THROUGH STUDENTS' EYES: USING PHOTOGRAPHY TO EXPLORE AT-RISK
MIDDLE SCHOOLERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AND SCHOOL

by

Heather M. Britt

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum and Instruction

Charlotte

2011

Approved by:

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Dr. Jeanneine Jones

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Dr. Richard Lambert

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Dr. Roslyn Arlin Mickelson

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Dr. Tom Reynolds

ABSTRACT

HEATHER M. BRITT. Through students' eyes: using photography to explore at-risk middle schoolers' perceptions of self and school. (Under the direction of DR. JEANNEINE JONES)

Everyone goes to school but everyone does not have the same experience of schooling. Assumptions about the schooling experience affect policy decisions as well as the way schools are structured and operate. Freire (1970) reminds us that all students are creators of culture and have the right to name their worlds. They also have a right to use their critical capacities to tell those in power what is working and what is not when it comes to school. Yet how do we create a system that allows students access to the ears and eyes of those in power with whom they can share their experiences? Furthermore, how can we convince those in power that these student experiences are valuable and in fact essential to the discourse on school reform?

The literature on dropouts, particularly since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), has become more and more limited to at-risk categories and lacks the voices and experiences of students in schools. At the same time the dropout statistics for minorities in particular are staggering (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Schott, 2010). Less than 50% of black males graduate in the United States each year (Schott, 2010). Terms like "dropout factories" have become commonplace in discussing schools that produce more dropouts than graduates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

This research study intends to provide a glimpse into the lives of labeled at-risk middle school students through photography, writing and interview. This dissertation was grounded in a critical feminist framework and employed a qualitative methodology with

an ethnographic case study design (Merriam, 1988). The primary data collection tool was Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice is a community and participatory action research methodology developed by Wang and Burris (1997) that "uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing knowledge and expertise" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). The purpose of this study was to explore self-image and schooling through the eyes of students so that we can better understand what school means to them by placing them as the knower, at the center of the study. This study relied upon students using cameras and words to capture and share their views on self and their schooling experiences.

The students were volunteers in an after school enrichment program and were also serving long-term suspensions from their homeschools for serious discipline violations. These students are considered high risk by their school district for dropping out, truancy, violence and criminal behavior. The data is presented primarily in photos with writing and interview excerpts. There are three stories or case studies, which highlight the individual voices of students as well as holistic themes, which tell the collective story of this bounded group (Glesne, 2006).

There were four main findings that emerged from the data the students and I collected: 1.) Overall, this group of labeled at-risk students do not see themselves as at-risk or bad or as future dropouts. Instead they see themselves as active, positive, smart and unique individuals. Furthermore, there is little difference between how they see themselves and how they think school sees them. However, there is a struggle to reconcile their unique personalities with the rigid rules and conformity expected of them at school. This struggle is represented throughout how they see and experience school.

They show their resistance through acts that are misread as insubordination by teachers but to them are expressions of self. 2) School is Boring. 3) School is dominated by Mean Teachers and 4) Students Break the Boredom in various ways in order persist in school. These acts create a negative cycle of suspension, expulsion and disconnection from school.

The findings give voice to the complexity of the schooling experience for this group as shared with me during the course of the after school program. What we collectively found sheds light on how students see school and gives researchers, teachers, administrators and policymakers hope. How these students see themselves is very different from the way that school has classified them. They do not see themselves as at-risk, dropouts or as potential dropouts. They have specific and positive dreams for their educational futures. At the same time, how they see school, sheds light on the possible outcomes of their educational paths. It tells us why many students would leave school before graduation even when they have good intentions of graduating.

The findings provide a window of opportunity for dropout intervention with middle school students. They also suggest how educators, policymakers and researchers can increase student engagement and school holding power through engaging, relevant pedagogy, creating an ethic of care and transformative leadership.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To JJ who never left my side during this beautiful and challenging process. Thank you for gluing me back together when the time came. Thank you for being my editor, chair, inspiration, professor, coach, cheerleader, mentor and mom. I can only hope that as I go forward from here that my work will do justice to your legacy of caring about the kids above all else. Thank you to the whole Jones family for sharing JJ with me during this time. I know you heard more than you ever wanted or needed to about my project. You can have your mom back now. Be nice and don't fight too much, kids.

To my family who saw little of me during this process but still took good care of my heart, mind, and body. I felt your encouragement all the way—near and far. Lin, you really read the whole thing! I am proud to be the first doctor in the family but not the last (hint, hint). I love you each of you.

To my dissertation committee who allowed me to be creative, thoughtful and true to my vision and voice. Thank you for your support, professionalism and wisdom.

To my girls (plus Vic!), my urban educators for change, my confidantes, and my inspirations. Bethie, Quoy, Kerr, and Lo. Thank you for those pushes when I needed them and those hugs when I needed them. This road would have been too lonely without each of you. You each are so profoundly powerful in your work. Together we rock the world. I see the light.

To Mrs. Niedl, my catcher in the rye. Thank you for noticing. Thank you for asking. Thank you for breaking the rules. Thank you for inviting me to eat with your family. You are what all teachers should aspire to be.

To all those friends who walked my schooling path with me, especially the early part at STA and Mercy. So if you know those schools, then you know just what I mean. You are all here in these pages.

To the "doctoral students" who wrote the dropout prevention grant that made this project possible: Laurie Garo, Sequoya Mungo and Beth Salyers. We were an amazing collaborative effort of brains and creativity we had to write a dropout prevention grant. Who knew anyone would fund this crazy thing with cameras?! Thank you for staying the path of this project even when it got very ugly and difficult. I know that you did it for me and for this paper.

Thank you Ash, Quoy, Bethie, Alexis and JJ for showing up to teach each week and for putting up with my pre-break insanity. Thank you for letting me work this out and for being the most amazing teaching team on the planet. On those moments when I stepped back and breathed, I looked around the room and saw the kids with each of you and felt so proud and empowered. You have blessed this project.

Thank you to Ms. T who had the key to every door, the number to every phone, the bus for every ride and the best interest of our kids first. I literally couldn't have done this project without your generosity of time and heart.

To all of my students since leaving Harvard. There are too many to mention but I will name a few. I am a teacher because of you. Thank you for showing me how to become the woman who could finally do this work. In Poughkeepsie: Grace, Keisha and Kiandra. You taught me how not to judge. In Westport: Lisa, Jenny, and the whole documentary class. You taught me to be flexible and generous. In Telluride: Pagie, Sarah, Los, JD, Ian, Jesse, Ryan, Lane. You taught me how to climb mountains, ski (sort of),

and travel in a van without losing it. In Charlotte: Eric, Gracie, D'Lisa, Lauren, Claire, Kat, Denzel, Camille, Sock. You taught me how to put these pieces together.

And to the students in this project. I have to thank you for making my life richer and more beautiful. This is your project, your faces, your stories, and your lens. This is your paper and should be your degree. I thank you for all your courage, for showing up each Tuesday and Thursday, for being patient, and for being so honest. Your stories are what teaching is about. Thank you for reminding me what true courage means and for teaching me that your questions are way better than mine. I love each of you with all my heart and plan on attending each of your graduation ceremonies. Keep seeing the world in your way and sharing what you see with your cameras, your mics, your poems, and your words.

Thank you for teaching me that we *all* deserve forgiveness, fairness and second chances. And because I know each of you so well, you each get a shout out below.

To AS, this is mostly your paper. You should give lots of credit to your mom for that. I can't thank you enough for inspiring me to tell your story and for being so honest with me. I hope you know that you are beyond brilliant and that the world is there for you. Choose those battle wisely, okay? In other words, sometimes it's okay to not say everything, but never lose you. (PS: Go Sox!).

To CW, thanks for keeping me honest and reminding me when I need to do stuff that I promise. Your monkey series will always make me laugh. You are a true leader. Lead for good things.

To DeMc, you left early but you made a great impression on me. Thanks for staying awake in school for the first time in years. Hope I had something to do with that.

To DM, you never said a lot but your camera always did. I love your photo of your mother painting. I hope you give it to her. I'm glad you are coming along with me for a fresh start. We need to start working on your engineering path.

To JA, your bravery astounds me. Thank you for telling me that there are things that still scare you. We will get a burger in Harvard Square one day soon.

To KA, as if you need me to sing your praises. Okay. I will. You spin gold with your words and your voice. Your pictures too! You are an artist who will change the world. How will you change it? Will you change it for good? I think you will. Dare to do that.

To MG, you spit fire for sure. You gotta be you. What can I say? Love it! Thank you for making me laugh and for always be true to you. We should all do this more often.

To MR, your photos tell a million stories and your interviews made me crack up. You are so insightful and en-thu-sias-tic. Don't ever stop standing on desks. (You know that is a metaphor, right?)

To NI, you have the eye of an artist. You are creative and sweet. Every time you said, "Hello, Ms. Heather!" you made my day. Thank you for teaching me about taking responsibility and for sharing your stories of Florida. Stay on the right path and make me proud. I'll be right there with you.

To VM, your smiling face is perfect. It makes me happy every time I see it. Your energy is wonderful. Do let anyone discourage that or your super way with words. You made writing this paper easy because every single day you taught me something new.

You are under my wing for good, so you better get used to it. That means you are not getting rid of me!

To QJ, you knew exactly what would cause things to go wrong for you. If only we could figure out how to take the spontaneity, crunk and originality and make it work.

To ZL, my only girl, my perfect attender, my daughter. There is no one more honest than you. You are brave and courageous; do you know just how much? Child, please! You literally survive floods. The old ways are gone, like you said. So when I need that attorney, I'm calling you. Use your words to fight for things that really matter. It'll be okay. Oh, by the way. You're coming with me. I love you. There are more salads, car washes, and musicals in our future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"What children very much want to do…is to find out what is happening (in their world) and relate what they have learned to themselves and others" (Coles, 1997, p. 250).

Stealing Snacks

It is difficult to tell about the significance of this project without briefly telling my own experiences with school. While no school official identified me as at-risk, the fact that I showed up every day was nothing short of miraculous. My home appeared functional and normal on the outside but was volatile and uncertain on the inside. I have early memories of school days where I got myself up, found some food, grabbed my jacket and walked to school, all without seeing an adult at home. The first adult I saw was the teacher on courtyard duty who held the door open for me when it was time to come in.

Why would I willingly make my way to school every day? No one was yelling at me to go, encouraging me, threatening me to go. Was it that being at home was simply less appealing? Maybe. But there was something that drew me to school; I had a connection that kept me going back.

What I lacked at home spilled over into school. I remember being called into the principal's office in first grade and asked about stealing snacks from the pockets of my

classmates. The charges were true, but the causes were never identified. Here is how it went: Sometime during the morning block I would ask to use the bathroom and with big wooden key in hand, would sneak down the hall reaching into the coat pockets of my classmates, feeling around for that slippery Ziploc bag of Cheezits or potato chips. Then when snack time arrived, I would pull out "my" snack and feign great surprise that it was just like Sandy's snack that was missing. The whole thing made sense to me. I was hungry. Sandy's mom would pack her two snacks the next day. Mine would never pack one.

My snack-stealing incident tells me that the *schooling experience* is much more than books and grades, and that schools need to dig deeply to understand what motivates student behavior and attachment to school. I was told that stealing was wrong, yet I wasn't asked why I took the snacks. All I wanted was to share what was happening in my life both in school and out, to have someone hear me, to affirm me and to maybe even fix me. Yet had they asked, I am not sure I would have been able to explain, maybe out of shame or maybe out of an inability to put it into words. I was, after all, a first grader.

My attachment to school sustained my academic success through elementary and middle school. School was snacks. School was mom. School was family. School was safety. School became success and who I was. I continued to attend, to do what teachers asked (listen, read, write, talk, not talk), and I created a self that was successful and stable outside of an unsuccessful and unstable home.

In high school I came to the realization that what was happening at home was both wrong and not normal. Anger bubbled up in me and I had thoughts of quitting or leaving school (and life). A caring teacher who took the time to ask and listen sustained

my connection to school. She allowed me to express myself in stories and met with me after school to talk about them. This teacher invited me to her home where I shared dinner with her family. She also took me to my first Ala-teen Meeting, which helped me make sense of what was going on with my parents. This relationship was not dictated by the school mission, yet they were what maintained my attendance, my success, my engagement, and eventually my graduation and acceptance to college.

So what did school mean to me? Not books and grades. School meant safety and possibility. If an educational researcher had come to school to study what was going on, it is quite possible she would have only seen a student sitting in her desk following the rules. She could not have see school through my eyes. To me-- and to many students who look like me and many who do not-- what kept me coming to school was not school in an academic sense, but school as so much more.

It is not surprising that I became a teacher or that my research topic places students as the "knowers" -- the central players in the story. My success as a teacher stems from my belief that school is more than books and grades. This belief has colored every aspect of my teaching, from how I structure my classroom to how I talk with students and parents. Through my ten plus years of teaching I have seen that students who leave school early, fade out, and drop out are not experiencing school in a way that supports them. It seems pretty simple. But how do we encourage engagement, foster connection and discourage alienation? I do not know a formula, but I do know from my own experience and classroom teaching that students will tell us if we listen.

The students in this dissertation study have had a series of negative experiences in school that have led to suspension and placement in an alternative school. Some argue

that their bad decisions have brought them there. Others argue, that they have been pushed out of their home schools. Still others contend that the very structure of school has created this outcome. This dissertation seeks to provide some insight and solutions. Understanding what brought them there is part of the solution. We must also look forward to their educational futures. The questions become: How did we (collectively) get here? What can be done at this point to re-engage these students who are clearly "winnowing" (Hodgson, 2007)? How can we ensure that they are provided an education or what the President refers to as "a pre-requisite to opportunity" (Obama, 2009)?

Seeing and Decisions

As Smyth (2006) aptly points out:

> If we want to really understand phenomena like 'dropping out' or 'disengaging' from school…then we need to access the meanings of these concepts and excavate them from the inside outwards…from the existential experiences of young people, and from there, begin to construct more feasible reform platforms from which to pursue forms of school organization, culture and leadership that acknowledge those important realities. (p. 288)

What educators, policy makers, and leaders do not fully understand is what it is like for students to go to school (Ayers, Ladson-Billings, Michie, Noguera, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2006). From this mismatch in understanding develops a mismatch in school programming and policy that fails to meet the needs of many students, particularly minority students (Noguera, 2003; Orfield, et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2004; Schott, 2010). This mismatch, coupled with historic and systematic discrimination and the inequity of resources, facilities, access to high quality teachers and curriculum, may account for the

excessive dropout rates for minority students in this country (Kozol, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Schott, 2010).

I was lucky that my schooling experience happened to meet my emotional needs and thus created a connection to school for me. Yet more than luck is needed to ensure that this happens regularly for more students. All students deserve systematic and scaffolded programs in place that provide them opportunities to make meaningful connections to school (Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Luttrell, 2003; Meier, 2002; Schott, 2010).

Everyone goes to school but everyone does not have the same experience of schooling. Assumptions about the schooling experience affect policy decisions as well as the way schools are structured and operate. Freire (1970) reminds us that all students are creators of culture and have the right to name their world. They also have a right to use their critical capacities to tell those in power what is working and what is not when it comes to school (Freire, 1970; Wissman, 2007). Yet how do we create a system that allows students access to the ears and eyes of those in power with whom they can share their experiences? And how can we convince those in power that these student experiences are valuable and in fact essential to the discourse on school reform?

When we better understand how students experience school, then we can be purposeful in creating schools in which students feel connected, supported and challenged (Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Meier, 2002). If we are able to create schools in this way, then students will be much less likely to drop out or fade out or be pushed out (Ayers et al., 2008; Fine, 1991; Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Smyth, 2006). This would be true school reform.

What is happening for students in schools is both important and elusive. Their experiences are important because they could inform teacher education, curriculum development, school reform, education policy, and school organization (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Their experiences are elusive because what is happening for them is not always evident or easily measured. It is therefore difficult for those in power, who care to ask, to fully understand what decisions might be best *for students* (Anyon, 2005; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006). We must listen to students in order to understand what is happening to them and to make more meaningful reform decisions based on their experiences (Kozol, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Lack of connection to school can be defined as alienation or a feeling of estrangement from the schooling process (Finn, 1989; McInerney, 2009; Wehlage, 1986). Alienation or disconnection can affect a student's willingness to do work, participate, perform and in the end, to come school at all (Allen, 2008; Fine, 1991; Jones, 2004; Reschly et al., 2008). Many dropouts from school cite disconnection, isolation, and silencing as reasons for leaving school early (Fine, 1991; Noguera, 2003). "Prevailing explanations for youth alienation tend to focus on psychological traits and individual deficits rather than oppressive economic and social structures that are bearing down on young people" (McInerney, 2009, p. 23). A critical analysis of alienation would explore the structures in school that cause feelings of alienation among youth, particularly examining why some groups (i.e. minority males) may experience greater levels of alienation and thus higher dropout rates than other groups (McInerney, 2009; Schott, 2010).

Alienation may be part of the missing piece in understanding why and how many students leave school early, and it may contribute to why some schools are known as dropout factories with large numbers of minorities who do not graduate (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Fine, 1991; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Jones, 2004; Wald and Losen, 2003). Clearly something is happening for students at these schools where graduation is not the norm. Alienation for this group may be more closely related to the "dehumanizing forces that operate within and outside of schools" (McInerney, 2009). For example, outside the school high unemployment rates for families, discrimination, and neighborhood violence. Inside the school, zero tolerance discipline tactics, restrictive curriculum and dilapidated facilities (Anyon, 2005; McInerney, 2006).

The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males (2010) cites that only 47% of black males graduate high school in the United States. The decision to drop out has more dire consequences for some students than others. For example, a body of research connects early school leaving for minority males to a pipeline to prison (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Noguera, 1995; Wald & Losen, 2003). This means that disciplinary decisions made in schools as well as less overt policies that push out students have serious long term consequences. Not only are these students denied their right to an education but also they are funneled swiftly into the criminal justice system Christle, et al., 2007).

In addition, these voices are not being heard in the school reform debate. For example, student voices in educational research have too often been ignored or simply reported through the perspective of the researcher, yet students are the ones who are

living the schooling experience (Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 2003). Too few studies focus *primarily* on the voices of students and even less focus on the stories of students who are in the vulnerable stages of middle school (Bland & Carrington, 2009; Doda & Knowles, 2008). There are few ways to better understand if schools are meeting the needs of students than by asking students themselves to show us what is going on (Fine, 1991; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Wehlage, 1986).

Purpose of Study

In *The Catcher in the Rye,* Holden Caulfield encapsulates the vulnerability of adolescence with the following:

> I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around - nobody big, I mean - except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff - I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and *catch* them. That's all I do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be (Salinger, 1951, p.173).

Holden struggles on that precarious cliff himself. He has no one to catch him and ends up leaving school. Because of his experience, he understands the necessity of a dedicated person whose job it is to protect the little kids who are approaching danger. I relate to Holden. I became an educator to find a way to catch students before they fall because an English teacher did that for me. Whether we do it because it did not happen for us or because it did happen for us, all children need catchers.

The students in this study are those who are very close to the edge of their own

cliffs. They have been suspended or expelled from their home schools, have failed and been retained in school, are in the vulnerable years of adolescence, and are labeled "high risk" for dropping out of school. In many ways, their current setting is their last chance to stay in the public school system and out of the criminal justice system (Christle, et al., 2007; Noguera, 2003). This study contributed to knowledge that will allow educators to stand at the edge of that cliff and catch students before they fall off, before they disengage entirely and drop out (Dei, Mazzuca, McIssac & Zine, 1997; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006).

This study does contribute to the plethora of research on identified at-risk students that operates from a deficit point of view. School is more than what goes on at home, and it is more than socio-economics or parental education levels. School is more than books and grades. School is a personal and social experience that is complex and multi-layered. School is about who students are, how they see themselves and how their self-image relates to their (dis)engagement with the schooling process. Only students can tell us this.

This dissertation was grounded in a critical feminist framework and employed a qualitative methodology with an ethnographic case study design. The primary data collection tool was Photovoice, which helped document student experiences in school. Photovoice is a community and participatory action research methodology developed by Wang and Burris (1997). Photovoice "uses the immediacy of the visual image to furnish evidence and to promote an effective, participatory means of sharing knowledge and expertise" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). In order to affect real change, we must see what students see and hear what students say. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore self-image and schooling through the eyes of students so that we can better

understand what school means to them. This study relied upon students using cameras and words to capture and share their schooling experiences.

In the next chapter I review the literature on the issues raised in this introduction chapter. Following my review and critique of prior research methods directed at student perceptions of school, I describe the theoretical framework I use to answer the following research questions:

- How does this group of labeled at-risk middle school students experience self and school?

    o How do these students represent self?

    o How do they think others, particularly school, see them?

    o How do these students see and experience school?

The answers to the questions shed light on how and why students co-construct the decision to stay in school or drop out of school. These answers may also suggest ways that schools may better organize themselves to engage students who have been labeled at-risk for dropping out of school. In the presentation of their pictures and stories in the final chapters, we see and hear what it is like to attend school for these students. We are given a glimpse into otherwise private spaces and interpreted reflections on schooling. The final chapter ponders this question: If we are truly listening, what will we do with this information?

GLOSSARY

1. Agency: The process by which a lesson, idea or realization is actualized or acted on (Freire, 1970).

2. Agency Artwork: The process of manipulating and engaging directly with photos to recreate, re-imagine, and re-vision one's current view (Britt, 2011; Greene, 2007).

3. Alienation: Estrangement from the learning process manifested in behaviors such as passive resistance, withdrawal of labor, truancy, disruptive activities, violence, self-harm, and dropping out of school (McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006).

4. Early school leaving: Withdrawing from school before graduation (Hodgson, 2007).

5. Emotional engagement: How students connect with school on an emotional level with school including interests, values and emotions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Often includes a sense of belonging and feeling important; also called identification (Finn, 1993). It can be an antidote to alienation (McInerney, 2009).

6. Documentary work: A person or group's attempt to record the world around them and represent what they see, feel, think and hear for others. This can take the form of writing, photography, film, or a combination of media (Coles, 1997).

7. Dropout: One who leaves school before graduation. This term has a negative connotation that suggests a student's bad decision (Fine, 1991). Dropping out (verb).

8. Fade out: One who emotionally disengages from school but still attends. This person might fall asleep in school or show little emotional engagement or attachment to school. This person often ends up leaving school early or dropping out (Fine, 1991). Fading out (verb).

9. Persistence: A student's willingness to stay in school and graduate. To have persistence students understand there is a benefit from education. They are willing to learn the rules of school and follow the rules to meet that goal. They seek and build meaningful connections and relationships for support and communication. In order to develop persistence students must feel: valued, heard, cared for, validated, and feel that they have a role in decisions at school. Schools can support or thwart persistence(Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

10. Photo elicitation: Process that uses photographs to initiate discussion and conversation about the meaning of images and experiences involved in creating those images (Harper, 2002).

11. Photovoice: Based on Freire's (1970) concept of problem-posing education, feminist theory and documentary photography. It is a participatory action research method that allows researchers to hear and understand how people make meaning themselves or define what matters to them. It has three goals: enable people to record and reflect community strengths and concerns, promote critical dialogue about important community issues through small and large dialogue, and reach people who can be mobilized for change (Wang & Burris, 1997).

12. Push out: One who is forced out of school by legal processes such as expulsion or age restrictions or structural encouragement such as informal conversations or

suggestions. The school can create a negative situation in which the student feels he or she must leave (Fine, 1991). Pushing out (verb).

13. School: An institution where instruction is given, esp. to persons under college age (dictionary.com).

14. Schooling: Implies the hidden curriculum, the unintended messages and consequences of attending school (Anyon, 2005).

15. Visual research: Rooted in the fields of anthropology and sociology. It is immersion in and description of a culture that relies heavily on visual data such as photography, film and drawings. Images provide another means of gathering data, another medium for participants to express themselves and informs understandings and analysis (Pink, 2007).

16. Winnowing: The slow accumulation of negative school experiences that cause students to emotionally disengage from school and eventually drop out (Hodgson, 2007)

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

"'What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children as the knowers and actors?'" (Oakley, 1994 in Mitchell, Stuart, Moletsane, & Nkwanyana, 2006, p.25).

Schools are the domain of children, yet the dominant methodology used with students does not ask them to describe their experiences (Kaplan & Howes, 2004; Fine, 2001; Smyth, 2006; Way, 1998). Young people are further marginalized when researchers neglect to present students' views (Goodhard, et al., 2006; Harper, 2002; Jones, 2004; Kaplan & Howes, 2004; Rifa-Valls, 2009; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Wissman, 2007).

The traditional research power relationship is one in which the researcher is the expert and the person living the experience is the subject (Fine, 1993; Wallerstein, 1987; Way, 1998). This dissertation study shifted the traditional power relationship by giving students cameras and asking them to document their lives and their schooling experiences. In addition, students were provided the time and space for critical dialogue on how things are and how things could be and how agency could be increased (Ezzy, 2002; Goodhard et al., 2006; Greene, 2000; Noland, 2006). This process lends significance to students' lived experiences in school (Noland, 2006; Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997).

For this study I employed Photovoice as a research method for data collection and analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is also a theoretical lens in that it is a participatory an emancipatory approach to research (Glesne, 2001; Pink, 2007). A feminist framework complemented the theoretical underpinnings of Photovoice. A critical feminist framework places the students as the knowers and emphasizes context and location in knowledge production. As Fine (1993) reminds us "to listen to people is to empower them but if you want to hear it, you have to go hear it, in their space, or in a safe space" (Fine, 1993, p. 215). This study does that.

Structure of Dissertation

I will first provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework and the documentary influence on this project followed by a somewhat nontraditional literature review and methodological critique. Since the focus of this project was equally on the research methodology and process as much as the data and findings, the literature review reflects this. The main areas of exploration are: at-risk and dropout, silenced voices, student perspectives on school, emotional engagement and alienation.

Theoretical Framework

Freire and Critical Theory

Educational reform research and school reform discourse almost always center on what leaders, policymakers, administrators, and academics believe is important in schools (Ayers et al., 2008; Noguera, 2003; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Smyth, 2006). However, some critics of this approach argue that without the voices of students included in the discourse, school reform will remain ineffective and school structures oppressive (Anyon,

2005; Ayers et al., 2008; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006). Many argue that this limited

discourse and structure is best confronted and counteracted through participatory and

liberatory research methods (Fine, 1993; Freire, 1970; Torre, Fine, Alexander & Genao,

2007).

Identity.

A primary location of both oppression and potential liberation of youth is the

school (Smyth, 2006). Schools are places where students' identity negotiation takes place

and where relational power is created and tested (Smyth, 2006). Context makes a

difference in the amount of freedom allowed to students (Kozol, 2005). For example to

maintain control many urban schools resort to a stimulus-response framework based on

accountability and consequences instead of one based on making students active agents

who are capable of success (Kozol, 2005; Smyth, 2006). The tightening of reins,

increasing of rules and surveillance reduces trust and community and creates a "pedagogy

of poverty" under which students can either comply or resist (Kozol; 2005; Smyth, 2006,

p. 294). In these contexts student resistance looks like disengagement, truancy, violence,

acting out, or dropping out (Smyth, 2006). On the other hand schools could channel this

resentment into liberatory efforts that foster critical thinking, activism, social justice and

change (Freire, 1970; Greene, 2007).

Banking model.

Urban students, like similarly oppressed groups, have been taught to be silent, to

be docile, and to be receptors of information (Delpit, 1996; Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005).

They are recipients of what Freire (1970) calls the banking model of education during

which students listen and teachers talk. In these contexts there is a subject (teacher) and

object (student) and the story (curriculum) that is detached from the lived reality of the students (Delpit, 1996; Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In this system, youth are being separated or alienated from the world, rather than connected to it, through education (Freire, 1970; Delpit, 1996; McInerney, 2009; Smith, 2006). Students, teachers, and leaders lose sight of the transformative powers of education and begin to accept that this is "the way it is" (Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006).

Compression of time and space.

Schools carefully control the time, space, and ideas that might ignite critical reflection and critical self-realization for students and teachers. Thus, one of the first steps in liberation is an opening of time and space (Greene, 1995). From this space critical awareness may arise. Freire (1970) reminds us, "Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (Freire,1970, p. 27). Reflective participation is essential or the oppressed are further objectified.

Students who are identified at-risk, in particular, have their space increasingly truncated and mobility increasingly restricted in schools (Luttrell, 2003; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Schott, 2010). They are often physically moved to a separate space from the regular population for school (Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 2003). In addition, most schools do not provide safe space for positive community building, critical dialogue and democratic activity (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). According to Hubbard (1994) "photography is a natural medium for the application of Freire's ideas, as it lends itself to helping a community reflect back upon itself to reveal the everyday social and political realities that influence their lives" (p.12).

Conscientization or liberation is the act of (re) humanization (Freire, 1970, p.27). It is a difficult process "constant, humble, and courageous… emerging from cooperation in a shared effort" (Freire, 1970, p. 157). This process could be an antidote to alienation (McInerney, 2009). Maxine Greene (2007) concurs that individuals can be transformed but the *collective* effort toward imaginative release is significantly more powerful and liberating. While critical theory and pedagogy may not change the oppressive structures outside the school, they can lead to individual and group conscientization, and thus praxis (Ayers et al., 2008; Freire, 1970).

Application.

This dissertation study combined the visual with the relevant as it "started with issues that are central to the lives of students and enables them to identify themes, think critically and act" (Jones, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997). In order for young people to be empowered, we must place responsibility for solving school problems directly in their hands (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Cameras and photography were used as an antidote to the constriction of time, space and ideas placed on this group of students. These tools were used to unearth hidden assumptions about school to understand the social phenomena of schooling with a focus on human agency and action (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999; Freire, 1970).

Feminist Theory and the Knower

Feminist theory posits that knowledge is situated and influenced by the standpoint of the knower (Ezzy, 2002; Fine, 1993). When school research on students' lives and perspectives is told through the researcher via interview, survey, and focus groups, the knower is still primarily the researcher. In traditional approaches, the researcher "guards

the order" by acting as the main vehicle for data collection, analysis and presentation (Fine, 1993, p. 210). Feminist research seeks to redress this traditional order through more collaborative practices.

Fine (1993) separates feminist research into three categories: ventriloquy, voice, and activism. In ventriloquy authorship is obscured and the researcher is a vehicle for transmission of the "truth." In voice the subject's words are infused throughout the text by the researcher, but this approach fails to acknowledge how the voices are created and (re)presesented. In activism the researcher/researched relationship is disrupted, transformed, and unearthed (Fine, 1993). Activism turns a critical eye toward what is and what could be (Greene, 1995). It is the "ability to open contradictions within collaborative practices" (Fine, 1993, p. 224). The central dilemma in activism becomes how to reconcile our "adjective" (feminist) with our "noun" (educational researcher) (Fine, 1993, p. 225).

Other important components of feminist theory essential to this project were the concepts of marginalization and space. Marginality shapes knowledge claims, and the way students position themselves in schools. It shapes how students are seen, heard and how much power they have to enact change (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). Space relates closely to marginality. To make sense of the multiplicity of locations in which they live, students must be given the space to examine, explore, question and eventually re-imagine these roles (Fine, 1993; Greene, 2007;Wissman, 2007).

This dissertation study primary called on activist research to examine the effects of marginality and space on dropping out and engagement. The study took place after school and provided a safe "counter public space" where students and instructors could

grapple with issues of marginalization such as at-risk labels, class, race, and social justice (Fraser, 1990, p. 223 in Torre et al., 2007). Students used cameras to represent self and school and were provided the time and space to explore and re-imagine these roles.

Documentary Influence

Documenting America.

James Agee and Walker Evans were commissioned in 1936 by *Fortune Magazine* to write an article about southern sharecroppers. Agee took his notebook, Evans his camera, and they set out, but something happened to these young men once they met the families and began living with them. A one-week assignment to create a "photographic and verbal record of the daily living and environment of an average white family of tenant farmers" became a two-month immersion into the lives of the families (Agee & Evans, 1939, xvii). When Agee and Evans left, the working title for the piece was Three Tenant Families. After they returned the piece became a book, and the title Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

The publishers at *Fortune Magazine* did not know what to do with the manuscript. Agee, the author, appears as a character in the book sharing his *feelings* as he interacts with the families. "The book is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell" (Agee & Evans, 1939, p. Xlviii). The chapters are simply titled: "clothes," "near a church," money," shelter," "education," and "work." Evans' black and white photos appear at the beginning of the book with no captions: an unmarked grave, three men outside a feed store, a baby covered by cheesecloth. They invite interpretation and engagement. Let Us Now Praise

Famous Men was an attempt to understand the role of the outsider when documenting "common folk" struggling with issues of representation, access and privilege.

The FSA and systematic documentary work.

A systematic approach to documenting American life grew out of Roosevelt's New Deal. The goal of the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) Historical Section established in 1935 was to document in photographs the need for agricultural assistance and to record efforts in meeting those needs. The FSA images showed people at home, at work, at play with an emphasis on rural and small town life, specifically concentrating on the daily lives of ordinary Americans all over the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (http://www.loc.gov). This documentary photography was characterized as "a social conscience presented in visual imagery" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 371). The work of renowned Dorthea Lange, Gordon Parks, Russell Lee and John Collier documented images of people and places that were not at the forefront of the American collective imagination. Men in soup lines, women and children living alongside a road, displaced farmers, migration West. These photographers used the art of photography as a means of raising social consciousness. In other words, people who saw their images would be moved to ask questions and demand answers. This was a step toward social action, but the power to create the images remained in the hands of the privileged and those who were photographed remained the objects.

Handing over the camera.

Documentary photographers of the next decades questioned their ability to speak for anyone and began to look for ways to "speak about" or "speak with" others (Nichols, 1983 in Ruby, 1991). Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), or participant photography

(Hubbard, 1994), emerged in the 1980s-1990s as a community, participatory grassroots effort to relinquish the means of imaging making from photographers and put it into the hands of those affected by social issues. Photovoice projects work on getting these images into the hands of those in power to create change. Today there are Photovoice projects in progress all over the country.

In the early 1980s, Jim Hubbard worked as a staff photographer at United Press International where he documented homeless families. Over the years, children had asked him to "hand over his camera" and finally he did. In 1989 Hubbard founded Shooting Back, an organization dedicated to empowering children at risk to question structures of power and authority in their lives by teaching them photography. "The name was coined from a spontaneous comment by one of the young participants in the program: when asked why he was photographing his own world, the homeless child responded, 'I'm shooting back'" (shooting back.org).

Wendy Ewald's (2001) thirty years of non-traditional documentary photography with children greatly influences this dissertation study. As a photographer she attempts to "attend to our neglected physical and visual surroundings, and the need we all feel to articulate and communicate something relevant about our personal and communal lives" (p. 8). Early in her career, Ewald realized two important facts: gaining access to these communal lives was difficult, and attempting to objectively document the lives of others was even more difficult. Ewald's first project in Alaska on a reservation began more traditionally: she with her camera taking pictures of people, places and things she thought were important. Soon a shift occurred (2001):

Each child took a camera and pack of film. A group of about fifteen of us walked

around the reservation. I took pictures of my students and their families (when

they'd allow it) and other children. I was selective and cautious. The children,

however, took pictures of everything they saw: the chief, drunk, trying to saw a

board; young couples fighting; a teapot on the windowsill; a great-aunt in her

white Sunday dress sitting on the rocks overlooking the sea. The children's

pictures were more complicated and disturbing than mine — and, I began to

realize, much closer to what it felt like to be there. (p.9)

In 1990 Ewald was invited by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke

University to take her work into the Durham public schools in North Carolina. The

program, called Literacy Through Photography, worked with students to document their

dreams, their homes, and their self-perceptions. In a project entitled Black Self/White

Self, Ewald had children create pictures that represent visions of their black and white

selves (2001). The children decided how to pose, where, with whom to pose and also

what the picture represented for them in their words. Students and teachers were able to

address issues of race and stereotypes that may otherwise go unarticulated (Ewald, 2001).

In 2008 Ewald, her colleague Katie Hyde and students from Duke University expanded

their work with LTP to Tanzania where they focused on training teachers to develop

similar programs there.

These examples of some influential photographers over the last seventy years

represent their developing roles as documentarians, humanitarians, and activists.

Separated by over sixty years, Ewald's work with children represented a seismic shift

from that of Agee and Evans (1939). For those two men to insert themselves into the

homes of the farmers and into the story as participants was groundbreaking, but to literally hand over the means of image production and meaning making to the people themselves was revolutionary. Especially when those people were children.

Literature Review

At-Risk Labels

At-risk is a social construct that defines an individual's "propensity for achieving some outcome, particularly an unwelcome one" (Lee & Burkham, 2003). At-risk labels are used to describe behavior in an effort to explain why some students fail in school and others do not, and to account for the achievement gap (Rumberger, 2004).

Students are labeled at-risk according to a number of factors associated to dropping out and poor academic performance. These factors are: prior grade failure, underachievement, low self-esteem, non-acceptance by teachers/peers, poor school attendance, socio-economic status, race, unstable family life, parental education, family configuration, pregnancy, substance abuse and history of disruptive behavior (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004; Patterson, Hale & Stessman, 2008; Losen, 2004; Schott, 2010).

The at-risk perspective described above is commonly referred to as a deficit perspective since it limits opportunities to encourage attendance, promote engagement, create relationships, develop a positive school culture and discourage early leaving (Hodgson, 2007). Some critics argue that it blames the victim and relieve schools of responsibility for providing equal outcomes for all students (Fine, 1991). "By framing explanations this way, leaving school before graduation is seen as a bad decision that

individual students make, often based on a pattern of unwise behaviors and low commitment to school" (Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 42).

Labeling students at-risk has long term and devastating effects (Lee & Burkam, 2003, Fine, 1991). Often at-risk students are marginalized, are shut off from academic success, and are no longer afforded the privilege to be meaning makers in the school (Farrell, 1990; Fine, 1991; Hodgson, 2007; Lesley, 2008). These students who ostensibly need extra support in school are often sent to separate facilities or separate classrooms where the curriculum is less interesting, the rules more constrictive and the creativity truncated (Noguera, 2003). At-risk factors such as low self-esteem, poor school attendance, socio-economic status, race, unstable family life, parental education, family configuration, pregnancy, and substance abuse relieve schools of responsibility for these student's academic success. Schools essentially wash their hands of responsibility citing these factors as unchangeable and out of their realm (Fine, 1991; Lesley, 2008; Wehlage, 1986).

Another view: the school.

Smyth and Hattam (2002) examined the cultural geography of high schools to explain why students drop out. They identified three types of school geographies: passive, aggressive, and active. In the passive school, students and teachers appear/feel helpless. The school operates at the hands of overly dictated curriculum and rules that come from above, some place else and are not supported by teachers or students. In the aggressive school, the administration dominates and restricts. Often the teachers enforce the rules. In the active school, there is a negotiation of power and dynamic attempts to connect to students' lives outside of school. There is also challenging curriculum that is

couched in a culture of listening and respect. In the end, they found that the more active

the cultural geography, the greater the school's holding power (Smyth & Hattam, 2002).

