data collection after students were enrolled in this program, it is difficult to disentangle what participants brought with them to this program and what identities and qualities this program fostered in the way that it positioned students as elite and capable of success. Likewise, it is with caution that I extrapolate from the experiences of Pathways students to the larger population of young adults returning to school. Nonetheless, these data appear to indicate that the act of reenrolling in school is associated with optimism and high expectations for the future which are more powerful than past disappointments, struggles, or hardships.

Why do students leave school and why and how do they make the decision to return?

As I discovered during my year at Pathways, one of the limitations of this question is its implication that there is a discrete "decision" to leave or return to school. Instead, students' narratives indicated that in many cases the departure from high school was a long process that began in eighth grade or before. Likewise, the return to school was rarely based on a single decision or turning point moment. Instead students reported that they always intended to finish high school, but they struggled to find the right environment. They described themselves as "high school swingers" who moved from school to school or program to program, rarely out of school for more than a few months. In total, these nine individuals went to 20 schools or

programs before coming to Pathways. Thus, the salient decisions were not if they should return to school but where and how.

In Chapter Three I profiled participants' "high school pushout" stories which reveal the range of ways students came to be out of high school. These stories were highly individual and specific (e.g., Brittany's hospitalization, Dana's family upheaval) and yet at the same time thematically similar (e.g., narratives of alienation). In these stories students adopted subject positions as exceptional and as different from typical high school students who were content with low-expectations, substandard facilities, violence, and demeaning behaviors by school staff. Accordingly, participants' departures from school were framed as attempts to find an educational option more suitable – more caring, more rigorous, more tolerant, safer, or with peers who were more interested in learning.

In accordance with the literature on high school attrition, participants chronicled a host of high school characteristics which left them feeling disengaged at best and unsafe at worst. While most students could identify one or two teachers or adults who served as mentors or role models, these caring or "relatable" adults were the exception rather than the rule. Overall, they described their high schools as unwelcoming places. In addition to tolerating specific instances of racism and homophobia, they described a generalized feeling that adults in the school did not care if they attended, succeeded, or graduated. As stated earlier, these retrospective accounts do not offer insights into the particularities of interactions between school staff and students; however, they do reveal something important about how students perceived their high school experiences.

Students' talk about the city's system of special admissions high schools and its role in their high school departure was a more unexpected finding. Seven of the nine participants wished or hoped to attend a selective high school. For students like Lady, Cleveland, and Talia, who attended neighborhood schools, the awareness of the hierarchy of schools in the city was related to their disengagement. Knowing that "better" schools were available yet unattainable prompted

their disillusionment, a process that began in eighth grade. Mercedes and Chanel's departures from their selective schools marked the end of their careers in traditional high school since both were unwilling to attend their neighborhood schools. Thus, in addition to creating an inequitable landscape of school "choice" in which resources and capital are concentrated in a few schools, the city's special admissions system is associated with the feeling among some students that their high school career was over before it had even begun. The participants in this study understood comprehensive neighborhood high schools as violent and dysfunctional places with more non-graduates than graduates. When they were relegated to these schools, either due to a lack of resources and guidance during the application process or poor grades or standardized test scores, their sense of themselves as students and their sense of investment in their high school education were severely compromised.

Finally, students' narratives of exceptionalism reveal something significant about how they were positioned by their schools, their teachers, and cultural narratives about urban youth in public schools. In students' stories about how they were different from traditional dropouts and typical students, they implicitly and explicitly referenced a number of normative expectations related to motivation, intelligence, and success. By framing their identities as exceptional – as smart, as life-long learners, as readers and writers, as respectful – they were able to imagine a hopeful future with a greater range of possibilities. As discussed in Chapter Three, these narratives show the ways in which participants made sense of their trajectory in and out of schools. In their tellings, they left school because they were exceptional and they returned to school because they were exceptional. While these findings unfortunately cannot tell us how the experience of leaving school might be understood by individuals not currently enrolled in an elite program like Pathways, they do indicate the power and prevalence of dominant discourses and their impact on how poor youth and youth of color see themselves and their futures.

What are the experiences of returning students in a college-based program for adolescent dropouts?

This third question speaks to the importance of Pathways as a unique context for students returning to high school. When proposing this study I knew that the nature of this program as college-based would be significant, but throughout the course of my data collection I uncovered what program features were meaningful to students and in what ways. Specifically, the messages staff and faculty projected about this program as "college, not high school," as a privilege and as challenging were significant as students negotiated their identities within the positions made available to them by this programmatic discourse.

In what the director of the program self-critically called the "rah-rah college" effort, program staff and faculty talked about the challenges and rigor of college, the amount of hard work required for success, and their complete confidence that Pathways students could meet these high expectations. As explored in Chapter Four, this discourse resulted in a particular construction of schooling and college in which hard work and following instructions were paramount, while critical thinking, personal growth, and inquiry were less significant. One of the important places this rah-rah college message was communicated was in the students' English classes, as professors worked to prepare them for the literacies that would be required in their college courses. As mentioned above, many participants enrolled in Pathways with robust identities as readers and writers based on their experiences with texts outside of school; however, participants' literacy practices were often framed as contrary to the expectations of college literacy. Given the relatively narrow conceptualizations of literacy in the program and the ways in which some students struggled to meet professors' expectations for "good" writing, several participants experienced a disruption to their identities as writers within the program. Because it was assumed and communicated to students that they could all succeed through hard work, within

the rah-rah college discourse, students' struggles with writing or in other areas was largely attributed to a lack of effort or motivation.

In many contexts and circumstances, students took up these discourses readily, identified as college students, and talked about their ability to succeed in college through hard work. However, participants struggled with aspects of this discourse too, particularly when they questioned their identities as real college students. Media images of white middle class university students, emic conceptions of community college as "thirteenth grade," questions from family and friends about whether they were in college or "a program," and their familiarity with the language of remediation contributed to students' questions about the extent to which they were really in college. Likewise, comments from faculty and staff about the expectations for college students in terms of dress, language, and behavior also served as a point of tension for some participants who felt uncertain about their ability to adopt a collegiate identity while maintaining other cultural practices.

This tension was enhanced for some students by the programmatic rhetoric about "outsiders," negative influences, and past mistakes. In an attempt to help them achieve success, staff and faculty warned students to avoid people and scenarios who would distract them from their work or devalue their efforts to get a college education. While participants indicated they understood the program's concern about outside influences (and frequently attributed other students' departures from the program to these negative influences), in their lives they were understandably reluctant to sever ties with family, neighbors, and friends, even those who were a source of stress or distraction. The data indicate that participants' relationships with outsiders were far more complex than "good" or "bad" and that even those individuals who exerted a negative influence were often also an important source of love and support. Just as the program's recommendation that students put their past mistakes behind them failed to capture the ways in which each student's past, present, and future were intricately intertwined, the admonition to

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avoid negative outside influences oversimplified students' relationships with childhood friends and old high school "associates." Participants experienced Pathways as just a small part of their lives as they maintained literacy practices, roles, responsibilities, and relationships with a range of family and friends during their time away from school.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Patti Lather (2004) wrote that one of the goals of qualitative research in education "is getting people to no longer know what to do so that things might be done differently" (p. 23). In the context of this study, I wonder what we, as educators, think we know about how to welcome out-of-school students back to school settings, how to engage them in critical conversations about inequity, how to motivate and encourage them toward success, and how to help them envision possibilities for their futures. Just as the stories presented in this dissertation challenged some of my assumptions about "dropouts," they offer new ways of thinking about how our field might design learning environments to sustain the engagement of high schoolers, students reenrolling in school, and community college students. The study's findings do suggest a number of implications for educators, program administrators, and researchers, even while prompting new questions for discussion and research.

How do we welcome students back to school?

As programs for returning out-of-school youth proliferate, questions emerge about how educators and administrators think about the multiple components of their students' past, present, and future selves. What parts of students' lives are welcomed into schools and classrooms and what identities, experiences, and practices are explicitly and implicitly excluded? In community college courses, in which particularly narrow definitions of literacy are valued, students' out-of-school literacy practices are often unwelcome (e.g., Rose, 2006). When programs encourage students to leave their pasts behind them in an effort to craft a bright future, they fail to capitalize on the fullness of students' social practices, lives, and experiences. Talk about "outsiders" or

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negative influences can exacerbate the real or perceived disconnects between the spheres of home and school.

