Chapter 3
Peer-Proofing Academic Competition Among Black Adolescents: "Acting White" Black American Style

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Introduction

Peer-proofing black adolescents’ school achievement practices is a widely sought, but rarely fully achieved, social goal of school and school officials. They maintain that this is a much desired goal because, among black adolescents, peer influence is a critical deterrent to academic excellence (Hanna, 1982; MacLeod, 1987; Ogbo, 1974; Silverstein and Krane, 1975). Also, as I shall document in this analysis, among school officials a kind of reinvention ethos exists in the American system of public schooling leading to the celebration of the dominant culture and,

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Perhaps unwittingly, the suppression and degradation of the culture of those groups who are not dominant group members (Fordham, in process).

Peer-proofing Black adolescents' school performance, in the views of many school officials, will empower Black students in ways which are not available to them now. For these officials, peer-proofing Black students' school success has come to mean separating them from other Black students and changing their cultural and racial identity so that they no longer view themselves as Black people. Admittedly, in today's post-civil rights America it is possible to choose not to be Black; nevertheless, choosing not to be Black is fraught with conflict, pain, and confusion. There are many reasons to question the appropriateness of structuring the school environment in this manner; there are also many reasons to question why Black teenagers should have to choose between their identity as Black Americans and academic success. In light of these untenable options, Black teenagers find themselves on the horns of a dilemma, with consequences which directly and unequivocally affect their futures as adults and as Americans of African descent.

When I began my research on Black adolescents' school success at Capital High, I was primarily concerned with how Black people's social organization—which I described as being characterized by a fictive kinship system (Fordham, 1987, 1988a, 1988b; Fordham and Ogby, 1986)—affected their children's school behavior, effort, and commitment. Hence, I began by focusing on those aspects of the students' school performance which could be clearly associated with the existing fictive kinship system. As time progressed, however, I became more and more convinced of the holistic nature of the problem of Black adolescents' school performance and saw merit in pursuing the effects of peer influence on academic behavior. Indeed, in response to the poor visibility of Black adolescents' school achievements in the research literature, I was driven to document the existence of Black high achievers in the high school context and to point out, at the same time, some of the factors implicated in their academic success. As I came to view it, the widely acknowledged but infrequently stated goal of peer-proofing Black adolescents' school performance as operationalized at Capital High was a major deterrent rather than an incentive for academic competition among the students.

In light of the fictive kinship organizational structure in the Black community and its implication in the school performance of Black students, I am using this opportunity to explore, for the first time, an alternative way of peer-proofing Black students' academic performance. The peer-proofing I am suggesting here will empower them rather than school officials, and will motivate larger numbers of Black students to seek academic excellence. In many ways, my definition of peer-proofing Black adolescents' academic competition is an inversion of the practice most frequently used by school officials. Their most prominent practice is to separate Black adolescents who have been identified as academically successful from their age-cohorts and peers, putting them in advanced placement and/or gifted and talented programs. As I shall demonstrate, peer-proofing Black adolescents' academic competition must come to mean immersing them in the fictive kinship system or collective ethos of the Black community, thereby combining their desire to be academically successful and their ethnic and/or racial identity. It also must mean beginning academic instruction with their cultural predisposition to idealize the collective and structuring the school curriculum and academic learning in ways which make them feel responsible for each other rather than engaged in one-on-one competition against each other.

The data base for this chapter comes from my two-year ethnographic study of Black students' school success at Capital High School in Washington, D.C. I selected the school as my research site for the following reasons: (1) it is located in a historically Black section of the city of Washington; (2) it attracts both middle-income and low-income students; (3) it has an expanded and well-developed advanced placement program; (4) the principal was eager to have me study school performance at the school; and (5) the faculty did not appear to be unwilling to cooperate with me.

After the District of Columbia Public School System had approved my application to complete this intrusive, long-term study, I then located an appropriate research sample of thirty-three students: twelve high-achieving students (six males and six females) and twenty-one underachieving students (fifteen females and six males). These students were identified and selected in cooperation with the school's counselors, teachers, and administrators. Each of these professionals suggested certain students, and I checked their academic performance and behavior. Having unlimited access to the students' cumulative folders made this verification possible. It also allowed me to document socioeconomic impressions which were frequently bantered about by some school officials. I paid close attention to school officials' suggestions regarding who could be accurately labeled a high or underachieving student, but ultimately I made the decision regarding which of the identified students would become a participant in the study. Much to my surprise,
more students than I needed and/or had originally planned for—especially females—were interested in being participants in the study. These students’ parents were also very supportive and/or the students were able—individually—to convince them that this was a worthwhile research study. Students who participated in the first year of the study agreed to (1) in-depth interviews, which were completed in three or more sessions; (2) classroom observations and visitations; (3) observations of their non-classroom activities, including after-school and weekend activities; and (4) home visitations and interviews with their parents. During the second year of the study, I returned to Capital High and administered an extensive research questionnaire to about 650 students from the ninth through the twelfth grade. This questionnaire was developed in situ, based on the data obtained from the thirty-three eleventh-grade students observed during the first year of the study.

Let me state at the outset that I am not claiming that the findings emerging from this one research site are generalizable to all Black adolescents. The data were derived from a small segment of a larger group of Black adolescents. Moreover, although Capital High School’s student population reflects the socioeconomic heterogeneity of the Black community at large, it was physically located in a poor Black community. Obviously, data from other research sites are needed to validate the claims I am making regarding this research context and to formulate a general theory of Black adolescent school achievement.