Holding power is defined as a school's ability to keep and move students from ninth

grade to graduation within a reasonable amount of time (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Pushed out.

Fine (1991) found that students who dropped out felt ignored, underrepresented,

disrespected, and that the school pushed them out. Dei et al. (1997) found results similar

to those reported by Fine (1991), and additionally reported students felt a lack of respect

for diversity, that their needs were not being met by the school, and that unfair policies

pushed them out. Other research concurs that a good number of students, at-risk or not,

can find school an isolating and overall negative experience (Dei et al., 1997; Lee &

Burkam, 2003; Wehlage, 1986; Smyth, 2006).

Using both qualitative and quantitative measures, Christle et al. (2007) cited that

retention and expulsion rates showed the highest factor difference for dropping out.

Rumberger and Thomas (2000) reported 77% of drop outs cited school-related reasons

for leaving, and only 32% cited family-related reasons. School Effectiveness Research

made use of four categories for assessing school effectiveness; only one category was in

the realm of student control (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). The other three categories

were related to school structure. For example, student teacher ratio, quality of teachers,

school control, size, attendance, and school composition (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000).

Patterson et al. (2008) pointed to the contradictions between school culture and students'

home cultures as increasing dropout rates.

Based on the body of research above, clearly more than at-risk factors are at play in what influences a student to drop out of school. Many of these factors are ultimately in the hands of schools and administrators (Losen, 2004; Stevenson & Ellsworth; 1993).

Engagement

Student engagement is broadly defined as how students think, feel and behave in relation to school (Fredricks et al., 2004). More specifically there are three types of engagement: cognitive, behavioral and emotional (Fredricks et al., 2004). Cognitive engagement is the "psychological investment required to comprehend and master knowledge and skills explicitly taught in schools" (Wehlage, 1986, p. 64). Behavioral engagement is positive conduct and involvement in learning (Finn, 1989). Emotional engagement is affective feelings, attitudes, and perceptions related to learning, school and education (Archambault, et al., 2009).

Both cognitive engagement and behavioral engagement are well researched in the literature. Each is fairly easy to observe and measure objectively through self-reports, surveys, and observations (Finn; 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Several studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between behavioral engagement and achievement-related outcomes (e.g., standardized tests, grades) for elementary, middle, and high school students (Archambault, et al., 2009; Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioral engagement or participation has also been associated with school performance across grade levels (Archambault, et al., 2009; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Attending school, arriving on time, paying attention, and completing assigned work all contribute to a student's academic performance (Finn, 1993).

Emotional engagement includes interest, values and feelings and is more difficult to

observe objectively and document (Finn, 1993). It is less explored in the literature (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). While there are anecdotal reports of the connection between emotional engagement and achievement, there is little empirical research showing a direct correlation between the two (Fredricks et al., 2004). Yet common sense would suggest that *how* students experience school impacts how they think about school, how they feel about school, how much or how little they engage in school and how well they do academically (Cassidy & Bates, 2007; Finn, 1993; Schussler & Collins, 2006). In turn their engagement would affect their persistence, their willingness and ability to complete the schooling process (Cassidy & Bates, 2007; Dei, et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Carter, 2005; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Meier, 2002; Schussler & Collins, 2006).

Student emotional engagement is an important component in understanding why students stay in school or leave early. Smyth (2006) argues that when students withdraw from school "emotionally, educationally, psychologically, and eventually, physically…" the reasons are "'political'—that is to say, students refuse to make the emotional and relational investment necessary to become engaged with the social institution of schooling in a manner necessary for learning to occur" (p. 289). Yet at the same time, engagement is left out of the discourse on school reform. School improvement and school effectiveness literature agree on how engagement is identified, how to measure it and what impedes it but not what is meant by engagement. Vibert and Shields (2003) aptly ask, "Engagement in what? For what purposes? What ends?" (p.226). Until we ask these questions, research on student engagement will merely serve to tweak the existing educational structure that is based on unchallenged assumptions.

Alienation

Noguera (2003) cited a large body of research on schools that showed that many students are bored, academically unengaged, and deeply alienated in school (p. 347). Alienation involves varying degrees of "student estrangement from learning" which manifests in disruption, violence, truancy, "withdrawal of labor" and dropping out (McInerney, 2009, p. 23). McInerney (2009) found that schools reinforce and recreate existing unequal power structures. He argues that alienation has increased in the age of accountability and testing under No Child Left Behind when students are asked to repeatedly perform on assessments, which have little meaning to them or to their lives (2008).

As alienation increases in schools, so do acts of resistance such as truancy, violence and dropping out. "When students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance or withdraw their assent altogether from school" (McInerney, 2009, p. 24).

Oppressive schooling arrangements such as scripted curriculum, banking models of instruction, and restricted freedoms contribute to youth alienation that is further perpetuated by society and the media (McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). As schools fail to engage students in critical readings of their own lives, alienation and disengagement increase. School responses to alienation range from attempts to create belongingness to more policies that control behaviors. According to McInerney (2009), the more at-risk the student population the more restrictive the policies become.

Critique of Methodological Issues in Educational Research

Silenced Voices

"Silencing is about who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled" (Cummins, 1986, in Fine, 1991, p. 33)

The public often perceives schools as impenetrable, grand institutions of equal opportunity based on meritocracy (Fine, 1991). Many students and families maintain abstract attitudes that school is a "vehicle for success and upward mobility" in the face of the concrete realities of joblessness, poverty and discrimination (Mickelson, 1990, p. 45). Control of discourse is one way that the myth of equal outcomes is maintained (Fine, 1991). For example, silencing is disproportionate to low income, urban and minority schools. This is true because questioning power from below is more dangerous than questioning power from above (Kozol, 2005; Fine, 1993; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993).

There is a power in naming what is going on in schools for students identified at-risk (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970). If they don't say it and name it and if we (adults, policy makers, teachers, leaders, activists) don't see it and listen, we (all of us collectively) cannot problematize it, reform it or change it. Freire (1970) reminds us that one must name the world in order to change it. Certain groups do not want students to name injustices or to name their worlds. From this desire arises fear. Sometimes teachers skirt around sticky issues of race, class, gender, and discrimination in fear that it will make things worse. "There persists a systematic commitment to not name those aspects of social life or of schooling that activate social anxieties" (Brodkey, 1987, in Fine, 1991, p. 33).

Silence is not agreement.

What may appear to be an "absence of grievance cannot be read as an indication of consent" from students for the current practice of schooling (Fine, 1993, p. 23). Grievance is often called insubordination, disruption and disobedience. Thus students, who speak out, act out, and question are pushed out and funneled into alternative schools, the streets or prisons (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). One merely needs to refer to dropout statistics to understand that dissent can come in many forms (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995; Orfield, 2004). One merely needs to ask permission to conduct a research project using cameras to see fear in administrators' faces. Fear says: we do not want to know what students will show you. *We do not want you to see* what is going on here (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993; Torre et al., 2007).

For this project I utilized Fine's (1993) concept of silencing and gender as a lens to analyze/understand the identified at-risk students in this study. They, too, were a socially constructed group that is marginalized, silenced, and essentialized (Fine, 1993; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993; Wallerstein, 1987). The two key points I applied were individual voice and elasticity.

Student voices are individual. When students or student voices are presented as a monolithic group, difference and complexity are camouflaged and hegemony is strengthened (Fine, 1993; Jewett, 2006). By not listening to and valuing individual voices and experiences of students in schools, we perpetuate schooling experiences that for many students are damaging, culturally dissonant and at best, disengaging (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1993; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Wehlage, 1986). The Self-portrait and How School Sees Me components of this study explored individual student

representations. They documented and honored each student's story and his or her individual relationship between self and school. The three case studies also highlight individual student voices.

Student voices are elastic and relational. To best understand them, we need to understand and investigate not only what is represented but also what is not represented, what is not known in order to find out what could be (Fine, 1993; M. Greene, personal communication, August 1, 2010). To meet this end, students engaged in constructing and re-constructing images of themselves, what school means to them and what school could be for them (Greene, 1995). This was done in their photographic images, writing, agency artwork and discussion. Their cameras were one way of seeing what was apparent and not apparent to them about themselves and about school (Greene, 1995).

The collective.

What if silenced voices of students are given expression? What if the experiences of students are respected enough to be documented and shared? What if these experiences are not "whispered, isolated or drowned out in disparagement?" (Fine, 1993, p. 134; Greene, 2007). What if these voices are not only given individual outlets but are also brought together in concert as support? Then there is even greater power to "release the imagination and project change for themselves" (Greene, 2007, p. 293). When we critique silencing in schools, we make a commitment to the possibility of change and imaginative release (Fine, 1993; Greene, 1995). To this end, student experiences in school are presented as holistic themes in powerful, collective voices and images.

Student Perspectives on School: the Research

Most research on student perspectives on schools falls into two categories: survey/self-report and structured interview (Archambault et al., 2009; Bland & Carrington, 2009; Booth & Sheehan, 2008; Defur & Korinek, 2009; Doda & Knowles, 2008; Dolan & McCaslin, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Freeman et al., 2002; McCaslin & Buross, 2008; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008; Reschly et al., 2008; Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009). Following is a brief summary of the literature that examines K-12 student perspectives on school in the United States.

Survey, self-report and interview.

The majority of literature related to student perspectives on school has been done through survey, self-report measures and interview. Archambault et al. (2009) used self-report measures to study the "flow of engagement" with students over a three-year period (p. 408). Instead of treating engagement as a general experience, this study had three facets: behavioral, affective and cognitive. Findings suggested that the most highly motivated students avoid breaking rules even when they report low interest but that interest or engagement decreases the likelihood of breaking rules (Archambault et al., 2009). They also found that engagement decreased over time as students moved from middle school into high school. Overall the authors recommend increased efforts to sustain and nurture student values and interest in school in order to create a positive school experience (Archambault et al., 2009). The use of a likert scale survey limits student responses and input in this study.

Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009) used teacher and student self report measures and classroom observation to study student engagement. The authors employed a four-component approach: engaged behavior/engaged emotion, disaffected

behavior/disaffected emotion. In observations, behavior was easy to measure and emotion less easy to measure (Skinner et al., 2009). Findings suggested a weak correlation between teacher and student reports on emotional components (Skinner et al., 2009). Skinner et al. (2009) confirmed research that suggested emotional engagement was difficult to measure and that teachers often misread student emotional cues (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Booth and Sheehan (2008) used a combination of surveys and interviews to measures adolescents' interpretations of their schools in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Students were given a fall and spring survey. The spring survey was created based on the responses to the fall survey. Structured interviews were a subsample in which students were asked to further explain their answers on the survey (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). Findings from both countries pointed to the importance of space and movement for students (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). Also findings suggest that happiness at school was most influenced by peers followed by relationship with teachers (Booth & Sheehan, 2008). While interviews illuminated survey responses, the questions in the interviews were based on the original survey items. In this way, student perspectives were limited to the original framework created by the researchers.

The Clearing House research on "listening to student voices" used focus groups and interviews with students from rural and suburban schools with and without disabilities (Defur & Korineck, 2009). The eight focus groups were structured but ended with a chance for open-ended responses. The findings align with the earlier school effectiveness and leadership research (Defur & Korineck, 2009). "Students have a solid sense of what is both effective and important to keep them engaged and successful in

learning" (Defur & Korineck, 2009, p. 19). Questions about good teaching and bad teaching allowed student input on these issues but also presuppose that these are essential issues to students in school. This is an example of researchers imposing what they believe school is about for students.

Freeman, McPhail, and Berndt (2002) examined sixth graders' perspectives on what helps them learn. They had students brainstorm lists of what best and least helps them learn, then used the lists to create structured interview questions. The findings suggest that interest falls into two categories: genuine (self) and situational (group or context). Overall, students differed in what they find interesting, and how they prefer to learn (Freeman et al., 2002). Students and teachers translated student interest lists into situational activities that teachers could recreate in their classrooms. This study started where students are by asking them to brainstorm lists and then using those lists to create interview questions. In the end, the findings returned to application in the lives of students. Overall, this study attempted a direct relationship to student's lived experiences in the classroom.

McCaslin and Buross (2008) studied students' motivational dynamics at urban schools under comprehensive reform using surveys, principal interviews, observations, field notes and participant observation. The authors developed a set of instruments that addressed "what seemed to matter to students (in language that they would be comfortable with), that were reasonable if not interesting to complete and that were theoretically based and practically relevant" (p. 2454). The authors sought to understand the individual differences in student perspective on self and schooling. The findings suggested that interpersonal validation was basic to students with high levels of mobility

and poverty (McCaslin & Buross, 2008). The authors combined both student perspectives on school and motivational theory. Although it was not entirely clear how the researchers established "what seemed to matter to students."

Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2008) used surveys to understand adolescent perception of the instructional climate. They used a Modified Classroom Climate Inventory with repeated measures of five subscales (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008). Because the study examined perception and not perspective, they did not employ interviews or observation. Reschly et al. (2008) studied engagement related to positive emotions using three surveys that measured both cognitive and psychological engagement. Findings suggested that frequent positive emotions at school lead to broadened cognitive and behavioral engagement. These findings aligned with Finn's (1993) participation-identification model of engagement.

Other methods.

Using innovative research methods to obtain student perspective on school such as photography, story telling and narratives is not common in educational research (Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 2003). Especially since No Child Left Behind (2001), educational time and space has been constricted and restricted with a focus on measurable outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Smyth, 2006). Most often non-traditional research is done outside the parameters of the regular school day, in alternative settings or urban schools under intense reform (Luttrell, 2003; Wissman, 2007). Some argue that schools in these conceptual spaces fall outside the constraints of traditional expectations and therefore are more amendable to innovative approaches (Fine, 1994).

Dolan and McCaslin (2008) used pictures to understand how students in urban schools under comprehensive school reform conceptualize student-teacher interactions. They presented students with pictures of typical classroom events and asked students to write a story, then analyzed the stories for themes using a motivational theory lens (Dolan & McCaslin, 2008). They found that students had positive views of teachers and learning. One critique of the study is that the team analyzed student stories through the lens of the Thematic Apperception Test that "targets implicit, unconscious motives" (Dolan & McCaslin, 2008, p. 2425). The researchers were limited by focusing on specific unconscious motives as being either present or not present in student stories. In other words, they may have missed other compelling or relevant findings related to perspectives of school.

Bland and Carrington (2009) focused on imagination and young people to explore disengagement. They used visual narrative techniques and asked students: what engages you in learning, what disengages you? Students worked in groups and drew cartoons on butcher paper, engaged in metaphor making, and wrote poetry and lyrics to answer the questions. Student and teachers presented the findings at an educational conference.

Doda and Knowles (2008) practiced democratic ideals by having middle school students free write about what middle school teachers need to know about them. From the sample, they developed themes and subthemes. The most recurring theme was relationships. One issue with this method is the possible limitation of student's writing skills and their ability or lack of to express their answers to the question in writing alone.

Rodriguez and Conchas (2009) worked with youth in a community based after-school program to understand how the program helped with student re-engagement. They

wanted to better understand how the community program helped students re-engage in school and how the program empowered youth "to handle their own problems" (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009, p. 227). The study focused on how the program shaped student experiences rather than outcomes of the program. The methods included several interviews with the youth, interviews with staff members, observations, field notes and shadowing (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). In the analysis, they "placed student voices at the center" and focused on themes that make students more productive adults (Rodriguez & Conches, 2009, p. 229). This study was time consuming because of the extensive fieldwork. However, the findings represented a rich understanding of student perspective.

Photovoice

Photovoice is an "innovative participatory action research method based on health promotion principles and the theoretical literature on education for critical consciousness, feminist theory and a community based approach to documentary photography. Its three goals are: to enable people to record and reflect on community assets and concerns through photography, promote critical dialogue about the issues, and reach those who can create change" (Wang et al., 2000, p. 81). Photovoice is context based and provides a rich glimpse into the worlds explored, while valuing the knowledge put forth by people as a vital source of expertise. It provides access to locations, places and situations that may be inaccessible by traditional research methods (Bloustein & Baker, 2003). Schools and the lives of adolescents are locations that researchers do not often have access to.

There is an immediacy in the visual images that makes people look and makes people listen (Goodhard et al., 2006; Graziano & Litton, 2007; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photos are material realities in their own right (Wang & Burris, 1994). They are powerful

proof of what it means to live, to experience, and to be (Hubbard, 1994). As Hines

reminds us, "If I could tell the story in words, I wouldn't need to lug a camera" (in Wang

& Burris, 1997, p. 372). This is particularly true for young people working with

researchers who are outsiders often of a different class and race (Torre et al., 2007). A

camera can break down some barriers and allow students to address subjects they may

not feel comfortable talking or writing about otherwise (Ewald, 2001).

Health and community.

Photovoice can be adapted for use with different groups and communities and for

diverse public health issues (Wang & Burris, 1994). It is particularly useful in addressing

the needs of groups who have been silenced or spoken for. In essence, anyone can use a

camera and this is where the process begins in the lives and realities of the participants.

A possible disadvantage of the methodology is the potential risks raised by the act

of documenting community reality (Wang & Burris, 1997). This political act may create

uncertain or unpredictable outcomes for the participants (Wang & Burris, 1997). Other

issues to consider relate to representation and the means of image making and resources.

Wang and Burris (1997) ask, "The process entrusts cameras in the hands of ordinary

people, but in whose hands does money, support, and editory control remain?" (p. 374).

Thus, those who use Photovoice should consider all steps as important. For example, one

cannot ask a community to document their lives with cameras, then take the photos and

leave to do what one wants with them (M. Greene, personal communication, August 1,

2010). In the case of this dissertation project, data collection, analysis and presentation of

findings was as collaborative as time and access allowed.

Wang and Burris (1997) first used Photovoice for participatory needs assessment in rural China with women farmers. They invited the women to become advocates for their own needs and photograph their everyday lives (Bloustein & Baker, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1997). Like Ewald (2001), they wanted the women to "expand their ideas about picture taking but stay close to what they felt deeply" (Ewald, 1985, p. 18, in Wang & Burris 1997). Unlike other types of needs assessment that may promote impotence by focusing on what communities lack, the women photographed not only grief and loss but also celebration and strength. This in turn increased a sense of community and agency for change (Allen, 2008; Chio & Fandt, 2007; Jones, 2004; Wang & Burris, 1997).

The women were involved in all stages of the process: taking photos, selecting representative images, contextualizing the images and codifying the images. Wang and Burris (1997) found that what policy makers assumed these women lacked (and therefore needed) was education. In fact what the women lacked (and therefore needed) was water, food, transportation, and childcare. This mismatch in perceived need and true need created a mismatch in policy and programs (Wang & Burris, 1997). "From the people, their visions, and their words, we can begin to assess real local needs" (Wang & Burris, 1997). The same mismatch of perceived and real need might be applied to school reform policy. What are the perceived needs of students? The true needs? (Anyon, 2005).

Photovoice has been used to inform practice with pre-service doctors and teachers (Quinn et al., 2006; Walsh et al., 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997). Pre-service doctors reported that stories and photos of women receiving prenatal care added to their understanding of what it means to be a patient, and thus changed the way they provided care (Quinn et al., 2006). The photos illuminated the surveys and charts and opened a

dialog about ways to change the culture of maternal and child health services (Quinn et al., 2006). With pre-service teachers, Photovoice was used to furnish evidence to promote an effective way to share knowledge and expertise regarding teaching diverse students (Graziano & Litton, 2007; Kaplan & Howes, 2004). Teachers took photos of their student teaching experience, shared the photos in groups, and generated solutions to issues that arose while working with students with disabilities (Graziano & Litton, 2007). With both groups, Photovoice had implications for understanding patients and students, for seeing them as "human beings with multiple identities" (Graziano & Litton, 2007, p. 369).

Walsh et al. (2009) used Photovoice with homeless women to answer the question "What is home to you?" which informed creative, joint solutions to community issues regarding housing. The researchers acted as "sounding boards" for the women as they captured their lives and offered solutions over a five-month period (Walsh et al., 2009). The results of the project were used for programming and revising services. Jurkowski (2008) used Photovoice with people with intellectual disabilities, a group that has "few opportunities to actively participate in research affecting programs and policies" (p. 1). The group disseminated photographs and findings to policymakers and leaders.

Youth and schools.

With youth, Photovoice has been used to explore issues of sexuality, disability, gender, race and diversity (Allen, 2008; Jurkowski, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2006; Thomson & Gunter, 2008). It has rarely been used in schools in the United States. When it has been used in U.S. schools, it was used in after school programs, in at-risk settings, or with highly marginalized students (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009).

When Photovoice has been used in schools, the focus has not been about school, per se. For example, Allen (2008) used it to examine sexuality in school. She and the students faced censorship from school officials and limitations on what students could and could not photograph. The author notes that students "found a way to subvert" these limitations, which she noted as an important finding (Allen, 2008, p. 573). Chio and Fandt (2007) used Photovoice in the classroom but not to examine the school or teaching; rather, they used it to help teachers develop relationships with students in an inclusion classroom. Goodhard et al. (2006) used Photovoice for student advocacy but this was on a college campus. Students were given three weeks to take photos and three weeks to select, write about and present their findings to the campus leaders. Jones (2004), Wilson et al. (2007) and Zenkov and Harmon (2009) all used Photovoice with identified at-risk students but in after school programs.

Photovoice can change the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Researchers are able to see their subjects as collaborators in a multiplicity of roles and redefine their locations with and to them (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Graziano & Litton, 2007). Through Photovoice, the picture-takers find a safe place to share their images and stories, to represent themselves and speak for themselves (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Noland, 2006).

Photovoice can be very effective with young people and adolescents as it can help them go from personal to relational and to witness the self in a concrete way (Chio & Fandt, 2007). It also can have them pay attention to their institution and environment and to "frame" problems and solutions for real issues regarding self and school (Goodhard et

al., 2006; Piper & Frankham, 2007). It can give students a voice. For this dissertation study, it was used in all of these ways.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

To better understand why students dropout of school, it's important that we hear from the students themselves. It is my contention that dropping out is not merely a bad decision but an accumulation of experienced disengagement from school that may begin as early as the first grade (Fine, 1991; Finn, 1989; Christle et al., 2007; Dei, et al., 1997).

Students go through several stages of tuning out (seeming disinterested), acting out (deviant behavior) then fading out (attendance) before finally dropping out completely (Dei, et al. 1997; Fine, 1991). Hodgson (2007) suggests that students co-construct the decision to drop out with the school, and the decision is an accumulation of negative experiences—failing a course, being retained, unfair treatment, and being ignored. If dropping out is truly "winnowing" as Hodgson (2007) posits, then there may be several chances for schools to intervene (Fine, 1991; Hodgson, 2007). First we must understand how and when this happens for students, and we must understand from the students' perspectives.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

"Imagination can be…becoming a friend of someone else's mind, with the wonderful power to return to that person a sense of wholeness. Often, imagination can bring severed parts together, can integrate into the right order, can create whole" (Greene, 1995, p.38).

Releasing the Imagination

How one defines the problem is how one defines solutions (Greene, 1995). For example, if we continue to look at dropouts from an at-risk, deficit perspective, we will continue to blame students, families and even communities for lack of interest in education or lack of commitment to school. So to re-imagine new solutions for dropouts, we must re-imagine the problem. This requires re-imagining the approach to the phenomenon (Greene, 2007; Hodgson, 2007).

Greene (1995) challenges "old quantitative models" of research in which school reform dialogue is "entrenched." She encourages educational researchers to explore imaginative possibilities and to "break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real…to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal and to carve out new orders in experience" (Greene, 1995, p. 19). In the case of this dissertation study what is "fixed and finished" are the at-risk labels placed on students and the "new orders in experience" are those shared stories with us by the students.

To this end, I asked students to literally *show me* how they experience self and how they see school. For this study we engaged in a collaborative process that ignited all of our critical capacities as we defined, documented, shared and shaped our perspectives on school (Greene, 1995; Wallerstein, 1987; Wissman, 2007). From this effort new conversations about school occurred (Bland & Carrington, 2009; Greene, 2007; Harper, 2004).

Imagination is an important concept in this study. It is, however, a term that has multiple meanings and connotations. To clarify, I am not using the term to refer to students creating artwork or imagining fantasy lands. I am using it to apply to the concepts of marginalization and space as discussed in the previous chapter. Maxine Greene's (1995) imaginative possibility in education provides the foundation.

According to Greene (1995) *releasing the imagination* occurs through a person's encounters with the arts. These encounters can be with music, books, film, painting, or drama. Through these encounters or interactions with the arts, students and instructors can experience an imaginative release or freedom. In this release or space, students and instructors can re-position and re-create their own sense of self in relation to the art, to each other and to the world (Greene, 2007). In this study we employed photography as the art encounter to open imaginative space with students in order to "engender transformation" in relation to school (Greene, 1995, p. 144).

Methodology: Setting the Stage

Low-income, minority, middle school students who are identified at-risk are rarely the primary subjects of collaborative research studies (Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang & Minkler, 2007; Smyth, 2006; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). At the

same time, they are rarely the subject of constructive discussion in staff rooms, the media or community. This marginalized group represents a multi-dimensional gap in our understanding of the schools (Bloustein & Baker, 2003; Losen, 2004). In this gap are the stories of students who may be accruing bad experiences with school that could potentially lead to silencing, invisibility and eventually dropping out (Fine, 1991; Hodgson, 2007; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006; Wehlage, 1986). This study invited one such group to pick up cameras, release the imagination, and tell their stories.

The data collection occurred over a four-month period as part of a larger after-school program, Literacy Through Photography (LTP), funded by a Department of Public Instruction Dropout Prevention Grant. This time period encompassed two units of study: Self-portrait and School. Data collection ended with Art Show Two and right before winter break. While I continued to work with these same students for the rest of the school year in the program, I did not include data after December. It was difficult to end the collection at this point as I wondered how these students' stories would unfold through May and wanted to record them. The ethnographic nature of living in the school with students collided with the necessity for deadlines and defense dates. The dissertation process required me to define an end point for data collection, a clear plan for analysis and a report of findings. Life in the school and for these students obviously continued on.

To facilitate a full understanding of this work, the next section will describe the Dropout Prevention Grant, the LTP program, the curriculum for the program through which the data was primarily collected and the school context. Following that are data collection methods and analysis.

Dropout Prevention Grant

My interest in dropout prevention or as Holden would say, catching kids from falling off that "crazy cliff," (Salinger, 1951, p.173) had been the focus of my classroom teaching and was the focus of my doctoral program in urban education. In the fall of 2009 during my last year of doctoral course work, I learned about a dropout prevention grant from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. It seemed like an ideal opportunity to fund my emerging dissertation ideas with at-risk youth. Three other doctoral students and I wrote a grant proposal that outlined a unique approach to dropout prevention based on the Literacy Through Photography program (LTP) and Wendy Ewald's (2001) work at Duke University. We wrote that "the goals of the proposed program are to help students return to their home schools better prepared to set goals, to resolve conflicts, and to draw on their own experiences to increase agency and efficacy" (Britt, Salyers, Mungo & Garo, NC DPI Grant Proposal, 2009).

The team selected New Leaf Alternative School as our project site since the students are considered "high-risk" for drop out by the district, and we had a connection with the principal who was willing to participate. Also, we knew that if we could show an impact with the most vulnerable population at New Leaf, then we could show that our program had potential anywhere. Before we submitted our proposal, we secured a professor who would oversee the grant's logistics. The State Department of Public Instruction accepted our proposal for 2010-2011 and awarded our team a grant of $158,000. The after-school program under which I collected data for this dissertation study was called Literacy Through Photography (LTP) and the program was funded by this grant.

This dissertation study was a segment of the grant's activities and I oversaw curriculum and delivery for both the grant and the study. I pulled parts of the data for the dissertation study from the grant, specifically units one and two. In addition, I conducted observations and video interviews for my study that were not included in the grant.

Program and Curriculum: Literacy Through Photography

Literacy Through Photography (LTP) is both a curriculum and a methodology that is based at the Duke University Center for Documentary Studies. It stems from the work of photographer Wendy Ewald (2000) and encourages young people to explore their worlds as they photograph their own lives. LTP's goals are to communicate with the language of images, promote self-expression, develop cultural literacy for teachers, enhance writing and language skills, and increase visual literacy. The LTP process is flexible and interchangeable and includes reading images, pre-writing around a theme, planning photographs, making photographs, writing from the photographs, and sharing photographs.

The program.

LTP was based on Ewald's (2000) work and was held two afternoons a week from 3:30- 5:00 at New Leaf Alternative School. For the program we had five primary instructors (including the three original grant writers), three New Leaf teachers for support and a curriculum director from the University. The curriculum for the dropout prevention grant and thus this dissertation study was inspired by the original LTP design described above. It shares its goals and processes but varies slightly in the thematic units, as we were focused specifically on dropout prevention.

Our curriculum was developed during the summer before the study's fall implementation. As the team leader, I oversaw the team of instructors in developing the curriculum. LTP Charlotte (from this point called the program) specifically focused on using photography as the primary mode of expression to increase connectedness to self and school. The four umbrella curriculum themes were: Self-portrait, School, Neighborhood/Community and Dreams.

Curriculum overview.

In the program, students engaged in the process of picture making, writing, agency artwork and discussion related to self and school. The primary focus of each unit was photography and photo making assignments. Instructors posed questions for students to answer with their cameras. For example in the first unit, Self-portrait, students answered: Who am I? How do I see myself? through the creation of self-portrait images. Students also responded to other media (short stories, poems, song lyrics, current events), and artwork (famous work, peer work) by taking photos. In the end, photography was the basis for everything.

Agency artwork.

Photo assignments included an interactive dimension regarding how things *are*, how things *should* be, and how things *could* be. In this stage of the process, students engaged actively with their photos about school and wrestled with how to portray school *as it could be*. I named this process of manipulating and engaging directly with images Agency Artwork. For example, after completing How I See School students worked in groups to show How School Could Be. They used markers, paint, words and collage to create a new vision of school. See Figure 1. In this process and through discussion with

their instructors and peers, students re-imagined school based on the group consensus

regarding the purpose of school.

Figure 1. Agency Artwork. Student Collage. How School Could Be.

Art shows.

Twice during the fall semester, students selected photos and writing to share in a

public forum which we (the instructors) called art shows. With our assistance, students

displayed their selections in the multipurpose room and the old gym (a larger space

across the street) at New Leaf. Students invited family, friends and their teachers. The

instructors invited family, friends and colleagues to attend. Art Show One focused on

Self-portrait and Art Show Two focused on School (How School Sees Me, How I See School, and What School Could Be).

Description of the Setting: New Leaf Alternative School

At-risk factors commonly include high truancy, violence, retention, and suspension or expulsion rates (Allen, 2008; Ayers et al., 2008). While some see these factors as *the* problem, others see them as the symptoms of the true problem: disconnection, neglect, and alienation from school (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006). Because I am most interested in this highly marginalized population, I chose this alternative school in a large urban district for the grant and thus this dissertation study.

New Leaf is a Title I placement for students in grades 4-12 who receive a long-term suspension or expulsion from their home school or other public schools in the district as a result of committing a Tier IV or Tier V offense, according to the Student Code of Conduct Handbook. A Tier IV offense as: "physically assaulting and injuring a teacher or other school personnel; physically assaulting and injuring another student; bringing a firearm or explosive to school or onto school property; communicating a bomb threat and/or perpetrating or reporting a false bomb threat or hoax." A Tier V offense is " a permanent expulsion for students over 14 years of age whose continued presence constitutes a clear threat to other persons." Students are eligible to petition the Board for re-enrollment after expulsion. Until then, these students may be placed at New Leaf with a re-entry plan developed by school personnel (Student Code of Conduct Handbook, 2010). Most students are placed at New Leaf for 180 days. On a rare occasion a student is sent to New Leaf for a shorter time of 45 days (personal communication, 2010).

According to district data, the demographics of the students who attended New Leaf in 2010 were: 80.9% African-American, 6.6% White, 6.6% Hispanic, 0.9% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.8% other. Sixty eight percent were male and thirty-one percent were female, with a free and reduced lunch status of eighty percent (district website, 2010).

New Leaf is "a 'redirection' program designed to meet the education needs of 'at-risk' students through therapeutic intervention services, behavior and academic prevention and intervention programs" (school website). New Leaf requires students to transition in within the first ten days of their suspension from their home schools. This is called in-take. To be successful at New Leaf and thus return back to their home schools, student earn daily points based on their behavior, attendance, academics, and attitude. When students have met the goals, they are eligible "to transition back to the home-schools at the anniversary date"(school website, 2010). This is called out-take.

Anniversary date refers to the date on which a student's suspension ends. Students transition out of New Leaf at the end of the quarter closest to their anniversary date. For example, if a student's suspension ended November 5th, he would transfer back to his home school at the end of second quarter in mid January. A transition coordinator leads a meeting with the student, parent, and home school contact to clarify expectations for the student upon return to the home school.

The description of the setting above was derived mainly from published literature on the school, district handbooks and school and district websites. Once in the field, however, I realized that the official description of the school and the day-to-day workings of the school varied greatly. Understanding the setting is imperative to understanding the

stories of the young people who spend their days there. Therefore, I have included a more detailed and first hand account of the New Leaf at the beginning of Chapter Four.

Research Design

"'What should it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children both as knowers and actors?'" (Oakley, 1994, p. 25 in Mitchell et al., 2006).

This dissertation used a qualitative methodology and case study design with a critical ethnographic approach. I chose this design to explore how this group of students sees themselves and school (Glesne, 2006). I was both an instructor in the program and a researcher, which required specific attention to both roles (MacLean & Mohr, 1999).

In this study a critical, feminist lens was used to "describe what is and what could be" (Thomas, 1993 in Glesne, 2006). Photovoice allowed the viewer/reader to see the world through the eyes of students and cameras gave glimpses into spaces, places and worlds that are often inaccessible to teachers and researchers (Bloustein & Baker, 2003). Student reflection and interaction with these photos, the process and the product provided insight into their complex worlds as well (Wang & Burris, 1997).

A focused case study of three students is set against the backdrop of the larger ethnography of the school and the core group of thirteen students (Way, 1998). These students are a "bounded integrated system" in the after school program, in their suspension from their home schools and in their prescribed at-risk labels (Glesne, 1996). Each student has a unique story to tell. Yet, there is a common experience of school among them all (Stake, 1995, p. 13 in Glesne, 2006). Thus focused cases added depth and illumination to the larger themes that emerged from the group data and vice versa (Way, 1998). This design addressed the complexity of the issues presented and allows for

multiple entry points and multiple interpretations from various points of view (Greene, 1995; Murdock, 2005; Rifa-Valls, 2009; Way, 1998; White, 2009).

Sample

The sample for this dissertation study combined purposive and convenience strategies (Glesne, 2006). Participants came from approximately twenty-five students who volunteered for the program at New Leaf, which was funded by the dropout prevention grant from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. Participants had to be enrolled at New Leaf Middle School in sixth, seventh and eighth grades during the 2010-2011 school year.

Parents and students were introduced to the LTP program during a summer orientation, at in-take, and from one of their core teachers, Ms. T. The program instructors also visited the middle school homeroom during the first week of school to recruit students directly. All interested students and parents received a brochure about the program, and assent and consent forms. To be eligible students had to be willing to participate, have parental permission, and commit to the times and days of the program (two days a week after school for an hour and a half each day).

Core group.

Over the fall semester our average attendance in LTP was eleven (field notes). We had a group of thirteen regular attenders. I refer to this as the core group. The core group was comprised of one female and twelve males. On certain days our attendance was as low as six, primarily due to student suspensions (field notes). In other words, if LTP students were in school, they came to program. I learned from conversations with teachers, students and parents that often LTP students attended school only so they could

attend program (field notes). One parent told me as she was gathering her son's transcripts for their move out of state that the program was the *only* reason her son came to school (personal communication, 2010).

The demographics of the core group as students identified themselves were these: 1 white male, 2 Hispanic males, 9 black males, 1 mixed-race male and one black female. I collected data from all members of the core group and during analysis chose three students for the focused case study. However, due to the nature of the school and transience of student population, not all students in the core group remained in the program for the entire study. Thus, some data points have all thirteen students, some has only ten and some only eight.

The students in the case study closely reflect the group population in race and gender but are not a representative sample (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam, 1988; Way, 1998). This decision indicated an attempt to re-present the variety of students in the larger group but in no way was preparing to generalize the findings to a larger population of at-risk students (Glesne, 2006). Other criteria for the three case study students was: consistent attendance for a minimum of eleven weeks, completion of necessary photography, writing and artwork assignments for data collection, and willingness to participate in multiple interviews. After the first set of interviews, the students for the case study naturally emerged (Weis & Fine, 1993).

I observed only three girls enrolled in the middle school while I collected data and one was a regular attender in the program. Most of the time, only two girls were present on any given day in the middle school (field notes). Overall, the majority of my experiences in the school, the program and this study were with boys. Therefore, my

pronoun usage throughout this dissertation is masculine. This decision simplified the

writing process, and it also represented the site more accurately.

Procedures

The following chart outlines the procedures followed during fall 2010. It

delineates student expectations, researcher responsibilities and time frames. It also

includes revised portions (indicated with *), which are explained following the chart.