The message conveyed by Pathways staff about students' past mistakes – "that part of your life is over" (Fieldnotes, 5/6/08) – was intended to help students focus on a positive future. Unfortunately, embedded in such statements is an implication of deficiency. How might past experiences, both good and bad decisions, be reframed as a resource and mined to uncover students' strengths? In this context, the framing of dropout as a mistake also resulted in missed opportunities for critical discussions about structural and systemic issues contributing to high school attrition. As seen in Chapter Three, participants struggled to engage in truly "penetrating" (Willis, 1977) critical conversations about leaving high school. Even while students offered insightful critiques of their schools and the school district, their talk about dropout as a mistake and about the ways in which they were different from "traditional" dropouts upheld dominant discourses that too often alleviate schools of their responsibility for students' success.

As currently conceptualized, continuous enrollment in high school is the normative pathway to graduation and post-secondary education. Alternative trajectories are labeled "deviant" even when those pathways lead to post-secondary credentials. Aston, Schoen, Ensminger and Rothert (2000) found that African Americans with discontinuous schooling careers had similar educational outcomes as students who completed high school continuously, and thus argued that "models of educational attainment that emphasize the importance of continuous enrollment need to be updated" (p. 133). The participants in this study demonstrated considerable persistence and resilience as they navigated various systems and enrolled in a number of programs. Still my inclination was to view these students as "dropouts," highlighting their "mistake" rather than the effort they exerted in returning.

Staff members' well-intentioned warnings that some friends and family might not support students' quest for a college degree oversimplified the complex relationships participants had

with peers and family members in and out of school. The implied binary between "outsiders" and "insiders" appeared to exacerbate tensions students felt as they navigated the boundaries between home and school. The notion that some cultural practices and ways of being were incompatible with college complicated students' ability and willingness to enact fully a collegiate identity. The challenges students experience crossing borders hold the potential to prompt nuanced conversations about dominant culture, contextual identities, self-representation and code switching. The data suggest the possibilities for reconceptualizing students' expansive social networks, past experiences, and home practices as resources rather than risk factors (Gadsden, Davis, Artiles, 2009).

How do we engage students in critical and productive conversations about inequity?

As explored in Chapter Five, professors' attempts to engage students in conversations about poverty, racism, and structural inequities were complicated by larger programmatic discourses which endorsed a meritocratic view on success and failure. Further, the notion that success is the result of hard work and perseverance (rather than privilege) was an essential source of optimism, hope, and motivation for students. Thus, students often resisted talk about race and class in their courses. Given that my education and training instilled in me a strong allegiance to critical pedagogy, to quote Lather (2004), this finding prompted me to "no longer know what to do" (p. 24). In retrospect, I am now startled by my own failure to recognize how painful discussions about oppression might be for poor youth or youth of color. Likewise, I am also struck by how frequently it is assumed that students marginalized by race, class, or language need to learn about these topics when the same assumptions are not made for privileged youth.

Nonetheless, decades of scholarship on critical pedagogy and critical literacy make clear their importance in creating an informed, engaged and active citizenry that can advocate for social change (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2004). Likewise, it is evident in the data that despite their resistance to talk about inequity in some contexts, participants had a wealth of

personal and generalizable knowledge about historical and contemporary discrimination and the ways in which systems of privilege create differential barriers and obstacles for individuals and groups marginalized by race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Building a class around generative themes – selecting texts based on students' questions and problems, engaging them in conversations that draw explicitly on their own experiences, and encouraging them to formulate inquiries about the issues they face in their own communities – allows students to have a measure of control and ownership over how these issues are discussed (Fiore & Elsasser, 1982). By contrast, I often saw Pathways students resisting the ways in which statistics were presented to them as reality with little follow-up discussion about how social trends might be challenged or disrupted.

I see this issue as intimately related to the question posed above about welcoming students back to school. Programs like Pathways that work diligently to offer youth from marginalized groups a pathway to the middle class face immense challenges in giving students the tools they need to succeed in institutions of power (e.g., Delpit, 1988). Students who have repeatedly been failed by schools, students from families and communities that have historically been barred from such institutions, and students who have not been previously held to high expectations need significant support to adopt the ways of being and thinking that will facilitate access to power-holding structures. Unfortunately, some of the techniques for school success discussed above (e.g., putting the past behind you), perhaps inadvertently promote a form of erasure which fails to account for the pain associated in remaking oneself. When approached dialectically and with care, critical pedagogy allows for transparent conversations about gatekeepers to power, the historical origins of current systems, and the challenges and sacrifices associated with adopting different aspects of the dominant culture.

What does it mean for teachers to craft a curriculum that is "relatable?"

As discussed in Chapter Six, the notion that books, activities, assignments, and teachers should be "relatable" was important to participants. This term was used repeatedly in different contexts as students evaluated their teachers and their class assignments. Over the course of my year at Pathways, my understanding of "relatable" books evolved, as I had initially assumed it referred to texts that reflected students' life experiences. I came to see, however, that in students' out-of-school lives they engaged in a wide range of reading practices that rarely involved reading books about experiences that mirrored their own. Instead, students preferred to read fantasy books, Manga, informational texts, magazines, and astrology books. Some students reported reading for pleasure, stress relief, or escape, but many more reported reading to learn new things about a range of topics that interested them (e.g., motorcycles, song writing, and history). Some participants, like Lady, Dana, and Cleveland explicitly stated that they did not want to read books that reflected their experiences because it was painful or repetitive – Dana complained that she was tired of always reading about poverty. Likewise, when I followed up with participants to clarify who counted as a relatable teacher, they explicitly stated a teacher could be relatable regardless of his or her background or life experiences.

As I came to understand it, "relatable" is not a quality that is inherent to a book or person, but instead is a product of the way a book is used in the classroom and the way a teacher conducts himself or herself. When students were asked to make connections between the texts and their own lives, the text was more likely to be relatable. When teachers disclosed information about their lives or told stories about personal experiences, they were deemed relatable, even if their experiences were different than the students'. In both Ms. Wilson and Mr. Franklin's classes there were many activities and assignments endorsed by students as "relatable" and many that were not. The difference appeared to be in the ways in which assignments or texts were

introduced and framed, the level of student choice in the assignments, and the work the class discussions did in allowing students to make text-to-self connections.

The assumption that students will *only* enjoy reading about characters and circumstances similar to their own life experiences is not supported by the data. Instead, students talked specifically about wanting to read to gather new information, learn new things, and be transported to new places. At the same time, students appeared to yearn for guidance from professors about the ways in which classroom texts and activities might intersect with their experiences and interests. Thus, it appeared that students sometimes needed support in seeing how the classroom content was relatable. Similarly, as chronicled in Chapter Six, students also openly craved a choice of texts and essay topics, which was rarely allowed. While Mr. Franklin and Ms. Wilson were adamant that students need to become accustomed to writing and reading things selected by their professors, I wonder about the possibilities for choice within these introductory college courses. What would it mean for college to be reframed as an opportunity for students to take ownership over their own learning and to explore more deeply topics of interest to them? In response to a student's request to select her own topic, Mr. Franklin said "College is about learning something new" (10/28/08) – revealing his assumption about the type of topics students would pick. However, I saw numerous instances outside of class in which students freely chose to learn about new things.

Research has long demonstrated that exceptional instruction creates opportunities for students to make personal connections to classroom content and texts (Hinchman, Alvermann, Boyd, Brozo & Vacca, 2003; Langer, 1984). However, when students experience "cultural discontinuities" (Nieto, 1999) between home and school, the work of facilitating connections between course material and students' experiences and ways of knowing become more important and more challenging. The work of creating a relatable curriculum is not only encouraging students to see how professor-selected materials relate to their lives, but also inviting students'

own experiences, interests, and "cultural repertoires of practice" (Lee, 2007) into the course in meaningful ways.

Based on these data, I argue for a broader understanding on what is appropriate course material for low-income youth of color. The notion that students need to read about people and places "like them" is quite limiting; although, it appears that teachers need to be quite explicit and intentional in uncovering students' interests and questions and helping students make connections between the course material and their lives. Students have a wide array of life experiences; however, it appeared that often they were asked to read books that focused on the negative aspects of their lives (poverty, crime, and violence). It is possible that students might respond more favorably to more uplifting or positive representations of people "like them." Likewise, student choice has a significant role to play in a relatable curriculum, even choice within parameters (which was allowed occasionally by the professors I observed). Might we view low-income youth and youth of color as curious scholars with diverse interests in search of connections between novel and unique topics and their own lives?