Theoretical Framework: Fictive Kinship and Black Peoplehood

Initially, I sought to build my explanation of Black adolescents’ school success on Ogbo’s (1978) cultural ecological model. Essentially, Ogbo theorized that the existence of a “job ceiling,” or set of barriers in the opportunity structure, affects Black students’ perception of the careers and opportunities available to them, which negatively affects their academic effort. As it was originally constructed, Ogbo’s theory focused almost exclusively on Black students’ school failure. Since I was interested in determining what factors influence school success among Black adolescents, I became more and more conscious of this theory’s inability to explain intragroup differences in school. Working with Professor Ogbo to modify his cultural ecological theory (see Fordham and Ogbo, 1986), I was able to move beyond the original focus on instrumental exploitation (limitations in opportunity structure, such as “job ceilings”) and instrumental responses to examine the expressive dimension of the relationship between the dominant culture and the indigenous culture of Black Americans. More specifically, in studying the expressive dimension of Black-White relations in America, I was able to isolate two additional factors which are obviously implicated in its unique texture. These two factors, an oppositional collective or social identity and an oppositional cultural frame of reference (Fordham, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1986, 1988a, 1988b; Ogbo, 1980, 1981, 1984), which I described as “fictive kinship,” enabled me to explain, to some extent, school performance differences within the Black-American population.

Anthropologists and other social scientists who have been studying the unique texture of dominant-nondominant relationships in both traditional and contemporary urban societies argue that conflicts and oppositional processes often lead the subordinate members to develop oppositional social identities and oppositional cultural frames of reference. This leads ultimately to what they unanimously identify as the emergence of a people, or peopleshed, which is not to be equated with a racial or ethnic group. Whereas a people may share with racial or ethnic groups the idea of distinctiveness, designation as a people is much more inclusive and broader in scope (see Castle and Kunzler, 1981; Spicer, 1971, 1980). The unique quality of the historical experiences to which a group attaches significant meaning enhances the possibility of its designation as a people. This is possible, Spicer (1980) argues, because each human population has a “historical经验 which no other group has undergone” (p. 327). For example, the Jews experienced the Holocaust; Black Americans experienced slavery. Even though one social group may share a human experience with another social group (e.g., other social groups have been enslaved at various times in the history of the world), no other social group has had a particular historical experience in the same way. Hence, both the uniqueness of the historical heritage of a particular social group and the meaning it attaches to these common identity symbols influence the people’s experience as a people.

Negatively affecting the school performance of Black adolescents at Capital High are the competing pressures of (1) their identity as Black Americans, that is, their sense of peoplehood as I have described it; (2) their desire to be academically successful; and (3) the narrow view of the Black organizational structure in place at the school. Since value or respect these forces equally, they struggle constantly with what they perceive to be unacceptable options: (1) denying their emerging peoplehood by suppressing issues of identity or, alternatively, (2) camouflaging their desire to be academically successful by pretending not to be
doing as well in school or putting forth as much effort as they need to, in order to retain their identity as Black Americans. Neither of these "choices" is appealing to most of the students at Capital High, primarily because their identity is anchored in the fictive kinship system.

Fictive kinship indicates a kinshiplike relationship between persons not related by blood or marriage, who also have some reciprocal social or economic relationship. To capture the essence of the oppositional process within the Black community and between Black and White Americans, I have broadened the anthropological definition of fictive kinship to encompass the self-definition of an entire human population: all Black Americans. This wider definition of fictive kinship conveys the sense of peoplehood or collective social identity evident in the numerous kinship and pseudo-kinship terms that Black Americans use to refer to one another. It is also evident in the unique way Black people structure and define their relationship to one another.

In fact, some scholars, including Abrahams and Gay (1972, p. 204), argue that the use of the Black vernacular among Black students in the school context, for example, is "simply another way of communicating a feeling of identity and brotherhood and thus a substitute for ‘Brother,’ ‘Sister,’ ‘Man’ or ‘Dude’" (see also Holt, 1972). Others, including some anthropologists (see Fordham, 1981, 1988a; B. Williams, 1988), see the use of the vernacular as merely another expression of the fictive kinship system as I am describing it here. Williams, for example, does not abel the social organization which she found in the Black community as a fictive kinship system. Nonetheless, her description of the interactional patterns of the people she studied on Elm Street in Washington, D.C., documents the kind of human interactions which I postulate are characteristic of people who are intensely involved in the fictive kinship system.

The fictive kinship system which exists in the Black community does not separate a personal and nonpersonal self. Indeed, a striking feature of it is its participants' almost unilateral focus on density in their interactions. This suggests that a valued component of group life in the Black community is knowing the members of the community at many levels. In other words, members of the group are judged in "the round" (see Bailey, 1977). Also, as B. Williams (1988) notes, there is a decided passion for "texture . . . preference for depth over breadth, an interest in rich, vivid, personal, concrete, tangled detail" (p. 58). Furthermore, human interactions are replete with "repetition, density, [and] mingling [of] a situation from many facets and angles" (p. 58).

This kind of social interaction contrasts sharply with what is expect-
Peer-proofing Black Adolescents’ Academic Competition: The Traditional Approach

The existing literature contains many examples of how school officials’ tendency to peer-proof Black adolescents’ school achievement patterns by separating them from their peers and other Black people negatively affects their identity as Black people. Major negative consequences are spilled into the practice of placing Black students who perform well on school measures of success into contexts which are dominated by their White peers. Or, alternatively, if they are unable to remove them from a predominantly Black school context, school officials put them in classes which are homogeneously structured, separating them from peers who might benefit from their tutelage were the school’s curriculum organized differently. The mere act of separating Black adolescents from those who are racially similar suggests to them that they are, in some important intellectual and nonintellectual ways, different from other Black people and, with the possible exception of phenotypical (or racial) features, clones of their White peers. Separating Black adolescents and other non-dominant-group children—both spatially and psychologically—from their peers and other adult members of their communities, regardless of its benign intentions, appears to exacerbate the conflict such students experience around academic achievement and school success. This appears to be especially traumatic for Black students born and/or schooled during or immediately following the civil rights movement. The following examples illustrate this claim.