Students	Researcher	Timeline
Introduction		
Come to school Media Center. Participate in team building activity in large group. Meet instructors and meet each other. Learn about LTP goals and concepts.	Meet with initial group of approximately 25 students. Lead team-building activity with students around storytelling and photography. Use Helen Levitt street scenes as prompt.	September 21st
Practice with cameras. Sign agreement on use of equipment and ethical use of photography. Receive course packet and materials packet (binder, scissors, markers, etc.). Create daybook.	Explain procedures for cameras, materials and how the afternoons will look. Hand out daybooks and materials.	Week 1
Unit I: Self		
Look at samples of self-portraits. Read poems and excerpts about self. Write about myself.	Begin Unit 1: Self-portrait. Introduce essential questions: Who are you? How do you see yourself? How do you describe yourself?	Week 2
Draw self and star important physical attributes related to memory. Create storyboards of possible images for Self-portrait. Work in pairs to create Self-portraits for several assignments.	Small groups: Take students through several activities to lead up to Self-portrait picture taking. Practice storyboards and picture planning. Give students Self-portrait assignments	Weeks 3-4

	(two total) and cameras. Share examples of portraits from other photographers.	
Decide what images to use for final Self-portrait assignment. Write about these images. What does this image say about me? What would someone looking at this image think about me?	Help students select representative images for final Self-portrait assignment. Collect photography and writing. Photocopy, scan and save data.	Week 5
Meet with Heather (researcher) to talk about photos in video interview. Use photos to talk about self, Self-portrait and School.	Lead photo elicitation interviews with each student about Self-portrait. Transcribe interviews. Code and analyze for emergent themes. Use these themes to develop future assignments and interview protocol.	On-going
NA	Share field notes and thematic analysis with co-instructor. Ask co-instructor to read transcripts and check against developing themes.	
Write about Self-portrait activity.	Collect writing. Photocopy, scan and save data. Analyze writing.	Week 6
Art Show One: Self-portrait Week 6		
Unit 2 School		
* Complete graphic organizer related to how others see me. Focus on how school sees me. Talk with the group.	*Begin Unit 2: School. Talk with students about how others see them- peers, family, associates and school. Focus writing and discussion on how students feel school sees them (Leading to How I See School)	Week 7
*How does school see me? Generate a list of adjectives and create a shot	* Create shot list of How School Sees Me. Plan and	Weeks 8-9

list of images that would represent these words. Take photos.	take photos.	
* View images of How School Sees Me on computer and discuss with instructor. Which ones do I like? Which ones best tell the story I want to tell?	*Ask students to write about taking photos about how school sees them. What issues came up? Work through selection process of photos. Talk about choosing images and representative images.	Week 9
*Write about two images of How School Sees Me and prepare the photos for Art Show Two. Frame and write captions.	*Collect photos and writing. Photocopy, scan and save data. Analyze for themes. Look for relationships between images and writing. Begin to draw out specifics from the selected cases as needed.	Week 9
Collaborative Analysis One		
Selected students: Look at all student photos, from Self-portrait. What themes do you see from the whole group? Share with Heather and peer.	Collaborate with students on theme development. Observe and take field notes. Video record these discussions. Develop themes for self-portrait.	Week 7
* Write a letter to an alien telling it about school. From the letter, choose specifics that you would show the alien. Narrow down list to five images of How I See School.	*Ask students to identify the major aspects of school for someone who has never been to school. Brainstorm as whole group, have students write individually and generate shot list of How I See School.	Week 10
Take pictures of How I See School. Look at collection of pictures and choose five to represent school. Create poster of five images. Write captions under each photo for someone to understand the images.	Work with students on taking photos, selecting photos and writing captions. Collect posters of How I See School, laminate and prepare for Art Show Two.	Week 11
Prepare photos of How School Sees Me with writing. Finish How I See School collage. Give a title. Share school photo project in small groups.	Lead video interviews with each student about How School Sees Me and How I See School. Transcribe	Week 11

	interviews. Code and analyze for emergent themes. Use these themes to develop future assignments and interview protocol.	
NA	Share field notes and thematic analysis with co-instructor. Ask co-instructor to read transcripts and check against developing themes.	Week 11
Write about why I come to school, the purposes of school and what school should be. Share with group. Create Agency Artwork using photos to answer the question: What could school be?	Lead students in writing and discussion about the purposes of school, in their eyes. Generate list of four top reasons for school according to students. Break students into groups to take pictures and create agency artwork that represents their stated purpose of school. (future, friends/social, learning, and sports/teams).	Week 12
Working groups on purpose of school pictures. Review and print. Collaborate with other students in creating a collage: How School Could Be. Prepare for Art Show Two.	Collect Agency Artwork. Photocopy, scan and save data. Analyze for themes. Begin to draw out specifics from the selected cases as needed.	Week 12
Art Show Two: School Week 13		
Collaborative Analysis Two		
Selected students: Look at all student photos on How We See School. What themes do you see from the whole group? Share with Heather (researcher/lead teacher) and peer.	Collaborate with students on theme development for school- specifically How WE See School. Observe and take field notes. Video record interviews. Transcribe.	Week 13+
Final Analysis		
NA	Compare and contrast student interpretations of	Week 15

	Self- portrait and School with researcher's interpretations.	
		On-going
	Identify umbrella themes for both self and school. Identify singular themes. Develop case studies and place in context of larger groups and themes.	

*Procedures Revised

The pen incident.

It is enlightening to look back at what I planned to do in my procedures and what actually happened at New Leaf. Even with ten years of teaching experience, I had an idealized image of school, how things go at schools and especially of doing research in school (Ferguson, 2000; Way, 1998). This phenomenon is not uncommon for teacher researchers (Glesne, 2006; MacLean & Mohr, 1999). I anticipated having to tweak the curriculum to meet student needs and interests, but I did not see the bomb scare coming.

The program had been going for about six weeks. We had a regular group of attenders, and we were preparing for Art Show One. I was going to the school on a Monday morning to drop off pictures for a student. As I got closer to the school, I saw the flashing lights and blockades around the entire perimeter. Police cars, fire engines, and bomb squad trucks surrounded new Leaf. I was rerouted to park down the street.

My initial thought went to *our* students: Were they okay, were they involved, could I get to them? I tried to park down the street away from the school and was sent away by a woman who caught me as I got out of my car. "This is a doctor's office!" she yelled at me. I told her that I needed to get to the school and gestured to all the blockades.

She wasn't hearing my excuse and told me to move. Another reminder that New Leaf seems to be a burden on the neighborhood rather than an asset.

I called Ms. T on her cell phone and she told the police to let me in. I was directed toward the old gym across the street from the school. There the entire staff and middle school student body were on lockdown. Administrators and teachers stood out front and communicated on their walkie-talkies with those still in the building and with the police. Middle school students had been on lockdown since 9:00 a.m. It was now after 12:00. High school students were sent home on busses an hour earlier. Ms. T. called out the student whose pictures I had. "How's it going in there?" I asked. "It's hot. And we are *hungry*."

As we stood outside Ms. T explained the situation: a high school student planted a "pen bomb" in a cup on a teacher's desk; the assumption was that the pen was meant for the teacher, yet that particular teacher was absent that day. A student in the class asked for a pen from the substitute teacher, was directed to a cup full of pens, pulled out the "pen bomb" and when he opened the top, it exploded in his hand (field notes). The "pen bomb" was a ballpoint pen stuffed with lead and some kind of substance that caused the lead to pop out when opened. It made a very loud exploding sound "that scared everyone" (field notes). The student who opened the pen had some small cuts on his hand and arm. Since the incident happened on the high school side, the middle school students were ignorant to all the facts. All they knew was that they were on lockdown for a bomb scare. All the information they had was what filtered through the old gym doors from the adults outside, what they created in their minds, and what stories they told each other to pass the time (field notes).

The local news covered the event for the next four days. It became Bomb Explodes at Alternative School and Are Your Kids Safe in School? New Leaf was mentioned over and over in the same sentence as "bomb scare" and "alternative school." The student's injuries were described as "shrapnel like" cuts. An interviewee on the news also speculated that if the victim had "put the pen in his mouth" it could have been very serious.

Art Show One was scheduled for that Friday. Students had sent out invitations and were excited about their first public show. Would the school still allow us to hold the event? Would anyone come? I contacted the local news through a reporter friend who agreed to do a "feel good story" about the art show. However, the Central Office for the district refused permission at the last minute citing that the proper channels had not been followed for a news conference. This is not surprising; students were being instructed that if they talked to reporters on the way to the bus or elsewhere, they would be suspended (personal communication, 2010).

The long-term effect on the school is not the focus here. What I can speak to is the effect on the project. The unit following Self-portrait was School. We had plans and permission to take pictures *during* the school day, of actual school in progress so that students could document what school is and what school is not. After the "pen bomb," security clamped down even harder at the school on these students and thus on our program. All pens and mechanical pencils were forbidden for the rest of the school year. The instructors had to go through each LTP student's pencil pack and pull out contraband (mechanical pencils and ball point pens) and replace them with No. 2 pencils and felt markers.

Our students showed up for program that week following the incident when most students at New Leaf used the bomb scare as an excuse to skip school (field notes). One of our students was suspended that week for pulling a ballpoint pen out of his pocket, waving it around and daring someone to pull the top off (field journal). Another student told me he was sick of talking about the incident with counselors and teachers and tired of seeing it on the news. He said to me as we walked outside to take pictures one afternoon, "How are we supposed to move forward if they keep telling us to look back?" In the end, we had Art Show One as scheduled.

Changing School curriculum.

Cameras in school during the school day were no longer an option. I never heard this officially from the administration, but I heard it unofficially from Ms. T who was under a great amount of stress trying to get the middle school "back to normal" (field notes). If kids could not have pens, how would security allow us to carry cameras in the hallways and classrooms? While this event is a real part of school for these students, I decided not to push the issue and we set aside our assignment on taking photographs during the day.

Instead, as noted in the Procedures above, we amended the curriculum so that students re-enacted situations from school during the program to show How I See School. This may have benefited students since it allowed them more freedom and creativity to re-present school (Greene, 1995). In the "counter-space" of after school, students were able to recreate common situations from school instead of trying to catch them in action (field notes). Their impressions of school might have been denied or censored if they had tried to snap pictures of these situations occurring during the day. Students had free reign

in the after school setting (Way, 1998). Some of the images may be exaggerated, but in the end they represent how these students see school.

Robbery.

Over Thanksgiving break, and right after I completed my full first round of interviews, my apartment was robbed and my laptop computer was stolen. I had not backed up the video interviews, but I had kept extensive notes on each interview. I wrote notes before, during and after, recording important points and writing down quotes for reference (Glesne, 2006; Way 1998). Also, I had watched each video with the student as it downloaded to my laptop.

These interviews were irreplaceable. In the first round, students told me what brought them to New Leaf and talked about their families as they introduced themselves. After consulting with my dissertation chair, I decided not to ask students to re-do these interviews. For many, it would have been disheartening to repeat those stories, especially recounting the events that led to being sent to New Leaf. The students would have done it, though, if I had asked them. They were aware that I was writing a "big paper" about the program as part of my graduation. Still, I thought it best to move forward. So with the permission of my chair and methodologist, I continued on to the next round of interviews and used my notes from the first set as data.

Data Collection: Excessive and Messy

Glesne (2006) reminds us that, "the methods of qualitative data collecting naturally lead themselves to excess" (p. 151). This was certainly true for this project given the different types of data and the ethnographic approach. There were five identified sources of data collection under curriculum units Self-portrait and School; thus,

there were ten points total: photos, student writing, agency artwork, field notes, and interview. Agency Artwork only occurred in School. As described in Procedures Revised, the data collection process was far from this neat or easy. In addition to life as it unfolded and the excess of data, collection was simultaneous with description and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994, in Glesne, 2006).

Photos.

Students took photos almost every day at program. Specifically students took photos related to questions posed by instructors under the curriculum units Self-portrait and School. They used Nikon digital cameras and printed copies of their photos from small portable photo printers. Students viewed, critiqued and selected photos in small groups with instructors on laptops and at times projected on a large screen. We enlarged student-selected photos to 8 1/2 x 11 for Self-portrait and School. For Self-portrait and School students chose what they felt were representative images from the questions posed, including: How do you see yourself? How does school see you? These are referred to as "student selections" in the next chapters. They were shown in Art Show One and Art Show Two.

The categories for photos were: unassigned photos (all images from the students' cameras), Self-portrait, How School Sees Me, and How I See School.

Student writing.

Students wrote about their photos for Self-portrait and School. They wrote about representation, selecting subjects and taking photos. Students kept daybooks where they recorded all of these writings, as well as plans for pictures, drawings and notes to themselves (field notes). I collected daybooks and scanned them on two occasions, once

after Self-portrait and once after Art Show Two. I also reviewed the daybooks once a week to get a sense of how things were going with the program.

The main student writings used for analysis were the photo captions and reflections for Self-portrait, the letter to the alien explaining school, and the photo captions under How I See School. Captions explain an image to the audience (Pink, 2007). For captions, instructors prompted students to tell the viewer what they were seeing but to also add to the image (Ewald, 2001). We encouraged students to say more than "This is my self-portrait." We asked them to explain what the image said about self or school, to explain what the person in the image might be thinking or feeling or to say what the viewer might be thinking based on the image (Ewald, 2001).

For School, we asked students to begin by writing a letter to an alien explaining this "thing called school." We asked them to pretend that the alien would soon be coming to an earth school to visit. What should the alien expect? What would happen there? Where would it take place? What would the alien see, smell, experience, feel? From this letter, students identified ten key components of "school" then narrowed it down to five. We asked this: If you could only show school in five images, what would they be? For their final How I See School, they took photos, selected five images, wrote captions and mounted them in a poster for display.

Agency artwork.

Students created one collaborative collage called How School Could Be. This collage included photos, writing, and mixed medium. See Figure 1.

Field notes.

I kept a detailed field journal during the entire data collection period (Dei et al., 1997; Ferguson, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Way, 1998). These notes, observations and reflections were collected while teaching in the program, during school and classroom visits, and as overall impressions after each day at New Leaf. My notes included sketches and diagrams, analytic notes, memos to myself about the data and program, and often autobiographical notes that included personal reflections and emotions (Glesne, 2006). In addition, I kept a record of conversations with teachers, staff, parents, and instructors as they related to the project (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Way, 1998).

Interviews and Photovoice.

Images alone do not have meaning (Pink, 2007). The creator of the image creates meaning through writing and speaking about the image (Mason & Dicks, 2001; Pink, 2007). Images have their own biographies, and arbitrary categories such as chronology are ineffective modes of data organization for photos (Pink, 2007). For the program, student photos rarely fit neatly into the units we created or the questions we posed. It was impossible to separate out completely the Self-portraits from How School Sees Me and How I See School. This provided further credence to a research approach that addressed the complexity of school for students (Weis & Fine, 1993).

Students gave meaning to their images through selecting, editing, writing, and discussing their photos and through an interview process known as photo elicitation (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation is a "model of collaboration giving those who are in the photograph or take the photograph the opportunity to share their interpretation of the experience" (Harper, 1998, p.392 in Zenkov & Harmon, 2009).

I conducted two formal photo elicitation interviews with each student in the study,

and I conducted three interviews with students who emerged as case studies (Zenkov & Harmon, 2009). I used a small Flip video camera with two hours of memory for each interview, and I began with time for the student to film something and then play it back. I wanted them to see how the camera worked and to have an idea of what the finished interview might look like so they would be comfortable with the process. The photo elicitation interviews were unstructured but were influenced by Wang et al. (2000) using a process labeled SHOWeD: What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? (or how does this affect our lives?) Why does this problem, concern, strength exist? What can we Do about it?

I assumed I would lead the interview but students regularly "high jacked" the process by taking the camera into their own hands. They were naturally drawn to the camera and were familiar with the confessional style videos they had seen on television, YouTube and Facebook (Noland, 2006). More than half of the interviews consisted of the students holding the camera themselves, talking into the camera, and using the camera to pan their photos as they explained them. More than once a student turned the camera on his peers or me to ask questions or to look for confirmation (field journal). One interview with Alberto took place in the car on the way back from pizza. Only a couple of interviews were done the way I had envisioned them, with the camera on a small tripod while the student talked and showed photos.

Member checks.

Directly after each interview, we downloaded the video to my laptop. While the interview downloaded, the student and I watched it together. This process was not planned but became very important in analysis and establishing trustworthiness. While

the student watched, he also told me what I could not use in my report, if anything. Some students commented on the content as well, which was part of the analysis. After I transcribed the interview, I shared the transcript with the student. Again, he would tell me what was incorrect or what he did not want me to include in my paper. I found that students liked seeing themselves talk and seeing their words on paper (field notes). For example, one student said he couldn't believe I would take "all that time to write down every word I said!" Students began to look forward to the interview process (field notes).

I based the second round of interviews on my initial findings from Self-portrait and data collected during School (Way, 1998). After transcribing the first interviews, I noted questions that remained unanswered and needed further probing (Glesne, 2006). For example, I realized after transcribing a couple of interviews that students had not specified if the images of school were all schools they attended or only New Leaf. After seeing the students construct their How I See School posters I wondered this: If school is so negative, why do they come? That considered, I added the question, "Why do you come to school?" to the next round of interviews. From that I asked, "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

I also conducted what Ferguson (2000) calls "free time" interviews with students (p.12). These took place while taking pictures, in the hallways, during the many Bojangles lunches that I brought, and as we set up or cleaned up for program. I agree with Ferguson (2000) that these moments often revealed more than a formal interview (with camera) could. At these times, we were more relaxed, just chatting, catching up and sharing a meal.

Data Analysis

As with most qualitative research, analysis was recursive and simultaneous with data collection (Ezzy, 2002; Glesne, 2006; Mason & Dicks, 2001). For this collaborative study it was also co-constructed with the students, as they were my "assistants in discovering the answers to these questions in the realities of the photographs" and their lives (Jones, 2004, p. 105). Analysis was flexible and fluid and happened during the process of picture taking, writing, agency artwork and interview (Pink, 2007). Analysis had to be as flexible and fluid as data collection. It had to be responsive to life as it unfolded during these months working on the project, working with students (Fine, 1991).

It was important that the analysis of the data not further marginalize this group of students who were already labeled at-risk (Way, 1998). Marginalization can occur if the data is looked at through the lens of at-risk theory meaning if I looked for themes such as drug use, delinquency and criminal behavior (Way, 1998). I took care, as Fine and Weis (1993) suggest, to represent the mundane and daily living of these students and to not mine the data for "hot spots." I sought to "present the regularity and texture of everyday living" for this group at this time in school (Way, 1998, p. 41).

All data from the core group of students was analyzed. The data that eventually formed the case studies highlighted recurrent themes and common experiences. Also, the data from students in the case studies received more in-depth attention, as they were the focus of the findings, which came from their stories (Way, 1998). Themes began to emerge early in the field as explained above. I noted them as they arose, and then crosschecked the actual data with these developments to see if they confirmed or disproved what I was seeing and hearing (Walcott, 1994 in Glesne, 2006). I listened to

students' stories and remained open as they showed me, in photos, what they were experiencing.

Overall, the research questions directed the analysis process. I continually asked: How do these students see themselves? How do they feel school views them? And how do they view school? I asked these questions of individual students, of the group, and in the field.

Photos.

Analysis of photos took place using photo elicitation interviews and as students wrote about their photos with captions (Ewald, 2001; Harper, 2002). It also took place as students shared their ideas in program, during informal conversations, during art shows and whenever we were in program. In program, we often talked about what images mean, what students wanted their images to mean and how they could possibly show what they wanted to show.

As Ewald modeled (2001), for Self-portrait students had to orchestrate and direct their own portraits. This meant first deciding how they see themselves, then planning out the images and asking peers to collaborate in setting it up, having the peer sit in for them while they looked through the camera, then having them snap the picture in the end (Ewald, 2001). I was able to observe this process with the core group. I heard them say things like, "No, that's not what I want" after looking at an image on the LCD and then retaking the photo. I saw them change the angle of the camera, move something from the background, and change a facial expression. This process is not evident in the final photos but was invaluable in understanding what students were working to portray with their photos.

Looking at all the photos.

Students selected representative photos for Art Show One and Art Show Two. While these selections spoke to the student's process of representation, they took many more pictures related to the assignment than the ones chosen. For example, some students like Marcel took more than ten photos of How School Sees Me (see Chapter Four) but only selected two for the Art Show Two. Therefore, during analysis, I looked at all the images related to the question while focusing on his selections. Also, when taken as a whole, all the photos from all core group cameras in response to How We See School presented a powerful message in images.

I downloaded all contents from student cameras to my laptop on two occasions. This allowed me access to all student images at any time. Seeing all the photos students took under Self-portrait or School helped confirm emergent themes and added depth to my case studies. It brought to light my own biases in interpretation. For example, what I assumed would be a theme in How School Sees Me was not at all how students saw themselves. Viewing the photos as a whole brought to light another theme that was present in interviews.

Student selections.

Next, I laid out all of the student selections for How School Sees Me and How I See School and viewed them as a whole. It was then that I realized that How School Sees Me was more individual and more positive for students than I had expected. I assumed that most students would say that school saw them as troublemakers, violent, or bad, given their current placement at New Leaf. These students were not a monolithic group and have unique experiences even though they are all labeled at-risk (Way, 1998).

Students completed a Venn diagram of descriptors before taking photos for School. As I circulated the room and read students' descriptors, I became aware of my biases and expectations about what I thought students would say. I consulted the instructors after program to talk about what we were observing. Students were not describing that school saw them as trouble. "How could this be?" we asked. After all, they were all suspended from their home schools for serious offenses. Were the students in denial? Were they trying to be more positive for our sake? As we continued planning photos for How School Sees Me, I talked with students and probed them for more. They truly did not think that school saw them as bad or as at-risk for dropping out.

As I looked at the photos, I noted what was not being shown as much as what was being shown (Way, 1998). Students generally felt that school saw them in positive or at least neutral ways: athletic was a common descriptor. Others adjectives included helpful, smart, focused and silly. I started to think that what I expected as trouble making was being represented as silly by students. After further discussion with students about the meaning of "silly" a third theme developed: the difference between how students view their actions and how teachers view their actions.

When I laid out all the posters of How I See School the themes were immediately evident. Images fell into clear categories. I could literally count the images of teachers yelling, sleeping or something resembling sleeping and silliness/disruption. These became the findings for the whole group related to how they view school. The case studies then illuminated each of these prominent themes.

Co-constructing meaning.

To better identify emergent themes of the photos from School alone (without

elicitation or writing), I met with two separate groups of students to view the images, identify themes and discuss our findings (see Procedures). On two separate occasions, two students and I viewed all the images under either How School Sees Me or How I See School. I projected the images onto a screen from my laptop. The students and I wrote down words or phrases that we thought were represented in the images. We looked at the images a second time and amended the categories as necessary (Glesne, 2006). We added check marks next to categories for every time they were represented in an image. We made space for outliers, or what students called "random" photos.

After the second viewing, I asked the students to tell me what they saw and how they would categorize the images. I held back my words, themes and categories so as not to influence their language or choices (Wang & Burris, 1997). After they shared their categories, I shared mine. We then tallied our check marks and shared our top three categories. In both sessions, the students and I agreed on our top three themes. For How I See School there was little to no discrepancy. The following comes from my field notes:

> I give Alberto and Zak a big piece of paper and tell them to write down words
> for what they see….very good agreement on themes. Some outliers are easily
> consumed into other. Then we agree on what to drop. We've developed a group
> consensus for How We See School ☺: Mean teachers, boredom/boring and
> violence/bullies/fighting. Wow! (Field notes, 12/6/2010).

As I stated above, How School Sees Me was more diverse and the collaborative analysis confirmed this developing theme.

> The process was HARD. These pics are so much more personal than How I See
> School. Plus, Nate and Rashard are quieter than the other group…there is a

major difference between what they call 'silly' and 'playful' and what I would call 'troublemaking.' Also, they clarified for me that 'bullies' were different than 'fighting'…we agree on: 1) silly/playful, 2) sports/activity 3) bullies" (field notes, 12/8/2010).

This co-constructed analysis confirmed a discrepancy between how students and adults view the same events.

Student writing.

I analyzed the writing separately from the images and in the context of the images, with students and without students. I took all of the writing listed in data collection and then created a chart to record the captions and descriptors students added to their images for all the photos. From the chart, I identified recurring words and phrases related to self and school. I added a column for these (Glesne, 2006; Way, 1998). I then went back to the images and looked for confirmation or counter examples related to the emerging themes.

Student daybooks were used primarily to develop the case studies. Once the cases began to take shape, I looked for more information from the daybooks and writing. This writing was helpful in filling in the gaps and also in creating details that were not covered in the other data (Glesne, 2006). I specifically analyzed the students' letters to an alien for more details on How I See School since some students wrote more in the letter than what appeared on the poster at the end.

Agency artwork.

Agency Artwork was analyzed as it related to how students imagine school could be (Greene, 1995). This was a challenge for students and instructors. My field journal

chronicles my frustration during these days at program. We were preparing for Art Show Two, which would have three segments: How School Sees Me, How I See School and How School Could Be. I assumed that after completing the first two projects, students would want to work creatively on a new vision for school. I was correct that students wanted school to change, but they could not re-imagine it. They resisted taking imaginary pictures of school, they resisted collaborating on a collage, they resisted Agency Artwork altogether. Students struggled with how to re-imagine school (Greene, 2007).

This experience with agency artwork was part of the analysis process. It speaks volumes about how entrenched students' ideas of real school are. It also speaks to the challenge of change and reform. While students were clear about wanting school to change, they did not know how to reconceive it in words or images.

Interviews.

As described in Data Collection, analysis of interviews was on going and collaborative. I watched each interview with the student as we downloaded it. I then watched the interview another time and took notes on facial expressions, pauses and gestures. Next, I transcribed each interview. By this point, themes had already begun to emerge from the other data. The interviews were used to confirm or disprove what I was seeing and hearing in the other data, what students were showing and talking about. As I transcribed, I also began to select the students for the case studies. The interviews that added depth to the developing themes, particularly those established in collaboration with students in the co-analysis sessions, were selected.

I reviewed each of the transcripts and highlighted the emergent themes: boredom was highlighted in blue, teaching and teachers were highlighted in red, silliness was

highlighted in pink, and why school was highlighted in green. I then cut out all of the

highlighted information and placed them in envelopes with the theme titles. I next cross-

referenced what I found in the transcripts with the writing chart, photos, and daybooks.

Field journal.

The field notes helped me create rich description in the case studies and also filled

in some gaps not accounted for in other data (such as the pen incident). Once I began to

write the case studies, I revisited the journal and highlighted notes that related to the three

students in the case study. These notes filled in gaps and included more day-to-day

details that did not appear in other data sources. I also used the field journal extensively

while rewriting Chapter Three, as it was documentation of how the process unfolded. The

field journal helped create the context for the study as well.

Emerging themes.

While analysis was focused on two units Self-portrait and School, I also looked

holistically at the data to try to capture the most relevant themes across both units (Way,

1998). For example, the theme of silliness was apparent in both Self-portrait and School

yet in different ways. The theme of Mean Teachers was only apparent in School.

However, if the data suggested that Mean Teachers (rules, restriction) was a common

theme, I looked to see if it was or was not present in a different form or in the other

sources of data (Way, 1998). I found that Mean Teachers was represented as Breaking

Boredom in different sources. Overall, if a theme appeared in one or more variation in

several data sources, it is discussed in Chapter Five.

Trustworthiness.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) identify four core questions to consider when addressing trustworthiness in data. They are: What do you notice? Why do you notice what you notice? How can you interpret what you notice? How can you know that your interpretation is the 'right' one? (in Glesne, 2006, p. 166). The first two questions have been addressed throughout this chapter and also in my autobiographical story in Chapter One.

Licoln and Guba (1985) suggest that prolonged engagement and persistent observation provide scope and depth (in Glesne, 2006, p. 167). They also argue that time building "sound relationships" contributes to trustworthiness. I provide further evidence of my extended time in the field and relationship building at the beginning of the next chapter and throughout this paper.

How can you know your interpretation is the right one?

Glesne (2006) suggests this is where the researcher enlists others to provide feedback. I had several points in this process. One member of the teaching team who was familiar with the curriculum assisted me with theme confirmation of data. The other instructors engaged in informal member checks during weekly meetings before and after program. There we would share our thoughts on how things were going and what we were seeing and hearing. We revised the curriculum based on these discussions and thus the data was affected as well. I regularly talked with the instructors about their impressions of students, photos and the research questions.

Students engaged in validity checking throughout the entire process through discussion, taking photos and by participating in the program. At the same time, students also formally reviewed their interviews, transcripts and case studies. Triangulation of

data came from the multiple data points: photography, writing, and interviews under two units Self-portrait and School.

After I completed the case studies, I met with of the boys individually and asked him to read his story. We stopped after each paragraph and talked about what I had written. I asked the following types of questions: What should I take out? What should I add? What do you think of what I wrote? Does this sound right? Do I have the facts straight? At the end of the entire story, I asked each boy: Does this represent you accurately?

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The description of the school setting in Chapter Three was derived mainly from published literature on the school, district handbooks and school and district websites. Once in the field, however, I realized that the official description of the school and the day-to-day workings of the school varied greatly. Therefore, I will begin Chapter Four with a more detailed and first hand account of what life was like at New Leaf School for the students and for the researcher. Understanding the setting is imperative to understanding the stories of the young people who spend their days there. This is followed by the data.

Part One: The School Setting: First Hand Observations

School Set Up

The school is divided into the middle school side and the high school side. They share the "old gym" which is across the street, the library and cafeteria but are scheduled so that the middle school students and high school students do not interact. Each side of the school is taught by separate teachers (except physical education). They share the principal, dean of students and counselors. The school is a locked facility (personal communication, 2011). Visitors must ring a bell and wait for admittance from school staff. All staff members and teachers carry walkie talkies at all times for communication with each other, the front office and security. There is one police officer at the school all the time.

The middle school side, the focus of this study, has one full time school resource officer (security) who maintains the hallways. The officer walks students to and from classes in a line, lets visitors in and out of locked areas, breaks up fights, and oversees dismissal and morning check-in. In essence, this officer maintains the peace on the middle school side.

One student in the middle school has a security officer assigned to him at all times. At first I thought this officer was assigned to ensure that the student did not hurt anyone else, but the students explained that the student was getting harassed so badly by the other students that the school assigned him a bodyguard (field notes). I was never quite sure which was true. I observed situations where both could make sense. Either

way, this officer sat in each class with this one particular student, walked beside him in the hallway and even stood on the court during PE (field notes).

The primary teachers for middle school are all located in one hallway, including: these are language arts, science, social studies and health. Students cross over to the high school side for technology/business class. The New Leaf teachers who assisted in the program came from the middle school faculty (referred to in the subsequent sections as teachers). During data collection, I had no contact with students or teachers on the high school side. When I refer to New Leaf, I am referring to information regarding the Middle School, unless otherwise noted.

Gaining Access

Under the grant, I had access to the students after school two days a week, 3:30-5:00. I realized a couple of weeks into the program that this allotted time would not provide enough time to get to know the students as well as I wanted for my study (field notes). What I would ask students to share and express with their cameras and words would require trust between us. This trust could only come with time (Glesne, 2006).

I started to go to school early for program and wandered the halls pretending to set-up for program (field notes). This allowed me to see students in the hallways between classes and for them to see me in school. It also helped me establish relationships with some key gatekeepers at the school, particularly the front desk secretary who had to let me in each day when I buzzed the front door and the resource officer. I also became a familiar face to the central disciplinarians and the core teachers. Over time, I started coming earlier and earlier to the school. My presence at school became less and less of an event. I even got my own laminated visitor's pass (field notes).

Buying Lunch

One day I brought lunch, Bojangles (a popular southern fast food restaurant), for one of our students who was having a hard time at his group home. Jason and I ate in the middle school lunchroom at a separate table and talked. The other students in the program were curious about what was going on, why Jason, why not them? As they walked by our table to be dismissed, they asked, "Where's my Bojangles, Miss Heather?" I answered without thinking, "Today isn't your day." This led to, "So when *is* my day?" That night I put all our students' names on pieces of paper, shook them in a baseball cap, and picked out the next two names for lunch. That is how the weekly lunches started and this also became my interview schedule.

Bringing lunch turned into a perfect opportunity to build relationship with the students and to build rapport (Glesne, 2006; Ferguson, 2000). It really changed everything: the afternoon program went more smoothly, the students were more engaged, and the discussions were more forthcoming. Bringing lunch also provided several hours before program to observe students and the school in action and to conduct interviews. After lunch I would ask teachers (mostly physical education) if I could keep a student for an interview. Students began to expect this and looked forward to the individual attention given to them in this interview process, which included fast food (field notes).

Immersion and Giving Back

The increased time at the school also allowed me to perform what is often referred to in qualitative research as commitment acts or giving back to the place which was opening its doors to me (Feldman, Bell & Berger, 2003 in Glesne, 2006). I helped out with small tasks in the office, volunteered to cover a class for a bit, and even set up

bulletin boards in the hallway. Taking students for interviews seemed like giving back at times too. On more than one occasion, teachers asked me if I wanted (name) and assured me "you can keep him for the whole period" (field notes). I felt like I was relieving teachers' stress since our students were considered among the most challenging (field notes). At the same time, some teachers seemed to begrudge my presence. When students saw me in the hall, they would beg me to "take me with you!" This certainly did not make the teachers feel good. It didn't make it easier for teachers to keep attention if the students knew or thought I was coming to get them out of class (field notes).

The more regular my presence at school, the more information I gained about my students, about how the school operated and about how staff interacted with students. The staff would fill me in as soon as I arrived if one of *my* students got in trouble or suspended. Once the security associate told me that he disapproved of me taking the "worst kids" under my wing and buying them lunch. He said I was spoiling them and they didn't deserve it (field notes). All told, this immersion in the field gave me invaluable ethnographic data (Glesne, 2006).

Students at New Leaf: Beyond the Definition

How does a student in this large urban district end up at New Leaf? "New Leaf serves students who have committed identified Tier IV and V offenses within a school setting" (school website). Before beginning the program, I researched the Student Code of Conduct Handbook to find Tier IV and V violations, to understand who our students would be. It described the acts for which students would be sent to the school. When I talked to students, however, the story of how each ended up at New Leaf was different from what was written in the Student Code of Conduct Handbook. This is not surprising

since the stories behind the policies reflect the lived experiences of real young people. A policy cannot account for these stories.

The policy at New Leaf is to give students a fresh start and not discuss or in many cases have knowledge of student offenses (personal communication). Ostensibly, then, teachers do not know why any student is at New Leaf. I asked my school contact Ms. T. about this and she confirmed that she did not know why any of the students were there, and she did not care to know. As I started to learn the students' stories, I had a range of feelings about the policy. On one hand, I felt glad that she (and the other teachers) did not know the details of events. At the same time, when all teachers know is that a student "committed a level IV or V offense," imagination fills in the rest. I overheard many conversations between teachers speculating that "he must have done x, y or z" and "he seems like the type who would have x, y or z." As instructors in the program, we did the same. After our first day of program, the instructors met to debrief. The general consensus was surprise. The students appeared very young. They were well behaved and engaging. They could not have done anything so bad, we thought. They were not what we expected (field notes).

Tell me the story.

While spending time with students and talking with them, I sensed that they wanted to be heard and that they wanted to "tell the story" as it happened, if for no other reason than to get it off their chests (Coles, 1997). In almost every interview, as soon as I turned on the camera and without prompting, students blurted out what got them there. Maybe they wanted to see my reaction. Maybe they just wanted to say it. After one interview a student told me, "That felt good. To tell someone the whole story."

Students told me the stories of how they got to New Leaf. They spoke at times with regret, at other times with disgust, but always with honesty. I heard a student take responsibility for bringing an unloaded gun to school so he could "turn it in to someone." I heard about a "fight that couldn't be avoided," about pushing a teacher who "took off his glasses to fight," about running when he was told to stay put by an officer, about "selling weed" in the hallway and about drawing guns and listing names. They told me stories of misunderstanding, of contraband in backpacks that was only discovered because "it was a bad day. I got in a fight. They searched my bag and found (contraband). Then I had fighting *and* possession!"

I never confirmed their stories with school officials. Why would I? To students, this was the only story. Factual or not, this is what happened to them. Almost all of the students said they felt that whoever was in power during and after the disciplinary event did not listen to them (field notes). This was true of teachers, assistant principals, security officers and the ever-present "lady downtown" which, I assume, referred to the district's disciplinary representative. Students also generally felt that the other students did not stand up for them and "tell the truth" about events, especially when the events included conflicts with teachers (Fine, 1991). Several students told me that another student could have set the record straight regarding the actions of the teacher, but did not (field notes). Early in the field, themes began to emerge: themes of silencing, misunderstanding and misrepresentation (Fine, 1991).

Changing Student Population

Students enter New Leaf at different points throughout the school year depending on their suspensions and leave at the end of the quarter during which their suspension

ends. The population is regularly changing. Over the semester I observed that this changing population caused issues for the students and teachers. For example, the middle school classes are very small, with approximately 6-8 students per class. This size allows students to get familiar with their classmates-- the good and the bad. They get used to each other, learn what buttons not to push, and how to negotiate their way through the day. I observed that since all students ultimately want to transition back to their home schools, they generally tend to stop pushing each other's buttons so that they meet that goal (field notes).

Adding a new student who by definition has discipline issues (fighting, insubordination, court referral) to this mix is disruptive to the current class, teachers, and environment. It is inevitable given the set-up of the school, however. Students all over the district are suspended for Level IV and V offenses throughout the year. When they are, they are sent to New Leaf within ten days (field notes). Teachers told me about the struggle to re-stabilize their classes with the addition of a new student. Students also struggled with this process. They explained to me how the new student had "front" to prove himself as tough, as cool, as bad, to make sure he isn't seen as a punk (field notes). This then causes the other students who might have let go of that behavior for a time to step it back up (field notes). The majority of fighting suspensions I observed during the project occurred when a new student entered the middle school. It seemed that when the equilibrium was disturbed, the result was a verbal altercation, a slap, a fight and a suspension (field notes).

Transitioning out.

During the program, three of our students transitioned back to their home schools, one in November and the other two at the end of January. I observed the transitioning out meeting led by the principal and counselor in January. In the meeting, the principal told the larger group of twelve middle and high school students where to report the following day at their home schools and what to expect. She read off each student's name and he received a certificate for completing time at New Leaf and a packet of materials so that he could "be a real student" the next day (field notes). My students showed me what was in their envelopes after the meeting ended: two pencils, two ball- point pens, and a 5-subject spiral notebook. These are items that for some reason New Leaf students are not permitted to carry from class to class as part of the discipline code.

Turning a New Leaf?

Students ride busses from all over the district with travel times of up to one and a half hours to attend school (personal communication, 2010). For some, this means getting on the bus at 5:15 in the morning. Going to New Leaf is a public and permanent mark for students. Students told me that they felt isolated from their old friends, their neighborhoods and spoke longingly of their "home schools" (field notes). They also believed that when they returned to their home schools they would be branded as "New Leaf" students and that would cause problems with teachers and students (field notes).

Students wear uniforms of black, navy or tan pants, navy (middle school) or burgundy (high school) shirts and all-black or all-white tennis shoes. Girls at New Leaf cannot wear make up, and no student can wear jewelry of any kind. Students cannot carry backpacks. They may only carry a black three-ring binder that holds all of their materials for the day including a "point sheet" where teachers record their behavior and

participation in each class. Their homeroom teacher keeps an ongoing tally of points earned for each student each day. Students are sometimes suspended for repeated uniform violations which include: being out of dress code, sagging pants, shirt un-tucked, no belt, and/or not being prepared by carrying the black binder.

New Leaf has the reputation as the school for delinquents, gang members and criminals (personal communication, 2010). It is not surprising that there is a high level of criminal-related activity at the school based on the criterion for which students are sent there. One adult explained the school to me as "all the bad apples in one place." Several students told me that they became tougher from being at New Leaf than before they arrived (field notes). I actually saw this happen to several students. One teacher called this institutionalizing, when a student "gets worse" from being at New Leaf (field notes). One student told me being at New Leaf taught him how to smuggle drugs into school. Another said it made him a better criminal (field notes). Students also told me that they felt they had to "front" more at New Leaf than their home school. Another student in the program asked me why I was wasting all my time and money on *them*. "Why don't you take the photography class to the good kids?" When I asked him where these good kids were, he said "anywhere but here" (field notes).

The teachers and staff at the school are aware of the school's less than positive reputation in the district and community. Since changing the school name and leadership two years ago, they have worked to counter negative perceptions through outreach, positive press and greater visibility (personal communication, August, 3, 2010). Still, local businesses do not welcome New Leaf students in their establishments even if they might be paying customers (field notes). One business owner told me he preferred that

those students get directly on the bus after school and go "back where they came from" (personal communication, 2011).