How do we prepare teachers to work with low-income youth and youth of color?

When I asked participants to tell me about their high schools, they often talked about teachers who "didn't care" or "didn't teach." While it is not my intention to burden teachers disproportionately for the troubles of large and under-resourced urban schools, I believe that these data do raise important questions about teacher-student relationships and student perceptions of good teaching. Previous research has indicated the importance of students' perceptions of caring or uncaring teachers (e.g., Epstein, 1992; Knesting; 2008; Lee & Breen, 2007). As stated above, students described good teachers as "relatable." Although students were careful to say that relatable has little to do with a teacher's background, given that their examples of relatable professors were two African Americans who grew up in a poor section of the city, I concur with scholars who argue for a more diverse teaching force representative of the students we serve

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(Foster, 1994; Sleeter, 2004; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). I suspect that my position as a white middle class woman and the students' overall shyness about talking about race may have influenced their response to my follow-up question "So does it matter where a teacher comes from or what her background is?" (C.G., 12/10/08). (Their answer was no.)

Beyond efforts to recruit more teachers of color and more teachers from the communities in which our students live, the data in this study suggest that teacher preparation programs must attend to how teachers think about their relationships with students. According to participants, good teachers disclose something about their lives and experiences, inquire into the students' well-being, and are willing "to have a conversation" (Interview, 4/10/09). Students repeatedly used the word "mentor" to describe the teachers they remembered positively. According to participants, "bad" teachers sat behind their desks, yelled, and did not demonstrate concern for students or their success. While certainly enormous class sizes, constant disruptions, and systemic dysfunction at some schools make relationship-building quite challenging, overall I was struck by the simplicity of students' requests. While curriculum content (relatable books and assignments) and pedagogical styles (fewer worksheets) were sometimes mentioned in relationship to their high schools, most often students talked about simply wanting teachers to talk to them.

In writing about the increasing trend of teachers working with students from cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own, Gutierrez (2000) wonders, "What assumptions and folk theories will teachers construct about students' potential, about who can learn, and about what can be learned?" (p. 291). These folk theories emerged in the data as students shared stories of teachers' assertions and assumptions that all students were deviant, lazy, and each on their way to becoming "a statistic." In particular, teachers of privilege, many of whom may demonstrate "tenacious resistance" (Sleeter, 2004) when asked to challenge their own assumptions, need significant support and guidance in unlearning these folk theories.

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In their writing on adolescent development, Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) argue for a method of relational teaching they call "educational mentoring" that "reflects a particular professional ethic, an ethic of learning through care and support" (p. 98). However, in our current climate of school reform, discussions of teacher quality, teacher preparation, and teacher accountability reflect an increasingly narrow perspective on teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006). Calls for better teachers tend to highlight content expertise, post-graduate degrees, better classroom management skills, and higher SAT scores (Green, 2010), but rarely emphasize "caring for the student as the pedagogical priority" (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 98). While it is likely that many factors contribute to a teacher's success with her students, the recent mandates place little value on intentionally preparing teachers to become educational mentors. Likewise, within a system that prioritizes test preparation, it is likely that teachers have fewer occasions to talk with students about matters of importance to them. The assumption that students need more direct instruction and more basic skills practice sets up a system in which there is little incentive or opportunity for teachers to be relatable.

How might the "college experience" and "college preparation" be broadly envisioned?

The college experience crafted for students at Pathways was marked by a number of features including its focus on hard work, the unquestionable authority of the professors, and a narrow conception of writing. Focus on fundamental skills like argumentative essay writing, pre-algebra, and time management techniques obscured what opportunities college might offer for creative expression, intellectual enrichment, inquiry, and personal development. Although Ms. Wilson talked extensively with her students about critical thinking, students also received conflicting messages from multiple sources about the importance of following the instructions of professors in order to earn high marks in their courses. I could not help but view these features through the lens of my own undergraduate experience; in that context, the messages circulated by faculty and advisors indicated that grades should be understood as secondary to intellectual risk

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taking, personal growth, and experiential learning. It was communicated to students that the real learning of college happened outside the classroom in extra-curricular contexts in which students developed leadership skills, cultivated their identities as learners, and engaged in lively discussions with peers. While students at CCC and my undergraduate institution experience college in a range of ways that likely deviate significantly from both messages, the contrast between these two images is striking.

If I momentarily lay aside my biases, I note that my institution's attempt to deemphasize grades is an indication of its privileged position in the landscape of higher education. When CCC students attempt to transfer to four-year institutions, they will not have a transcript from a prestigious institution and grades will matter. However, the contrast between these images of "the college experience" also raises questions about the assumptions made about community college students' ability and potential. The tendency for students with the greatest educational needs to receive the most restrictive instruction has been well-documented in studies of developmental education at community colleges (Adler-Kassner & Harrington, 2002; Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Shor, 1997). Thus, ironically while developmental education provides opportunities to students who might not otherwise have access to college, it also plays an important role in maintaining and legitimating social and economic inequity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Brint & Karabel, 2000). As part of their effort to hold students to high standards, Pathways staff reminded students that their CCC scholarship was a "privilege not a right." By contrast, students with resources and financial means largely not only interpret post-secondary education as a right but also understand the range of choices available to them for the type of college experience they would like.

According to faculty and staff, preparation for college involved adopting new habits of mind and cultural ways of being. At a recruitment session a staff member said that the foundation term was about "shaking off all those high school behaviors" (Fieldnotes, 4/22/08).

Unfortunately what and how much students were expected to "shake off" was often unclear. For example, students' rich out-of-school literacy behaviors were often treated as a liability rather than a resource. Carol Lee (2007) wrote that "practices and ways of using language in the world that are typically vilified in academic settings may actually be generative resources for both general learning as well as rigorous disciplinary reasoning" (p. 7). Thus, rather than conceive of college preparation as something that happens only in particular classroom spaces, might we view students' experiences – as navigators of multiple cultural spaces, as astute commentators on popular culture, and as autobiographers and creative writers – as part of their preparation for college?

Previous research has long pointed to the potential for teachers to invite students' out-of-school writing lives into the classroom. The findings in this study specifically indicate that writing classrooms can also be places for rich discussions about issues of representation, audience, and voice. Likewise, Pathways students' literacy practices highlight the potential for autobiographical writing prompts, digital stories, self-publishing technologies, and other forms of authorship in which explicit attention is paid to self-reflection and self-representation. My experience coordinating the Pathways Arts Magazine suggests that some students are craving opportunities for more expansive invitations to write than afforded in their college coursework. However, this experience also indicated that when "real" college writing and the grades associated with performing well are consistently valued over less privileged forms of expression, students will rightly prioritize their coursework over extra-curricular activities. I struggled to encourage students to write new pieces for the magazine; many students submitted old work created before they enrolled in the program. As discussed in Chapter Six, students frequently commented that they did not have time to be creative anymore. Research suggests that a wide array of texts and classroom activities can be employed to facilitate the development of students' academic literacies (e.g., Frey & Fisher, 2004). How might we "capitalize on students' expertise"

(Hinchman et al., 2003) and value and include their current practices in broader versions of the college experience as we push them to grow and develop new literacy practices?

What are the implications for policy and institutional reform?

The "high school swingers" who participated in this study offer us new ways of thinking about high school attrition and persistence. As they navigated the application and admissions procedures at multiple high schools and a range of adult and alternative education programs, they demonstrated not only determination, but a particular type of knowledge and facility with bureaucratic and institutional gatekeeping systems. Their stories indicate not only the limitations of traditional high schools, but also the lengths to which some students will go to find an educational context that meets their needs. This raises questions about the extent to which high school students have access to a diverse array of high-quality accessible options for earning a high school diploma.