In a strikingly revealing article published in Newsweek, Sylvester Monroe (1987), now a successful journalist, describes the pain, frustration, and loneliness he felt when he was sent away to school so that his academic performance would be peer-proofed.

One of the greatest frustrations of my three years at St. George’s [a predominantly White private school in New School] was that people were always trying to separate me from other black people in a manner strangely reminiscent of a time when slave owners divided blacks into “good Negroes” and “bad Negroes.” Somehow, attending St. George’s made me a good Negro, in their eyes, while those left in Robert Taylor [the housing project where he and his parents lived in Chicago] were bad Negroes or, at least, inferior ones . . . Another St. George’s teacher was surprised at my reaction when he implied that I should be grateful for the opportunity to attend St. George’s, far away from a place like the Robert Taylors. How could I be, I snapped back, when my family, everyone that I cared most about were still there? But you’re different (my emphasis), he continued. That’s why you got out . . . I’m not different, I insis- ted. I’m just lucky enough to have been in the right place at the right time. (p.57)

Gray (1985) offers an equally compelling description of how she internalized the peer-proofing efforts of her schooling. Like many Black students who were born during the transition period, Gray vividly describes the Herculean efforts of her “successful” parents to ensure the academic success of their children and the school’s complicity in their efforts. Moreover, she notes her overcompensation, her efforts to mini-imize her Blackness in a social setting where Blackness is devalued and stigmatized:

During my pompous period, I dealt with my insecurities by wearing a veil of superiority. Except around my family and neighbors, I played the role—the un-black . . . To whites, I tried to appear perfect—I earned good grades and spoke impeccable English, was well-mannered and well-groomed. Poor whites,
However, made me nervous. They seldom concealed their contempt for blacks, especially "upity" ones like me... To blacks, I was all of the above and extremely stuck up. I pretended not to see them on the street, spoke to them only when spoken to and cringed in the presence of blacks being loud in front of whites. The more integrated my Catholic grammar school became, the more uncomfortable I was there. I had heard white parents on TV, grumbling about blacks ruining their schools; I didn't want anyone to think that I, too, might bring down Sacred Heart Academy. So I behaved, hoping that no one would associate me with "them" [other Black Americans]. (pp. 51, 52)

Examples of the high cost incurred by those students who were seeking school success but were unable to "escape" the black community in which they were physically ensconced are equally striking in their implications. It is clear that, in these instances, school officials' efforts at peer-proofing Black students' academic dreams produce even greater conflict and ambivalence because Black adolescents are expected voluntarily to separate themselves from their peers, choosing school norms and standards instead. In the book Brothers, Monroe and Goldmann (1988) describe the case of several friends whose efforts at academic achievement were often unsuccessful. Their description of Billy's problems with school officials and his personal sense of unworthiness is illuminating.

[Billy] was good at school, even exceptional when he tried, but he didn't like going... Billy was a dreamer, and ghetto schools were not about dreaming; they seemed to him designed to discourage hope and freeze the black poor where they were, living in public housing and subsisting on welfare. Billy stayed in school in part to please his mother, though he did not have much faith in success through study. You had to believe in the system to go for that, he thought, and Billy was a precocious unbeliever. He saw cats as having crazy because some honky gave them a B instead of an A, when A's never got them anywhere anyway; they don't put articles in the paper about your last test score, he thought, and they don't reward you in the end for cloistering yourself and being the class egghead that nobody likes no F goin' way. You could see brothers like that years later down on Thirty-ninth Street, the walking wounded, stoned on wine, dope and
disappointment. They had been hellacious students once, guys who really thought they could be doctors or lawyers if they worked hard enough. (pp. 45-46)

Likewise, in a discussion of his painful attempts to live in a public housing project in New York City and attend an elite, unidentified preparatory school, Christian Neira (1988) admits that his sense of who he was seriously damaged his struggle to live in both worlds concurrently. Indeed, in an effort to peer-proof his academic achievement, the preparatory school rendered him a foreigner in both communities:

When trying to live in two different worlds, one is in peril of not belonging to either of them... Being put in a position of changing one's character every morning and afternoon to adapt to two different worlds endangers one's identity... Each of the two cultures considered me a foreigner, one who did not belong. Where my allegiance resided was their question. Neither world [the housing project nor the prep school] fully understood me because these two cultures almost never meet, when they meet on the street, violence and suspicion are their common language. (p. 337)

A common theme in each of the above examples is conflict and ambiguity. Each of these "successful" adults acknowledges that peer-proofing their school performance was internally discomfiting, forcing them to question the value of their racial identity and leading them to question the value of what they were doing and being asked to do even though they continued to do it. At the same time, it is equally clear from their discussions that this separation—either spatially or psychologically—was implicated in their academic success. The following examples from my research site validate the findings reported in the research literature: frequently, Black adolescents' school success is a pyrrhic victory.

Peer-Proofing Black Students' School Success at Capital High: Some Case Studies

Like many high schools in the United States, Capital High School has a tracking system in place. This is the case despite the Wright Decision in 1967, which outlawed tracking as a means of schooling students in the District of Columbia Public School System. Tracking has been found to have serious undesirable consequences on all students' academic perfor-
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mance (see Oakes, 1985; Lauter and Howe, 1970; Rosenbaum, 1976; Rosenfield, 1971). Still it persists, both formally and informally. Its existence at Capital is structurally sanctioned in that the school's curriculum is divided in ways which support the placement of students with similar scores on school measures of success in the same classes. Grouping by homogeneous ability is widely sought by Capital's teachers and other school officials. It is also idealized by many parents in the Capital community.