Morning search and afternoon freedom.

The school is a locked facility and each morning students are searched before entering school. That means that before breakfast, which the majority of students receive for free, students pass through a metal detector and are also physically patted down by a staff member of the same sex. Many students in the study told me that "search" was the worst part of the day (field notes). It is not what many would consider a good start to the school day but more like preparation for incarceration (Noguera, 2003). Search was mentioned by all the students I talked to as annoying and violating (field notes). Students told me they felt like criminals and like no one trusted them (field notes). At the same time, given many of the students' violent histories, it may be the only way to ensure a safe school (personal communication, 2010). In the end, even the most verbal critics of search came to accept it as part of their school day (field notes).

While at New Leaf, I observed the effects of search causing problems throughout the school day for students and staff in essence distracting student from learning. For example, the one girl in program had a small ring taken from her during search. This essentially ruined her day. She refused to do work in any of the classes. Security would return her ring at the end of the day but still her mood was foul and this caused issues for all of her teachers. Another student had his hair pic taken from him. He refused to work all day.

These students know the rules. They know or come to know what they can and cannot bring to school. In essence, they cannot bring anything personal to school. If they

do, it is seized and returned at the end of the day. The security officer even keeps the students' jackets and hoodies all day. Students are allowed to retrieve their personal belongings five minutes before dismissal.

I observed this end of the day ritual many times over the months. It is the typical end of the day excitement of any school, punctuated by something more. Students came alive as they were allowed to reconnect with their personal items. They immediately put on their coats, and throw their hoods up. They have more energy as they move out the door to "freedom" (student daybook).

Part Two: The Data

Reminders Concerning Methodology

As you read in the previous chapters, the methodological approach in this study places the students as knowers with cameras in their hands. The photographs, therefore, are the primary datum and these follow. Other data are the words students write to explain and describe their photos and the words that they share in interviews with me about their photos. These are referred to as photo elicitation (Harper, 2002).

Photovoice allows us, the viewers and readers, to see the world through the eyes of these students, and in the end, it can promote agency and social action (Freire, 1970; Wang & Burris, 1997). Cameras then, as the primary tool of data collection, give glimpses into spaces, places and worlds that are often inaccessible to teachers and researchers (Bloustein & Baker, 2003). This is the imaginative space explored by Maxine Greene (1995). This is the space in which we can better understand how these students experience themselves and then see themselves in relation to school. It is the space in which students can make sense of school, and in which they can also imagine how it might be different (Green, 2007).

Student reflection and interaction with these photos through writing captions and writing in their daybooks and the process of preparing the photos for art shows also provide insight into the complex worlds of these early adolescents. In photo elicitation interviews students shared their interpretations of both the photos and the experience of taking the photos (Harper, 2002; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009).

Captions

Captions explain an image to the audience (Pink, 2007). In their instructions, teachers prompted students to tell the viewer what they were seeing but to also add to the image (Ewald,

2001). For example, we encouraged students to say more than "This is my self-portrait." We asked them to explain what the image said about self or school, to explain what the person in the image might be thinking or feeling, or to say what the viewer might be thinking based on the image (Ewald, 2001). I have included specific prompts for each assignment at the appropriate place within the sections that follow.

What You Will See

The data is organized and presented here in direct response to each research question including the process by which students created their photos. The findings are supported by a minimum of three sources: photos, writing (captions and/or daybook), and interview. These findings take the form of both holistic themes and case studies, which are detailed in Chapter Five. Therefore, data are presented in both Chapters Four and Five. (Note: Student writing has not been edited form grammar or spelling.)

Research Question 1A: How Do Students Represent Self?

Students engaged in planning for their Self-portraits by first drawing themselves in their daybooks and putting a star by parts of their bodies about which they had stories to tell. Then they wrote about themselves in their daybooks. Student then chose adjectives that they felt best described themselves and sketched out photos for Self-portrait. Next they worked in pairs with one instructor to set up and photograph themselves. Each student took about ten photos. They reviewed all their photos and selected two representative photos for Art Show One. After selecting their photos, they wrote captions to accompany them.

The captions accompanying the photos came from one or more of the following prompts:

- What does this photo say about you?

- What does this one image say about you as a person?

- What is the person in this photo thinking, feeling or saying?

- What would the person looking at this photo think of the person in the photos?

This data follows:

1. Selected samples of student Self-portraits. I have included both the finished Self-portraits, which students altered and prepared for Art Show One, and the unaltered photographs. The altered pieces represent work in the imaginative space in which they moved from planning, photographing, and finally to finished product (Greene, 1995). Sharing both altered and unaltered photos here allow the viewer to recognize each student's encounter with the image (Pink, 2007).

2. Captions from Self-portraits.

3. Selected samples of writing from student daybooks about self.

Figure 2. I Don't Look Like My Mom- "People say I look like my mom. But I don't like for people to say I look like my mom cause I say I look like myself. Nobody else!!!"

Figure 3. I Don't Look Like My Mom. Unaltered.
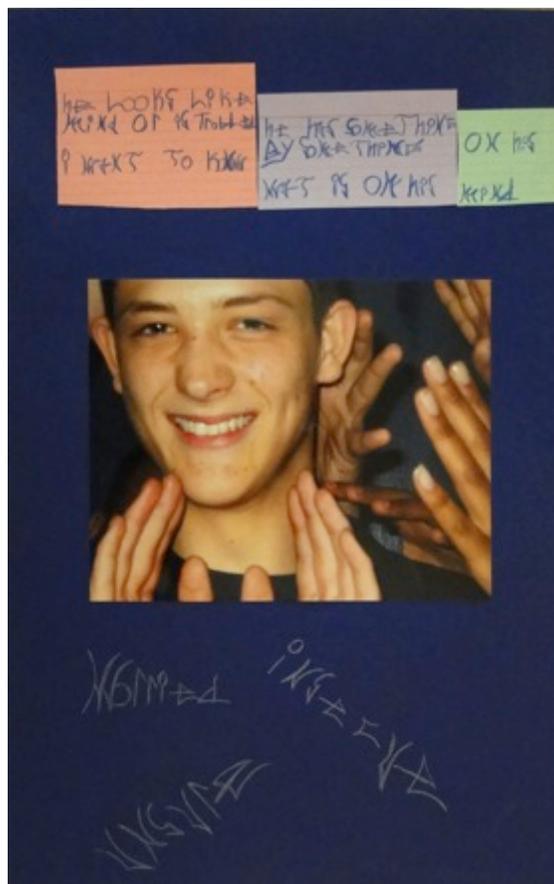
Figure 4 Hands. "He looks like he has something on his mind or is troubled by something. I want to know what is on his mind. Worried. Insecure. Unsure."

Figure 5. Hands. Unaltered.
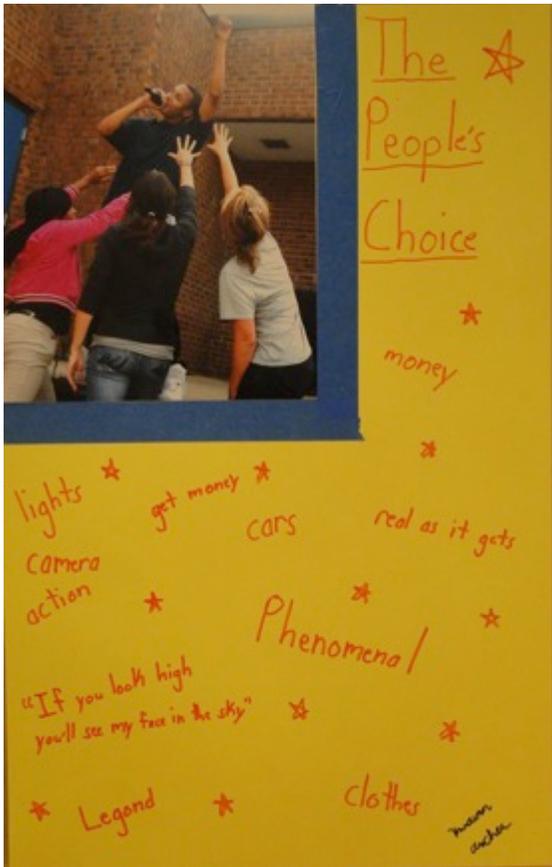
Figure 6. People's Choice.

Figure 8. 10 Reasons 10 Fingers. "Drawing-Cooking-Drums- Washing- Basketball- Boxing-Baseball- Football. Most Important."

Figure 9. 10 Reasons 10 Fingers. Unaltered.

Figure 7. People's Choice. Unaltered.
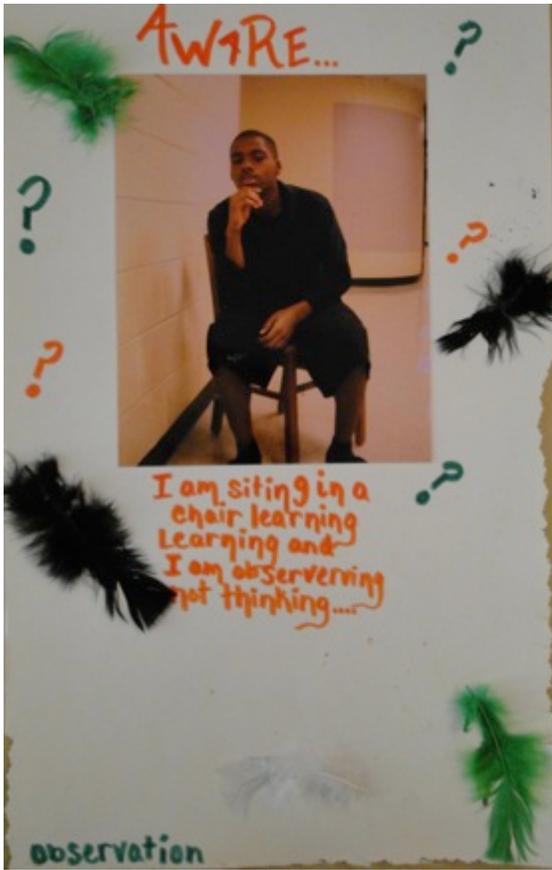
Figure 10 Aware. "I am sitting in a chair learning. Learning and I am observering not thinking …"

Figure 11. Aware. Unaltered.
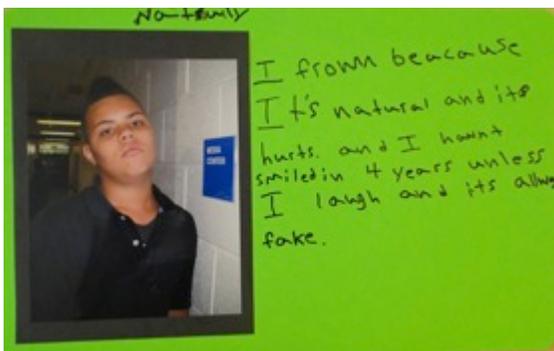
Figure 12. Natually. "I frown because It's natural and its hurts. And I havnt smiled in 4 years unless I laugh and its always fake."
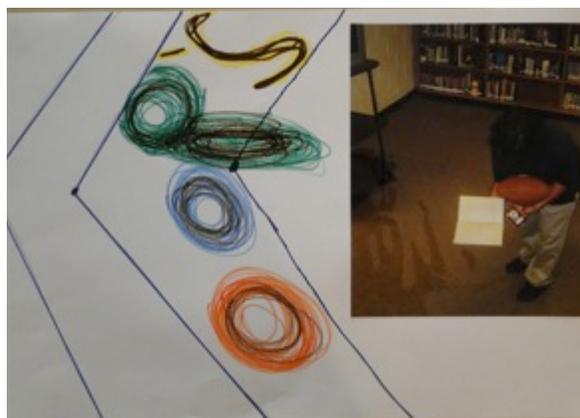
Figure 14. Oop's. "I like to read, play football. A weird combination of things. This kid is weird! Who would have a football in a library?"

Figure 13. Natually. Unaltered.
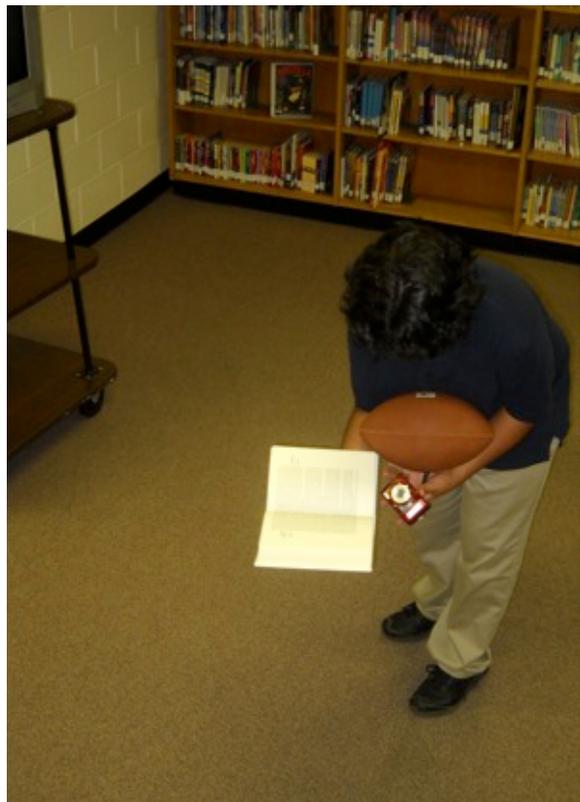
Figure 15. Oop's. Unaltered.

Figure 16. Me, Myself and Eye.

Figure 17. Me, Myself and Eye. "His eyes look like he's daydreaming about something. I'm feeling sad for some strange reason. I'm thinking about home. This boy must be sad about something."

Figure 18. Speak for Itself. "This photo shows that I am understanding but opininated. I'm going to express how I feel about the situation."
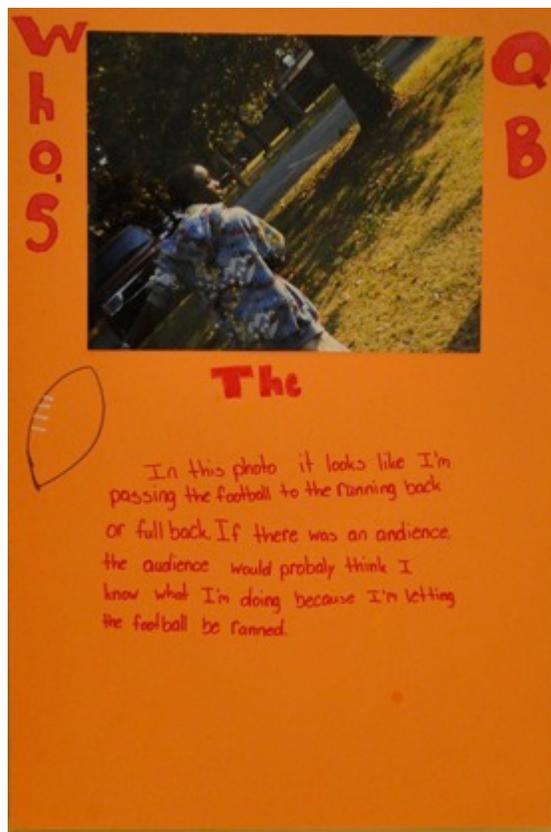
Figure 19. Who's the QB? "In this photo it looks like I'm passing the football to the running back or full back. If there was an audience the audience would probably think I know what I'm doing because I'm letting the football be runned."

Figure 20. Who's the QB? Unaltered.

Selected Samples of Writing from Student Daybooks about Self

- I'm strong. I'm very energetic, funny, athletic hyped up and I'm very happyish.

- I like that I'm always myself. I don't care about what they think of me. I'm

  sarcastic.

- I'm nice and have good sportsmanship.

- This shows I am funny. That I know when to joke and when to be serious.

  Someone looking at this would think I am silly.

- I got flow and I got personality.

- This shows that I have a nice jumper and good form.

- I stand out alone and I'm a leader not a follower.

- I think that people think I am beautiful.

- I'm a good kid. I'm cooperative, funny and athletic. I'm pretty good at classwork.

- Three things I like about myself is I'm smart, nice and athletic.

- I'm an outgoing person who is also fun.

- I like to draw, I'm creative. And I like sports and watching tv. I guess I'm athletic.

- My eyes are important because they show my expressions and my feelings.

- I like lots of things and I'm kind of unique.

- I like that I am smart, my independent attitude and my self asteam.

Research Question 1B: How Do Students Think School Sees Them?

For this assignment students started by completing a Venn diagram that asked them to consider different people in their lives and how they think these groups see them. Instructors then had students focus on school and how school sees them. Students wrote about specific memories of school or events in school that they felt represented how school sees them. Students then chose two to three descriptors and planned photos to represent those descriptors. Students worked in pairs or small groups to make those photos. Students took approximately five to eight photos for the assignment. They reviewed all their photos and chose two representative photos for Art Show Two. After selecting their photos, they wrote captions to accompany them.

The captions accompanying the photos came from one or more of the following prompts:

- What does this photo say about how school sees you?

- What does this one image say about how school sees you?

- What words can you add that would help the viewer understand this image?

- What would the person looking at this photo think of the person in the photos?

This data is follows:

1. Selected sample of student How School Sees Me.

2. Captions from How School Sees Me photos.

3. Selected samples of Venn diagrams.

4. Selected excerpts from photo elicitation interviews on How School Sees Me.

5. Selected samples of writing from student daybooks about How School Sees Me
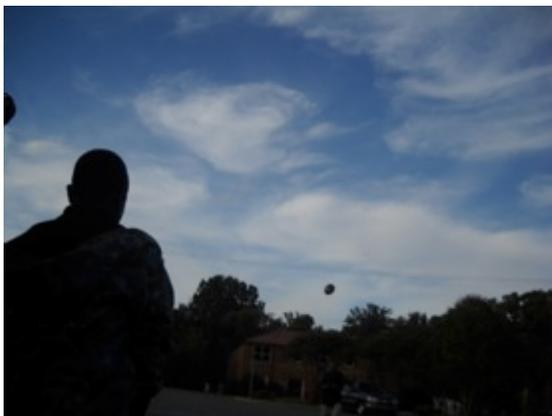
Figure 21. Independent. "This picture show independent. I chose to show independent because usually like choosen my own choices. That's why I chose this picture."
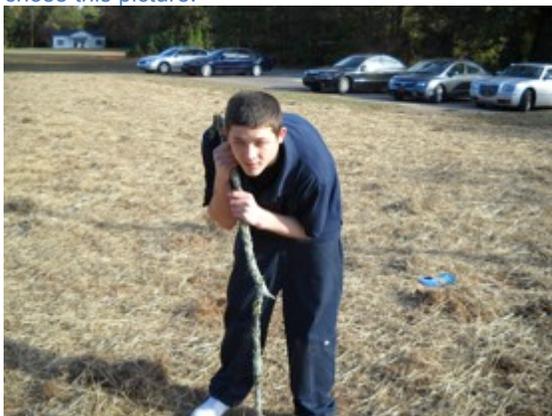
Figure 22. Old. "School sees me as old because I failed so many times."

Figure 23. Destructive. "People (mainly teachers) think that I'm a destructive person. For example, just a week ago I had accidentally broken my teachers pencil sharpener. Don't worry I fixed it at the end."

Figure 24. Trouble. "School sees me as a troublemaker, as you can see. I was hitting Marcel with the chair while he was doing work."
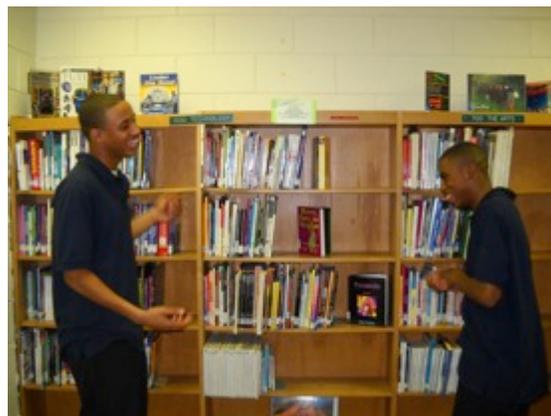
Figure 25. Funny. "This picture says that I am a funny person. I am always making people laugh. No matter what the situation is."

Figure 26. Misunderstood. "This image shows that I am misunderstood in school. I personally think that by looking at this photo you would probably wonder what's going on."

Figure 27. Controversial. "This shot tells that there's gonna be people who like me and others who don't. But I don't really care. I'm gonna be me regardless."

Figure 28. Independent. "Some people, not many, know that I don't like to follow the rules and that I like having my own way wheter they like it or not."

Figure 29. OMG! She's So Responsible☺ "This picture shows me as being responsible because I'm always bringing in my homework, getting my work done and doing what I'm supposed to do when I'm at home and when I'm at school."
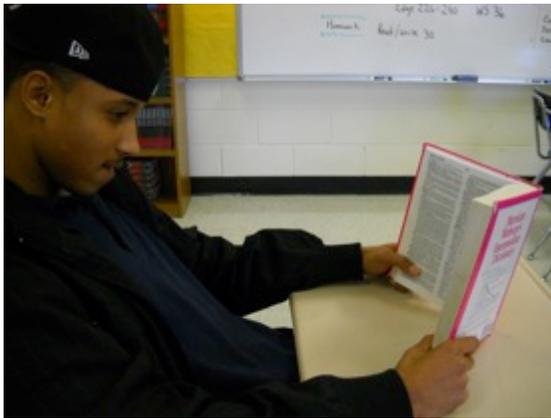
Figure 30. Smart. "This picture shows that I'm good with words. I am always looking in the dictionary for new words I can use in my raps."
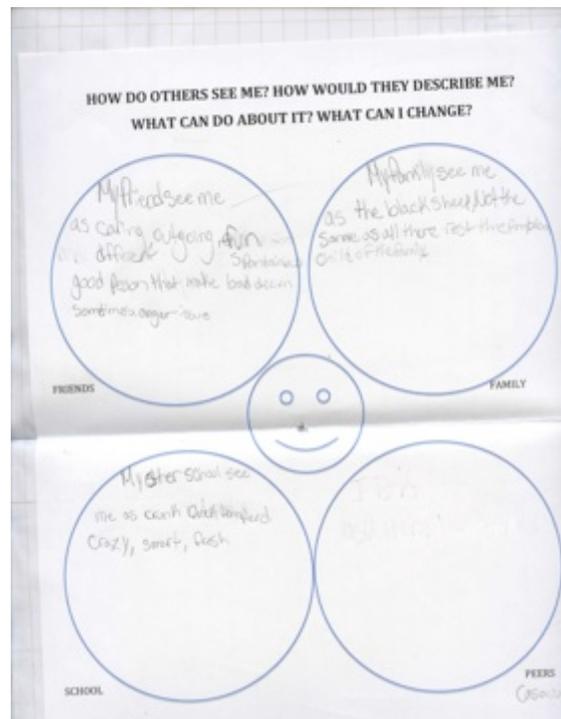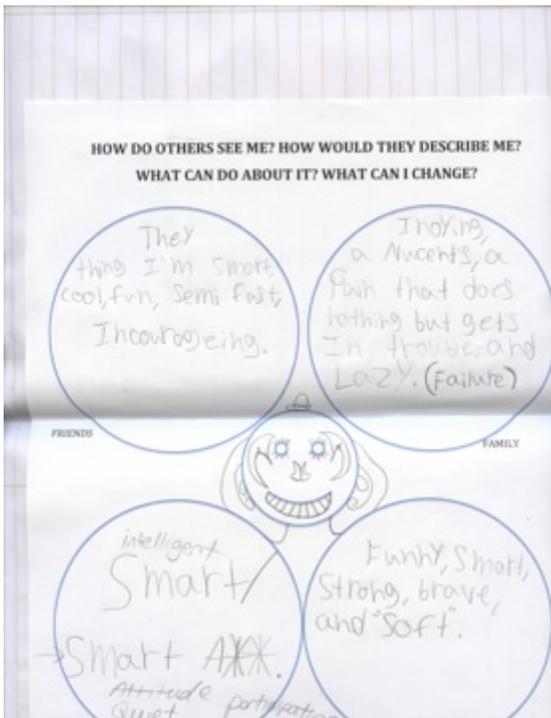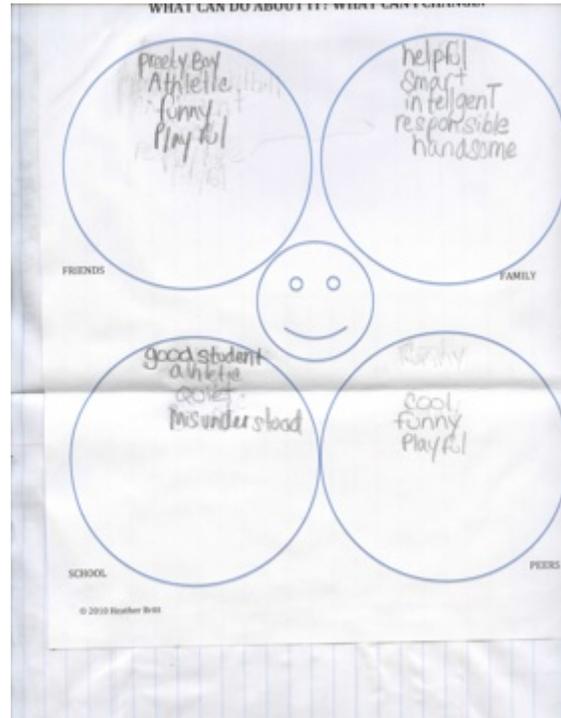
Figure 31. Student Venn diagrams on self.

Selected Excerpts from Photo Elicitation Interviews How School Sees Me.

- School sees me as helpful, responsible and aggressive.

- Most of how school sees me doesn't work out too good…I'm funny and goofy and crank.

- School sees me as good with words. And sees me as 0% value. They just don't see who I am. Like they see through me or like I'm not even there.

- This photo (shows picture) shows I'm misunderstood. School thinks one thing about me but it's different underneath.

- This (shows photo) shows me acting stupid at school. This is what I do. This is who I am.

- My teacher usually see me as focused on one thing until I get it done.

- I'm helpful. School sees me as helpful. I think.

- I'm silly and that isn't always good.

- This shows a mess (shows photo) a mess I made and left at school.

- I took that photo (shows photo) cuz I wanted to show that I'm smart. That I'm intelligent. That school sees me as smart.

- This photo (shows photo) explains me being spontaneous and distracting my class.

Selected Samples of Writing from Student Daybooks about How School Sees Me

- This picture shows successful because if I'll try again if I have oppertunity. I usually succeed the second time because the first time I have to see what I have to study.

- I'm a good kid, full of potential. I'm smart.

- This shows everybody doing something and not noticing me.

- I'm bad sometimes. Sometimes my mouth is too wide. I share with people and I care.

Research Question 2: How Do Students See and Experience School?

To prepare for this assignment, students began by writing letters to an "alien"--- a creature who had no understanding or concept of this place called school. We told student to pretend that this creature was coming to visit them and would come to school. The alien needed some preparation of what to expect. We asked students to explain what the alien would see, do, experience, think and possibly feel about this place called school. We asked them to identify the top ten images or concepts from their letters that they felt were *most* important to the idea of school.

Then we asked: If you could only show School in *five* images, what would they be? From there students created individual shot lists (what to take photos of, how, where, and from what angles) of those five images. Students understood that the final product would be a poster of How I See School with five images and captions for each image. These posters would be displayed in Art Show Two.

Note: Because we were unable to take photos during the school day due to the pen bomb incident, all of the photos of How I See School were planned, posed, and taken after school. It is also important to note that students planned their photos independently, although they volunteered to pose in each other's photos and collaborated on staging them. The concepts came from each student's idea of what school is to him. It is also important to note that the teachers you see in the photos are teachers who participated in the LTP program. They volunteered as actors and only did as directed by student photographers (i.e. act mean or scream).

The captions accompanying the photos came from the following prompt:

- Explain this image to the alien--- someone who has no concept of the people, places and terms most of us know about school.

This data is follows:

1. Selected sample of student letters to the alien.

2. Selected sample posters of How I See School.

3. Selected sample photos of How I See School with captions.

4. Selected excerpts from photo elicitation interviews on How I See School.

5. Selected excerpts from interviews about school.

6. Selected samples of writing from student daybooks about how school could be better.

Figure 32. Sample letter to alien 1.

School

School is a place where children come to be taught by people called teachers. Teacher give you information in a more understanding way than a book. Books give you infomation about everything you need to know. Books can usually be found in a classroom. A classroom is a room inside the school were students are taught and doing work. To get school without spend money you can use a bus.

This is all the basics thats need to know about school.

Figure 33. Sample letter to alien 2.

Pinhurstelematry
in florida
Dear Alien Jacob, I don't see why you want to go too School its whach. All you do is sit in class stair at the bords while othercompair fart in class. The only thing you smell is eggs!! Goss! The Kid are Jerks and bulle alway give peope wedgees, So don't be surprised if you get one when you come. Its the biggest building made of brick.

Figure 34. Sample letter to alien 3.

Dear Alien, "School?"

When you come to my school you should expect to see a lot of children Running, playing, talking etc. it smell kind of weird Because of everybody's perfume and cologne mixed together. And you should also expect mean/nice teachers or children. But the most fun thing about school is Gym we get to play games such as volleyball, basketball, etc. Oh yea don't you neva ever eat the school lunch. And

Figure 35. Sample letter to alien 4.

At my school we walk in these Doors to go to class and learn with the people that you chill with. Then we run into the strict teachers. So now our Day is over AND we take A car, or Bus.

P.S. nuthin is really what it seems

Figure 36. Sample letter to alien 5.

DEAR: ALIEN

when you go to school for the first time you need to do two thing follow my leed if You want to but if you don't Want do so Just be Your Self exsept You need to make sure You leave the whole alieh language and cwstoms behing And follow the rwes like getting to school on time and don't get freaked out If You get Yelled at or any thing like that and Just stay quit and If a student want's to fight with You, walk away but with alot of cautioh. Look for a brick bwding that has high wall's around and Security every where, don't forget a person culled teacheb make sure you don't make contact of any

kind of they will I come
up with Something stupid
to get you in trouble and
they are getting paid for
torture us for money

So be careful they
are dangerous and
discusting, and the work
will drive you crazy
but no matter what you
do, don't blank on the
teacher.

P.S most of
them (teachers) have
fake hair called toepys.

Figure 37. Sample letter to alien 6.

Figure 38. Selected posters How I See School.

Figure 39. Food. "You will die! Do not ever, ever eat the lunch food. Yuck!"

Figure 41. "Boring. The teachers are SO boring. They make the kids fall asleep."

Figure 40. "Going home is freedom."
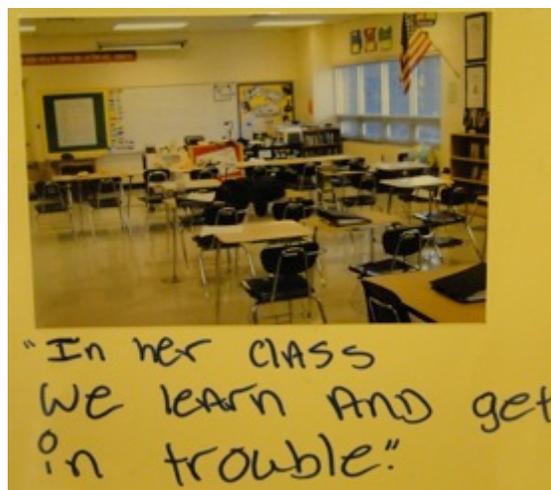
Figure 42. Teachers. "In her class we learn and get in trouble."
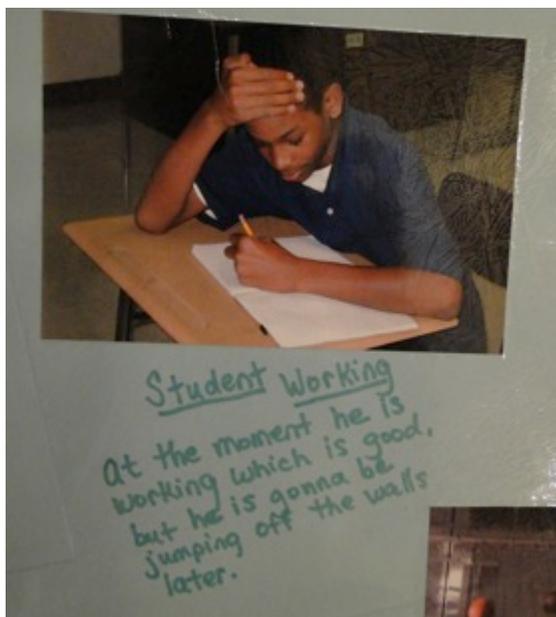
Figure 43. Student Working. "At the moment he is working which is good, but he is gonna be jumping off the walls later."

Figure 45. Search. "The guy getting searched means that they don't trust us enough to let us just go to class and not be messed with."
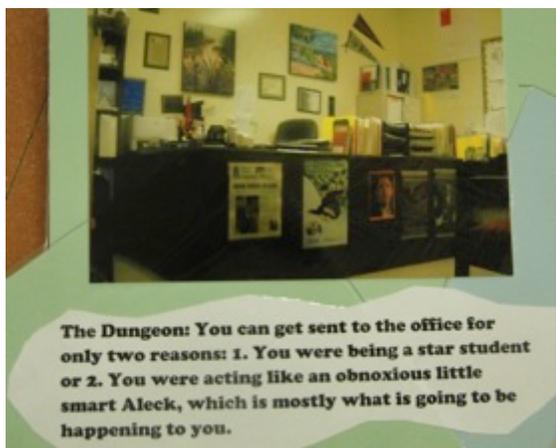
Figure 44. The Dungeon. "You can get sent to the office for only two reasons: 1. You were being a star student or 2. You were acting like an obnoxious little smart Aleck, which is mostly what is going to be happening to you."
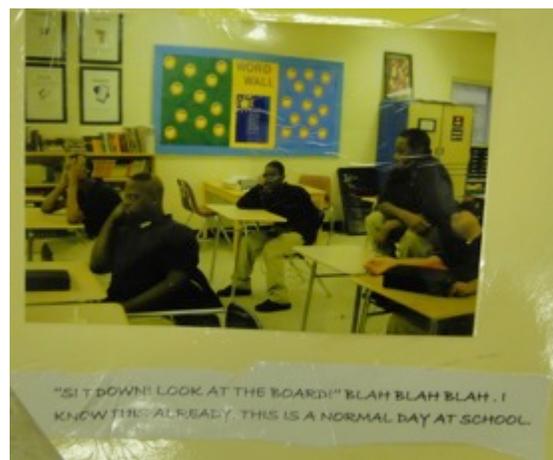
Figure 46. "'Sit down! Look at the board!' BLAH. BLAH. BLAH. I know this already. This is a normal day at school."
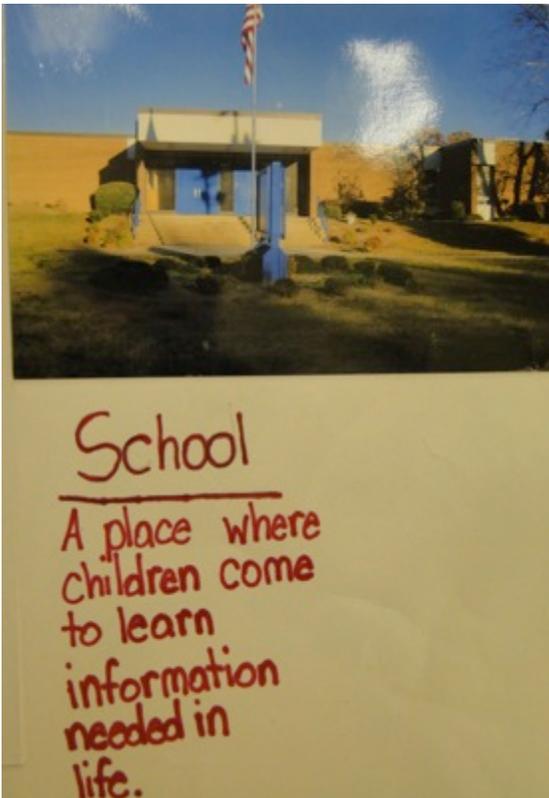
Figure 47. School. "A place where children come to learn information needed in life."
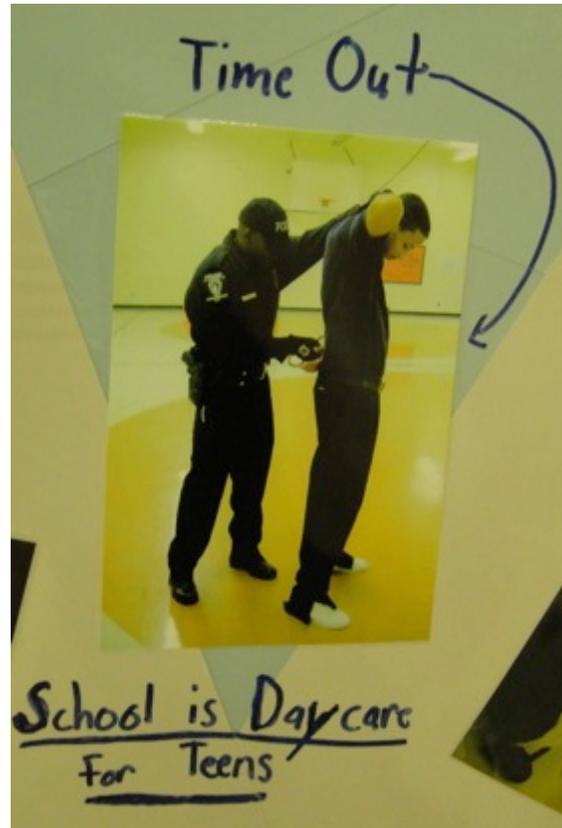
Figure 49. Time Out. "School is Daycare for Teens"
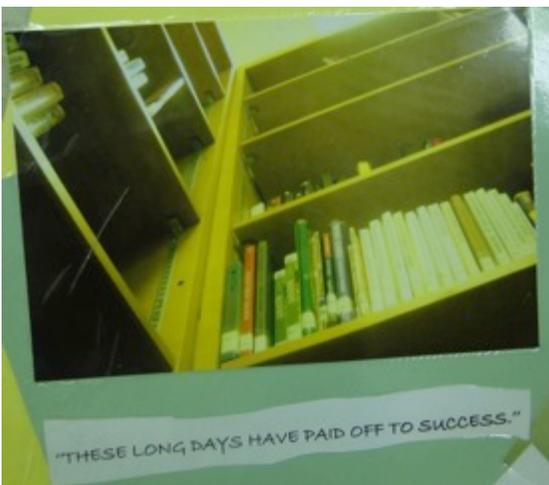
Figure 48. "These long days have paid off to success."
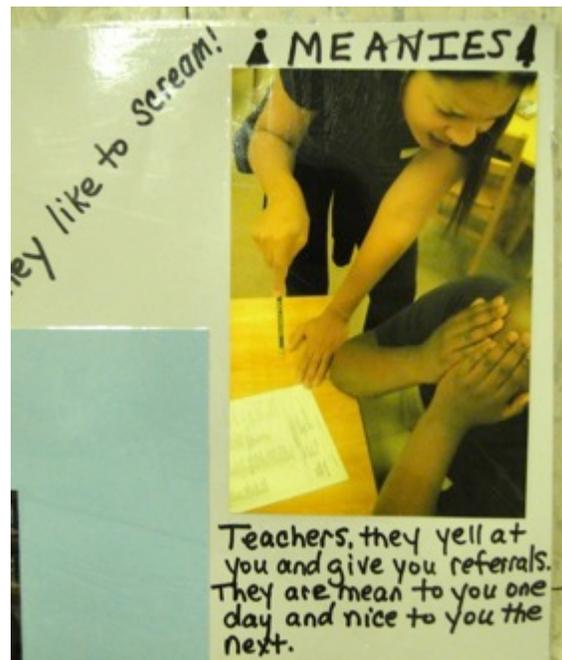
Figure 50. Meanies! "They Like to Yell! Teachers, they yell at you and give you referrals. They are mean to you one day and nice to you the next."
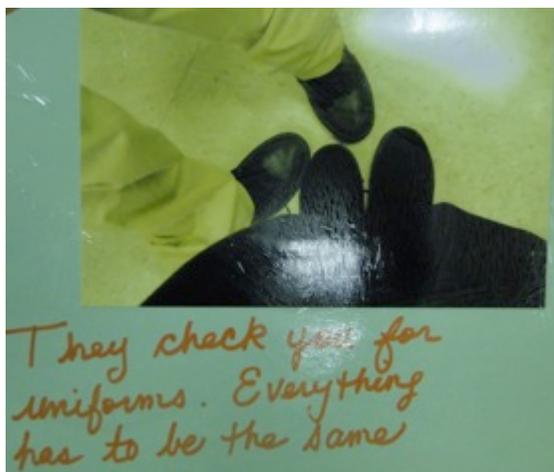
Figure 51. "They check you for uniforms. Everything has to be the same."
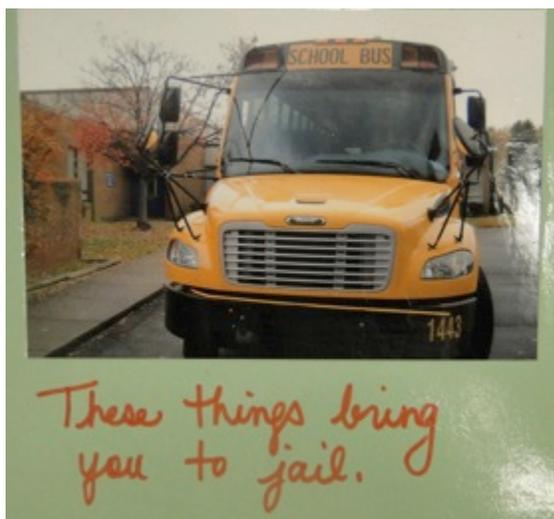
Figure 52. Bus. "These things bring you to jail."