Participants' stories suggest that while they may have ultimately found satisfaction at Pathways, their journey to this program was filled with challenges and obstacles. As indicated in Chapter Three, most wanted to attend rigorous and well-resourced high schools but were either unable to complete the application process or were denied admission. The school choice model employed in many cities, in which high schools are designed around themes or academic foci appeals to students who are looking for the "right" school for them. However, the inequity in quality across schools and programs in this city has significant implications for how students understand their high school experiences. Similarly, when special schools or alternative programs are designed as a "safety-valve" for overburdened high schools, they are typically understood to be less prestigious than "regular" schools (Kelly, 1996), thus further reifying the hierarchy of educational options. In hierarchical school systems, "choice" is a misnomer as only privileged students have an array of options from which to choose.

Literature has long suggested that non-traditional high school options are an important component of a comprehensive school system, as a 35-hour rigid school week may be inappropriate for working students, parents, and older students. Students have long relied on adult literacy programs and GED programs to fill this need, but recent efforts have widened the range of options available to students looking to earn a diploma outside of a traditional school setting. Yet these programs, diverse in their mission, history, and resources, are unlikely to meet the needs of every applicant. This study raises questions about the extent to which information is available to students about the assortment of high school options which are available to them, about these programs' strengths and limitations, and about how each can be accessed. These programs are part of the fabric of many school districts (administrators refer students to them when they are over-aged and under-credited), yet little is known about their quality and there are few structures in place to ensure that transferring students do not fall through the cracks. Likewise, these programs have varying emphasis on the transition to post-secondary education, and many students outside of traditional high schools lack the resources necessary to make sense of complex collegiate admissions and financial aid policies. This dissertation indicates the need to retain the diversity of options for students, but to ensure greater coordination and collaboration between the various schools and programs.

What can be learned from Pathways' success?

In the spirit of critical qualitative research and in an effort to improve the opportunities for youth who have been ill-served by high schools, I have closely interrogated many practices observed at Pathways. However, as I hope is evident in the larger dissertation, this program is quite successful, both in that it offers a gateway to higher education and also in the ways in which it provides meaningful relationships with caring adults and the supports necessary to facilitate students' success in college. I would be quite remiss if I implied that the program's limitations outweigh its strengths. The participants in this study reported that this program met their needs in

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ways that no other school had before. The sheer will of the staff and faculty members to reach out to students and the program's innovative structure are responsible for the success of many students who seemed unable to find another environment to foster their learning and growth. At the time of this writing, seven of the nine participants continue to take classes at City Community College either as Pathways students or Pathways graduates.

There remain very few opportunities for out-of-school youth to connect with post-secondary schooling, and thus Pathways fills an essential need, given the number of young adults seeking their credentials in alternative school sites. Likewise, the retention of first-year students at community colleges, particularly students enrolled in developmental coursework, is alarmingly low. Pathways' cohort structure and its intensive out-of-class advising and mentoring might serve as a model for a more comprehensive approach to support matriculating college students. Finally, I was continually impressed by the culture of high expectations and the environment of caring fostered by the staff and faculty. As described in Chapter Two, the staff at Pathways excelled at creating a positive, intimate, and rigorous school culture. The administrative assistant and program director, who had few direct responsibilities for advising students, both took an active role mentoring and building relationships with students. The Pathways office was always a pleasant place to be and students could always be found there in their free time. It is my hope that this dissertation will help a range of programs both learn from and improve upon the opportunities that Pathways has created for students.

Lingering Questions and Future Research

The findings presented in this dissertation raise new questions and suggest a number of areas for further research. The data provide rich and interesting insights in relationship to the three research questions, but much more work can and should build on this study in order to create a full picture of high school attrition and reenrollment.

The uniqueness of the context of this research, a community college-based program for out-of-school youth, both served as a strength and a limitation for this project. Because of the program's hybrid nature, these findings may speak to youth in a range of settings: alternative programs, high schools, and community colleges. The themes in the data are multifaceted. Thus, some may speak to the experiences of low-income high school graduates of color entering community college, others may inform how we think about students reenrolling in a wide range of alternative credential programs, and others can help us understand out-of-school youth who have yet to reconnect with the education system. However, some study findings are quite specific to the ways in which participants found themselves in a liminal space between high school and college. Students' dual relationships with faculty and program staff and the particular messages this program communicated about how its students should think about their position in the world may be unique to Pathways. Given the wide range of program structures and formats, it would be beneficial to ask similar research questions with students in GED programs, night schools, and other alternative school settings.

Likewise, this study is marked by the nine participants, who may or may not be "representative" of a broader group of high school leavers. As explained in Chapter Two, Pathways applicants undergo a battery of tests, write several essays, and participate in an interview as part of the admissions process. In order to be eligible for admission, applicants must read on an eighth grade level as measured by the screening assessment; the program turns away more students than it admits. This raises questions about the nature of the findings in this study. To what extent is this group of individuals somehow inherently different from "typical" dropouts because of their access to educational opportunities during elementary or middle school, levels of family support, or other social or cultural resources? For example, one might argue that much of the data about exceptionalism reflects the fact that these participants were in some way extraordinary in their high school contexts. I argue that while these individuals may have had

more academic preparation than many out-of-school youth, how they were positioned by the program as smart, successful, and elite was equally or more significant and any innate exceptionalism. Nonetheless, additional research with a more diverse group of out-of-school or reengaged youth would be beneficial in extending and complicating the findings presented here.

In this study I followed a group of students who were relatively successful at Pathways. Eight of the nine participants stayed in the program for the full year (Mercedes left after two semesters). Subsequently, after his fourth term Bart left the program. The remaining seven students continue to take courses at CCC as of the spring of 2010. However, as I noted in Chapter Two, a number of cohort members who did not volunteer to participate in this study left the program during their first semester and two study participants who are not profiled in this dissertation left early in their second semester. Pathways has a first semester retention rate of 60 percent, and attrition is a source of concern for faculty and staff. Four students in the cohort left the program by the sixth week of their first term. This raises questions about the experiences of students who are not successful in this program. How do they understand the "rah-rah college" messages? How do they think about their time in high school and out of school and the possibilities for their futures? Certainly more research is necessary to inform Pathways' work and to contribute to understandings of the range of experiences of students returning to school.

Although previous research has indicated that home and family can influence a student's school success, when I asked students to talk about the reasons they left high school few mentioned factors related to their home life. These data challenge conventional wisdom that suggests students leave school because of irresponsible parents or unsupportive families; however, the methodology of this study did not allow me to explore the full range of students' lives outside of school. I only met with students on campus, I did not visit their neighborhoods or homes, and most of my protocols had few questions specifically targeting their family lives. Given that some participants told me they were not as comfortable at school as they were at

home, observing them or interviewing them in their home contexts may have contributed significantly to my understanding of their lives.

Similarly, the second research question about students' departure and return to school could only be explored retrospectively, as I came to know these participants only after they enrolled in Pathways. I did not visit their high schools or the other programs they attended. I relied on students' self-reported memories about their past experiences. Using a post-structuralist framework, these data tell us much about how students understand their lives and how they think about their possible selves in relationship to their past experiences. Ethnographic research in high schools can go further to uncover the messages students receive in high schools, their experiences in classrooms and with teachers, and the events that lead up to their departure.

Concluding Thoughts

Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) write that while adolescence is a time of authoring and constructing a sense of identity and self, it is not a solitary endeavor. They write, "we are in a constant state of co-creating who we are with the people with whom we are in closest connection and within those contexts that hold the most meaning for our day-to-day existence" (p. 6). The participants in this study co-authored their lives with family and friends, but also in conjunction with high school teachers, mediated images of youth and "dropouts," college professors, their academic coordinators at Pathways, and even me. This process of co-authorship was reciprocal and dynamic, as participants wove together narratives linking past experiences, present circumstances, and their expectations for the future. In these narratives they made sense of the tumult in their life trajectories, which included both the departure from school (constructed as a mistake by various co-authors) and their entry to college. Through their stories, I saw the ways in which they negotiated identities imposed on them by others (e.g., a "statistic" or a "college student") and how they explored and enacted a range of alternate identities, often via their literacy practices.

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This dissertation invites educators, administrators and researchers to challenge their assumptions about "dropouts" and to think critically about the role we play as educational co-authors. To what extent do we constrain students' identities as readers, writers, learners, and members of their families and communities? To what extent do we fully welcome students back to school? This study demonstrates the wide range of opportunities available to educators to capitalize on the rich experiences of students returning to school – their language and literacy practices, their first-hand knowledge about injustice, their facility with navigating multiple worlds, and their persistence in finding an appropriate alternative education program. We have much to learn from listening to the stories of students and attempting to understand how they reconcile the multiple narratives and positions made available to them by the various co-authors in their lives.