I came to understand the Capital High School organizational structure and its hegemony in peer-proofing Black students' academic behavior in great detail during my two-year study at the school. The school has a four-tier curricular structure consisting of (1) advanced placement, (2) humanities, (3) the regular curriculum in which most of the students are placed, and (4) a program for students in need of special education. The two special programs were the advanced placement and humanities programs. In those instances when the curriculum areas overlapped, students assigned to the regular, advanced placement, and humanities programs at the school were grouped according to their performance on standardized measures of academic success and were either permitted or required to take the appropriate courses for their skill levels.

One of the major problems confronting the five school counselors was how to convince the students whose test scores and other indicators of academic excellence showed them to be well suited for the advanced placement courses that they should forsweat other options and choose that one instead. Given the nature and structure of the fictive kinship system which exists in the Black community and the Capital community as well, I was not surprised to find school officials lamenting their inability to convince most of the students to take the advanced placement option. The following cases show how the existing track system undermines the students' sense of collectivity and solidarity, acting as a barrier to the desired goal of peer-proofing Black students' willingness to pursue academic excellence.

Among the male students at Capital High School, the traditional means of peer-proofing their academic achievement were striking in their failure. They were also striking in their lack of efficacy in changing these students' perceptions of the value of high academic performance. My first example comes from a high-achieving male; I shall also present an example from the high-achieving females at the school to show the commonalities of their responses.

Wendell is a high-achieving student. He was the valedictorian of his junior high school class. He lives with his mother and sister in a public housing project in the Capital community. His mother and father have been separated since before his first birthday. He was unable to work full-time at this point in his life; therefore, in order to support himself and her two children, she depends on the existing welfare system. Wendell's mother's dependency and the stigma of being supported by welfare living in, as well as the welfare funds they receive from the state, have all made him keenly aware of the devalued status he occupies, both as an individual in the society and as a Black American. At the elementary and junior high school levels, he sought to minimize these influences on his individual aspirations and the status of Black Americans by working very hard in school. More recently, however, he has begun to rethink his commitment to academic excellence and the values he has lived by to this point in his life. He is apparent in his denial of the designation imposed upon him by school officials: Wendell is smart and therefore he is different from his peers. This is best manifested in his assertion that "I got academic [through schooling]—not smart, you know. I don't consider myself smart." (March 25, 1983).

His growing sense of alienation and resistance to school officials' efforts to peer-proof his academic performance were clearly manifested in his unwillingness to become a part of the advanced placement program which existed at the school. It was also evident in his refusal to participate in the ritual in which he was presented to the school's honor society during the second semester of his junior year. He linked his reluctance to participate in the honor society ceremony to the distinction he now makes between being smart and being academic. He also views school officials' efforts to get him involved in the advanced placement (AP) program as a veiled attempt to reinvent him, making him, in his view, a non-Black person.

When people think of smart, like, they know everything. I think people who are academic know some things, but, you know, to a certain point. That's how I think. I would have been in AP, but they kept pressing me... They keep on—like, almost begging me to be in AP... I wouldn't have kept on. They kept on. They almost was trying to make me get in AP. I would have got in, too. Like, when I was doing my grades, they looked, and my grades checked. "Oh, he gonna' be in AP," they was telling me I was going to be in [advanced placement]. I was in junior high [school]. And they was telling
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me. All through the summer, they kept telling me, "You want to
be in AP?" "No, that's all right." "You want to be in AP?" "No, that's all right." So that's why I didn't get in AP. And they—some things they don't let you do in AP, either. You know, like sports-wise and stuff. I don't like that. They almost run your life. (March 23, 1983)

Many of the female students respond in the same or similar ways. Lisa, for example, refuses to become a member of the advanced placement program. However, unlike Wendell, she takes most of the courses that are supposed to be limited to students who are registered in the advanced placement sequence at the school. Lisa loves school and clearly wants to be successful academically. However, like most of the students at Capital High, she perceives the school curriculum and its officials as asking her to make a choice between her identity as a Black American and her desire to be successful academically. These traditional peer-proofing strategies are not productive in her case. Fortunately for her, she has been allowed to compromise the existing track programs: to remain with her peers as a participant in the regular school curriculum while taking courses from the academically more challenging advanced placement component of the curriculum.

Lisa lives with her mother, maternal grandmother and grandfather, and four siblings in a three-bedroom apartment in the Capitol community. All of these adults are gainfully employed: her grandmother works as a domestic for a "rich white lady," her grandfather is a construction worker; her mother is a cashier at one of the major grocery stores in the Washington area. Her mother earns a decent income, but with five children she is barely able to make ends meet. Lisa's mother and father are divorced. Her father lives in Richmond, Virginia, with his new wife. Since her parents' divorce, her father has been able to return to school to obtain the advanced degree he desperately wanted all of his life. He is now an accountant. Lisa insists that despite his good fortune, however, he contributes virtually nothing to his children's support and survival. His lack of attention has left her with ambivalent feelings about him. She admires his school achievements and she now wants to become an accountant like him. On the other hand, she laments his lack of involvement in their (his children's) lives. His response to them has affected her perception of men, making her far more cautious and wary of the motives of the young men she meets.

Like most of the students at Capital High, Lisa is convinced that the way out of the pervasive, sticky poverty which characterizes her life is academic success. Her family's impoverished living conditions have made owning a house a top priority in her life. In many ways, she equates success with the ability to own a house. Like most of the high-achieving females in the ethnographic component of the study, her family's impoverished lifestyle is at the base of her motivation for academic excellence. Consequently, more than many of her peers, she is severely torn between her desire to achieve success as defined by the larger society and her efforts to retain her identity as a Black American. At the same time, however, she criticizes her peers for refusing to immerse themselves in the academic programs offered by the school, noting that the biggest problem at Capital High is the almost complete absence of "competition" at the school. "Cause, you know, everybody—no body study. You know, if you have somebody to compete with, that's what I want. I'm serious. I mean, you know, they study a lot. I'm talking about, like, everybody, you know, you're competing real hard, you'll want to do it. But I want to do it, 'cause I want to get out of here" (March 10, 1983).