The Towers: The towers are a metaphor in school that kids use when they are doing a huge amount of book work that looks like a giant tidal wave of books ready to smash on you.
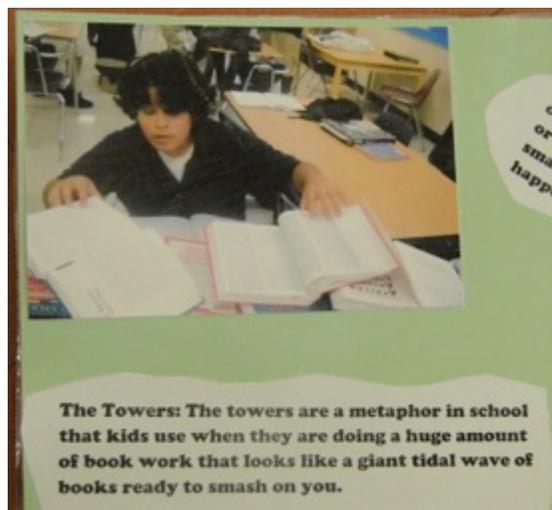
Figure 53. The Towers. "The towers are a metaphor in school that kids use when they are doing a huge amount of book work that looks like a giant tidal wave of books ready to smash on you."
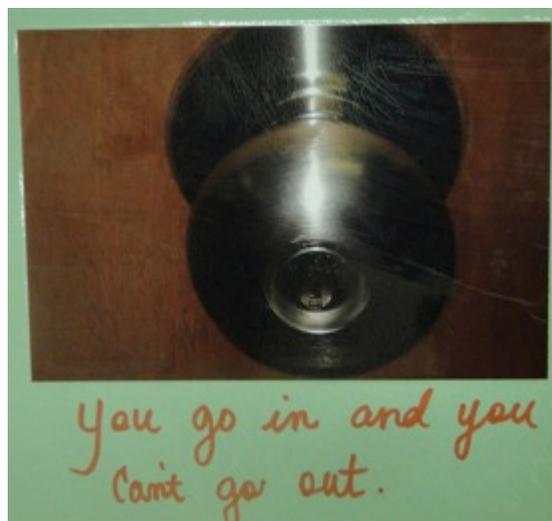
Figure 54. School. "You go in and you can't go out."
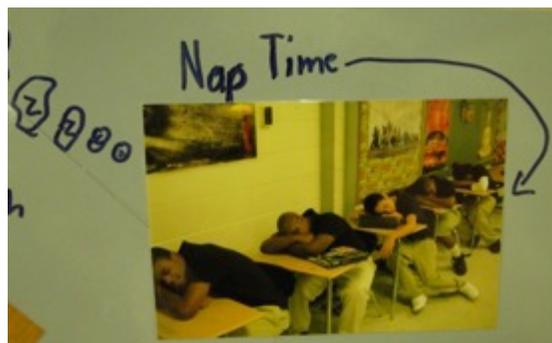
Figure 55. Class. "Nap Time."
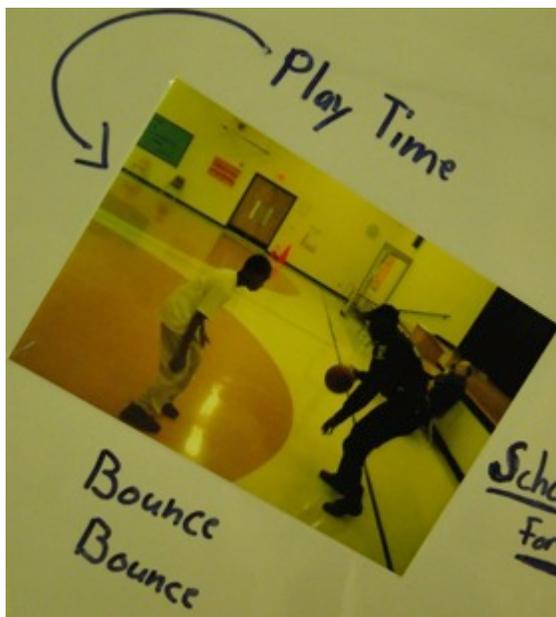
Figure 56. Play time. "Bounce Bounce."

Figure 57. The Teacher. "Some of the teachers are evil X-Predators of the school jungle and if you drop your guard for just one second they will seize the opportunity and swallow your soul and courage in one bite."

Figure 58. The Hall. "This school is so boring that even the meanest and nicest teachers get bored, but thanks to the creator of school, it's only 8 hours long but in some cases it's a miserable 10 long hours of school."
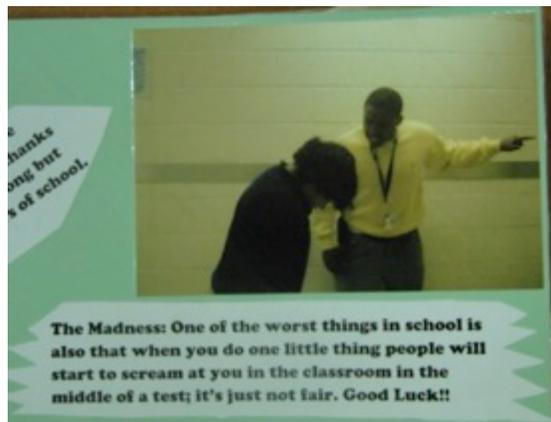
Figure 59. The Madness. "One of the worst things in school is also that when you do when little thing people will start to scream at you in the classroom in the middle of the test; it's just not fair. Good Luck!!"
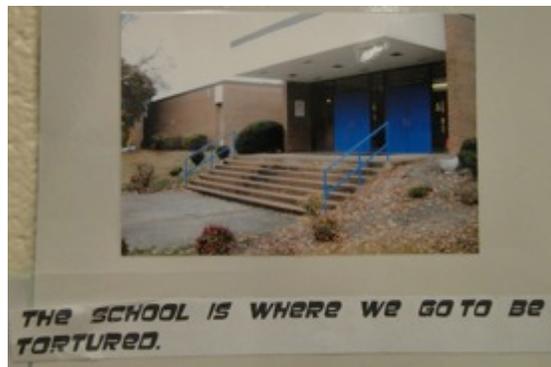
Figure 60. School. "The school is where we go to be tortured."

The Dungeon: You can get sent to the office for only two reasons: 1. You were being a star student or 2. You were acting like an obnoxious little smart Aleck, which is mostly what is going to be happening to you.
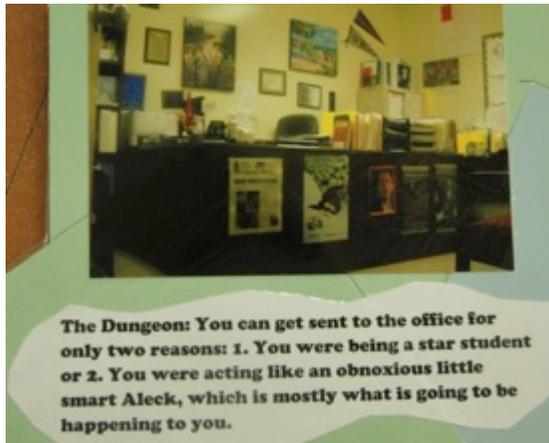
Figure 61. The Dungeon. "You can get sent to the office for only two reasons: 1. You were being a star student or 2. You were acting like an obnoxious smart Aleck, which is mostly what is going to be happening to you."

Selected Excerpts from Photo Elicitation Interviews on How I See School

Interviewer: Tell me about your photos of school.

- She (the teacher) does mean stuff. She's not like other teachers. She treat us different in a bad way. (Shows photo). This is a picture of how I walk into school. This is how I start my day. This is where the care riders walk in. (Shows photo and reads caption). This is a fast way we get to school. The bus is slower. This is a nice car. Here are some teachers. They are teachers in the program not real teachers. Two strict teachers. PS: They are just acting. (laughs).

- This picture (shows photo) means how bored teachers can get and that's how boring teachers are

- This a teacher that teaches things. (Shows photo). And this is the building where you learn everything you get. And you come to classes to see other students also… It's a neutral feeling. I think. Cuz I don't like learning and reading all the time. Well I do at points but I barely like reading. And yeah that's basically it.

- I did this poster. I did it in order actually. (Shows photos). This one is about the bus. This is the school bus and it takes you to jail, I guess. Cuz school is basically like jail. (Shows photo). And this is the locks. They lock you in and sometimes they lock you out. But um yeah. (Shows photo). And this is a cross. It symbolizes hope. There's still hope even though you did something wrong. (Shows photo). And this is the uniforms. They are both the same. You gotta wear tacky-- I mean khaki pants and black shoes or white shoes. (Shows photo). And this is the door being opened. Representing freedom getting out of the school is freedom at the end of the day.

- I see school as like a rough place. There's a hole in the wall. It's rough. This is how a classroom looks. (Shows photo). And this is how a teacher looks like teaching. That's a teacher's desk. That's some of the rules of the classroom.

- I was trying to explain to someone what school was gonna be like. This right here. (shows photo) which I named The Madness, which means that the teachers, they are the evil teachers. They will destroy you. They will break your pride. (Shows photo)…Then over here. (Shows photos). It's like the office. The bad place. I called it The Dungeon. It's horrible. They are keeping you in prison. It's a little bit worse than hell in a cell. (Shows photo). This over here I named The Towers. The reason why it's called The Towers is because it's a fake term that I made up that kids use when they're piled on by a bunch of books.

- This is our work. (Shows photo). We do it all day until we change classes. We still are doing work. I got Alberto here shooting a basketball. (Shows photo). Then Rashard, I think. I don't know. The caption is: To me this is the best part of the day. Gym. Which is to me fun.

- Well like if you walk in the door (Shows photo). You can be like…you could of woke up this morning and felt mad, sad or whatever. And when you walk in the door you either turn it around, do your work, make something special out of it. Or you can just go in with an attitude, get a referral and go home.

- I view school as boring cuz this stuff. I know this stuff already. So we just sit at the board all day. We sit down and look at the board. Blah. Blah. Blah. This is a normal day at school.

- The teachers. They're mean. Ok. They like to scream. (Shows photo). Like to scream at you for no reason, make you wanna cuss them out. Whatever.

- You say make school better? It's like you can't really make school better. Cuz then you would like get off track. Even though I say this is the only fun thing (points to gym picture) like if you have like a whole bunch of fun you ain't gonna get done what you need to get done. You can have fun kind of but at the same time you gotta know what you here to do. That's why I keep mines (poster) just plain and simple.

Selected Excerpts from Interviews about School

Interviewer: Why do you come to school?

- To have my education and everything. Because education is important to me.

- Sometimes I feel it's not worth it. The suffering I'm doing now is not gonna be made up for in the future.

- Education and learning.

- Education, of course. And friends….to get the knowledge I need so that I can have a better life for me and my children and all that stuff.

- Cuz there ain't nothing to do in the day at home. It's day care for teens.

- Learning. And to get an education…I don't wanna be stupid.

- Cuz I wanna go to a good school not a great school so I can get some props.

- Cuz I wanna to college, play football and own my own restaurant…it's really saving the rest of my life. Yeah.

- I have to. And I wanna be an engineer.

- Some days to play with friends and stuff like that…for associating with friends and going to PE.

- Cuz my parents make me. And because I like to meet new people.

- To grow up.

- I know that waking up at five in the morning is gonna be worth it at some point in my life.

- To better my life skills.

- So I can learn. Cuz if you don't learn then you won't know anything. And if you don't know anything, then how you gonna get a job? If you don't get a job then, then you're screwed because money is what makes the world go round. And I need to get money by having a job.

- You can get a job. A job. Then you can go to college. And you can get a degree. And that will open doors for you to get a job and stuff.

- Because we have to. If we want money and power. And we want to have cars and we need to have awesome…giant houses.

- I know I gotta go through high school just to get in college.

- I don't know. Go to college?

- Cuz I don't wanna be stupid.

Interviewer: How could school be better?

- If you could actually teach and make something more fun for kids to do then that would make stuff better.

- Like physical learning, I like to have fun.

- I want to be an architect. I like building things, taking things apart and putting them back together.

- I want to be an electrical or mechanical engineer. I just like breaking stuff and fixing it back together.

- School is better with activities. It's activities. We have a project where we make our own product then we have to bring it in and to like make it look like the product we are selling.

- I remember things that are fun. Like the ABC song? Like when they make math a rap. Find a creative way (to teach) like that.

- The boringness would change completely.

- A little more breaks. Like do more stuff like play games in school.

- Break up the classes more. Like the first five minutes of class…we do whatever we want, then they teach, and then the last twenty minutes we do whatever we want.

- To give me responsibility.

- Without school you wouldn't get the education you need and you're not going to get a job.

Selected Samples of Writing from Student Daybooks about How School Could Be Better

- Give a child a chance to explain and less yelling.

- Teachers need to learn how to teach instead of telling stuff.

- People doing more active stuff.

- There wouldn't be no teachers.

- School should be more funner with kids running around and playing.

- It should be fun not boring. It should look clean and should feel like a cool place to go.

- No boring teachers. Happier teachers.

CHAPTER FIVE: WHAT WE FOUND

"'What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of children as the knowers

and actors?'" (Oakley, 1994 in Mitchell et al., 2006, p. 25).

The use of Photovoice and a critical feminist theoretical lens in this study was to place

students as the knowers in their lives and in schools (Kaplan & Howes, 2004). What follows is

what the students and I found in this collaborative effort. After months in this effort with these

students collecting the data in Chapter Four, the question then became: How do I/we present

what I/we found? The answer is, well, not simple.

Stories and Holistic Themes

Student voices are individual. As feminist theorists remind us when student voices are

presented as a monolithic group, difference and complexity are camouflaged and hegemony is

strengthened (Fine, 1993; Jewett, 2006). With this in mind, part of this study's presentation

appears as three case studies, or I call them, stories. You will meet: Rashard, Alberto and Marcel.

By listening to and valuing these individual student voices and experiences, educators no longer

perpetuate schooling experiences that for many are damaging, culturally dissonant and

disengaging (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009; Way,

1998; Wehlage, 1986).

At the same time, the group of students in this study is bound by the common experience of life at New Leaf, their labels as at-risk students, and their long-term suspensions from their homeschools (Glesne, 2006). They have a shared experience, which tells a powerful, collective story "in concert as support" (Greene, 2007, p. 293). These collective stories appear as holistic themes: School is Boring, Teachers are Mean and students Break the Boredom for freedom. Together their voices, photos and words tell an undeniable story.

Thus, what we found is presented in two ways: stories and holistic themes. This decision not only addresses the complexity of what we found, but also allows for multiple entry points and interpretations from the reader and viewer (Greene, 1995; Murdock, 2005; Rifa-Valls, 2009; Way, 1998; White, 2009). The stories come from the larger sample of thirteen students and illuminate the holistic themes that emerged from the group and vice versa (Way, 1998). The chapter is organized to show the overlap of these components. Each story is followed by the theme it best illuminates. Please note though as the data, stories, and lives of these students are elastic and changing, each story does not neatly fit solely into the theme that follows (Fine, 1993;Way, 1998).

On a closing note about photos: Photo elicitation (Harper, 2002) includes photographers either writing or talking about their photos. In cases when elicitation was used it is directly linked to the photos shared. However, as the researcher I studied and analyzed the broad spectrum of data presented by students. In other words, I examined all the photos on all students' cameras but did not conduct photo elicitation interviews for all of them. Therefore on occasion there were photos students did not select for representation but these photos added deep meaning to the emerging themes and stories. On these occasions I included these images. These photos are not included with elicitation from the students. For example, students took many more photos

than those they selected for How I See School. I culled through all of the student photos as

emergent themes and selected from those for Chapter Five.
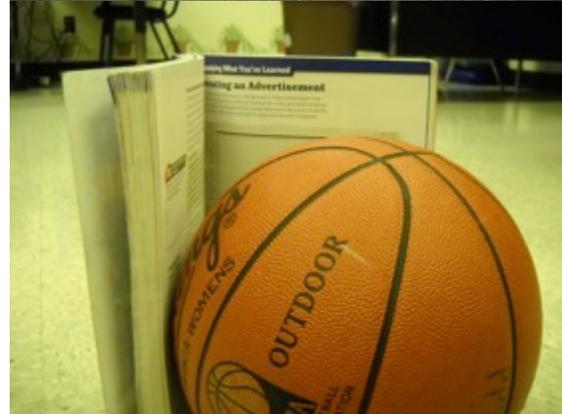
Story One: Rashard

"You have to sit down all day and do your work. If you get up then you will get into trouble. So school is like a teacher tying you to a chair." Rashard, on How I See School

Rashard was one of the youngest students in the program. He has a huge wide smile and a heavy southern drawl. Figure 62. Other kids regularly mocked his accent. To compensate, he sometimes put on his "announcer voice," which he also called his "white man voice." That voice sounded like a news reporter and was the distinct opposite of Rashard's natural voice.

Figure 62. Rashard's quick Self-portrait (self-timer).

Rashard's hands were always moving and so were his feet. He was usually tapping or thumping or rattling something. Whenever possible, he was in the air. See

Figures 63-65. I have a collection of pictures on my refrigerator of Rashard jumping because these pictures make me smile. They show a young boy who is full of energy and life. When we did Agency Artwork, he would cut himself out and put himself on a football field or a basketball court with one of his sport's idols (field notes). He was always looking for a picture of Disney World where he could cut out his picture and put himself too.

Figure 63. In the air 1. Rashard jumping over a bush outside the school.

Figure 64. In the air 2. Rashard jumping in library.

Figure 65. In the air 3. Rashard shooting in the old gym.

Rashard was one of the more prolific writers in the program. When we asked students to write a couple of sentences, he wrote six. When we asked students to reflect in their daybooks, he was the first to put pencil to paper. His writing was neat, detailed and thoughtful. Figure 66.

Dear Alien, So you wan't to go to school with me. Well you don't want to go, you have to sit down all day and wright. And you have to be quiet all day and if you talk without raising your hand, you will get in trouble. And plus they serve you discusting food. But it's some good things like this photography program, and we go on field trips sometimes. But inself of that it is horrible. Ooh and you get checked everyday in the gym. They touch you and act like you are a criminal. And I forgot you have to listen to stankin man who scream at you every second. If you come treat them like nothin. These people are called teachers another word for the devel. Plus you have to do a little thing called work. Were you have to get a yellow thing that wright and you have to make A million words for the hole day.

Figure 66. Rashard's letter to the alien.

One day in program we talked about "family." Rashard forgot his family artifact, but he did write in his daybook about what family meant to him. To him, family meant going to church for holidays and special occasions where he and his brothers would play video games in the church hall and eat tons of food (field notes). He took a photo of the church next door to the school to represent these ideas and then used a marker to write the name of his church on the picture. Next he cut out pictures of video games and game systems from magazines and glued them around the photo. Time was running out that day and Rashard panicked.

"I'm not gonna have time to write, Ms. Heather. I'll do it next time!" He sprinted out of the door to meet his bus (field notes). In program most students do not apologize for not getting to the writing since we focus mostly on photography. The next class Rashard immediately went back to the writing and completed it.

Self-Portrait: Keep It Moving

Rashard's Self-portrait selections typified his undying energy and shed some light on how this might interfere with school. His writing made the connection between his energy and getting in "big trouble" at school because of it. For example, Fly Boy. Figure 67 says, "I am thinking that a little boy is in trouble and if I don't hurry up and fly away out of this stupid library the boy is going to be in big trouble!"
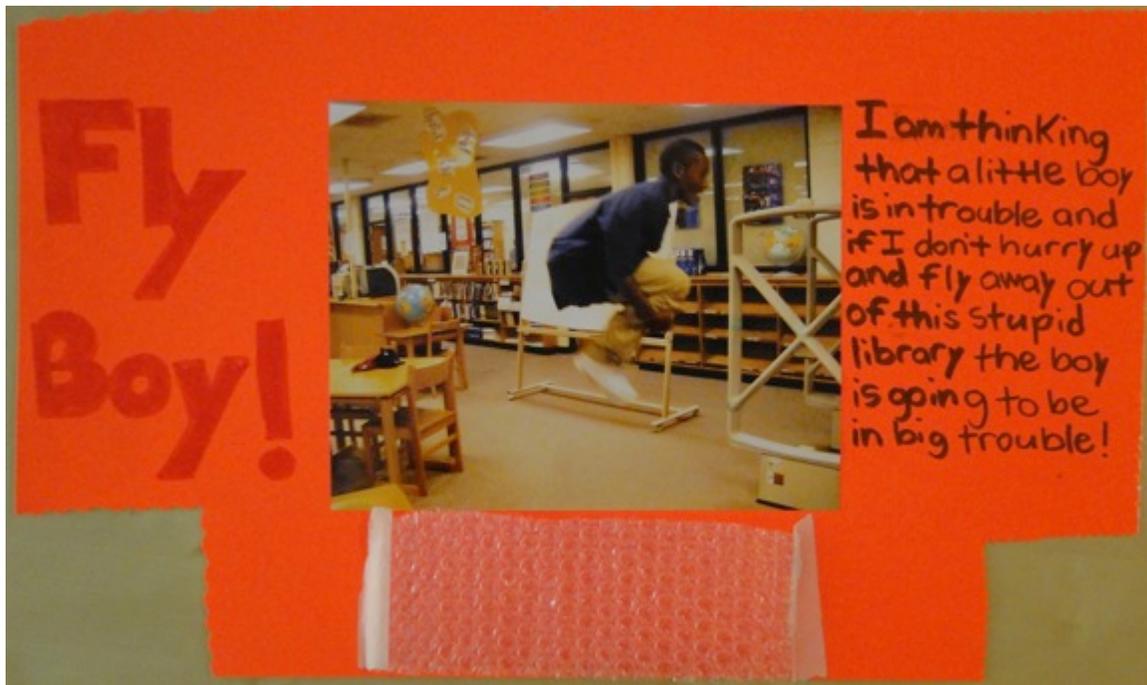
Figure 67. Rashard Self-portrait 1. Fly Boy! "I am thinking that a little boy is in trouble and

if I don't hurry up and fly away out of this stupid library the boy is going to be in big trouble!"

His second Self-portrait, Figure 68, The Best, shows him in the air (again). He

wrote in his daybook about the photo, "He looks like he is enjoying this" and that "I am

feeling excited."
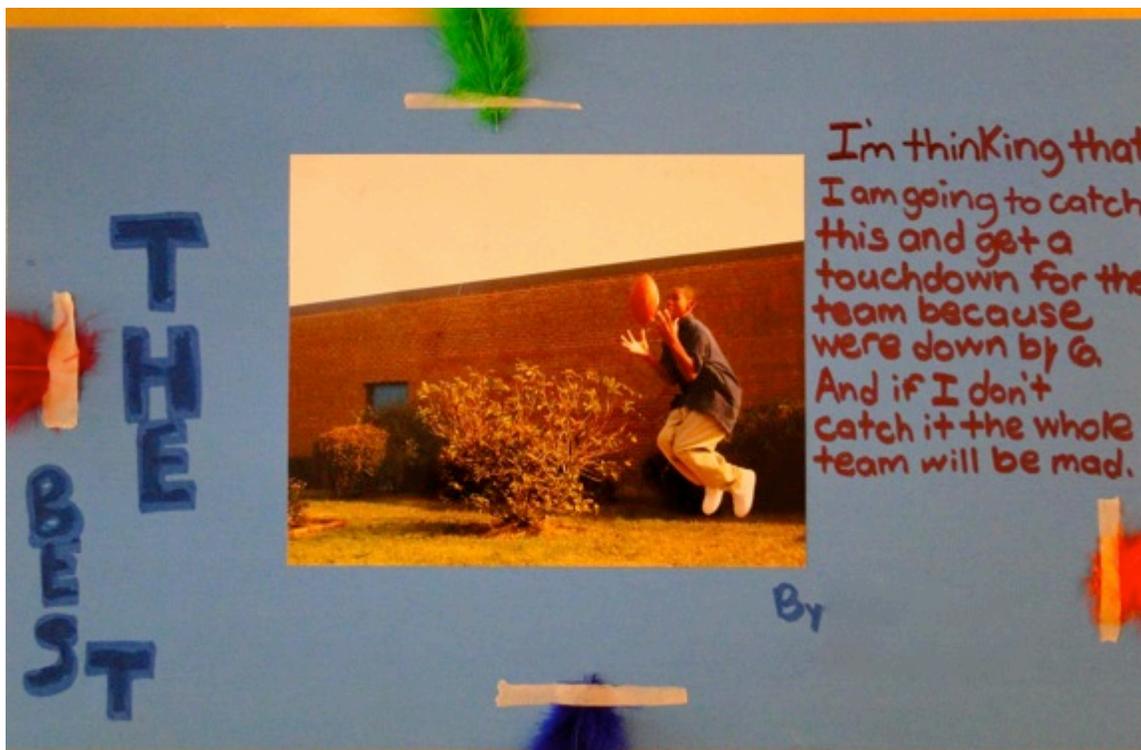
Figure 68. Rashard Self- portrait 2. (self-timer). The Best. "I'm thinking that I am going to catch this and get a touchdown for the team because we are down by 6. And I if I don't catch it the whole team will be mad."

Anyone who knows Rashard knows he likes to move. Another student

commented in a photo with Rashard as the subject, "Student working: at the moment he

is working, which is good but he is gonna be jumping off the walls later." (Figure 69).
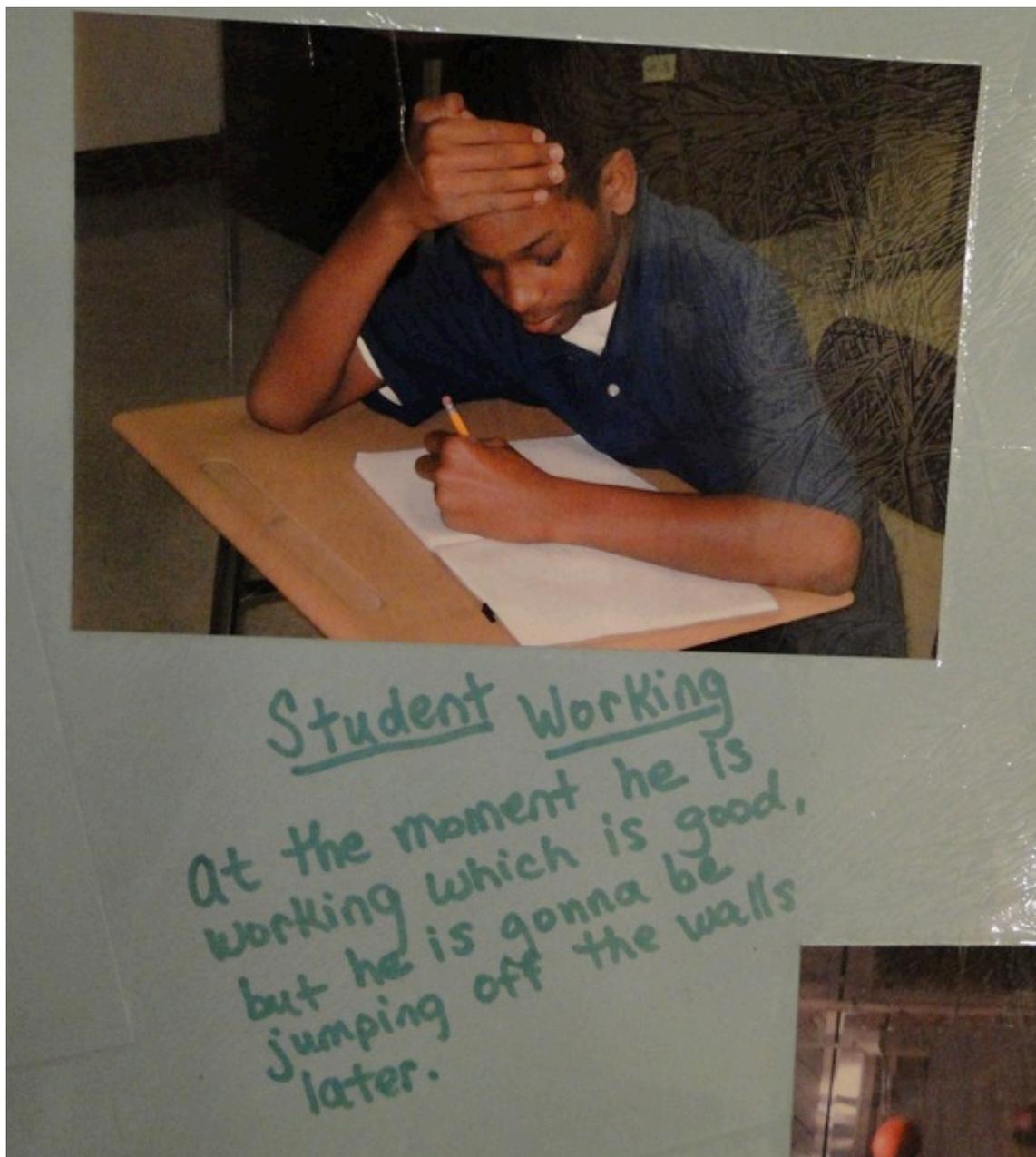
Figure 69. Student Working (Rashard as subject). "At the moment he is working which is good,

but his is gonna be jumping off the walls later."

How School Sees Me: Nice, Athletic, and Smart (Oh, and Silly)

Rashard's daybook showed his thoughts on himself and how school sees him in

images and writing. Figure 70 shows Rashard's planning for How School Sees Me.
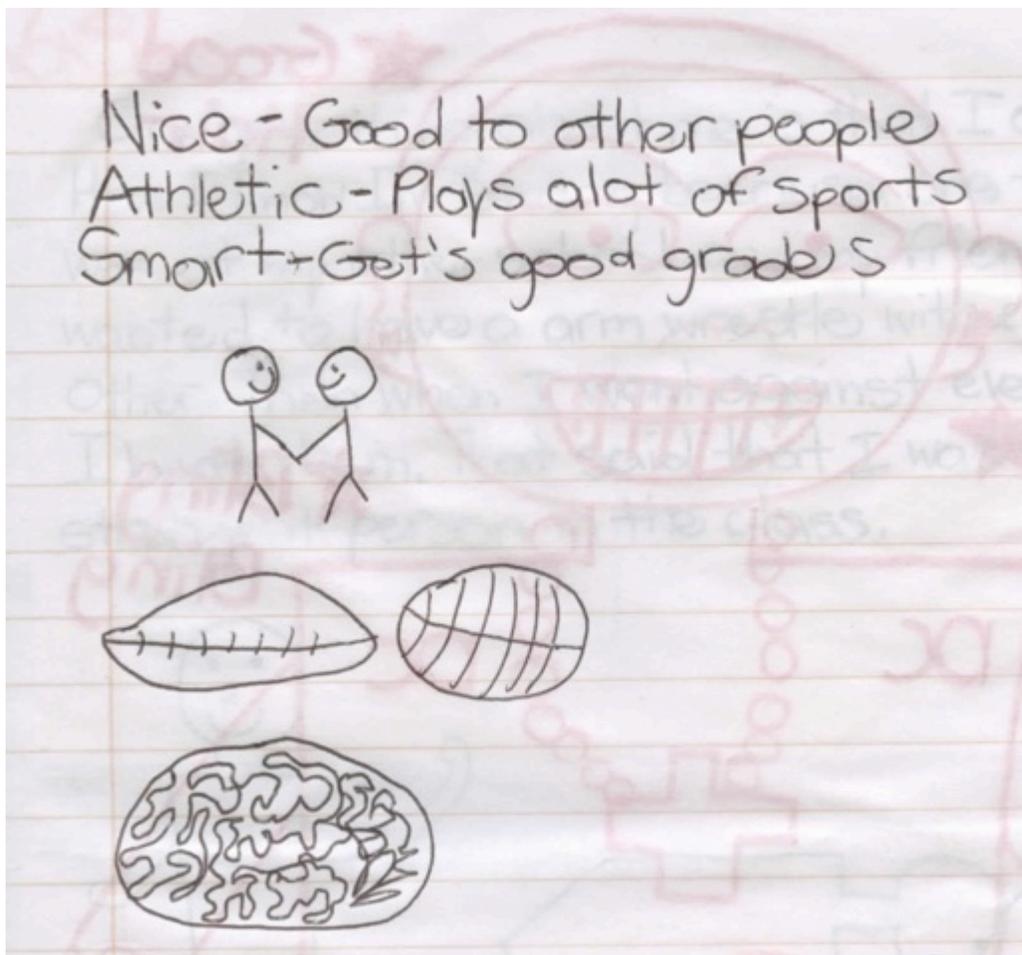
Figure 70. Rashard's plan for How School Sees Me. (from daybook).

He wrote about being athletic and strong and proving himself in school through physical contests like arm wrestling. He also viewed his strength as a way to help others (in school) "because if I want to help somebody with lifting something I can."

One good thing about me is that I am strong
How I know Im strong because one time I
was at my other school and my friends
wanted to have a arm wrestle with each
other. Then when I went against everybody
I beat them. That said that I was the
strongest person in the class.
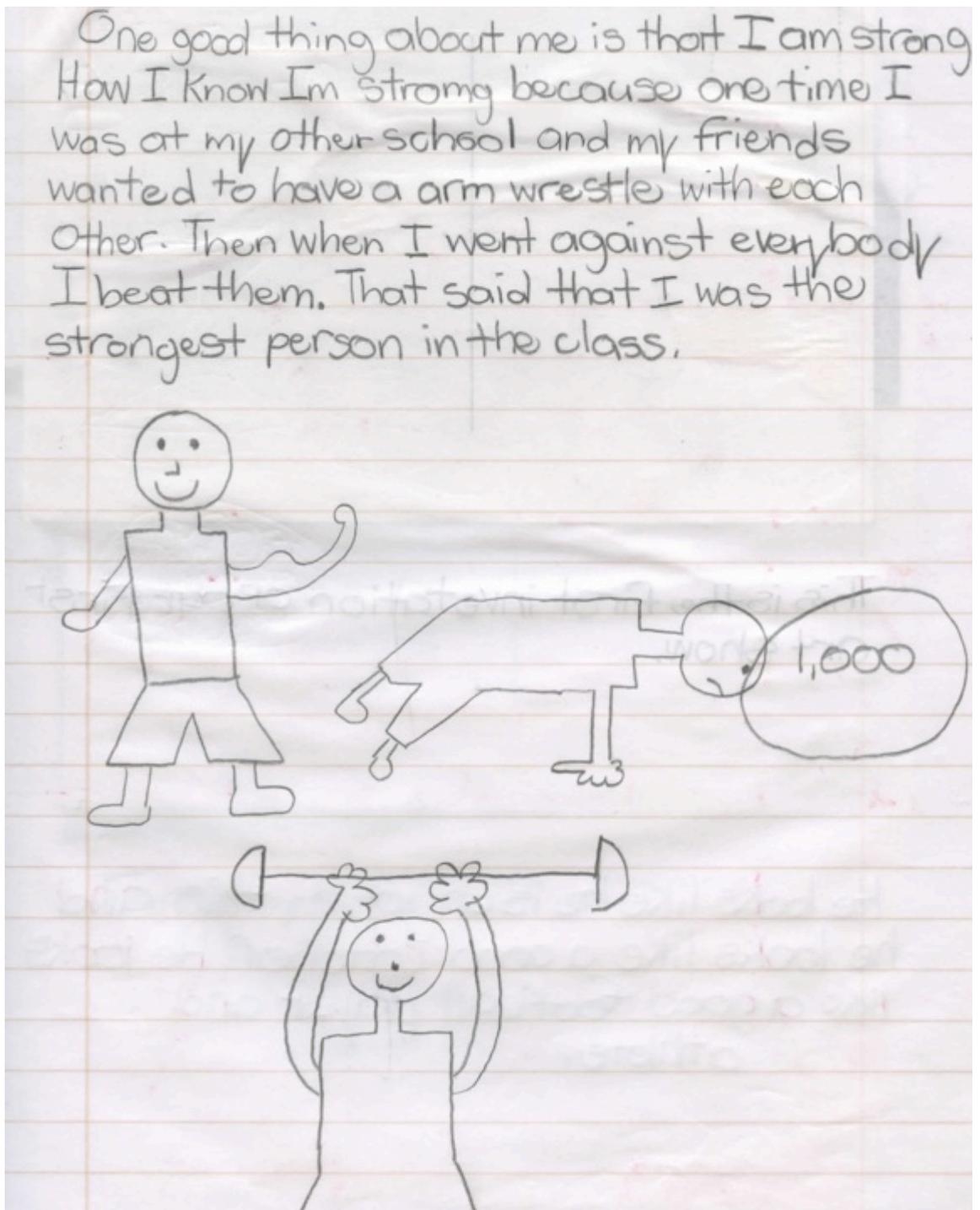
Figure 71. Rashard's writing about self. (from daybook).