APPENDIX A: Participant Profiles

Bart

When asked to complete the sentence "In high school I was," Bart told me, "I would say I was a follower because I followed the people that wasn't going to class" (Interview, 7/15/09). While that may have been true during his tenth grade year, his last year of high school, at Pathways I saw Bart finding his own way. For the first several weeks of the summer term, Bart appeared largely silent to me. Usually dressed in baggy jeans and a black t-shirt or jacket, he did not raise his hand to participate, and when he was called on to speak, he did so with a smile, but in a soft monotone.

It did not take long for my impressions of Bart to evolve as he appeared to blossom before my eyes. Bart was among the students with the best attendance and he worked so diligently that he was recognized by Ms. Wilson on the final day of the first term as the most improved student. A year later, he was known to professors and staff as unfailingly reliable and known affectionately to his fellow students as "The King of Pathways," a title he earned for spending so much time joking around in the office. Bart achieved a sort of quiet class-clown status; although he rarely seems to call attention to himself—his voice is still soft—he is always smiling and somehow always seems to make the people around him laugh.

Born and raised in the south, Bart and his family first moved to the northeast when he was in middle school. He moved back down south for ninth grade and returned to the city in tenth grade to attend a neighborhood high school. Bart originally did not pass the Pathways entrance exam, but he enrolled in the refresher course and the second time he applied he was admitted. When asked about his sources of support, he explained that he receives "too much moral support" from his mom and sisters who each ask him daily about his schoolwork (Interview, 2/20/09). Although he admitted that his plans are not concrete yet, he reported looking for a career that will be lucrative enough to support his family. He is considering owning

his own business. Bart is consistently cheerful and optimistic. When asked how he wanted to be described to readers he said, "I smile a lot" (Interview, 4/22/09).

Brittany

At Pathways' graduation ceremony in May of 2009, most of the students had taken well over a year to earn the school district's required 23.5 credits. Only one graduating student, Brittany, had earned her high school diploma in a brief 12 months. At the ceremony, Ms. Bea gave a speech highlighting Brittany's accomplishments, which, in addition to taking four classes per semester instead of the usual three, included her perfect 4.0 GPA for the year she spent at CCP. This prompted a round of applause from the audience, but those students and staff who knew Brittany were not at all surprised.

Brittany wore her hair short and straight in a style that flattered her heart-shaped face. She was the quietest of the students in the group, but when she spoke, she did so thoughtfully and with an expansive vocabulary. Although her voice was soft, she was frequently impassioned, particularly when talking about her own motivation to succeed. "The strong drive that I have, the determination, the perseverance because I want as many opportunities as many doors to be open to me as possible" (Interview, 3/3/08). A strong writer, Brittany had an interest in journalism and business; she reported hoping to find a career that would be rewarding, but also allow her to have plenty of time for family life. She admitted to perfectionist tendencies, and I could see traces of these in her impeccable handwriting, her immaculately organized notebooks, and her visible distress when she was not able to turn in an assignment on time.

Brittany graduated at the top of her class in middle school and attended one of the most competitive special admissions high schools in the city. She was a member of the school's championship track team and fully intended to graduate with her class and attend college. "School was my life and that wasn't a good thing, and it proved to be just too overwhelming and I eventually got burned out from the schoolwork" (8/11/08). Over the course of her junior and

senior years of high school, she was hospitalized, for up to six weeks, on several occasions for an eating disorder. When she finally entered recovery, she had missed most of her senior year.

Chanel

In class I once overheard Chanel's friends tell her lovingly that she looked like a little vampire. With her trademark affable smile, Chanel appeared to take the comment as a compliment. When I first met her, she sported a purple Mohawk, her hair shaved close to her head on the sides and bit longer on top. Even when she abandoned that look for long dark or blond locks, her appearance was eye-catching with her numerous piercings and her preference for a combination of gothic and classic styles. In listing some of the most defining aspects of her life, Chanel included "not really having a race" (Interview, 4/3/09)—her complexion is fair, "stark" as she described it; in high school she mostly hung out with the white kids; her mom is one-half black; and the rest of her family is "jumbled up confusion."

Chanel was one of the few students at Pathways I heard talk openly about homosexuality. She typically wore a rainbow pride pin, bracelet, or lanyard and she talked freely about her girlfriend with peers and staff members. In high school she was active in the school's gay-straight alliance and spent time volunteering at a local gay youth center. Chanel attended a magnet high school which she reported had "a great reputation." However, she "later found out it wasn't really a great school" (Interview, 7/23/08), and her ninth grade year was challenging, with many students, faculty, and administrators expressing intolerance toward the school's gay students.

I could always count on Chanel to make me laugh during our interviews, as her sharp, often self-deprecating, wit came through as she told stories about her life. Her sense of humor was evident in the classroom too, as she excelled in utilizing an understated deadpan for effect. Chanel struggled during her first semester and at the end of the summer, she was put on a semester-long probation due to her failing grades in English and math. Although there was no

guarantee she would be allowed to return, during her semester off in the fall she said she reportedly "called the program like 30 times" (Interview, 3/5/09) asking to be allowed to come back. She was readmitted in January. When we met in the spring to talk about her dreams for the future she reported feeling uncertain about her goals for after college, but feeling determined to succeed in Pathways this time: "I have to. Like seriously, if I messed this up again, not only would my mom kill me, but I'd be so out of options" (Interview, 4/30/09).

Cleveland

On the first day of the semester, Ms. Wilson asked each student to list three adjectives to describe him or herself; Cleveland selected "funny, creative, and shy." These three words did capture something essential about Cleveland who, although he had a number of close friends with whom he cracked jokes, tended to be reserved, revealing little about himself except through his stories, drawings, and poems. Before class, Cleveland could often be found sketching dark and fanciful creatures in his notebook. For Cleveland, writing and drawing offer a safe path for self-expression: "It lets me get the evil out without being evil" (Interview, 10/9/08).

Cleveland's creativity extended to his personal appearance; during the time that I knew him he had his lip and tongue pierced, he often wore outrageously large aviator sunglasses, and sported a collection of retro t-shirts. Cleveland had a quiet presence at Pathways and there was a seriousness about him despite his sly and ironic sense of humor. He had little tolerance for cruelty or rude behavior, and spoke fervently about students who only come to school "to socialize and make people's lives hell" (Interview, 4/6/09). His own high school experience was a difficult one. He opted not to attend his neighborhood school, but instead selected a school with an JROTC program based on the assumption that it would be safe. Unfortunately, he soon discovered this was not the case; he described his two years of high school this way: "My life was basically about getting back home. I would wake up in the morning saying let me get through this day" (Interview, 7/16/08).

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Despite his shyness, Cleveland took any opportunity to present and publish his work and I was consistently impressed with his courage. Despite never having attended one, he signed up to compete in a poetry slam competition on campus; he took full advantage of the "creativity board" in the Pathways office; he was one of the most prolific contributors to the Arts Magazine, contributing a number of poems and assisting with the cover art; and his poems were posted on his MySpace page in the hopes that someone would read them and offer feedback. Cleveland intends to continue this work in his professional life; he plans to become a video game designer or a writer. When asked how he wanted to be represented, he said that he wants readers to know that "he's trying to do better with his life" (Interview, 4/6/09).

Dana

"I think I have an old spirit" (Interview, 10/21/08), Dana told me as she compared herself to other friends who were more interested in fashion, MySpace, and materialism. Dana was 17 when she entered the program, but it was true that she had a lifetime of experiences. Living with her cousin's family, she frequently had responsibilities caring for her cousin's or sister's young children. Dana lost both of her parents when she was a child. For close to 10 years after that, she was cared for by an aunt who died of cancer when Dana was 16 years old. While she talked openly about the loss of her family members, casual observers would not be privy to the tragedies in her life. At Pathways Dana could usually be found joking and playfully roughhousing with her friends.