Ironically, however, when Lisa observed this desired competitive spirit in Mr. McGriff, the principal at Capital, she described him as being too preoccupied with work.

All he think is work, work, work. I mean, you know he won't give me breaks. You know, I'm sitting at the lunch—I mean, at the cafeteria, breakfast time, I'm just getting in, he's going to say, touching me, "You could be studying there!" I think he cares about the students, but in a way, you know, he be comparing us to White folks. Like he'll say—when I was in the library, he said, "You all should be in class. That's why you all don't know nothing now. You see White folks are already ahead of you." I mean, he don't have to throw them in there, he could just say, "You're always behind." I mean, he don't have to throw that in there. (March 10, 1983)

Mr. McGriff's decision to "throw that in there," that is, "You see White folks are already ahead of you," was virtually all Lisa heard. Comparing Black people with White people in 1983 at Capital High was totally unacceptable. Unsurprisingly, if an individual desired to lose all credibility among the students at Capital, comparing Black people with White people in an unfavorable manner was the ultimate "fair" pass. Mr. McGriff and many of the other school administrators appeared to be completely unaware of how totally debilitating this strategy was. They frequently resorted to this unfavorable racial comparison in an effort to
peer-proof the students' academic performance. Because most school officials use their own high school experience to guide their behaviors, they refuse to consider or acknowledge that today's teenagers are coming to adulthood in a cultural context which is drastically different from the one they inherited as young adults.

Lisa's anger at Mr. McGriff's insensitivity was unbridled. Her facial features became distended and her beautiful brown eyes brimmed with tears as she recalled the painful incident, more than six months later. Her voice thick with emotion, she continued: "In a way, I mean, but, you [we] know, you [we] already know they're ahead. But why rub it in? I mean, you [he] could say—he could have left that "white folks already ahead of you" out. He could have said, "You're already behind. It's time for us to catch up," or something like that. He didn't have to—he threw them... [in there]" (formal interview, March 10, 1985).

Lisa's recollection of how demigrated she felt when the principal of the school compared the students with White people typifies most of the students' response to school officials' efforts to reinvent them. However, unlike many of the other students—high achievers and underachievers, Lisa is an extremely mild-mannered person. Her ability to endure abusive and unkind treatment from her peers, who often teased her because her desire to succeed in school was repeatedly "discovered," was unparalleled. For example, she bravely withstood their efforts to dissuade her from the long bus ride she took every Saturday morning to George Washington University, where she participated in vocabulary-building class and accounting classes, under the auspices of the Upward Bound Program. They also teased her about the number of hours she spent studying every evening. She appeared unfazed by their behaviors and endured their teasing good-naturedly. However, in reporting her reaction to what Mr. McGriff said to her, it was transparently clear that she shared her peers' concerns regarding the school's efforts to reinvent them. Furthermore, the intensity of emotions displayed in recalling the incident suggests a passionate desire to perpetuate this approach in trying to motivate Black adolescents to increase their academic effort in school.

Regrettably, many of the teachers and administrators at the school discount the students' strong resistance to established school policies and practices, frequently attributing the observed dissonance to personal inadequacies shared by the students rather than to institutionally induced responses caused by the desegregation and denigration of African American people, their beliefs and values. Moreover, because the students' reaction to schooling differs substantively from the response which was prevalent among Black students during the historical peri-

ods predating the civil rights movement, it is judged to be inappropriate. Moreover, school officials tend to see these student responses as merely the reactions of adolescents who are being unfairly evaluated in their roles as uniquely adolescent. By accepting this view of the students' behavior, they are able to discount their reactions without feeling that to behave in this way is professionally irresponsible. Also, by responding in this manner, school officials are able to deny cultural or racial significance in the patterned responses they observe and can then act as if it is just "natural" for all adolescents—Black, White, Purple, or whatever—to behave in this manner.

**Peer-Proofing the Academic Curriculum: Some Alternatives**

Given the limitations of the existing organizational context, how might school officials at Capital High School increase the number of Black adolescents who are willing to seek school success? In other words, how might school officials peer-proof school success at Capital High? In a way which motivates the students to stretch their capabilities? As an anthropologist, I first sought answers to this question from the fieldwork in which I was engaged. I then sought to buttress my emerging answers by looking at several case studies at the secondary and postsecondary levels.

First, however, it is important to emphasize that Capital High is not now, nor was it at the time of my study, engaged in innovative curricular modifications which would likely expand the number of achievers at the school. Rather, as in most high schools in America, a traditional curriculum with some minor modifications is the modus operandi. Since this was and is the reality at Capital, large numbers of students at the school are less academically successful than they could be if the school's curriculum were arranged differently and Black students' life and culture were incorporated into the seams of the schooling process.

My findings suggest that the following elements might mitigate Black adolescents' school performance if they were included in the school curriculum and revised organizational structure: (1) repetition as an important element in school learning; (2) density in school sanctioned interaction styles; (3) a gender concern for the student's classroom interactions and the structuring of schooling outcomes, and (4) group sanctioned learning.