According to Rashard, school also sees him as nice, which includes being helpful to other students and adults. In an interview he told me that being helpful means holding the door or picking up something for someone if they drop it. For the photo, he decided to show two hands (instructors) giving a high-five. In his daybook he wrote that this makes him feel good about himself. (Figure 72). When making his selections for Art Show Two, he debated whether or not to use this photo but decided against it. He didn't think it really "showed him."

This picture shows me as nice and this is how the school see me. If a person needs a pencil I will give him one. If a person needs a piece of paper i'll give him one. And that is a good feeling when somebody tell me I am.
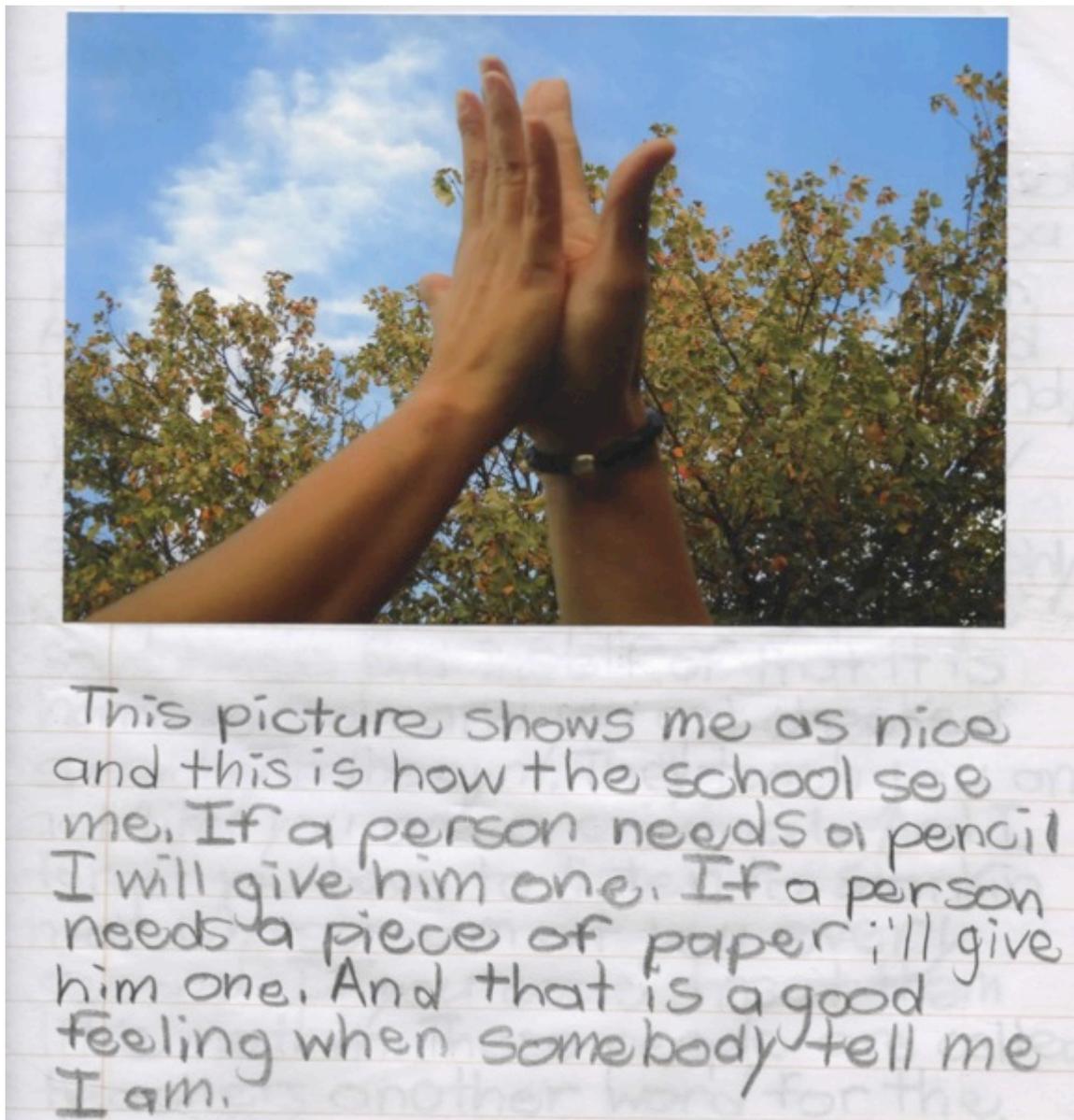
Figure 72. Rashard's writing about How School Sees Me. (from daybook).

Given Rashard's writing and attention to detail I am not surprised that he described himself as smart or as having good grades. However, he decided not to take a photo that represented this part of how school sees him (field notes). Instead when we got into the field, he changed his mind and made his last descriptor "silly." The way he explained it to me was that Silliness was also being helpful because it made his peers laugh (field notes). At the same time, it is his Silliness that leads to trouble.

Athletic

Rashard's How School Sees Me selections for Art Show Two were "athletic" and "silly." For his first selection, Rashard focused on his athleticism, which certainly encompasses the endless energy seen in his Self-portraits. (Figures 67-68).

Figure 73. Rashard's How School Sees Me. Athletic. "My school sees me as a very athletic person. I

play football, basketball, soccer, and maybe even tennis sometimes. Nobody can touch me on the field or on the court."

Rashard's favorite part of the day was PE. I observed this block at the end of the day many times over the months and observed him playing all kinds of sports with his classmates. He was quite athletic and was almost always chosen first for any team. Unlike his classmates, he rarely argued with the coaches or referee. I never observed him yell at his teammates when they missed a pass or a shot. He ran constantly for the entire two-hour period. He did not stop moving (field notes). It seemed true that his classmates saw him as "a very athletic person."

Silliness: Where Energy and Trouble Meet

"I am funny, wild and crazy. They (peers) want to be my friend." (Rashard's daybook)

From planning to completion Rashard ended up photographing himself as "silly" and included this in Art Show Two. In Figure 74, he wrote, "My school sees me as silly, which I am. This picture shows me about to throw some water on my friend. I am really, really silly in all my schools I go to. But sometimes being silly can get you in trouble with a whole lot of people." When I asked him who the "whole lot of people" were, he answered, "teachers mostly."

Figure 74. Rashard's How School Sees Me. Silly. "My school sees me as silly, which I am. This picture shows me about to throw some water on my friend. I am really, really silly in all my schools I go to. But sometimes being silly can get you in trouble with a whole lot of people."

I asked him if pouring water on his friend might get him in trouble with his friend. He thought maybe but probably not. Even when we were planning this photo, he had plenty of volunteers to act as the recipient. There were many willing participants to be "silly" with him. I asked about the teacher. What if a teacher was around? Would it get him in trouble with her? Yes for sure. I followed up by asking: So why do it? He told me that he was just playing and our conversation ended.

In a follow up interview, Rashard explained to me that being silly makes school less boring. Being silly also makes his peers want to be his friend. It's another way of being helpful as he sees it because it makes the boring school days go faster.

Next to fighting, "playing around" or "being silly" was one of the reasons Rashard cited for being suspended from school. Oftentimes, he told me, what started as a play fight would turn into a real fight or would be misunderstood by a teacher as a real fight. Then he would get suspended.

How I See School: Being Tied to a Chair

Rashard called his poster How I See School, How School is- The Kids. See Figure 75.

Figure 75. Rashard's How I See School. How School Is- the Kids.

By his title Rashard meant that his images showed school from the kids' point of view. In the photo elicitation interview he said, "It's how school really is…we see it different, school, than the teachers and parents. This (shows poster) is how kids see school."

In his letter to an alien (Figure 66), he wrote:

You don't want to go, you have to sit down all day and wright (sic). And you

have to be quiet all day and if you talk without raising your hand you will get in

trouble.

During the photo elicitation interview on How I See School, he explained his images of school without any of his usual humor and energy. I teased him about his seriousness.

Interviewer: You can be funnier.

I can't! This is serious. This picture shows me about to go to sleep after doing a lot of work that teachers give you a lot of work in class. (Figure 76). You can fall asleep from the boredom. That's just me with my head down doing a lot of work and stuff. Hate doin' that! This picture shows me tied to a chair. (Figure 77). You have to sit down all day and do your work. If you get up then you will get into trouble. So this is like a teacher tying you to a chair. That's me tied to a chair. Yeah!

This picture shows me about to go to sleep after doing a lot of work. The teachers give you a lot of work in class. You can fall asleep from the boredom.
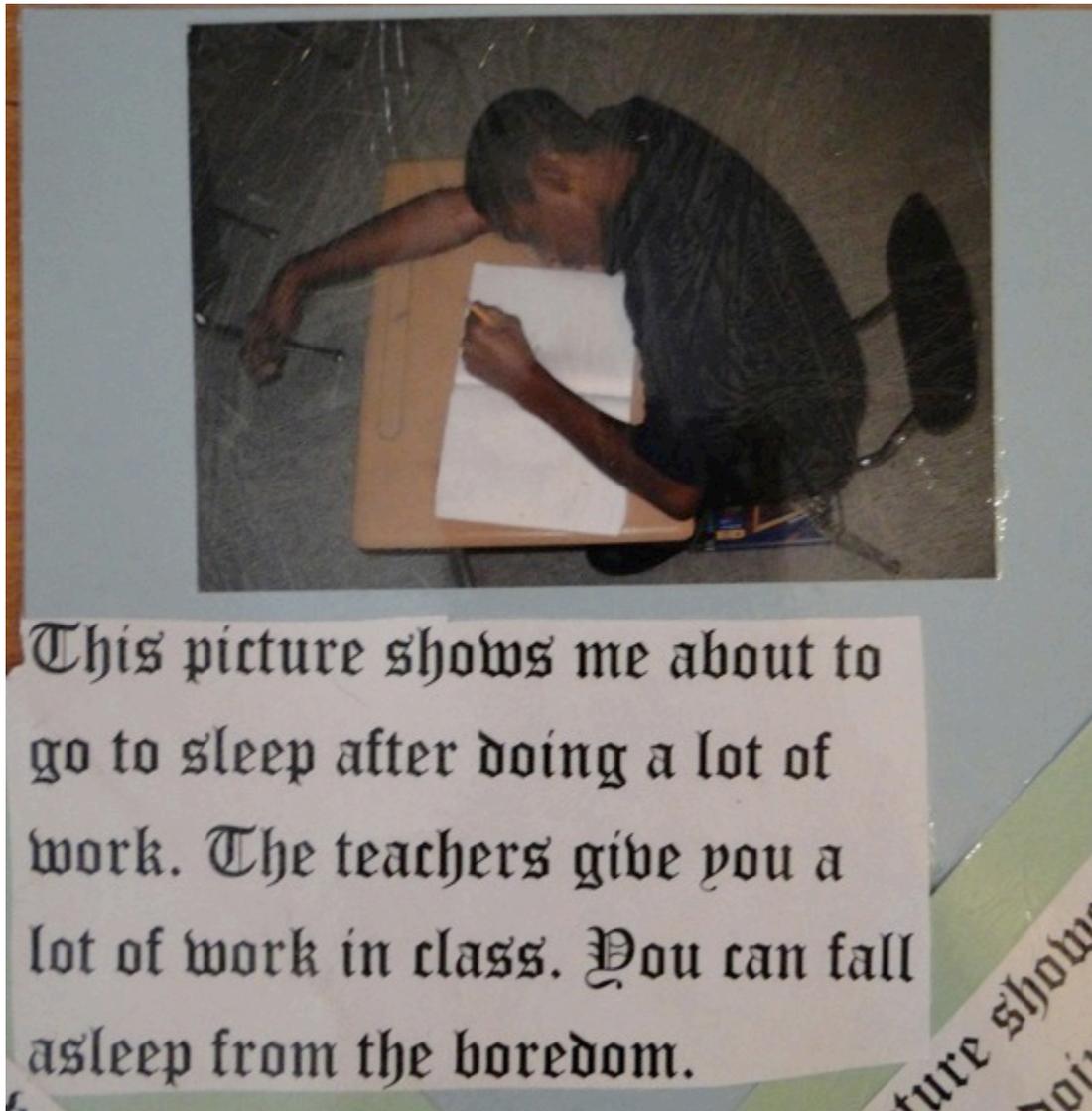
Figure 76. "You can fall asleep from boredom."
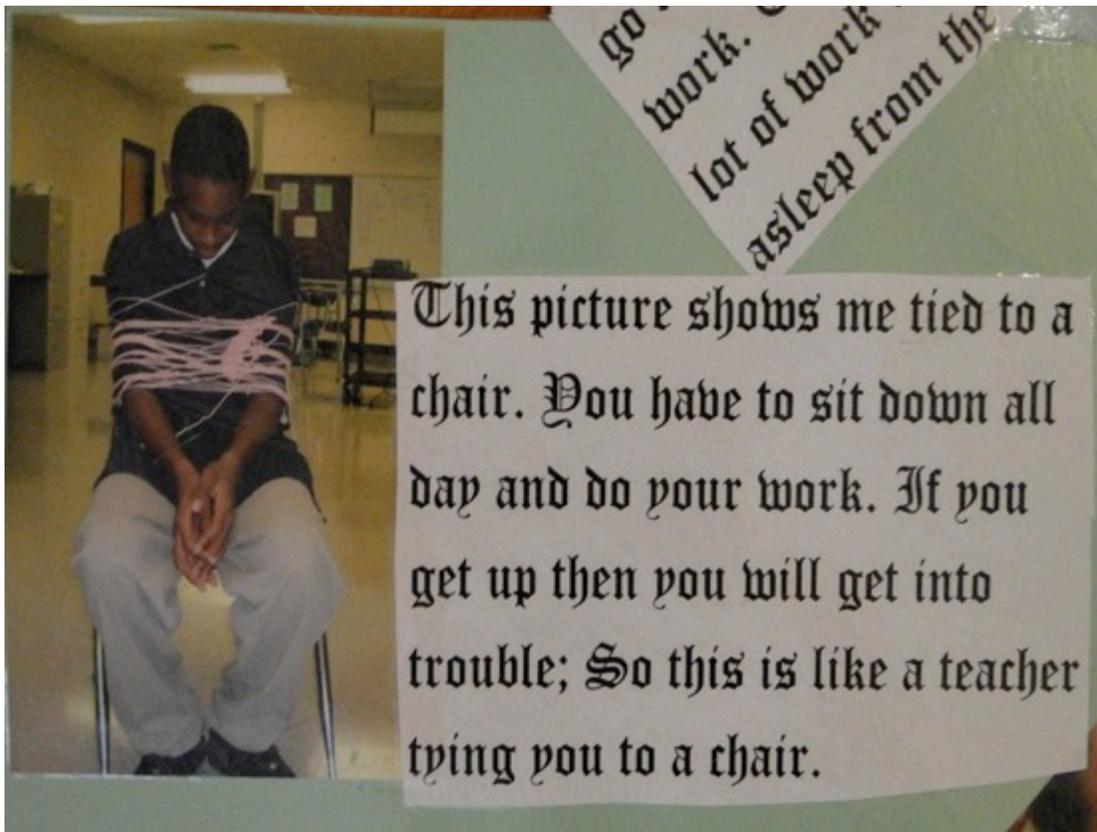
Figure 77. "So this is like a teacher tying you to a chair."

School was serious for Rashard, who earlier described himself as athletic, and

silly. For Rashard, who couldn't keep his feet on the ground, school was serious when it

included being tied to a chair, falling asleep from too much boring work, and the constant

"mean teacher yelling at me. This can happen when you don't do your work or when you

are not doing something you're supposed to do." See Figure 78.
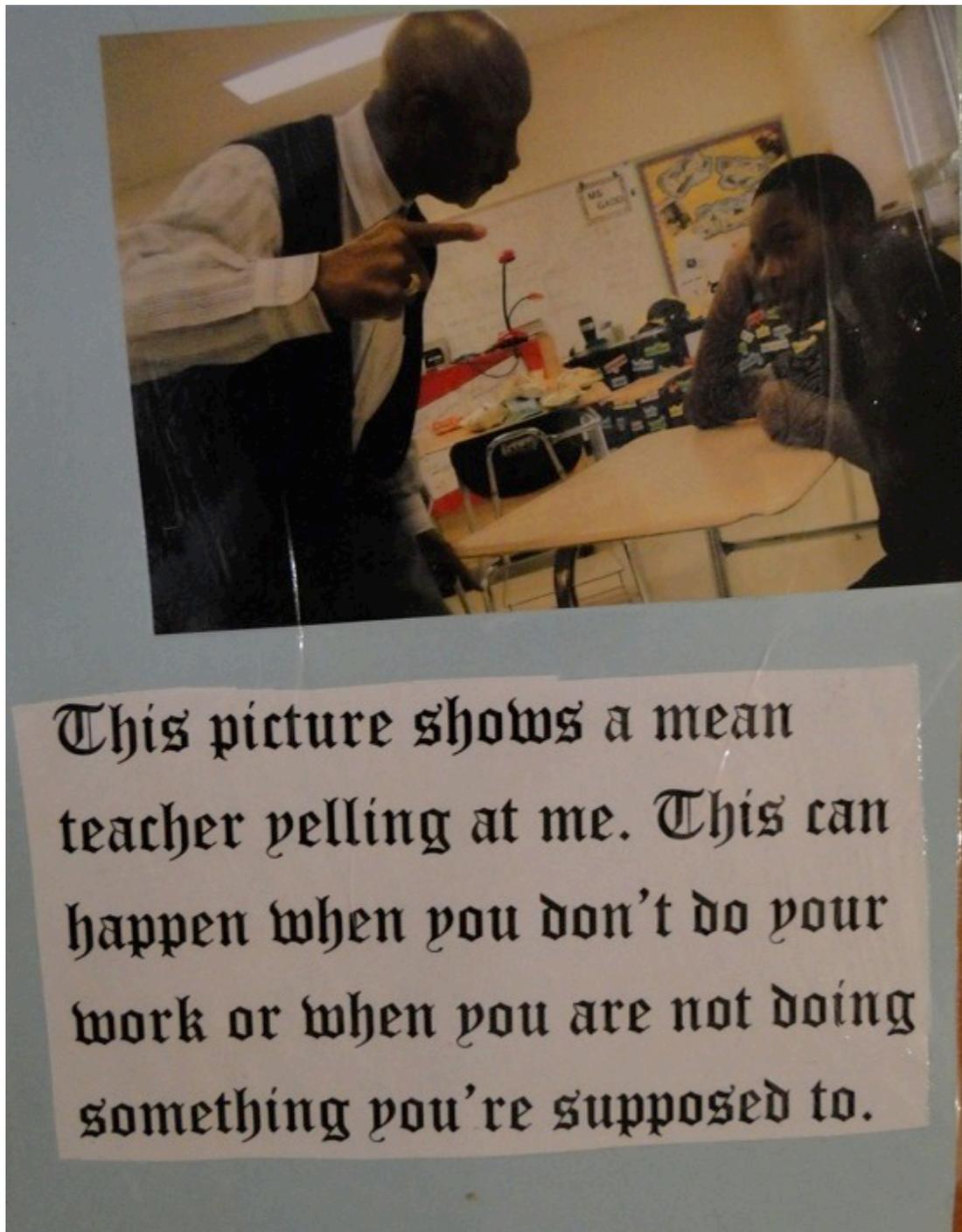
Figure 78. "A mean teacher yelling."

In an interview he told me more about his face in the picture with the yelling

teacher. (Figure 78). Rashard was trying hard not to laugh, but he couldn't help it. See

Figure 79. He said he's heard this "speeching" from his parents, grandparents and

teachers so long that it means nothing to him. I asked him what we (family, teachers, adults, people who care) could say to him to reach him. I told him to pretend he was the parent or teacher who wanted to get through to him. What would he say? He answered, "I would give one, last, whole day, no...whole *hour* speech. Then I'd stop."

Figure 79. Rashard's face close up while being yelled at by teacher.

Fighting and Suspension

Aside from the boredom of school, fighting was also a regular part of school for Rashard. On several occasions, he told me he has never started a fight but he has "never

walked away either." He assured me that in school fights happened all the time. See
Figure 80.
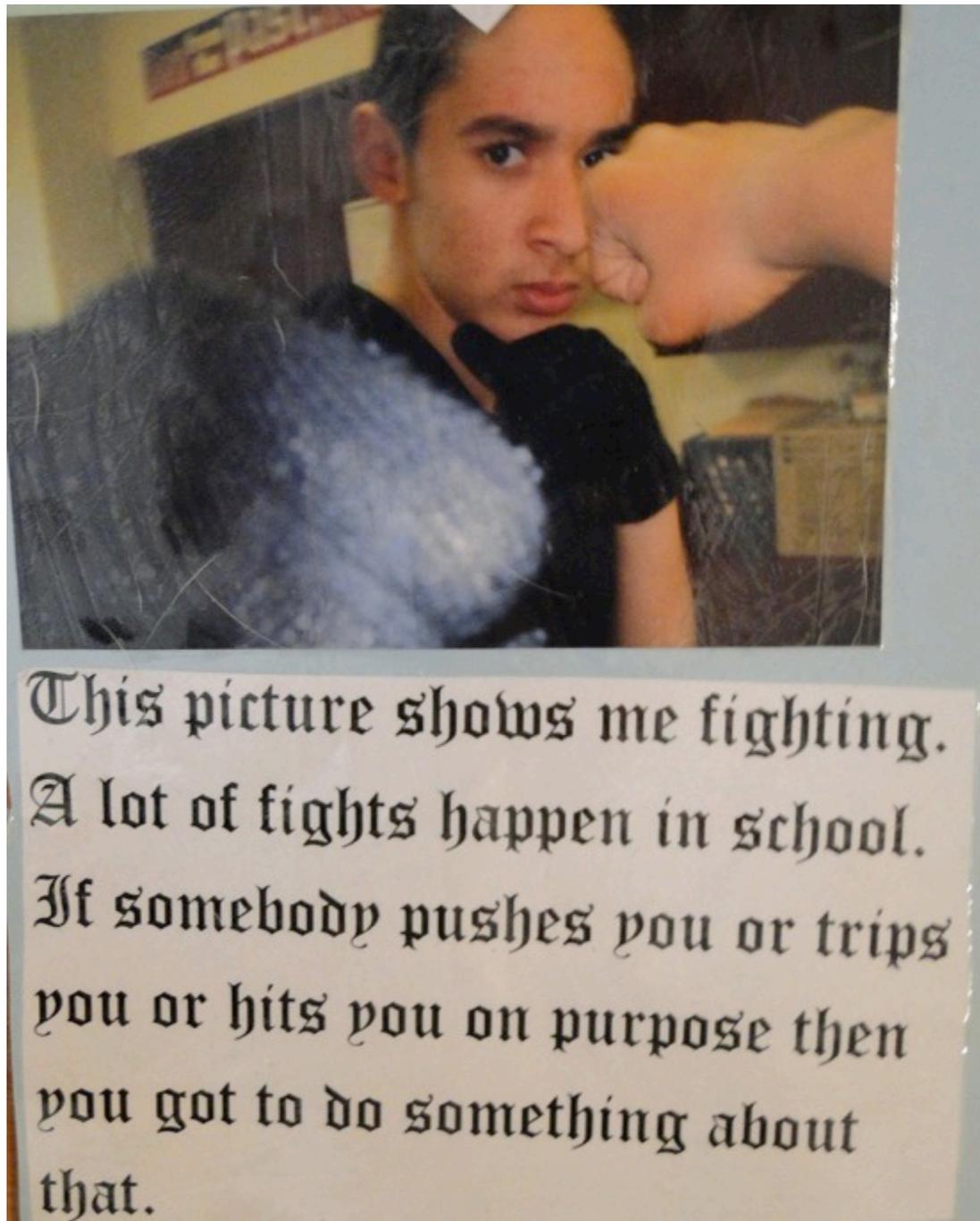
Figure 80. "A lot of fights happen in school."

He was suspended once in the fall for "play fighting" with another student in the program. In a second interview, I asked Rashard more about fighting:

Interviewer: Ok. It says, "A lot of fights happen in school. If somebody pushes you or trips you or hits you on purpose then you got to do something about that."
Tell me a story when that has happened.

All right. Somebody literally push you, slap you or punch you and that's the start of a fight.

Interviewer: When's the last time you can remember that happening?

Like…a couple of weeks ago and I got suspended for like three days.

Interviewer: Tell me the story.

Somebody came up to me and slapped me and I slapped him back. That wasn't really no fight.

Interviewer: Why do you think kids mostly fight?

Cuz either a kid says something to get the other person mad, push em punch em or it can start by playing.

<div align="center">School: Why Go?</div>

School seemed very negative and not a place he would want to go. I asked Rashard this: "When school seems so negative, why do you come?" He answered quickly, "Learning. And get an education…Cuz I don't wanna be stupid."

Interviewer: What will you get out of learning and education?

You can get a job. A job. Then you can go to college. And you can get a degree. And that will open doors for you to get a job and stuff.

When I asked what he would change about school, like other students he picked food and teachers. For Rashard, though there wouldn't be any teachers at all.

Interviewer: Oh! How would you do learning?

Give us computers and we'll get on the subject we wanna do.

Interviewer: Is there any reason why you wouldn't come to school?

Sitting in class all day (points to picture). Sitting down being quiet all day.

Listening to somebody talk all day.

Discussion

Rashard is an energetic, athletic, happy, young boy. He described himself as helpful, athletic and silly. He liked to write and seemed eager to please his instructors in the program. In LTP he was the first to finish his assignments and the first to jump out of his chair, grab his camera and move into activity. He told me he looked forward to program and he never missed a day unless he was suspended from school (field notes). However, how he sees school is completely opposite all that. As seen in the literature on labeled at-risk students and dropouts, Rashard's view of school confirms that his time, mobility and freedoms are overly restricted (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Luttrell, 2003; Wacquant, 2000).

Rashard's Self-portraits show an active young "boy" who is trying to fly away from trouble. Trouble, which is undefined, is in the library. The Self-portraits also show a "boy" who finds success on the football field and court. In both cases, the boy is active. In How School Sees Me Rashard is also active. He is spinning a basketball and about to "pour water on his friend." Yet, when we look at his pictures of How I See School, Rashard is passive, quiet, silenced and still (Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005;

Monroe, 2005). His smile is gone. He is literally not able to move. The only image in school that shows any action is one in which he is fighting (Dei et al., 1997; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003). Fighting is an accepted part of school, and it is also a playful outlet for his energy. However, it is a certain way to continue getting suspended and excluded from school (Christle et al., 2007; Finn, 1989; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Except for PE, school is an overall negative experience for Rashard (Dei et al., 1997; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Wehlage, 1986; Smyth, 2006).

School is filled with no wins for Rashard. Do your work and you fall asleep from boredom. Don't do your work and you get in trouble. Try to move and get tied to a chair. This is school in the eyes of the kids.

School requires that he is sitting still, being docile, and being quiet all day (Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1994). This alienates Rashard from school and marginalizes him (Delpit, 1996; Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Wacquant, 2000). He is disconnected from teachers who yell at him so often that he doesn't listen anymore (Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2009). Being silly breaks up the day but that gets him in a "whole lot of trouble" (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995). The good news is that at least right now, in the 7th grade, Rashard sees school as necessary to "not be stupid." Also, he believes that education "will open doors for you to get a job and stuff." But how long will he hang on?

Theme One: School is Boring

"You can fall asleep from boredom." Rashard

Theme One: School is Boring

The montage of student images depicted school as overwhelmingly sedentary and boring. Students described in words and images that school is so boring that it induces sleep.

Boring seemed to be a catch all for sitting still, being silent and inability to express one's self (Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006). Marcel, who sees the value of hard work and education, agreed. "This picture is me sleeping in class cuz sometimes class is boring." See Figure 81.

Figure 81. "This picture is me sleeping in class cuz sometimes class is boring."

Several students believed that teachers share in the boredom of school, "this picture means how bored teachers can get and that's how boring teachers are" Another student said, "Even the meanest and nicest teachers get bored, but thanks to the creator of school, it's only eight hours long." In these examples, students are seeing teachers as allies in the fight against boredom. They are all helpless agents in this boring structure of school (Smyth & Hattam, 2002).
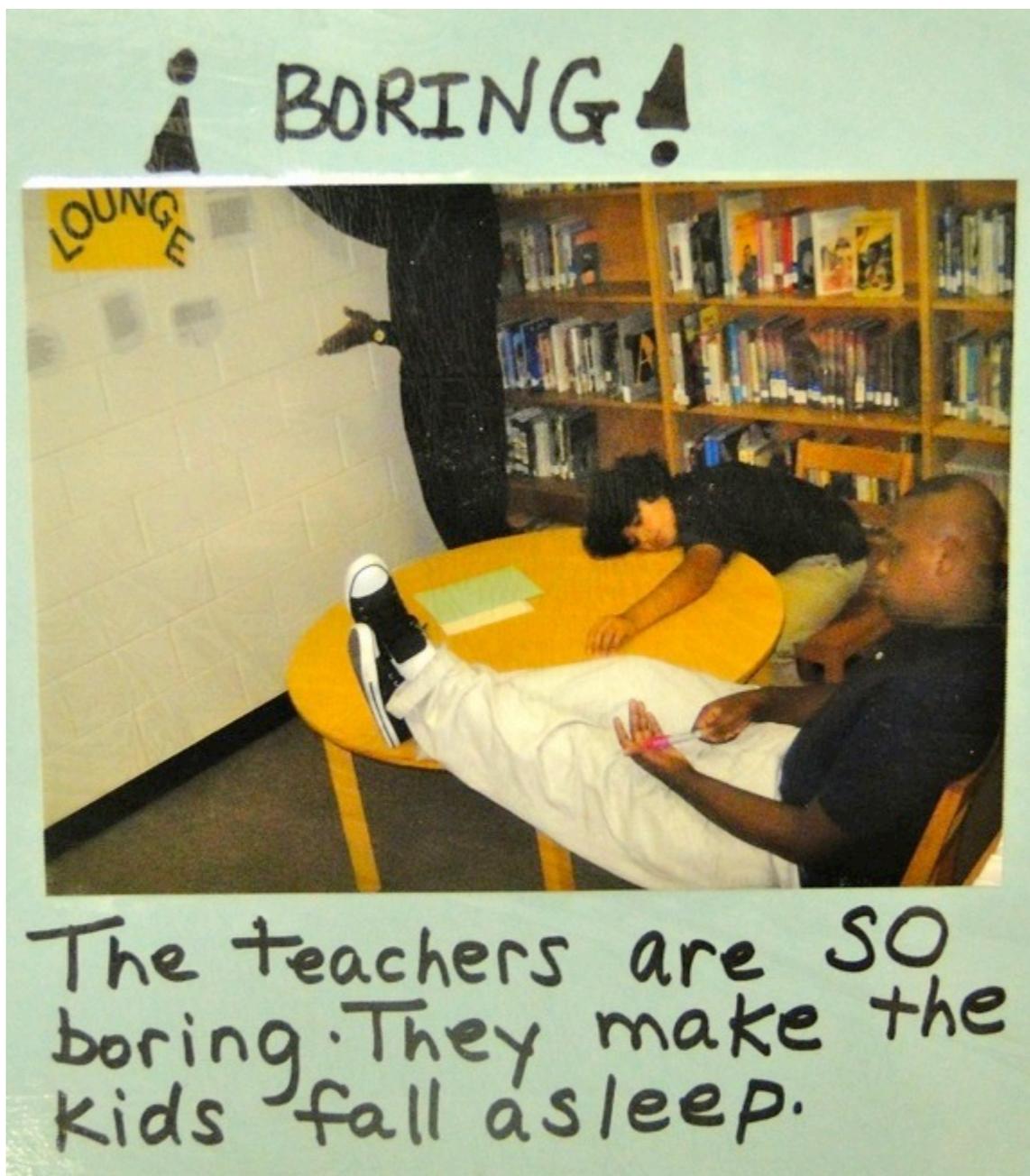
These examples also show the dehumanizing forces that operate both outside (creators of school) and inside the school (teachers) (McInerney, 2009). These forces of boredom can affect students and teachers at times. In either case, students have no power (Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2006). When students feel powerless, they are more likely to

withdraw their assent and leave school (Brown & Rodriquez, 2009; Fine, 1991;

McInerney, 2009).

The Hall: This school is so boring that even the meanest and nicest teachers get bored, but thanks to the creator of school, it's only 8 hours long but in some cases it's 10 miserable long hours of school
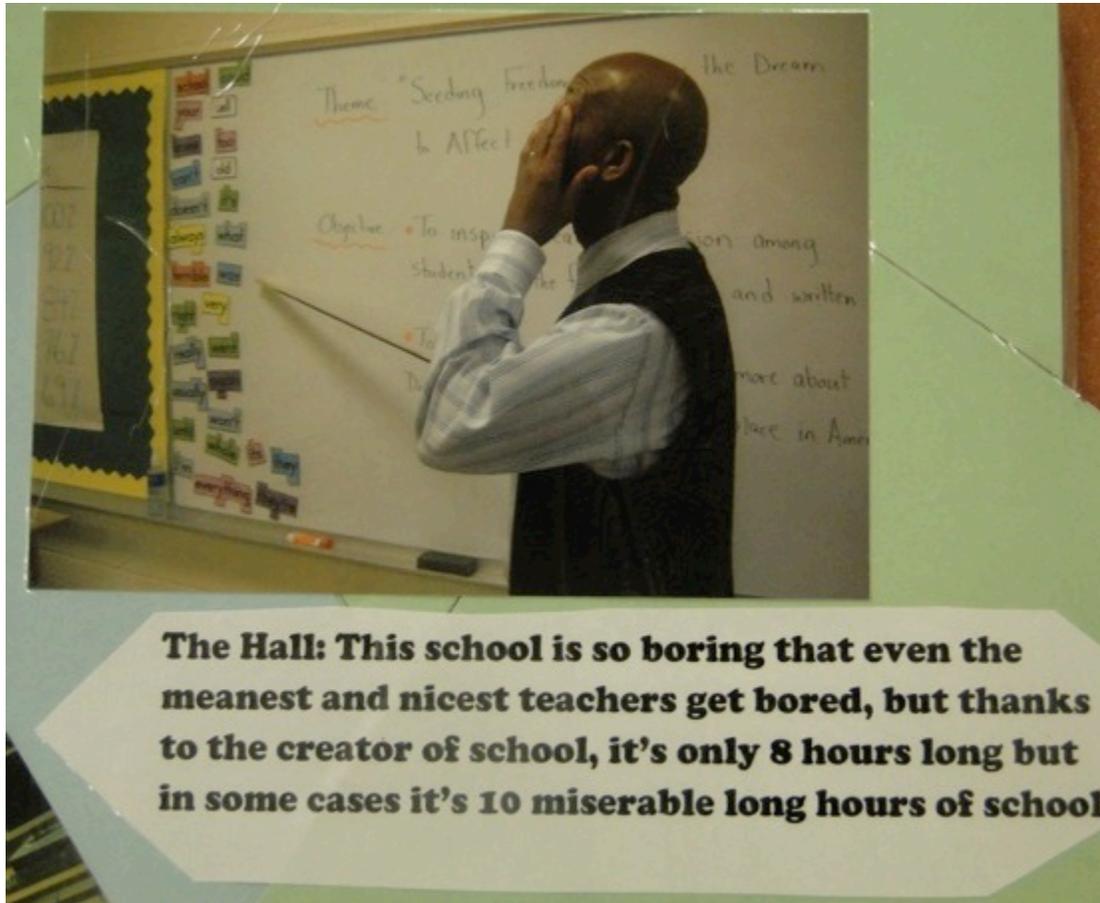
The boredom and passivity students represent in photos and words can be

described as the banking model of education (Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2009; Smyth,

2006). Where everyone, even teachers, have come to accept that this is the way school is.

"School is boring. Of course," one student told me as a matter of fact. According to

Alberto, school is so boring that "there's no way to describe it. It's like you have to

witness it first hand."

Boredom and Identity

For students boredom also encompassed having to deny the favorite parts of themselves: sense of humor, silliness, independence, originality and enthusiasm. In this way, students were showing that they had to suppress their identities in order to survive in school (Fine, 1991; Delpit, 1996; McInerney, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Smyth, 2006). Alberto showed this institutionalization (Smyth, 2006) as students turned into zombies with "no soul." See Figure 82.
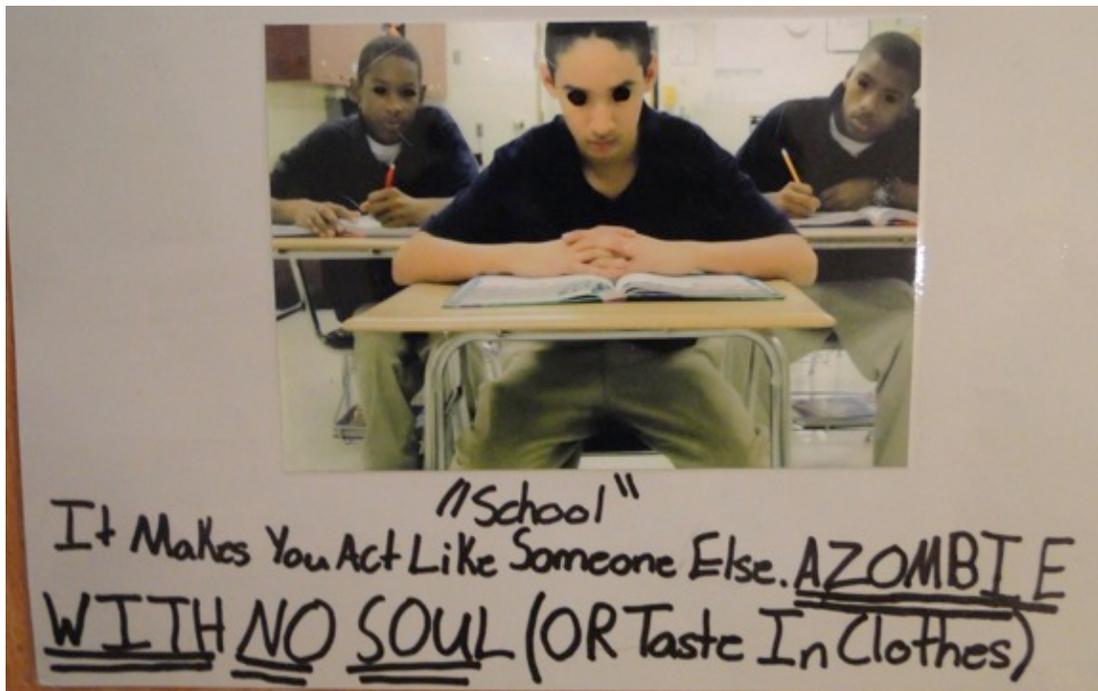
Figure 82. Alberto's How I See School. "It makes you act like someone else."