One of the most diligent students, she attended faithfully, sought tutoring when she needed it, and prided herself on her organization. Ms. Wilson referred to her desk as "Staples" because of her assortment of folders, binders, and different colored writing utensils. Dana is petite with a big smile and big laugh; she describes herself as "a loud person" (Interview, 7/30/08). Dana always greeted me, Ms. Bea, and many of her friends with a hug. She and I

developed a close relationship beginning in the second part of spring semester 2009, when I began tutoring her in writing, which I continued into the summer of 2009.

Dana was initially under the impression that she was not eligible to participate in the study because she never went to high school. She clarified this later, explaining that she went to high school, "only for a day, just to get in here" (Conversation Group, 12/10/08). In order to be eligible for Pathways, students must be withdrawn from a city high school. Because of family changes she was moved several times, frequently pulled from her school mid-year, and thus she was two grade levels behind. Faced with the prospect of starting ninth grade at 16, Dana elected to apply to Pathways instead. While always an honor roll student, her schooling experiences were not universally positive. She explains, "I didn't always fit in the in crowd because the in-crowd liked to do stuff that I didn't approve" (Interview, 7/30/08). Since childhood Dana intended to go to college and become a physical therapist. While English was a struggle for her, she excelled in math and in the summer session of 2009, she was the only Pathways student enrolled in pre-calculus.

Lady

At Friends and Family Night in May of 2008, the academic coordinators asked for a student volunteer to share with the supporters what the application process was like. Lady raised her hand and when she approached the stage, I observed that she did so with a confident smile. Her appearance was striking, both that evening and each time I saw her subsequently. I never saw Lady without heels, jewelry, and a coordinated outfit. She often wore her hair in long braids accented with color, or even more arresting, teased out, sometimes up to six inches, on all or part of her head.

At age 20, Lady was the oldest student who participated in the project and she often talked about maturity as one of her defining characteristics. Unlike the other students in the cohort, Lady had lived in her own apartment, working full-time as a waitress to pay the bills.

Earlier in her adolescence, when she was living at home, her family struggled with poverty: "I hated school and I realized that work became more, it was a necessity, and school wasn't at the time because we didn't have any lights, we didn't have heat, we didn't have a phone for months" (Interview, 7/7/08). She later enrolled in night school on two separate occasions, but found that the school staff treated her "like one of those kids that are just out running the streets" (Interview, 7/7/08).

A singer and song-writer with dreams of a record deal, Lady shared with the class a remarkable a cappella performance during the final AC time meeting at the end of the foundation term. In addition to pursuing her love of music, she plans to major in counseling psychology and become a motivational speaker: "I just think outside the box and I've always been good when it comes to talking to people, helping them" (Interview, 2/11/09). In our first interview, Lady told me that she loves to give, and I saw her generosity throughout the year. She could often be found helping her classmates with their work, she was almost always the first to volunteer for any task, and she was friendly with everyone. When asked how she wanted to be represented in this study she said, "My heart, that's what I want [readers] to see" (Interview, 4/10/09).

Mercedes

I did not get to know Mercedes as well as I did the other students because she did not return to the program for her third semester. Yet in the two semesters I spent getting to know her, I was consistently struck by her talents as a writer, her passion for words and language, and her ability to find the humor in even the most challenging situations. Mercedes was the class clown, always ready to entertain her peers and teachers with an irreverent joke. She took pride in her Puerto Rican heritage, although she frequently told comical stories of being mistaken for Persian. While her humor was often dark or caustic, her demeanor was not; she often wore pigtails, cute plaid skirts, and she expressed her love for Tinkerbell via her book bag, notebooks, jewelry, and MySpace page.

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Mercedes' departures from high school and later from Pathways were partially the result of an undiagnosed illness that caused numbness, paralysis, and pain in her extremities. Because it was unclear exactly what was causing the symptoms, the burden of proof always fell on Mercedes: "And then the [high] school didn't believe me that I was sick. They kept sending truancy and trying to get my mom in trouble" (Interview, 7/28/08). Although her reasons for leaving school were related to her health, her high school experience had not been positive: "Like I said, it's a waste of time going there if I'm doing nothing. I could do nothing at home. I could do nothing on the street" (Interview, 7/28/08).

After an episode of abuse, as a young adolescent, Mercedes dressed like a boy, played football, and was involved in a gang, "I was like, being a girl is not helping me…So I decided I cut off most of my hair, it was pretty short, and I started dressing in baggier clothes" (Interview, 7/28/08). At Pathways, that painful past was only evident in her writing. When asked to describe herself on two different occasions, she chose the word lyrical: "So I want to know all the languages I can and master words. Because I don't know, words just seem like they're cool and I guess I've always been good at it, I guess" (Interview, 10/1/08). A prolific author of stories and poems, her writing was deeply personal, and while sometimes funny, often heartbreaking.

Talia

When asked to describe herself in high school, Talia used the term "loner" and elaborated: "Not really, but in an emotional sense. I didn't really let people get too close to me" (Interview, 7/14/08). At Pathways Talia was friendly with everyone, always ready with a laugh or a smile, but I could see her tendency to stick to herself. She frequently wore her hair in long curls that framed, and sometimes hid, her face. Her voice was soft, and when uncertain or hesitant about an answer to a question, she would respond with a melodious laugh.

A poet, lyricist, and singer, Talia had recorded several songs of her own in a local studio. She was inspired by the poems in one of her favorite books, reporting that she read them almost

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every night. She said of the author, "She writes using her imagination and stuff and I don't know; it's just so beautiful" (Interview, 9/30/08). In the spring, Talia published two poems of her own in the Arts Magazine. Talia's strong interest in music and her experiences in Pathways were sometimes a source of friction with her family. When asked about her sources of support, she replied, "But it's like when it comes to my family situation, I don't really have as much as I would like to" (Interview, 3/27/09). However, her relationship with her younger sister was close and Talia told me that she worked hard to serve as a source of inspiration and support for her.

Talia speculated that her struggles in school might be traced back to her dreams of going to a prestigious private high school. When she was unable to attend for financial reasons, she became increasingly disillusioned by her neighborhood school. "I didn't feel like I was going anywhere in [my school]" (Interview 7/14/08). Talia's childhood dream was to go to college for psychology, although she recently she reconsidered that goal and instead was leaning toward majoring in music. Her fascination with astrology and numerology were related to interest in understanding the human mind and human relationships, as was her own ongoing process of self-examination. Talia reported that one of her short term goals is to increase her self-confidence and to that end she enrolled in a public speaking class for the summer of 2009.

Trinidad

When Trinidad selected his pseudonym, I was not at all surprised given the importance of his Trinidadian heritage. Born in Trinidad, his father's home country, he came to the United States as a baby. He listed his two subsequent visits to as being among the most influential moments in his life and he plans to own a home in Trinidad someday. Within the Pathways family, it seemed that everyone knew about his roots in the islands and occasionally you might hear someone, usually a girl tired of his teasing, playfully admonish him to "go back to Trinidad."

One of the most outgoing students in the group, Trinidad described his role in Pathways this way: "I'm basically cool with every student. I'm a very friendly person so, you know, I kind

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of attract a lot of friends" (Interview, 2/3/09). In my observations, I saw this to be true. Across cohorts and length of time in the program, Trinidad did indeed seem to know everyone, and he spent a fair amount of time socializing – and sometimes getting his hair rebraided by an obliging female student – in the Pathways office before or between classes. For Trinidad, the social element of Pathways was important. His recommendations for the program included his suggestion to "get a few more events together, maybe take a trip somewhere, I say, try to get like a room where we can socialize and be loud" (Interview, 4/10/09). At the conclusion of the spring semester, Trinidad took the initiative to organize a game day for Pathways students which featured pizza, soda, and four hours of video game playing on a projection screen in a campus classroom.

During high school, Trinidad faced a number of challenges ranging from his mother's incarceration, the deportation of his father, moves to three different school districts, and "teachers that didn't care, teachers that lie on you…and a few racist teachers" (Interview, 2/3/09). Although he originally never intended to go to college, Trinidad thrived at Pathways, excelling in all of his classes. Trinidad is very clear about his future plans to become a computer network engineer. Although he always knew he wanted to work with computers, his plans became far more specific when through a class at CCC he was connected with a mentor at a local computing systems company who offered him a job: "I got my job and basically the first steps of my career is to get some experience with the people that work there, that really helps me and you know just getting my foot in the door" (Interview, 4/10/09).