As I have suggested in my discussion of the fictive kinship system in the Black community, Black Americans appear to value knowing
each other in what Bailey (1977) has labeled "the round." His use of the term suggests that a strong value is attached to knowing the individual at many levels, that in order to understand the individual, one must possess information in excess of that which is publicly known. Knowing only that a particular individual is the principal of Capital High School, for example, is woefully inadequate for understanding him or even sparking the students' interest in him as an object of interest. If students knew other, less visible aspects of his life, their willingness to study Mr. McGriff would be enhanced. Requiring that they know other aspects of his persona—for example, that he was a track star in college, that he broke several college records, that he is married and the father of several children—would enable them to make use of their cultural propensity to value subjects and objects in "the round" (Bailey, 1977). 

One could extrapolate from this orientation a way of presenting school subject matter. As B. Williams' (1988) analysis indicates, attention to detail or background is one way of getting Black adolescents more interested in school-sanctioned learning. For example, Black students' interest in math might be enhanced by broadening the focus on algebraic formulas to include information about who invented the particular formula and also aspects of that individual's life that might have led to the person's willingness to risk going beyond the then extant knowledge boundaries. There might also be a greater emphasis on animate rather than inanimate materials in order to fuel the students' interest. The most important goal in teaching any subject matter should be increasing the students' willingness to put forth effort in order to master it. Consequently, if biographical details and other personal aspects of the inventor's life will inspire or motivate students' interests, these strategies should be sanctioned by school officials. 

This is also a way of incorporating what I am labeling "texture" into the existing school curriculum. In many ways texture in Black people's interactions is responsible for the density in human interactions which was discussed above. As I view it, texture suggests the existence of an organizational composition which is multi-dimensional in its valutative feature. Indeed, in Black Americans' fictive kinship system, texture implies a multilayered approach to life, emphasizing many stops and starts, beginnings and endings. It minimizes attention to linearly defined realities and broadens what it emphasizes instead is attention to the structure and vivid detail of human life, consistently marking and analyzing minute inconsistencies and contradictions. 

The efficacy of group-sanctioned learning as a way of peer-proofing Black students' achievement ethos can be illustrated with two examples from both the precollege and college contexts. The findings reported by Mr. Green in New York (see Bishop, 1986) and Professor Treisman at the University of California at Berkeley (see Treisman, 1985) indicate how powerful a tool peer pressure can be in promoting academic achievement among Black adolescents. 

Green changed the identity of Jordon Mott Junior High School from one well below the norm on attitude of academic achievement to one of the few schools where Black students outperformed most of their peers in comparable schools in New York City. 

He was able to do this by organizing and implementing a collective or group-centered ethos in the classroom context. His modifications enabled him to peer-proof academic achievement at the school. Essentially, the changes Green adopted at Mott Junior High support "self-realization through personal effort in service to the group," a latent yet powerful component of Black Americans' idealized cultural norms. This approach is not widely stressed in the American public school system, but, as Green so astutely observes, it is the predominant ideal in the status mobility system within the Black community, at least among school-age children. Consequently, in order to raise the school achievement pattern of the students at the urban school where he is the principal, Green defined the conventional wisdom which appears to be operating in the larger society: success is gained by destroying ligatures or social attachments to family and other subdivisions within the Black community. 

According to Green, "You have to make the kid want to be good" (cited in Bishop, 1986, p. 43). In other words, schools have to build on Black students' culturally learned predisposition to seek "self-realization through personal effort in service to the group" in order to raise their level of interest in school as well as to motivate students to put forth greater effort. Mr. Green insists that the most important prerequisites in getting Black students to put forth greater effort in school is the fact that it is patently clear that he believes that lack of effort is what is at the base of Black students' underachievement in the school context. 

One author described how Mr. Green's curriculum modifications were influential in peer-proofing academic achievement at Jordon Mott:
The student player is given rewards based on the performance of the class/team. Each of Green's classes must earn a certain number of points academically before any of its members are allowed to attend a basketball game much less compete in one. Class trips and parties are similarly earned on the basis of academic performance and attendance. A complex master schedule is drawn up at the beginning of each term, pitting all of the classes in each grade against one another in good old head-to-head, in-your-face competition. Reading and math are the games, and the desk-to-desk combat is fierce. The won-lost results and the standings are posted and followed keenly. (Bishop 1986, p. 43)

Bishop (1986) insists that Green would have been dismissed from his job as principal of the school were it not for the "astounding results achieved from this approach to learning at Mott Junior High School":

[Green's] students were drawn from two ordinary [elementary] schools that are ranked near the bottom of the barrel (Nos. 574 and 614 out of 623 public schools) in reading skills. By the time his students leave (after eighth grade) they are reading a full grade above their own level, a reflection of Mott's impressive ranking—in the top 11% of all city public schools. (p. 44)

Bishop's discussion of how Mr. Green was able to improve the academic performance of Black students at Mott Junior High School argues well for the importance of both incorporating the cultural history of the students in the school curriculum and minimizing a perception on the part of the students that they must "choose" between their identity as Black people and their desire for academic success.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Green assured me that what I had read about his school was accurate: the students at Mott were outperforming students in schools similar to Mott in socioeconomic factors; they are also outperforming students in schools that are dissimilar in socioeconomic factors. He went on to tell me that his major problem is limiting the excitement of the students and their teachers. At Mott, each class is divided into four teams, with each team balanced for ability. What Green is interested in promoting is academic motivation and effort on the part of the students. The best way to accomplish this goal, he maintains, is to have the curriculum materials structured in such a way that the students come to view what is taught in school and their racial identity as inseparable. If Black students come to see schools and schooling in this way, they also see academic achievement and effort as unavoidable without, at the same time, violating their sense of who they are as Black people. On the other hand, if curriculum materials are structured in such a way that Black students come to see the materials as designed to separate them from other Black people, academic effort and motivation will suffer. Unfortunately, in Green's view, this is how most Black students view the traditional academic structure. Consequently, instead of viewing the school curriculum as supporting and promoting their identity as Black people, many contemporary Black students perceive it as attempting to strip them of that identity.