As Smyth (2006) points out succeeding at school, for many students, means having to suppress their own identities and act within a narrow definition what it means to be a 'good' student. But what if a student does not want to conform? Sleeping is one way students can conform without actually denying their identities (Delpit, 1996; McInerney, 2006). This is a form of marginalization or imposed docility (Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005). Another way to force conformity is through silencing (Fine, 1993; Noguera, 1995). We will see later what happens when students chose not to conform and Break the Boredom (Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003).

The Role of Work

Overall, the main activity at school described by students was "work" and this work is forced upon them and sleep inducing. One student explained in his letter to an alien that "students are kids who come to school and are forced to learn and do work."

Another said that school was about "working all day until we change classes. We are still

doing work." Alberto's photo showed work that was created to "mentally torture you."

See Figure 83.
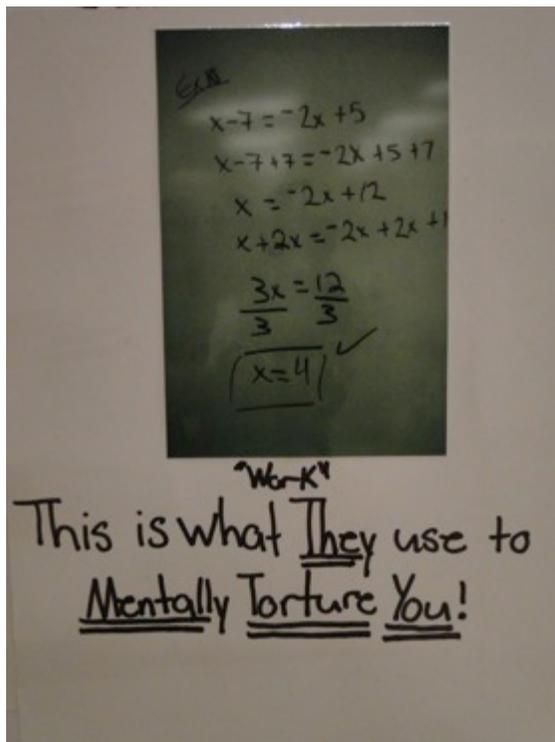
Figure 83. Alberto's How I See School. Work. "This is what they use to mentally torture you!"

In an interview Alberto continued, "It's the fact that you have to do work all day.

I mean if work was fun, I wouldn't have a problem with it but it's not fun. It's boring.

You put words on lines all day." Another student showed class as "nap time."
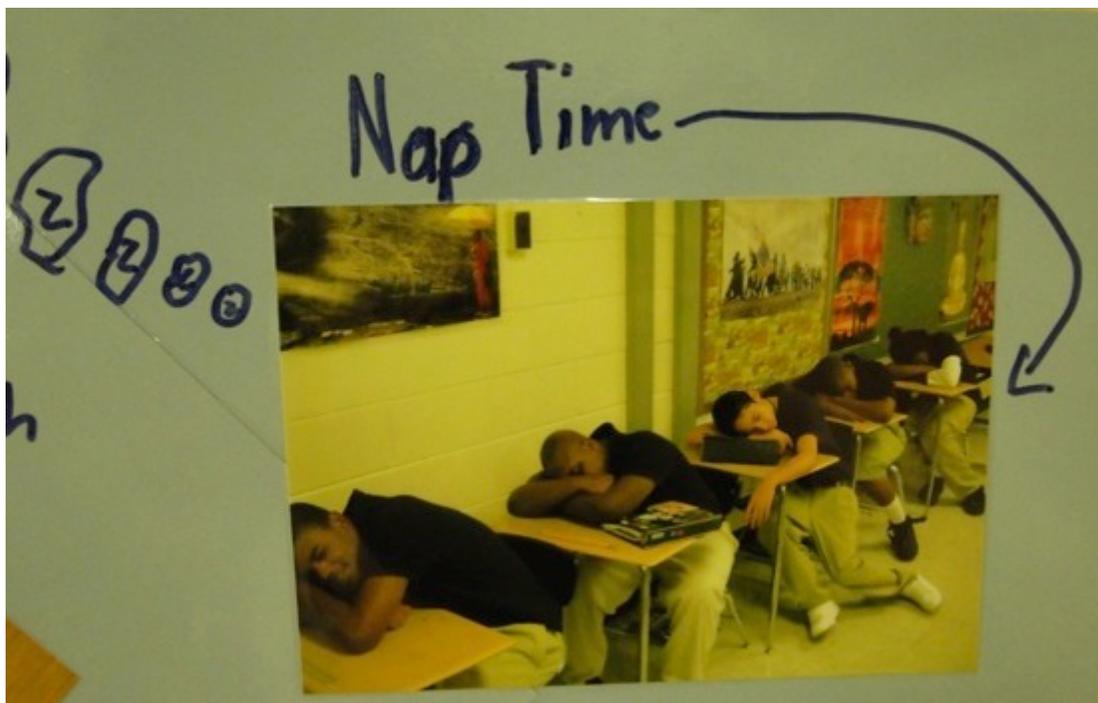
Figure 84. "Nap Time"

Rashard's picture showed him "about to go to sleep after doing a lot of work." He wrote, "the teachers give you a lot of work in class. You could fall asleep from boredom."
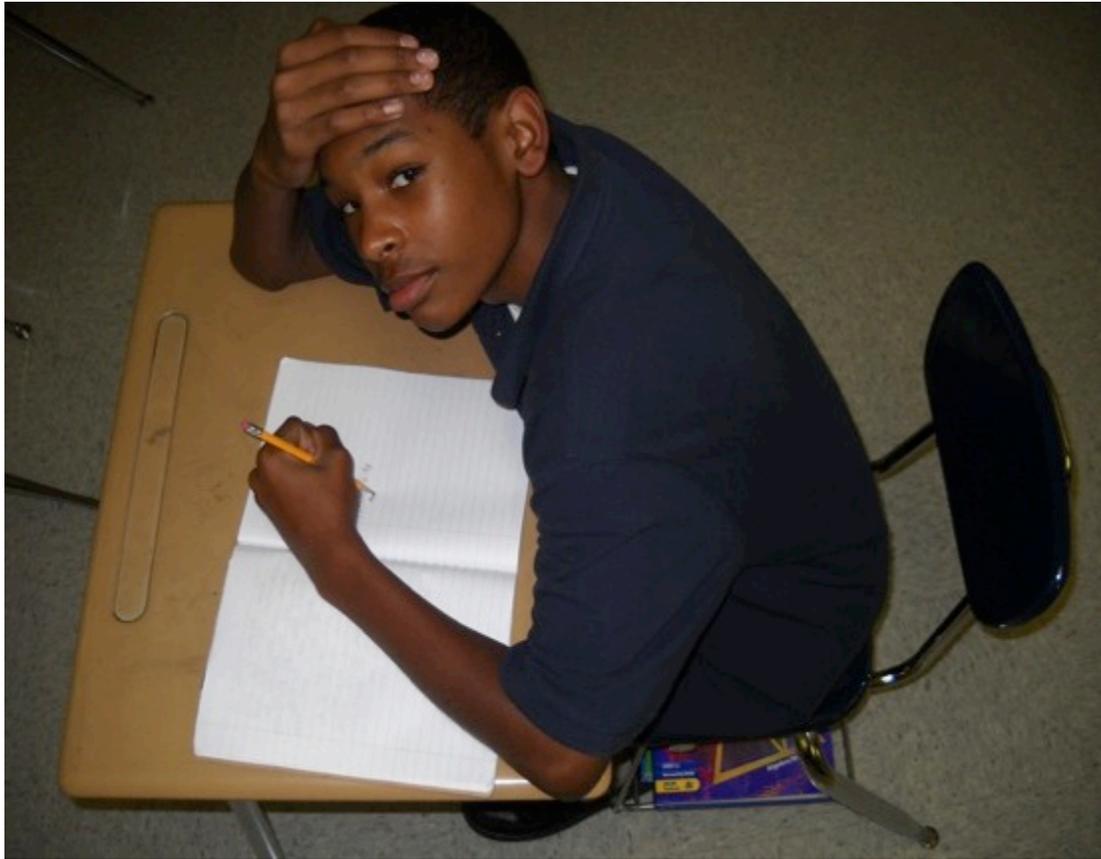
Work was described as physically disabling. One student said it was like "getting blasted by a title wave…ready to smash on you. " See Figure 84.
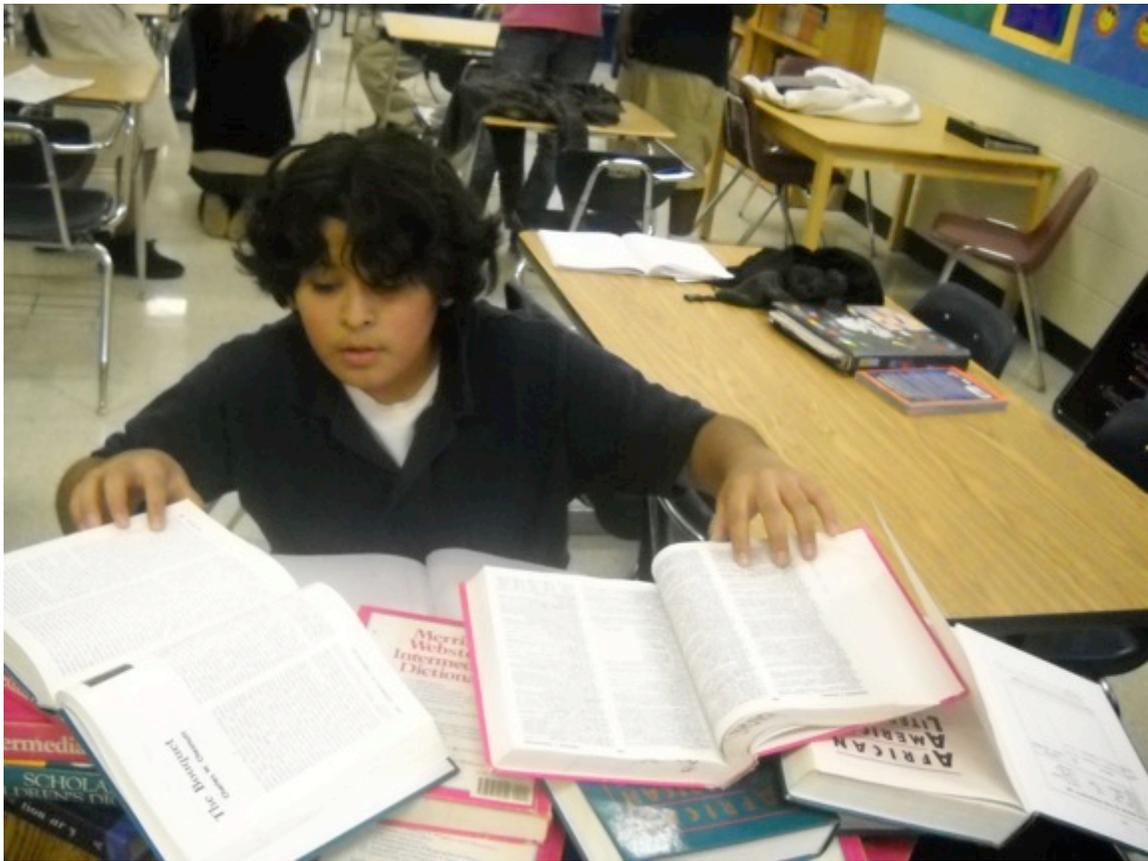
Figure 85. "Getting blasted by a tidal wave."

All students agreed that "work" was boring. Work appeared to have to meaning to students (Delpit, 1996; McInerney, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It was something students had to do, were forced to do, and it made them sleepy, bored and disengaged (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Defur & Korinek, 2009; Smyth, 2006). Students are not agents in their learning who are capable of success, critical thinking or personal engagement in academics (Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005; McInerney, 2006; Wissman, 2007). In no picture or interview did students show connection, excitement or engagement in school "work" (Delpit, 1996; McInerney, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1994). It was something completely disconnected from their lives.

Smyth's (2006) description of alienation works well here. These students are alienated from learning that has no meaning in their real lives (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McInerney, 2006). They are doing this "work" for hours on end with no defined purpose other than a far off goal of college and career (Smyth, 2006). This meaningless arrangement certainly increases the risk that they will quit coming to school all together.

Staying Still

Many students described school as having to sit all day long. Rashard said it was "sitting in class all day. Sitting down and being quiet all day. Listening to somebody talk all day."

Rashard's pictures of being tied to a chair represented many of the students'

experiences of school. See Figure 85. He wrote:

This picture show me tied to a chair. You have to sit down all day and do your

work. If you get up then you will get into trouble. So this is like a teacher tying

you to a chair.

Figure 86. Rashard's How I See School. Practicing for "tied to a chair."

Other students agreed. "We just sit at the board (sic) all day. We sit down and

look at the board. Blah, blah, blah. This is a normal day at school."

The only sense relief was when the bell rang.

When I got out of the doors, it was like going home was freedom. Or just getting

off that property was freedom…getting out of the school is freedom at the end of

the day. (Figure 86).
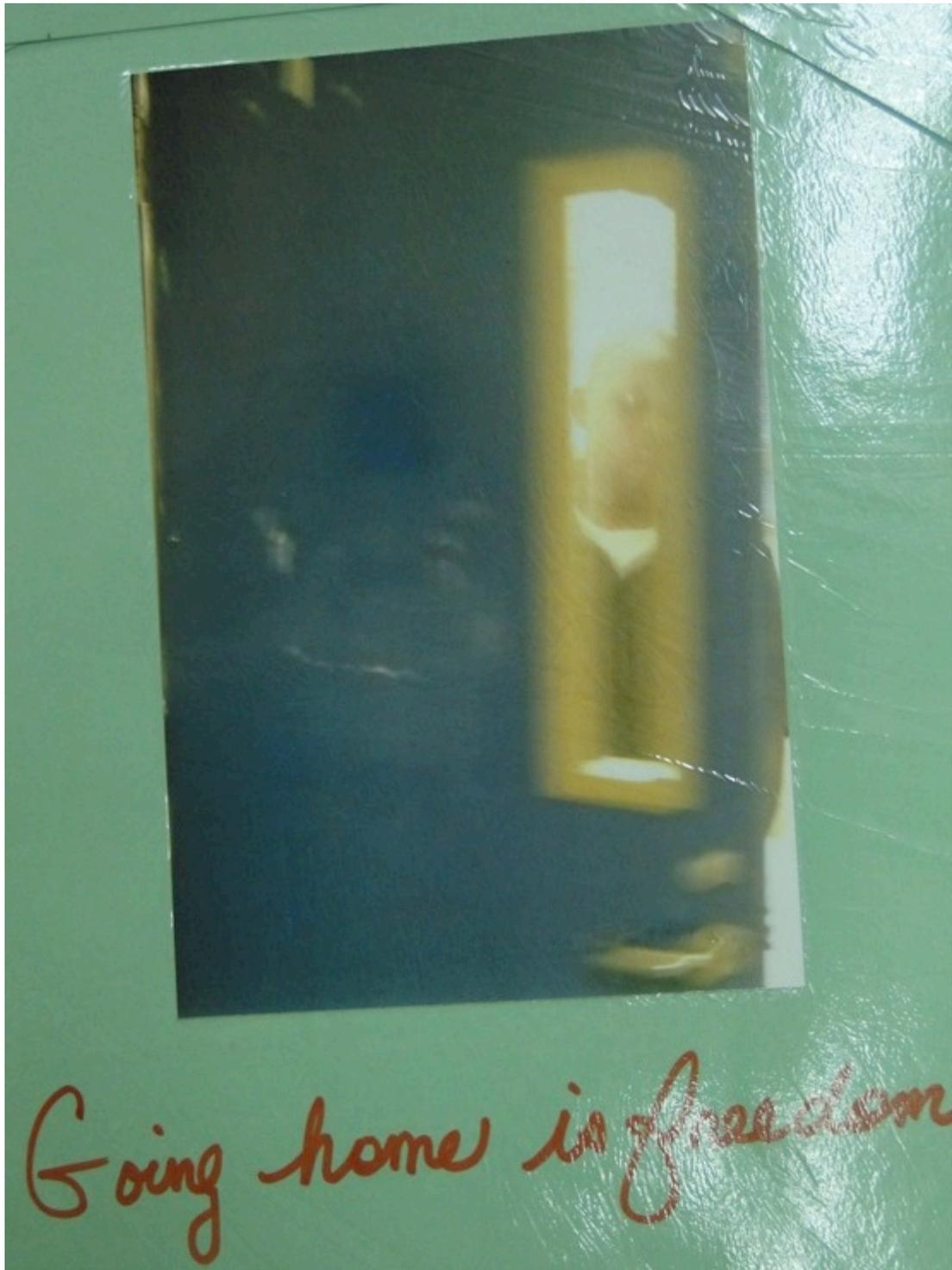
Figure 87. Student's How I See School. Hope. "Going home is freedom."

One student described his day as sitting down, looking at the board, writing things down, "then looking up at the board to finish writing something down." Students said that sitting all day was torture. It made school feel like a prison, dungeon and jail (Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995; Wacquant, 2000). See Figure 87.
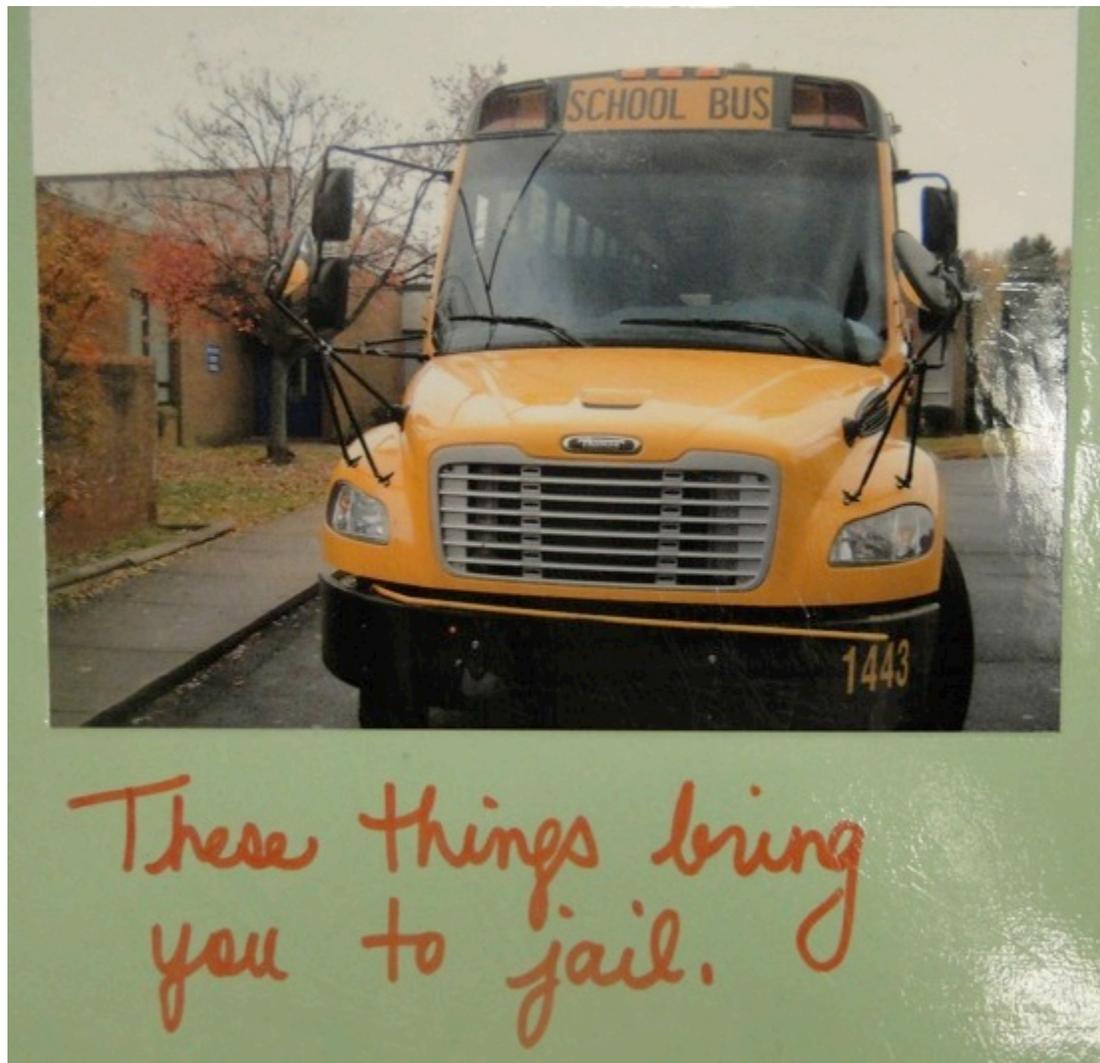
Figure 88. Student's How I See School. Bus. "These things bring you to jail."

Given that students are disconnected and alienated from work, they must be forced to stay still all day (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Teachers yell at students to comply. "'Sit down! Look at the board!' Blah, blah, blah." According to

students, a teacher's job is to make them do work, and work is boring. Therefore, teachers are mean and boring. Under this "pedagogy of poverty," students can either comply or resist (Smyth, 2006, p. 294). Resistance is often framed as disruption, insubordination, disobedience and disengagement from education (Smyth, 2006) when in fact, it is the manifestation of student's "estrangement from learning" (McInerney, 2009, p. 23).

THE SCHOOL IS WHERE WE GO TO BE TORTURED.
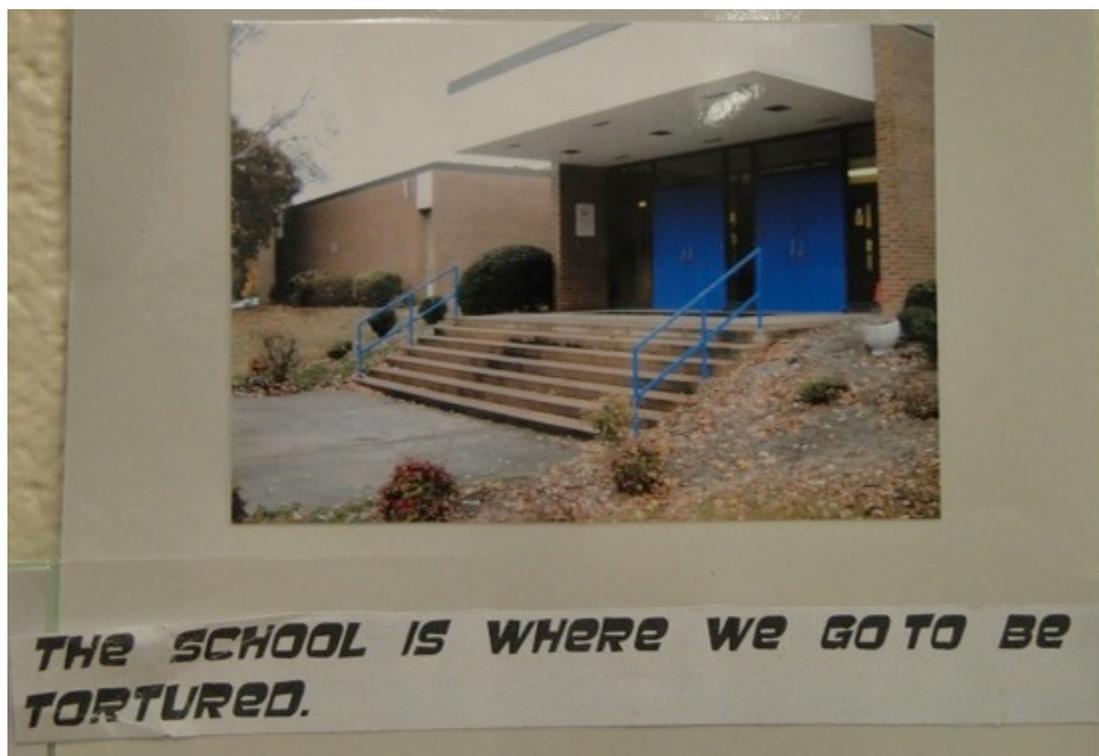
Discussion

Much of the deficit literature frames dropping out as a "decision that individual students make, often based on a pattern of unwise behaviors and low commitment to school" (Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 42). However if we look at the data presented here, we see that the consistent view of school is that it is overwhelmingly boring and disconnected from the lives of students (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991;

Monroe 2005; Wald & Losen, 2004). An overwhelming sense of boredom permeated

pictures, interviews, and conversations about how students see school. It led one student

to say, "Sometimes I feel it's not worth it. The suffering I'm doing now is not gonna be

made up for in the future."

As Smyth and Hattam (2002) explain, in the passive school, students and teachers

appear/feel helpless. This seems to be the case here. Yet if the school created an active

geography there would be a negotiation of power and dynamic attempts to connect to

students' lives outside of school, and a challenging curriculum, couched in a culture of

listening and respect. The more active the cultural geography of a school the greater the

holding power. The greater the holding power the less likely students will drop out

(Smyth & Hattam, 2002). A dialogic classroom with critical pedagogy would engage

these students in reading their own lives (McInerney, 2006). It would tap into the wealth

of experience and interest the students hold and make this an essential part of the

curriculum (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

What we see in this study confirms the holding power literature on dropouts

which suggests that students co-construct the decision to leave school based on an

accumulation of bad experiences, disconnection, silencing and an overall sense of

alienation (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2003;

Wehlage, 1986; Smyth, 2006). This makes sense if schools ask students to sit still all day

long, remain quiet and in many cases deny key parts of their identities (Fine, 1991;

McInerney, 2006; Monroe, 2005; Smyth, 2006). This type of experience would make it

very difficult for even the most committed student to attend.

Let me remind you, the students in this study are identified as high risk for truancy and dropping out. Yet, not one of them dropped out of school over the six months of data collection. This is surprising since they all agreed that "school is boring." Even in the face of sleep inducing classes, torturous work and hours of stillness, they continued to attend school. However, they did so while compiling a good number of suspensions among them (field notes). Yet what other way did they have to express their discontent with what was going on (McInerney, 2006; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Smyth, 2006)?

Story Two: Alberto

Alberto is a tall, thin 8th grade boy with close-cropped black hair. In our first interview, he told me his father is Cuban ("never see him"), and his mother is a "mixture of everything." Alberto has an infectious laugh and a wide, innocent smile. His favorite phrases are, "Awesome!" (for just about anything cool) "How 'bout *this* guy!" (when someone is acting silly) and "Bam!" when something was exciting or needed your immediate attention. In his daybook, he described himself as "awesome, smart and funny." See Figure 88.

3 words that describe me;
I am "awsome" because of the way
I "hold myself. I am smart, just look
at my grades. I am funny, I love
to make people laugh.

Awsome

Smart

Funny.
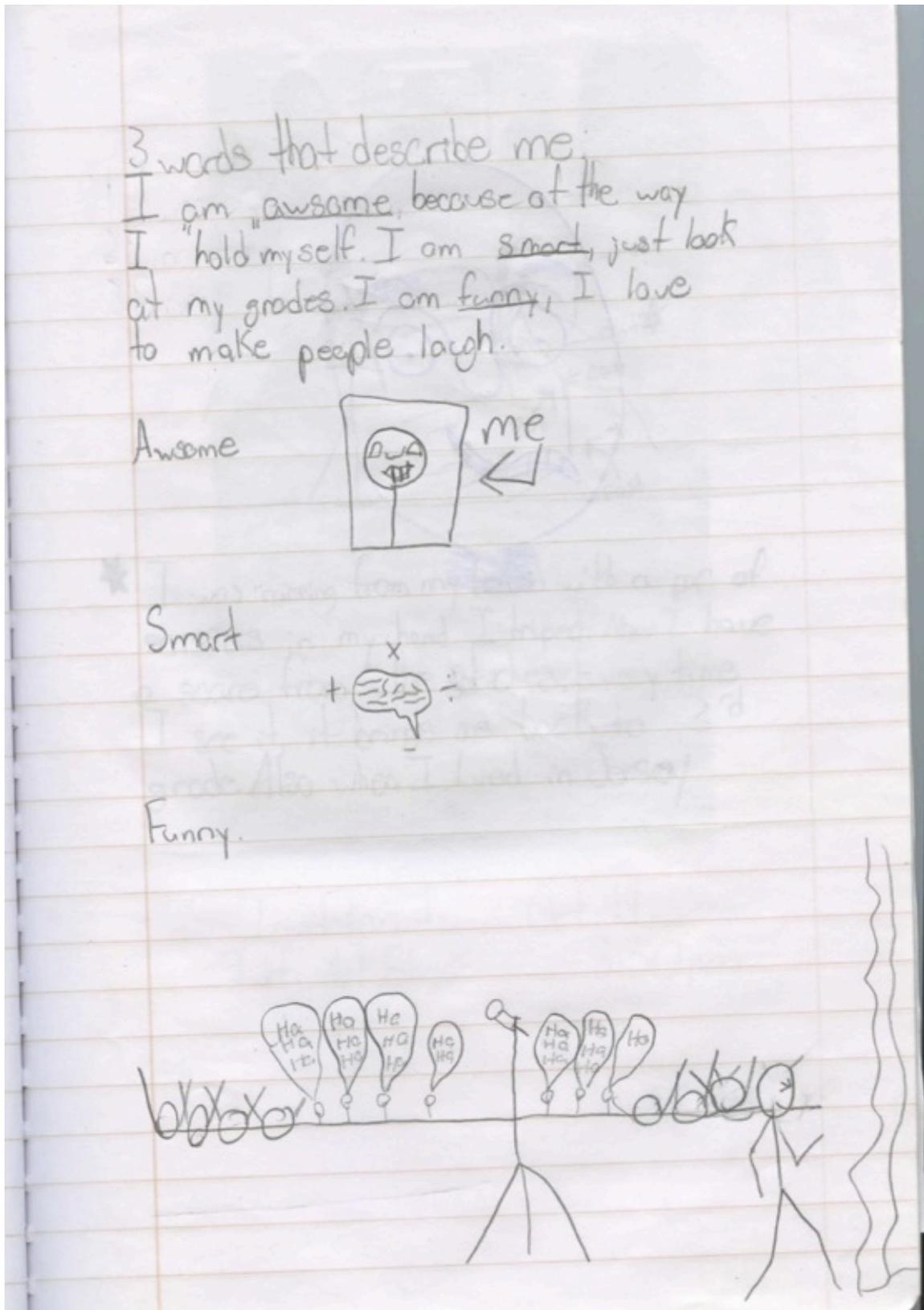
Figure 89. Alberto's plans for Self-portrait. (from daybook).

Alberto and I grew close over the course of the project. He was a quick study and often volunteered to help with extended projects by offering his artistic input and time. When my computer was stolen in November, he and Zak volunteered to take every student's camera and download the photos on to my new laptop during PE block. The two of them sat on the bleachers in the old gym, creating an assembly line of cameras, memory cards and boxes. Alberto took the job of downloading the images and handing the card to Zak, who then put the card back in the camera, camera back in the box and marked the completed boxes with big smiley faces to show they were finished. To help me out, the boys had to miss PE, a highlight at New Leaf and the only real outlet for students. Alberto was particularly angry about the robbery, "See, that's why I don't steal from people I know," he told me (field notes).

During the semester, I had regular communication with his mother by phone and email. I needed her cooperation to keep Alberto in the program since she had to transport him to school for our classes when he was suspended. She also had to drive him in the ice and snow to Art Show Two when he was suspended a second time. This was important to him because he had put a lot of time and preparation into the show, both into his own photos, and into the group slideshow, How We See School. When he finally arrived in the old gym wearing his oversized gray sweatshirt and tapped me on the back, I was so happy to see him that my arms instinctively went out to hug him, but touching is against the policy at New Leaf and I quickly caught myself. One of the other students astutely pointed out, "Ha, ha! Ms. Heather almost hugged you, Alberto!" He flashed that large grin and said, "Awesome!"

Alberto's family is important to him. He often talked about his extended family "back in Jersey" and is especially close to his mother and little brother with whom he lives. His little brother came to program, took pictures, posed in pictures and acted as Alberto's shadow at both art shows. (Figures 89-90).

Figure 90. Alberto and his brother. Art Show One.

Figure 91. Alberto and his brother. Art Show Two

Self-portrait: Awesome, Smart and Funny

Unlike Rashard, Alberto's camera was not filled with pictures of himself. In fact, there are very few pictures of him. He sees the world through the eyes of an artist, a comedian and a critic. He took pictures of people and things that intrigued him (field notes). He almost never planned his photos ahead or completed shot lists as requested by his instructors (much to our chagrin), but as we quickly learned, he didn't need to write things out. He worked better with freedom. Admittedly, these qualities often led to trouble in school. This was evidenced in his multiple suspensions from school for "insubordination" (as he explained not following directions) and talking back to teachers (as he explained speaking his mind). But as he told me, "I like that I'm always myself."

Alberto's two Self-portrait selections exemplify his connection to family, introspection, and humor. Scissors X Chair + Running= Screaming was a reenactment of a childhood memory. (Figures 91-93).
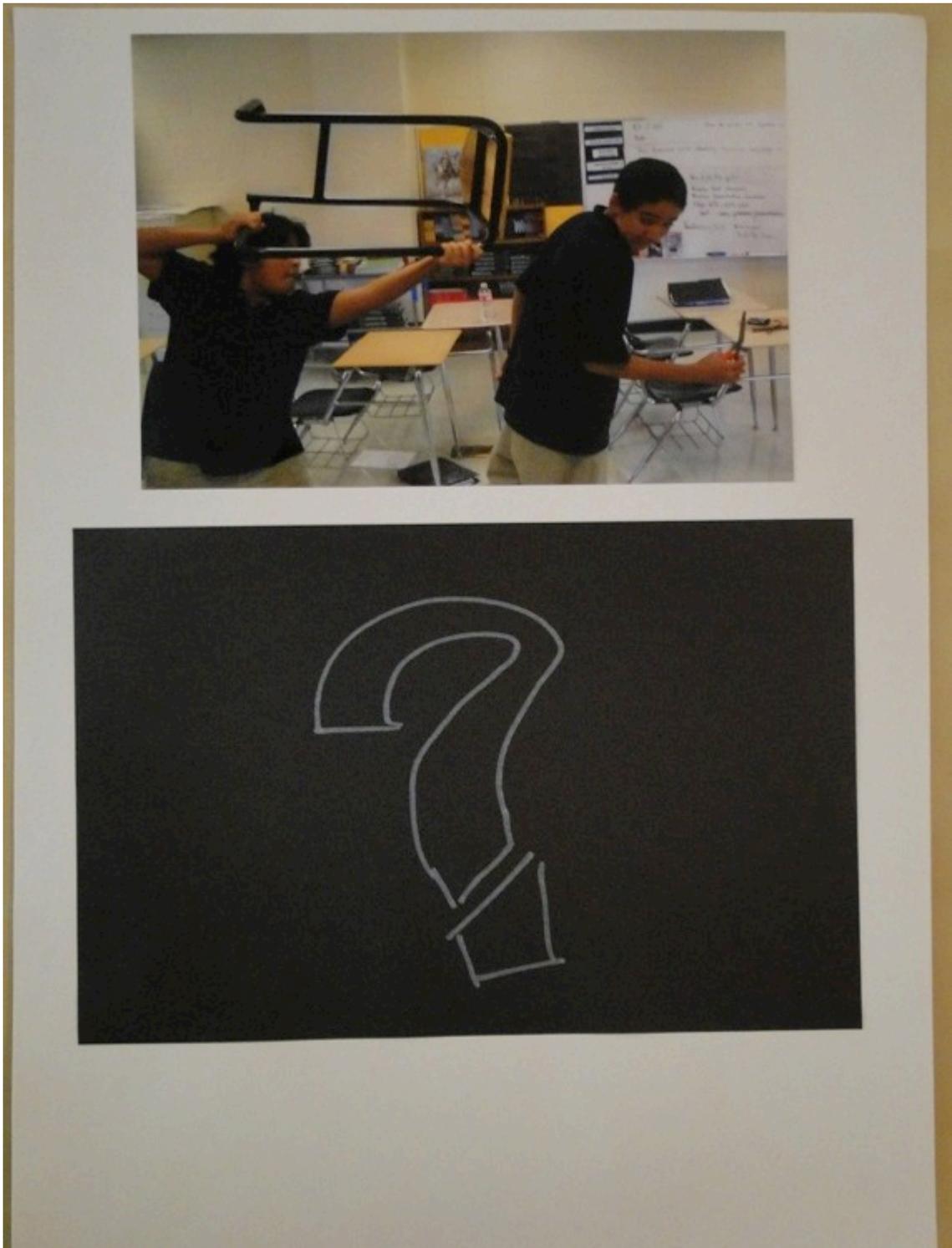
Figure 92. Alberto's Self-portrait 1. Scissors x Chair+ Running= Screaming.