<u>**Round One**</u>
Topic domain: Experiences in high school
Covert categories of interest: perceptions of the school; beliefs about what makes a good school; relationships with teachers and staff; relationships with other students; enacted identities while in school; perceptions of students who did not drop out; perceptions of others who dropped out

Lead off question: Tell me about your old high school. Imagine you are giving me a tour of the school. Tell me what I would see as I walked around.

Possible follow-up questions:
- You say the school was _____. Can you give me some specific examples of what you mean by that?
- Can you walk me through your typical day when you were in high school?
- Were there a lot of cliques in your school? Which one did you hang out with most?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about the staff/teachers/counselors/administration?
- Complete the following sentence: "In high school, I was a _____."

Topic domain: Leaving school
Covert categories of interest: is there evidence of a "critical consciousness;" beliefs about who is at "fault" for dropping out; reasons for leaving; was it a difficult decision; reasons for ambivalence about leaving; enacted identity as "dropout;" resistance to "dropout" label

Lead off question: Think back to a particular moment when you were still in high school when you thought seriously about not coming back. Can you describe that moment for me?

Possible follow-up questions:
- Was there a moment when you made a final decision that you were not going back to school?
- It sounds like (this person/event) had a big impact on your decision. Can you tell me more about him/her/it?
- How did you tell your friends and family that you were not going back to school? How did they respond?
- If you had to speculate about the reason that most students leave school, what would you guess is the reason most often?

Lead off question: I'd like to hear a little bit more about the time when you were not attending school. Can you walk me though a typical day – from when you woke up to when you went to bed.

Possible follow-up questions:
- Who did you hang out with?
- Did you still see the people you were friends with while in high school?
- What was hardest about being out of school? What was the best thing?

- Some people say it would have just been easier to finish and graduate at your old school. What would you say to them?

<u>**Round Two**</u>
Your Literacy Autobiography
Everybody knows about an autobiography; that's a story of your own life. But what's a literacy autobiography?

Literacy is reading, writing, drawing, and other kinds of self-expression. Literacy includes papers and books for school, but it also includes MySpace pages, a doodle on the side of a notebook, song lyrics, and text messages to friends. Our lives are filled with significant literacy moments. These could include:
- First memory of reading or writing
- Learning to read or write
- A particularly good or bad teacher
- Writing a story, a paper, a poem you are proud of
- Reading something meaningful
- Favorite reading/writing memories
- Embarrassing or painful reading/writing memories

Autobiographies usually talk about past events, but they also often talk about how those events and memories made the author into the person he or she is today. Who are you today in terms of your literacy life? What kind of reader or writer are you? How did your experiences as a young person shape your current literacy life?

<u>**Round Three**</u>
Mapping Exercise[8]
At times we think about what we hope we will be like in the future. Some of these possible selves seem quite likely (like being a car owner). Others seem quite unlikely, but still possible (like being a lottery winner or movie star). We might also have pictures of ourselves in the future that we are afraid of or don't want to have realized that are both likely and unlikely (being a divorced person or being homeless).

Write on the orange cards as many hoped-for selves as you can imagine. Write on the blue cards the feared selves you can think of. Rank each pile in order of importance. Place a star on the hoped-for and feared self you think is most likely to come true.

Follow-up questions
1. Think about where you will be in 10 years. Tell me in detail about what you expect your life to be life to be like.
2. If you could achieve your most important hoped-for selves, what sort of individual would you be?
3. How would you describe your ability to achieve your dreams and prevent your fears?

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[8] Adapted from Shepard and Marshall (1997)

      a. What do you think you will need to do to reach your goals?
      b. Describe a scenario in which your feared-selves may be realized – how might that scenario be avoided?
      c. What other activities could you engage in to bring about your most important possible selves?

4. What other resources and supports do you imagine you might need in order to achieve or deter your most important possible selves?
      a. Do you think your parents have had a fair chance at ------?
      b. Do you think you will have a fair chance?

5. Who and what have influenced your current development?
      a. Have these always been your possible selves?
      b. If I were to ask you this question 3 years ago, do you think your answers would have been different?

6. What did you learn about yourself from this interview?

Round Four

I'd like you to think about some important events or incidents in your life that led you to become the person you are today. Take a minute and jot down a few notes on those events and then I'd like you to tell me about them in detail, the way you would tell a story.

Followed by member check questions customized for each participant.

General Follow-up Prompts

- How did that start?
- Can you tell me about the most recent time that happened?
- Can you walk me through it?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- What were your feelings at the time?
- What were you thinking when that happened?
- What do you mean by _____?

Conversation Group Contract
This group session is a shared space where everyone should feel safe. How can we make sure these meetings are comfortable for everyone? I agree to abide by the following ground rules:

1. Whatever is said in this room is confidential. That means it is private and cannot be shared with anyone including friends, family, classmates, professors, or program staff. I agree to keep everything confidential, because I would want the same for me.

2. If I have concerns about anything that is said in this space, I will bring my concerns to Sue. I will bring my concerns to her first, because to bring them to anyone else would be a breach of confidentiality.

3. I will respect my fellow session members.

4. I will be a good listener.

5. I will "step up" and "step back." This means if it seems like I am talking too much, I will give others a chance. If I'm not sharing very much, I will step up so my voice can be heard.

6. Other group ground rules:
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Group One: August
My first semester at Pathways
- My best experience this semester:
- My worst experience this semester:
- I expected Pathways to be _____, but it was _____.
- If I was in charge and I could change one thing about the Foundation Term, I would _____.
- College is _____.
- This semester I learned that I am _____.

Group Two: September
Part I
- How is the transition term different from foundation term thus far?
- If you had to recommend a class for me to come visit, which would you recommend and why?
- Tell me a little bit about your relationships with students from other cohorts or from outside the program.

Part II
Pick one photograph to share with the group. Talk about why you took the picture, what it represents about you, and why you selected it to share. How does this picture show something important about you or your life?

Follow up questions
Do you see any commonalities across the pictures we all shared?
Do you think these pictures would have been the same if I gave you these cameras a year ago?
What don't these pictures show about you?

Group Three: October
Lyrics to *We Don't Care* by Kanye West

Oh yeah, I got the perfect song for the kids to sing
And all my people thats drug dealin jus to get by stack ya money till it gets sky high
We wasnt supposed to make it past 25 but the jokes on you we still alive
Throw your hands up in the sky and say we don't care what people say

[Verse One:]
If this is your first time hearing this
You are about to experience something cold man
We never had nothing handed took nothing for granted
Took nothing from no man, man im my own man
But as a shorty i looked up to the dopeman
Only adult man i knew that wasnt a broke man
Flickin starter coats man, Man you dont no man
We don't care what people say
This is for my niggas outside all winter
Cuz this summer they aint finna to say next summer im finna
Sittin in the hood like community colleges
This dope money here is Lil Treys scholarship
Cause aint no to tuition for havin no ambition
And aint no loans for sittin your ass at home
So we forced to sell crack rap and get a job
You gotta do something man your ass is grown

[Chorus]
Drug dealin jus to get by stack ya money till it gets sky high
Kids sing kids sing
We wasnt supposed to make it past 25 but the jokes on you we still alive
Throw your hands up in the sky and say we don't care what people say

[Verse Two:]

The second verse is for my dogs working 9 to 5
That still hustle cause a nigga can't shine off $6.55
And everybody selling make-up, Jacobs
And bootleg tapes just to get they cake up
We put shit on layaway then come back
We claim other people kids on our income tax
We take that money cop work than push packs to get paid
And we don't care what people say
Momma say she wanna move south
Scratchin lottery tickets Eyes on a new house
Around the same time Doe ran up in dudes house
Couldnt get a job
So since he couldnt get work he figured hed take work
The drug game bolemic its hard to get weight
So niggas money is homo its hard to get straight
So we gon keep baking to the day we get cake.
And we dont care what people say
My Niggas

[Chorus]

[Verse Three:]
You know the kids gonna act a fool
When you stop the programs for after school
And they DCFS them some of them dyslexic
They favorite 50 Cent song's 12 Questions
We scream, rock, blows, weed park
so now we smart
We aint retards the way teachers thought
Hold up hold fast we make mo'cash
Now tell my momma i belong in the slow class
It's bad enough we on welfare
You trying to put me on the school bus with the space for the wheel chair
Im trying to get the car with the chromey wheels here
You tryin to cut our lights like we dont live here
Look at whats handed us our fathers abandoned us
When we get the hammers gone and call the ambulance
Sometimes i feel no one in this world understands us
But we dont care what people say

1. What resonates with you? What relates to your experiences? What do you agree with? **Star these sections.**
2. What doesn't resonate? What don't you agree with? What bothers you? **Underline these sections.**

3. Make some inferences. What's Kanye's message in this song? Why do you think he wrote it? Who is the intended audience?