A second, even more powerful example of how it is possible for school officials to peer-proof academic learning comes from the Mathematics Department at the University of California at Berkeley. Professor Uri Treisman is intervening in the lives of Black freshmen students who indicate by taking calculus their desire to be involved in "name professions." He is currently reporting the results of an extensive six-year study of these students' response to group-centered learning. Treisman (1985) has the data to support his claims:

Most of the students I interviewed in 1975 and 1976 did not succeed at the University (of California at Berkeley). Among those who had come from predominantly minority, inner city high schools, there were validators and leaders of church and youth groups, individuals who were the pride of their communities. Their decision to pursue advancement through schooling had placed them in the limelight, separating them from the majority of students around them. Their rejection of non-academic routes to advancement had been so clear, their reinforcement from both family and community for their decision to pursue an elite higher education was so strong, that once at the University they felt there was no turning back. (p. 21)

Professor Treisman repeatedly notes that the Black students who came to Berkeley during this time period did not lack academic motivation and high expectations from their parents and home communities. Indeed, he insists that there was tremendous pressure to succeed. Nevertheless, most of these students failed the prerequisite mathematics and science courses mandated by the university for those persons seeking careers in the natural sciences. He attributes their massive failure to (1) a hostile environment—the university; (2) the lack of a supportive, academically focused peer group; and (3) an unwillingness on the part of
these former high school achievers to seek help when they needed it. Surprisingly, Treisman notes that this failure rate was not limited to Black students who had come to Berkeley from inner-city schools. “Even for many black students who had attended academically reputable, predominantly white high schools” (p.27), failure in the freshman year math and science courses was the rule rather than the exception.

Even though these students were relatively well-prepared academically, the pace and intensity of competitive first-year mathematics and science courses coupled with the unexpected social isolation they encountered prevented many of them from getting their bearings or developing adequate study habits; thus, few did well in these courses. (p.22)

In a concerted effort to reverse this dismal retention rate, in 1976 the University of California at Berkeley developed the Professional Development Program (PDP) for minority students. PDP is a “faculty-sponsored honors program for minorities and women, designed, in the words of one of its founders, ‘to produce a Nobel Prize winner’” (p.23).

The success of the program is embedded in its focus on the strengths of the students rather than remediation of their apparent weaknesses. Hence, the students are taught to view PDP as an honors program, with success being dependent upon their willingness to collaborate with each other. This was the critical strategy necessary to change the achievement pattern of Black math and science students at the University of California-Berkeley. More importantly, Treisman’s findings suggest that, when Black students are taught using a group-centered approach to school learning as the backdrop, their performance on school measures of success rises. Indeed, when this approach was utilized at UCB, Treisman reports that the Black student participants outperformed a similar group of Asian students. This is revolutionary! He indicates that he is now transplanting this approach to the teaching of calculus at other universities, including Stanford and UCLA. He is also looking at how other practitioners at the high school level who are willing and able can use the cultural orientation of Black and other nondominant students to enhance the academic effort of such students at that level.

Noting that Black students who are selected to attend the University of California at Berkeley are obviously among the best prepared in the country, Professor Treisman goes on to point out that at predominantly White schools—like UCB—with a minuscule Black student population, Black high achievers, like the ones studied at Capital High in Washington, D.C., come with a distorted sense of individualism or self-reliance as the way to make it in college. Indeed, in a conversation with Professor Treisman, he assured me that his observations and study of Black students at UCB over the past six years indicate that these very bright Black adolescents’ sense of self-reliance has gone awry, leading to a stronger tendency on their part to work in isolation, because they view this as the way to “make it.” They have internalized and distorted the peer-proofing messages supported by their high school teachers and other school officials. This is especially true among the male students. In short, his findings at UCB parallel the findings of my study at Capital High in that the high-achieving students worked without the total support and sanction of their peers. Indeed, as many of the high achievers at Capital High erroneously envisioned it, people who are successful in America achieve that status primarily because of some unique ability they have, and therefore if they desire to duplicate this feat, they must demonstrate that they too possess unique skills or at least skills which are commonly shared with others like themselves, but at a unique level. Hence, they become enamored of the notion of individualism and independence and working to prove that they are not dependent on someone else for advancement. Because the Black students at Berkeley were generally the high achievers in their classes at the high school level, they had accepted, wholesale, the individualistic ethos promulgated as the way to achieve school success in America. Consequently, it was difficult to convince them of the value of group-centered learning, of the value of depending on their peers for support and collaboration.

However, at a predominantly White institution like UCB, Professor Treisman found that this approach to schooling and achievement was dysfunctional for Black high achievers. Their unwillingness to seek support from either their White peers, whom they did not trust, or their Black peers, with whom they socialized but with whom they did not study, was disastrous for academic achievement.

Essentially, what each of these two examples suggests is the impact and power of the group-centered ethos in Black students’ school performance, with the group being the most important variable in both academic excellence and in underachievement. But since there are virtually no school-sanctioned efforts to peer-proof academic performance at schools like Capital High, it is not surprising to learn that when students from other academically similar schools enter college (e.g., Berkeley), they are extremely leery of a reversal of what has been drummed into
them for most of their precollege schooling: "Don't worry about what other students are doing in school. Outperform them and you will be successful." Ironically, what the New York, Capital High, and Berkeley examples demonstrate, however, is that policymakers and school officials might begin the effort to peer-proof Black adolescents' school performance by teaching them to work in collaboration with each other in order to maximize their human potential.