Group Four: November
Part I

This semester is: _____

The transition term is the same as the foundation term in these ways: _____

The transition term is different from the foundation term in these ways: _____

Part II

Design your ideal high school. Working in small groups, imagine you are starting a new high school or are taking over a high school. What would you do if you had a magic wand? What would it be like? You might want to consider:

- Academics
- Atmosphere or environment
- Extra-curriculars
- Teachers and staff
- School culture, mission, motto
- Resources for students

Group Five: December
A Warning to Future Dropouts
Philadelphia Daily News
Published Tuesday, September 30, 2008
by: Fatimah Ali:

Dear public-school students:

One of life's great joys is watching young people succeed. But when you don't, it's not only a poor reflection on you, but also a slap in the face to all of your adult supporters, including teachers, parents and guardians. Philadelphia's 50 percent high school dropout rate makes all of us look bad. It not only ruins *your* life, but makes it difficult for the city to compete for business and attract a bigger and better-educated population.

I know that many of you are focused on getting a solid education. You're motivated and have the drive to achieve and become successful. One day, you'll use your talents here in Philadelphia and make us all proud. But others are about to blow it. You can't seem to make the connection between your education and building a future. You cut school, disrupt class (when you're actually there) and refuse to participate or take ownership of your own lives. You have no goals and focus on partying instead of hitting the books. You hang out aimlessly, with no commitment except to your next adventure, proceeding through life as though it was one big joke.

Well, it's not a joke, and students here and in other countries are surpassing you academically by leaps and bounds. If you stay on this losing academic track, you'll not only be unable to compete with your peers, but will likely fail at anything you try. Forget being able to compete in the global economy. Without a solid education, you won't be able to compete for even the lowest-paying jobs. Your education is the best self-

investment you can make in your future. It's no secret that many of Philadelphia's public schools are a shambles. But that's no excuse for half of you to drop out, either. Exactly how far do you think you'll get in life with just a GED and no college or trade-school training?

Dropping out of high school won't solve any of your problems - it will only make your life more miserable than it already is. You'll either find yourself stuck in low-paying jobs, unemployed, incarcerated or in a cycle of generational poverty. In Philadelphia, state and local politicians have been trying for decades to make our public schools better. Unfortunately, they've made some mistakes along the way, but now after those failed attempts, they're finally headed toward a winning formula for improving the city school system. They're not only trying to eradicate the high dropout rate but to increase the number of college grads who live here.

Your new superintendent, Arlene Ackerman, brings a solid record of educational leadership from cities she worked in. She is already demonstrating her strong commitment to developing the classrooms and improving the schools most at risk for failure. Mayor Nutter's chief education officer, Lori Shorr, the liaison between City Hall and the school district, says the goal is to build an innovative standards-based system that can solve the long-standing challenge of how best to distribute available resources. Although these improvements won't happen overnight, the educators are trying to lay a good foundation for making classrooms better. But it's really up to you young people and your parents or guardians to be successful in achieving these goals.

Shorr speaks as both a scholar and a mom, and knows firsthand the value of pushing children to succeed. She says there are indicators of who might become the dropouts that can signal the need for intervention. They include repeatedly failing English or math, attendance that falls below 80 percent and frequent disciplinary problems. Ackerman has targeted 85 of the city's most underperforming schools to receive an additional $12 million earmarked to address social-services needs for students and enhanced staff development. All of us want our city to be competitive, and that means building a strong foundation. You children are our future, and we elders need to know that we'll be able to count on you. As Shorr tells us, better schools translate into more commerce, and that's both a moral and economical imperative.

So, from this parent who loves young people, make all of us proud. The city wants your talent because one day you'll be our leaders and we need confidence that you can do the job.
Love,
Your Elders

1. Read aloud
2. Write in silence your general reactions (agree, disagree, other thoughts)
3. One word share out

Follow up questions:
- What do you think of the fact that this was published in a newspaper?
- If you had read this while you were in high school, how would you have read it differently?
- If you had to write a response to F. Ali, what would you write?

- What do you think about her argument "It's no secret that….."?
- To what do you attribute your success here in this program?

Group Six: February
1. What is MySpace good for?
2. Why do you think so many young people like to use it? If you use it, why?
3. If you have a MySpace page, think about how it looks right now. Picture it in your mind. List some people who you would like to see it, and why. Who are some people who you would not show it to?
4. Is there such a thing as the "real you?" If so, who gets to see it?

Follow up questions:
- What can teachers learn from MySpace?
- What are some things about yourself you would never post on MySpace?

Member check – What do you think of these themes?
- MySpace is a place to show a side of yourself that you don't always show to everyone.
- MySpace is a place to show who you really are.
- MySpace is a place to show who you would like to be.
- Through MySpace I figure out who I am.

Group Seven: March
Think about what images come to mind when you hear the term "college student?" What characters or figures do you think of? What does this person look like? How does he or she dress and act? Is there just one image or are there many?

Now think about what comes to mind when you hear the word "dropout?" What characters or figures do you think of? What does this person look like? How does he or she dress and act? Is there just one image or are there many?

Draw a picture of a college student:
Draw a picture of a dropout:

Follow up questions:
Are you different in here than you are out there?
Did you always know you wanted to go to college? Who inspired you?

Group Eight: April[9]
Create a community life-space map. A community life space map shows how you fit into your community. Your community doesn't have to be one location. It might include church, family, friends, school, extended family, cultural groups, social groups, etc.

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[9] Adapted from Shepard (2000)

Use lines or shapes or some other visual representation to show how you fit into the various parts of your community. Who are the important players? Are some more important than others? Where do you get support? Do you support others?

Follow up questions:
- Who are your role models? Who do you look up to? Who looks up to you?
- What are the obstacles in your life? What are the resources/supports?
- What role(s) do you play in these aspects of your community?

Group Nine: May

Marcus is 17 years old and living in our city. He was a mostly "A" student in elementary school, but in middle school he started fighting and stopped doing his work, therefore his grades slipped. His mother had always expected him to apply to and get into a special admissions high school, but he didn't get in because of his poor record in middle school. At his neighborhood high school, Marcus stopped attending some classes early on and by the beginning of his 10th grade year he stopped going completely.

What stands out to you? What do you notice?
What other information do you want to know? What questions does this raise for you?
If you could meet Marcus, what might you say to him?

Follow up questions
- Who is at fault in the Marcus story?

Part II Follow-ups/Member checks
- How would you compare the quality of teaching here to high school?
- What is this thing about "relatable?" Can you explain that to me?
- Would you ever consider becoming a teacher?
- If Pathways didn't exist, where would you be?
- What should I call you guys? Dropout or new word?
- How would you describe the Pathway social dynamic (Cliques? Is everyone "cool"?)
- What is the most important thing about your experience that you want educators to know?

APPENDIX D: Data Collection and Analysis Timeline

	Data Collection	**Data Analysis**
May 2008 - August 2008	• Classroom observation of Ms. Wilson's English 90 • Round one interviews • First conversation group	• Biweekly analytic memos • Low-level coding of fieldnotes • Document analysis of program and course documents
September 2008 - December 2008	• Classroom observation of a math class and Mr. Franklin's English 100 • Round two interviews • Monthly conversation groups (4)	• Biweekly researcher memos • Low-level coding of fieldnotes and transcripts • Document analysis of in- and out-of-class writing • Biweekly peer debriefer meetings
January 2009 - May 2009	• Round three and four interviews • Monthly conversation groups (4)	• Pattern and high-inference coding • Selective reconstructive horizon analysis and discourse analysis • Biweekly peer debriefer meetings
June 2009 - December 2009		• Continue pattern and high-inference coding • Continue selective close analysis • Holistic reading of entire data set • Classify, combine, and refine code list

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