Conclusions

School officials' traditional efforts to peer-proof Black adolescents' school performance have been largely unsuccessful primarily because in seeking to peer-proof the Black child to fit into the culturally different world of the larger society, school people tend to make him or her a misfit in both contexts. Documentation of these outcomes was presented in the case materials of Gray, Neira, and Monroe, and in the Capital High case study data of Wendell and Lisa. All of them acknowledge that they have experienced some overt and covert pressure to separate themselves from their less successful peers. As case studies, Wendell and Lisa are typical of how high-achieving Black adolescents at Capital High respond to school officials' efforts to peer-proof their academic performance. They are unquestionably torn between their desire to be successful as defined by the larger society and their desire to retain their sense of who they are as Black people. These ambivalent feelings are evident in their refusal to become official members of the advanced placement program. Although there are many ways in which they are similar, it is important to stress briefly that there are also many gender-specific differences in the students' response to school officials' efforts to peer-proof their academic performance, differences which enable a larger number of the female students to achieve school success.

Nevertheless, as the data from the research studies at Berkeley and the junior high school in the Bronx show, it is possible to greatly improve the academic performance of all Black students in ways which are unparalleled in the history of Black people in America, without a major overhaul of the existing school structure. These cases in the research literature also indicate a need to revise and modify the existing school curriculum in a way which demonstrates to Black adolescents that they are living up to the idealized norms of Black people in America. As each of these programs suggests, making Black students dependent upon each other for success and survival is the best way to peer-proof their academic performance. Moreover, as I view it, by peer-proofing Black students' academic competition in this manner, we are strengthening not only the Black community but also America at large, an outcome which is not to be casually dismissed during this period in American history.
Chapter 2. Mapping Terrain of Power: Student Cultural Knowledge Versus Classroom Knowledge

References

Notes and References


Chapter 3. Peer-Proofing Academic Competition Among Black Adolescents: "Acting White" Black American Style

Notes
1. I have developed this idea elsewhere (see Fordham, 1989). As I view it, reinventing racial identity among Black and other non-dominant group students is a systematic attempt to transform their racial and cultural identity in ways which minimize their connectedness to the Black community. Essentially, as schools are currently structured, the core curriculum and other institutionalized practices in the school context are designed to make Black students Black in skin color only. All other aspects of the school curriculum are intended to separate them from those persons who resemble them racially and/or culturally.
2. Capital High and all other proper names are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the school and its officials as well as those members of the community who voluntarily and involuntarily participated in this ethnographic study.
3. Elsewhere (Fordham, 1989) I have postulated the existence of a three-tier historical time frame in the life of people of African descent in America. I have noted that the first 350 years of Black people’s history in this country can be accurately described as the period when they were forbidden to “act White.” I have labeled the second stage of this time period—the time focus of my study of Black adolescents’ school success—as a transition period or the period when Black Americans are compelled to “act White” in order to be successful. This historical period began about 1866 and ended about 1896. It is also the period immediately following the culmination of the civil rights movement. This is important, in my view, because the civil rights movement wrought changes in the internal organizational structures of both the Black and White communities (see Blasingame, 1985; Sitkoff, 1981). Inevitably, although some social barriers were dismantled during this historical period (e.g., legalized segregation), others emerged—maintaining many of the practices which were prevalent during the period of slavery. I am postulating that the existence of these socially unacceptable barriers, cloaked in the guise of equal opportunities for all, undermines Black adolescents’ school achievement efforts. I have labeled the third and final period of Black people’s history in this country as a period of cultural diversity or what some people are beginning to describe as “neo-segregation.” The true shape and texture of this historical period is not clear, and hence I simply identify and label it. We must await its clear shape and configuration.

4. By “repetition,” I do not mean the mindless drill and practice usually associated with the curriculum offered lower-track students. What I am suggesting instead is recognition of a cultural proponent among Black people to value richness and detail over parsimony and breadth in their interactions (see B. Williams, 1985). Hence, in the development of a core curriculum, greater attention will be given to how to present information so that the vividness and richness of phenomena under study are not sacrificed in favor of breadth and blandness.

5. Bailey’s (1977) claims are not specifically addressed to the members of the Black community. Much of his work was done in India. Nonetheless, his theoretical position appears to be applicable to the Black community in America.

6. I am not claiming that Black Americans have a monopoly on this phenomenon. I am simply trying to point out how I learned about Black Americans’ preferred interactional style might be used to enhance the school performance of a larger number of them. Also, I am trying to show how their preferred style of interacting with individuals might be used in helping them to better handle the school’s greater emphasis on nonhuman subject matter. The fact that students at Capital value richness, vividness, and striking details in their human interactions is important in the development and implementation of core curricula.

7. I am not an educator. In the tradition of social and cultural anthropolo-


Chapter 4.
Disempowering White Working-Class Females: The Role of the High School

Notes
1. Ellen Israel Rosen makes this point clearly when she suggests that women factory workers "choose" such jobs in order to earn more money to help fulfill their traditional responsibilities of caring for a family. See Rosen, 1967.
2. This is not to deny the very important role of the state itself in the perpetuation of certain forms of gender relations. Change in gender relations is not simply a matter of changed consciousness, of course. See Connell, 1989.
3. Granit and Steeter (1966) come to a similar conclusion based on their autography, as do Steinert and Solomon (1966).
4. Twenty-five students are in the "advanced class." This refers to a college preparatory sequence of courses.
5. I am not suggesting here that female teachers have nothing to say. I am simply suggesting that they do not have an articulated and coherent voice (or voices) within this working-class school. In so arguing, I do not mean to imply that there is anything innate in the notion of "female voice."
6. This occurred in other ways as well. Applicants pointed out that they "lived in Freeway all their lives," that they "currently own property there," that they "worked in Freeway in summer recreation," and so forth.
7. I have argued this point at length in Chapter 5 of Working Class Without Work (1960).

References