In Figure 92, he wrote about the event in his daybook "Every time I see it (the scar), it brings me back to 3rd grade. Also when I lived in Jersey."
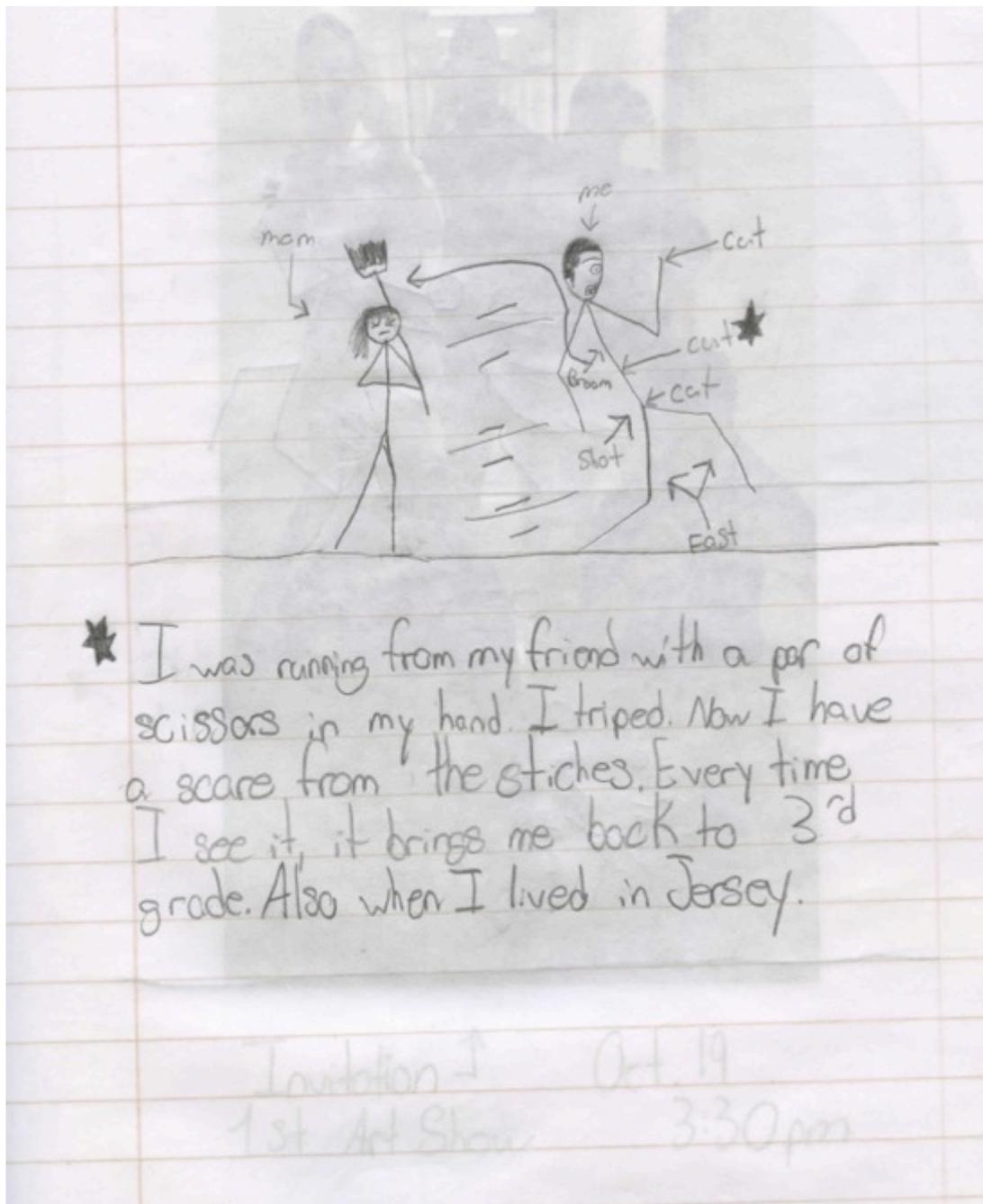
Figure 93. Alberto's plans for Self-portrait. (from daybook).

Our instructions to students in preparation for Art Show One had been to describe their Self-portraits with captions that explained their images as clearly as possible to

gallery visitors. Yet Alberto decided to display his Self-portrait with a large "?" below it and included none of the text from his daybook.

His second Self-portrait What is Life? Figure 93, shows Alberto deep in thought, writing, with his hood over his head hiding his face. The text covered important topics to him like money, friendship and the meaning of life. Money is the "root of all evil" and friends are "enemies with secret identities and disguises to hide their true colors."
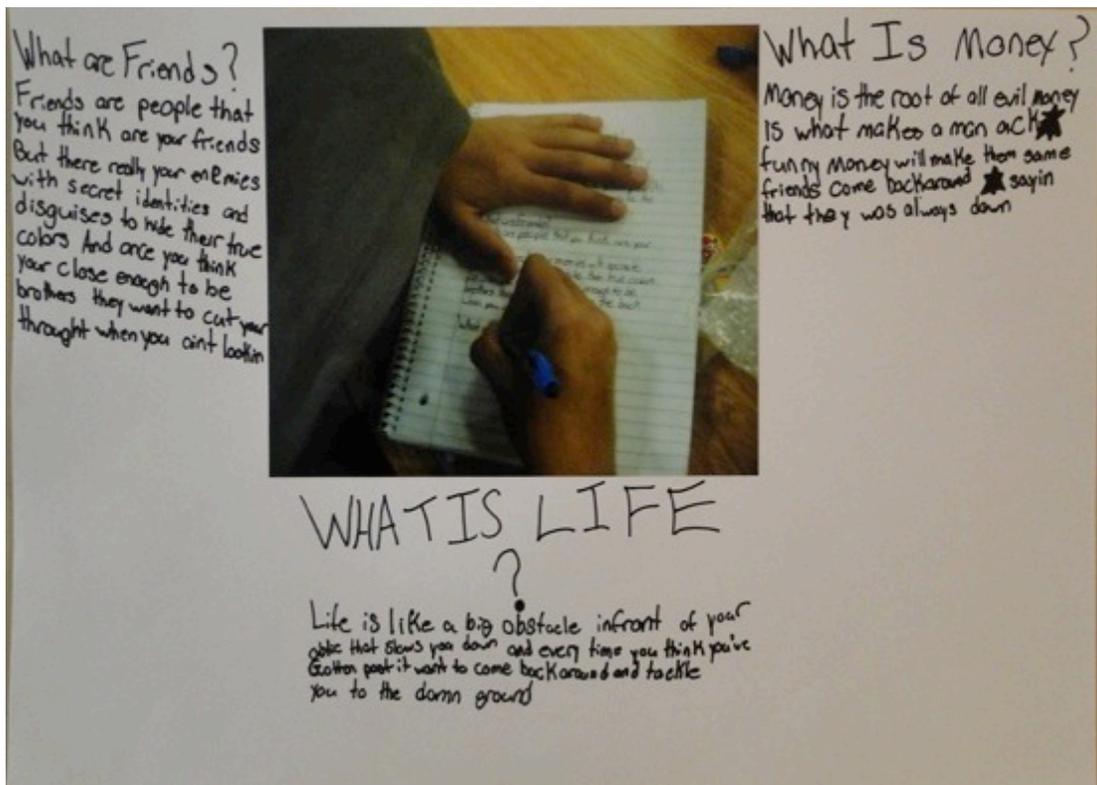
Figure 94. Alberto's Self-portrait 2. What is Life?. "Life is like a big obstacle in front of your face that slows you down and every time you think you've gotten past it want to come back around and tackle you to the damn ground. What are friends? Friends are people that you think are your friends but there really your enemies with secret identities and disguises to hide their true colors. And once you think your close enough to be brothers they want to cut your throught when you aint lookin. What is money? Money is the root of all evil. Is what make a man ack funny money will make them same friends come back around sayin that they was always down."

How School Sees Me: Smart and Outspoken (but I like It)

Alberto identified himself as smart in writing about himself and in How School Sees Me. He told me that his success or lack of success in school has not related to his

intelligence. He sees his troubles in school as a combination of smarts, boredom and outspokenness.

Interviewer: Is school easy for you?

School is easy for me.

Interviewer: So if it was challenging and you had to think…

Yeah. I used to fail because of that. The work was so easy I wouldn't do it. I used to get in trouble for that. My mom cuz, in 5th grade I was failing math cuz the work was easy and I wouldn't do it. My mom was like well if it's easy then why don't you do it and get it over with. And I was like I'd rather just not do it. Why would I waste time doing it when I would just not? (Laughs).

He also understood the link between his behavior and his access to certain classes in school. For example, when he was placed in higher-level classes in elementary school, his behavior eventually got him removed and sent to lower-levels. He told me in an interview, "Actually as a matter of fact in our elementary school we had honors classes and then I was… but I got in trouble too much."

In both of his selections for How School Sees Me, he mentioned "stealing" and "trouble" but also that he has "never gotten caught." The caption reads, "I might steal a lot, but I'm very smart. I get good grades in school, and I don't get in trouble…that often." See Figures 94-95.
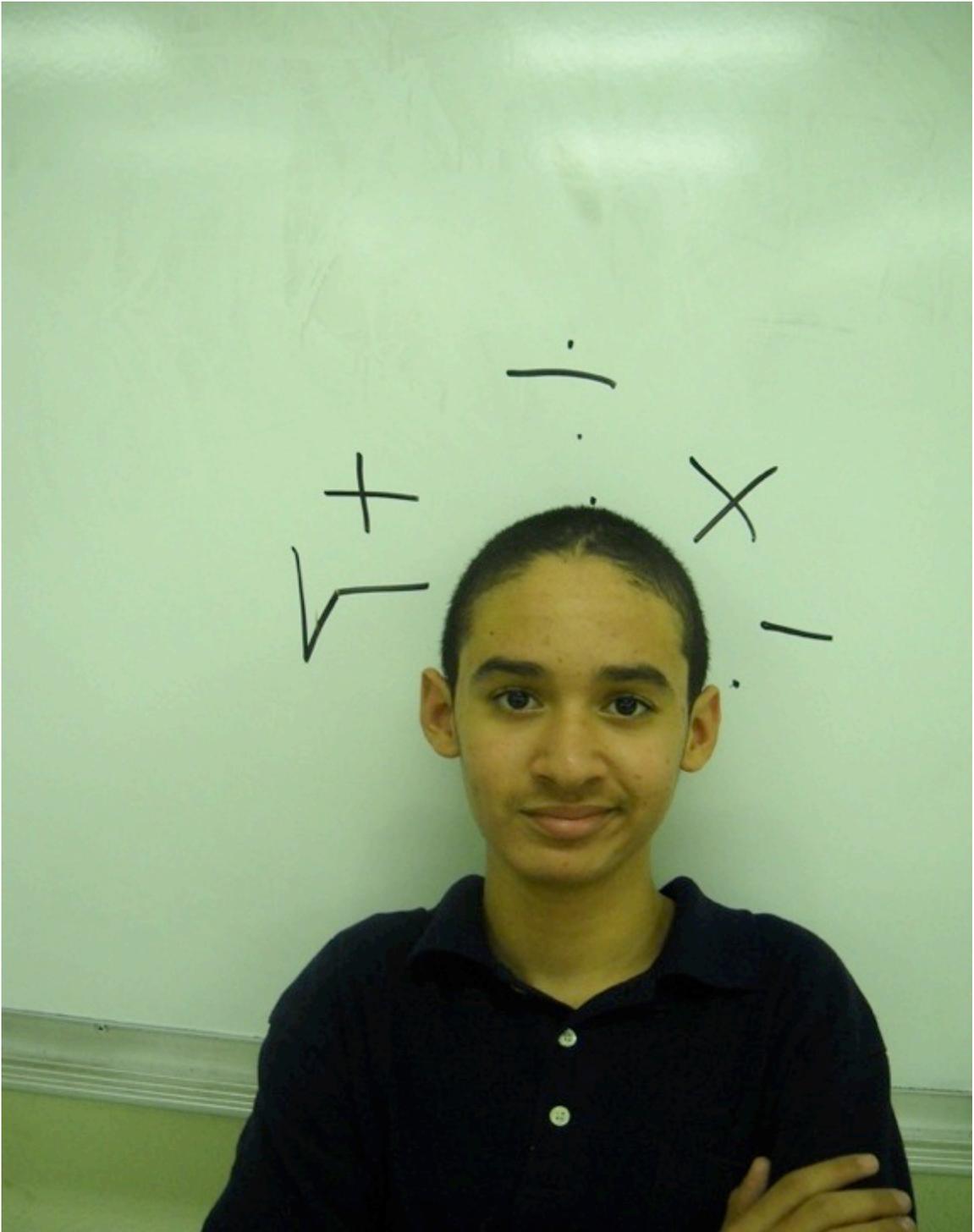
Figure 95. Alberto's How School Sees Me 1. "I might steal a lot, but I'm very smart. I get good grades in school, and I don't get in trouble… that often."

Figure 96. Alberto's How School Sees Me 2. "This picture shows me stealing Ms _____phone. I steal a lot, but I've never gotten caught."

He told me he had gotten in enough trouble to be sent to New Leaf and that his "trouble back in Jersey" was part of the reason the family relocated. Alberto seemed to accept that in school, behavior takes precedence over academics.

We are going to move to (school district), and I don't wanna go to any of the schools out there. But I don't want to go to there because they send you to alternative school for behavior and if you get in trouble. Not like you know, any thing major like why you get sent to New Leaf. But if you get too many little suspensions then they'll send you there or if your grades aren't good they'll send you there which I don't have problem with the grades. I'm set with that. It's the little suspensions they send you there which I really don't wanna go to.

Being Outspoken= Getting Referrals

Since Alberto does "not get caught" stealing in school, it is his comments "about everything" that get him in trouble in school. So to stay out of trouble would mean Alberto would have to remain quiet. He would have to keep his opinions to himself, and he would have to follow directions without questions.

(If) I'm going to stay out of trouble which it's—it's the hardest thing I've ever done is not talk. Cuz that's why I get in trouble. Cuz I have a comment about everything.

He doesn't distinguish between the targets of his opinions - teachers, students, adults and peers. It doesn't matter to him.

…but with teachers…if I feel like they're not doing something right I'm gonna tell 'em they're not doing something right. That's with teaching or just the way they're acting. If I feel they're being boring. You know you're boring, right? (Laughs). I'm gonna say that. (Figure 96).

Figure 97. No Talking.

Interviewer: So you get suspended for issues with kids or teachers?

Both. Both. Like I said earlier in the video. Like the up north thing? If I have

something to say I'm gonna say it. That's how we are. If I have a comment to say

I'm gonna say it. And usually that results in an argument or a fight.

As I witnessed over four months with him, his "comments about everything"

resulted in two suspensions and a third suspension averted by mom's quick attendance at

the school for an intervention. According to Alberto, one suspension was for talking back

to a teacher, the other for "commenting" on a situation between two other students that

didn't even involve him. The third was a "miscommunication" with a teacher. Had his

mom not made it to school that day, Alberto would have accumulated three suspensions, which would have meant another year at New Leaf.

<div align="center">How I See School: A Prison for the Soul</div>

Figure 97 shows Alberto's How I See School poster. It is titled School: A Prison for the Soul and is serious in its message but humorous in its approach. This is fitting given the humor he showed in his earlier work as well as his willingness to critique people and circumstances.
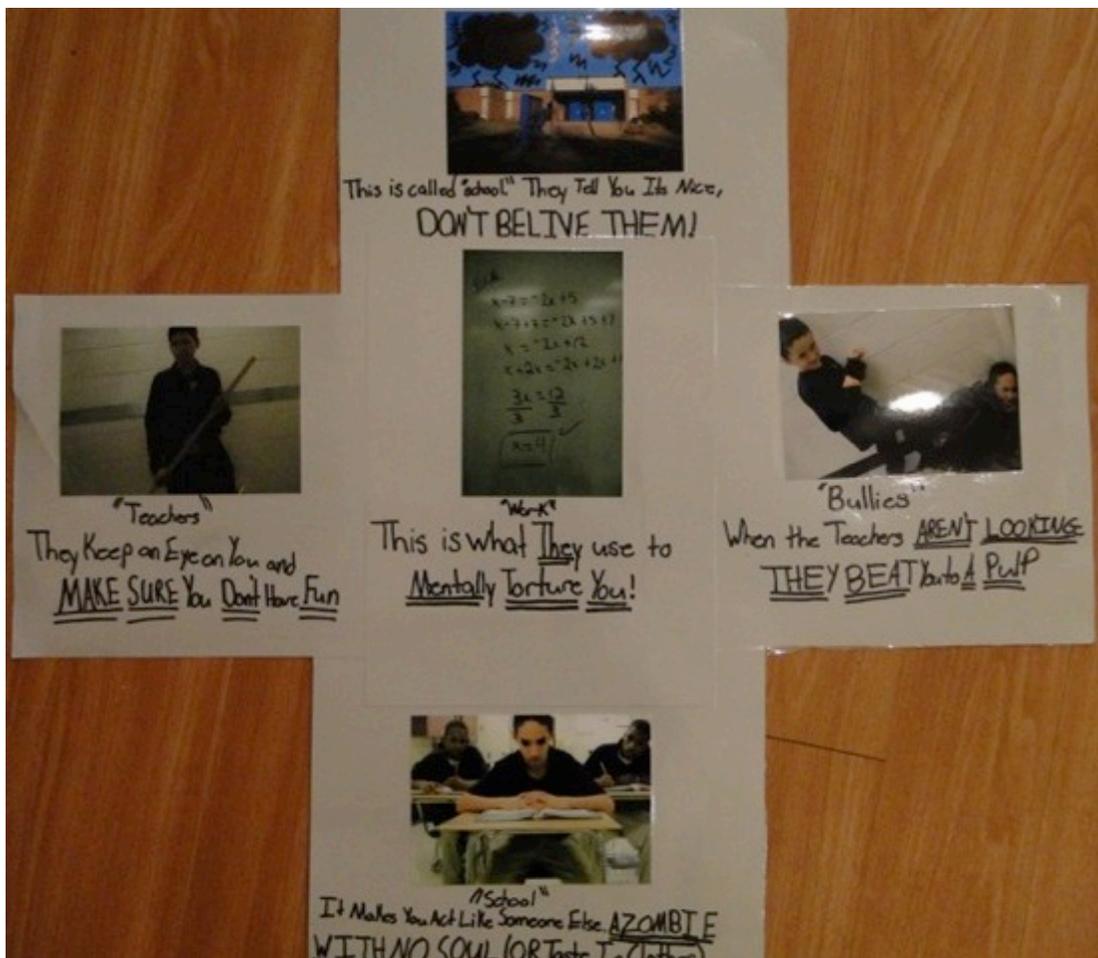
Figure 98. Alberto's How I See School. School: A Prison for the Soul.

He explained his thinking in the photo elicitation interview.

It was supposed to be in a comedic way. I don't know if it turned out that way. But you know…interpret it how you want. Teachers are very boring. They are always grumpy too. Especially if they don't have their coffee in the morning (laughs). They hit you with rulers if you don't listen. Not anymore, but they used to (smiles). I figured I'd incorporate that anyway. (Figure 98).
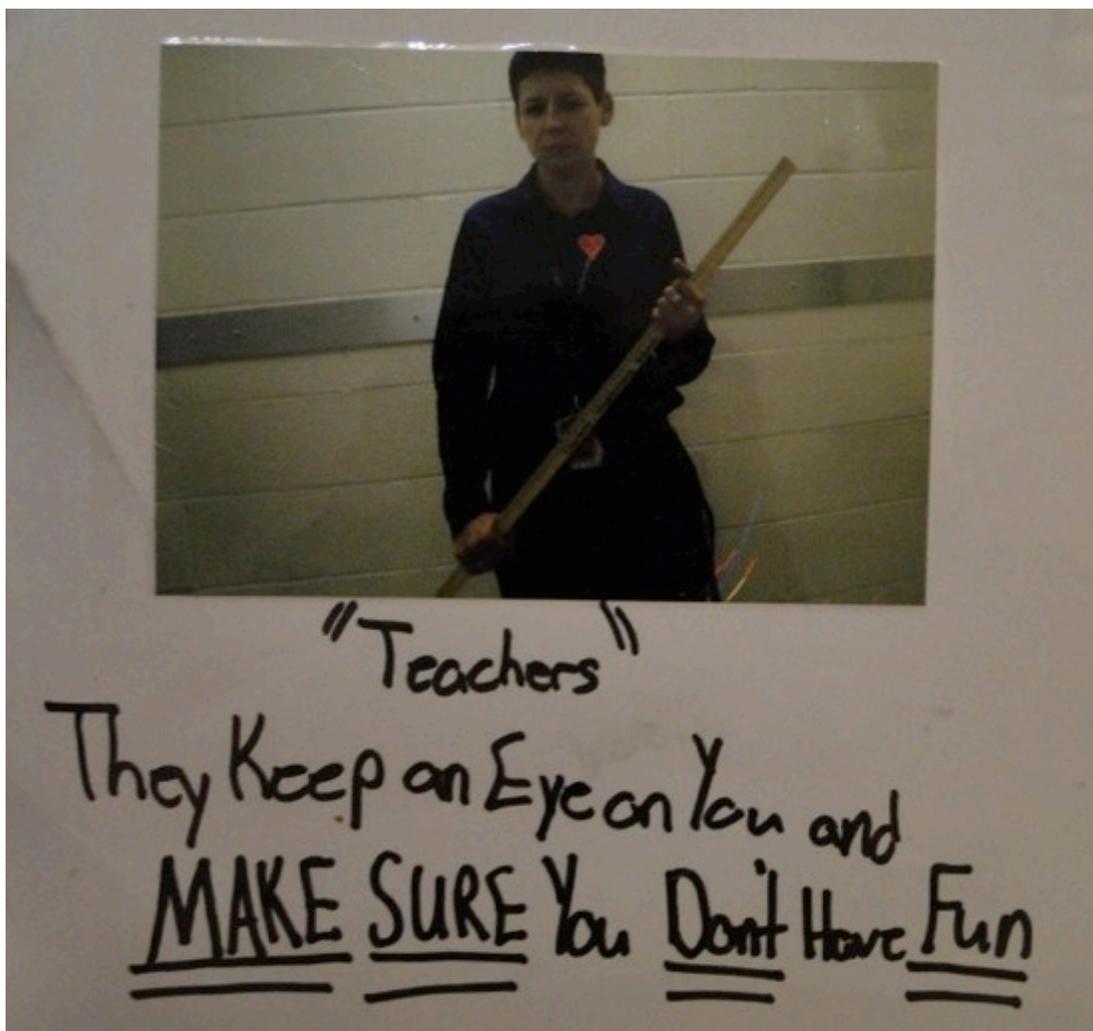
Figure 99. Teachers.

He was well aware that his vision of teachers using rulers to punish students was an outdated one, but he felt the image of a teacher with a ruler was more effective for his message. Also, he hoped it would get a laugh. At the same time, someone who doesn't

know Alberto or quite understand his sense of humor might be offended by his directness. He told me that this type of miscommunication has led to trouble in school and out (field notes).

Even though we had a good relationship, I was not exempt from Alberto's critique. During a lesson on how to use a shot list and how to abbreviate camera use, he called me over to his table and pointed out what he saw as the obvious. "Really, Heather, CU for close up? Come on! You expect me to write that?" We both laughed. Another time, when we asked students to plan out their photos for how they saw school, Alberto just sat at his table with his daybook closed. When I asked if I could see his shot list, he told me it was all in his head. "Trust me!" he said tapping his brow. When we got in the field, he knew exactly how and where he wanted his photos.

In a photo elicitation interview, Alberto talked about more about his photo of the school building school:

There you go (Figure 97). School. It's evil. (Figure 99) It's a very, very bad place. No one ever wants to go to school. Ever but you have to. They tell you it's nice but it's not. (laughs). I really don't like school. I hate it. It's terrible. It's depressing. It ruins your day everyday. So I decided to make everything a little, exactly like that. Mean and depressing. (Figure 99).
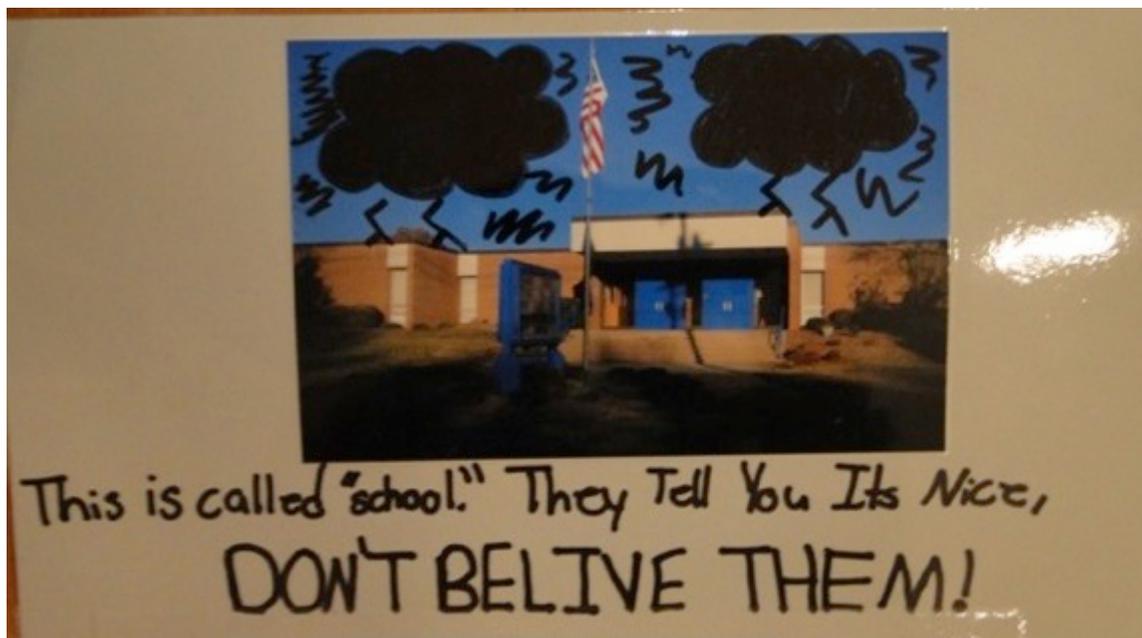
Figure 100. School.

Interviewer: Tell me about the title…

I called it 'A Prison for the Soul' because it's kinda like that's how it made you feel. You didn't want to go to school. And I feel like if you wanna learn it might as well be fun right for you to learn?

To Alberto school is a prison for the soul, where teachers "make sure you don't have any fun." But it's a prison especially because in school you are forced to "act like someone else…A ZOMBIE WITH NO SOUL (OR taste in clothes)." See Figure 100.
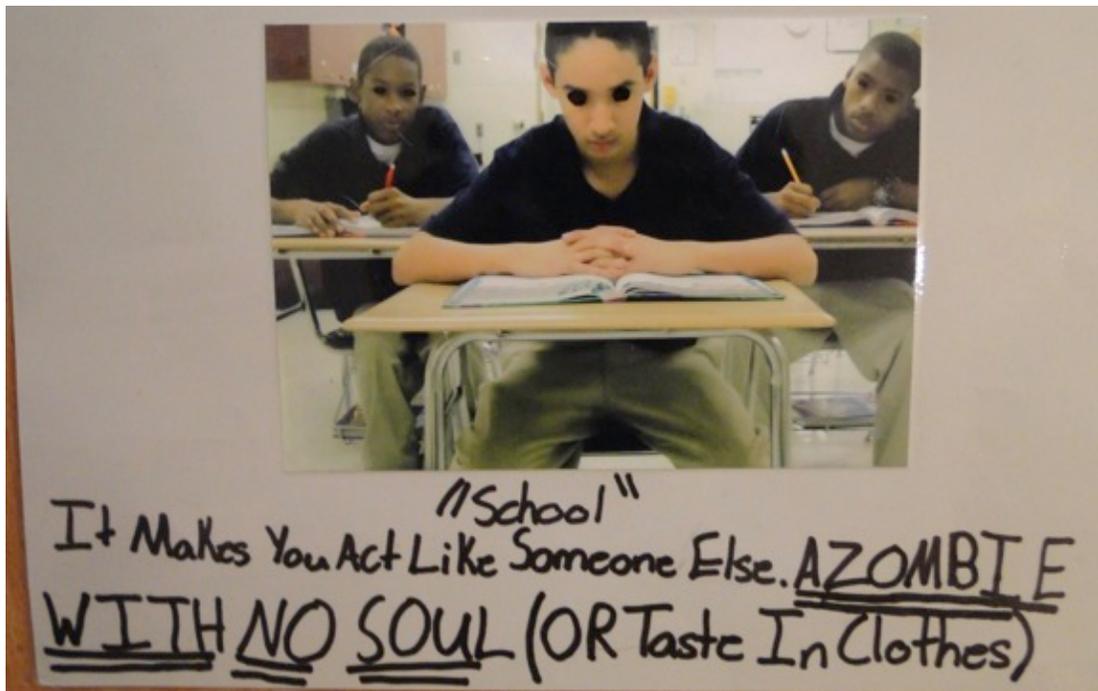
Figure 101. School. "It makes you act like someone else. "

The uniformity of school stifled Alberto's creativity and independence. I saw this firsthand. He often did not follow our teaching instructions in the program, yet he was always engaged in what we were doing and always completed the assignments. He simply did so at his own pace and in his own way. At the same time he valued high quality work and sought personal improvement as well as the instructors' approval (field notes). It was just that he wanted time to think and plan before beginning. He wanted the freedom to do things his way.

It is no surprise then, that "work" is seen as torture to him. See Figure 101. Work, after all, is "putting lines on paper all day." Although he earns good grades, Alberto is easily bored by school.
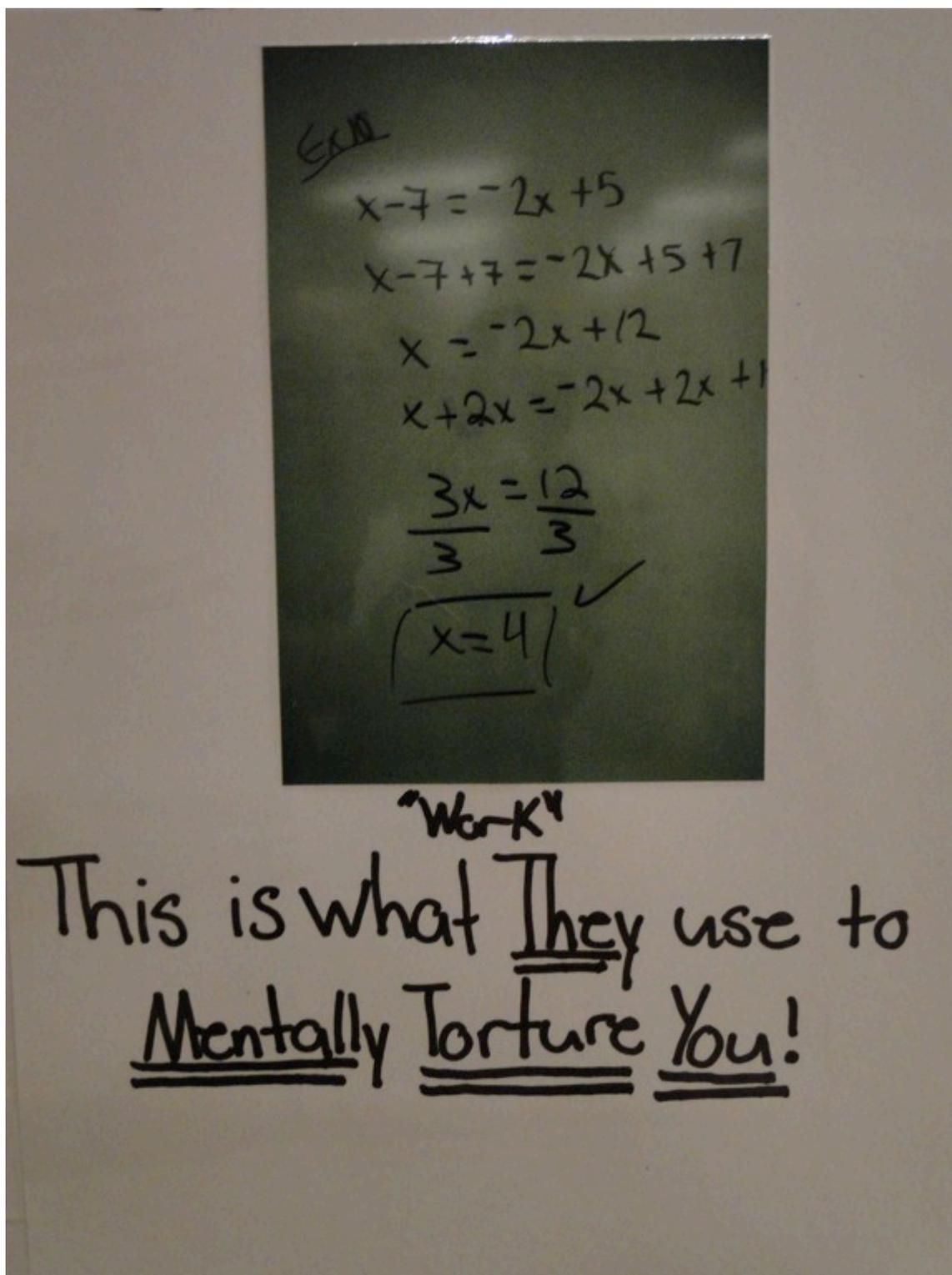
Figure 102. Work.

Alberto was a perfectionist with his work. When he explained his caption about bullies he said:

Hope I spelled pulp right. Don't know if it has an e. Pretty sure it doesn't. (I nod) It doesn't? And that's like the whole thing. (Shows me the whole poster). That's the way I put it out. And my handwriting is better than the last time I wrote on my poster, cuz last time I wrote on my poster you couldn't tell what it said so. That's good. That's a step up? (Figure 102).
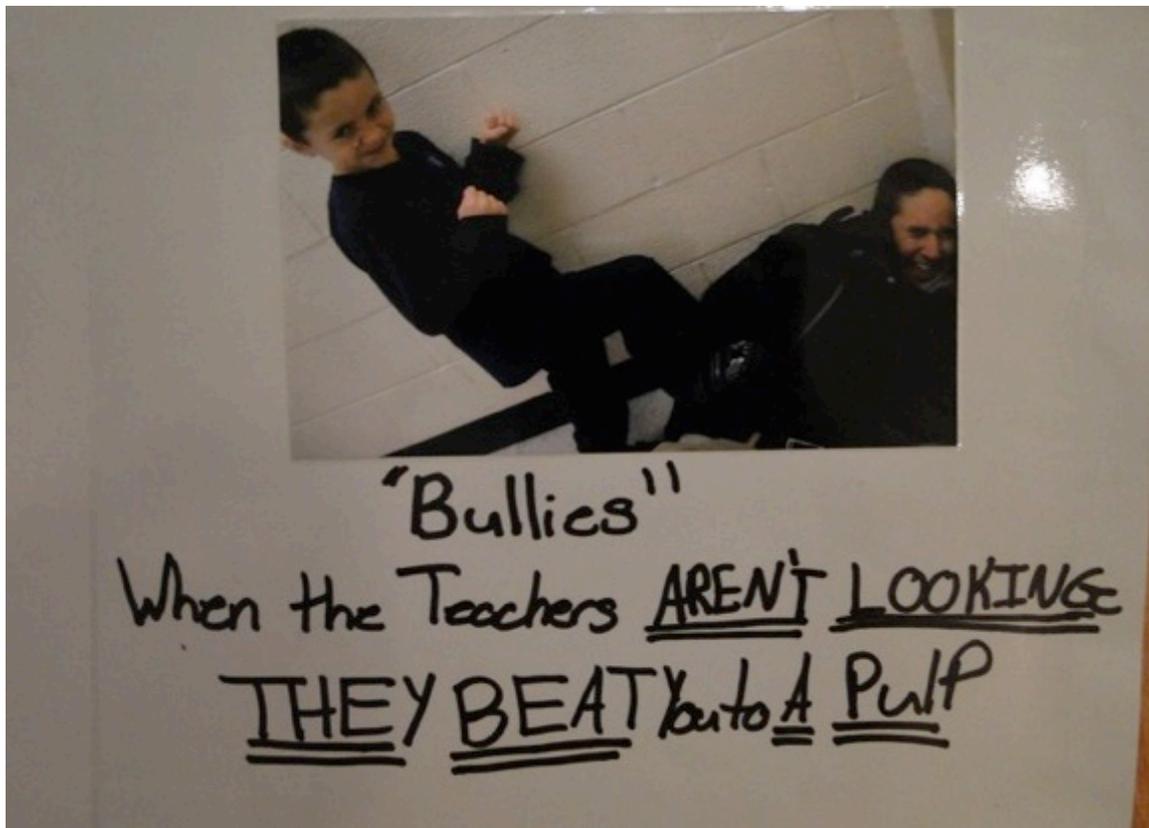
Figure 103. Bullies. (With his brother)

School: Why Go?

Interviewer: If school is so bad, then why do you go?

I go to school so I can learn cuz if you don't learn then you won't know anything you need to graduate from college. You need to get a diploma for an okay job.

But I don't want an *oka*y job. I have careers set that I need to get. I need to

become a paleontologist. Then after that build an underground city. (Laughs)

I asked him about future plans and what his life would look like five years from

now.

When I'm 18? Well I'm outta the house and starting my first year of college…In

college trying to get my degree. In NY, that's where I'm goin' to college. Guess

I'm living on campus. I guess I'm working at McDonalds or something just to

help?

He told me about a program he researched "back in Jersey" which has him

focused on going to NYU for college.

Because in sixth grade we had to do this thing on what college we were gonna go

to. So I was researching on it. And they were tryin' to get something like a grant

from the state or whatever they were gonna start an archeology-- some program.

If you were like a senior or something like that you got to. You would still do

your classes but they would take you around the world to, to, travel…umhumm.

(Smiles). I don't know if they're still doing that so. That's where I'm going

(NYU). And I wanna be closer to the family.

I followed that question with the one I asked all the students. The one meant to

determine how they would maintain this road to get to that future.

Interviewer: So what keeps you from coming to school? What would stop you

from coming?

It's school. School itself. The teachers who have the worst, well, not all teachers.

Most teachers have the worst sense of humor. Most of them have attitudes and it's

cuz they are teachers. It's like a job description. You have to have like no personality. (Laughs) Like totally. It's the teachers and it's the fact that you have to do work all day. I mean if work was fun I wouldn't have a problem with it but it's not fun. It's boring. You put words on lines all day.

Alberto and I finished our last interview at his house over winter break. For the whole interview, I sat on the floor playing with his puppy, while he walked around the house with the flip video answering my questions but mostly engaging in a monologue about school and getting in trouble. He told me about his earliest fight in school and the incident that got him sent to New Leaf. When he recounted the story he told me *the truth*, not what he told "the lady at the hearing."

Later on when I watched the video, I see that he took the camera upstairs with him when he answered the phone. There he took the opportunity to tell me (directly into the camera) that "The Red Sox suck, but don't tell Heather!"

Alberto was invited to the movies with a friend the afternoon of our interview. He told me proudly that he is friends with all the kids in the neighborhood and that he would be in school with them if he wasn't at New Leaf. His home school is around the corner from their house. New Leaf is an hour and a half bus ride each way. I asked him one last question before leaving.

Interviewer: How do you anticipate high school will be?

I don't know. How high school is gonna be. I mean I'm going to high school with my friends. It's not gonna be that bad. I don't know. I never thought about it.

Discussion

Alberto is a smart, funny and creative 8th grade boy. This is shown throughout his Self-portraits, his writing and in How I See School. He has a close relationship with his family that supports him and helps him negotiate the school system when he comes across trouble. Alberto is insightful and his sarcastic humor does not always sit well with adults and those in power at school. This tension is evident in his photos for How I See School. For example, he portrays teachers as people who hit students with rulers, and depicts school as tricking students by telling them it's nice but "don't believe them." Also, he shows that school is a place that turns students into zombies and tortures them with work.

He is different from Rashard in that he does not sleep through school; instead he verbalizes his discontent in his "comments about everything." His critical insight and unwillingness to keep these thoughts to himself caused great trouble for him in school (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Monroe, 2005; Wacquant, 2000). Alberto will not quietly be turned into a zombie. This was evidenced in his multiple suspensions from school for insubordination and talking back to teachers. Yet he said, "I like that I'm always myself." He clearly does not want to subjugate his identity to find success in school (Monroe, 2005; Smyth, 2006). At the same time, he understands that some rules and limits have to exist at school.

> You would be able to *talk* in class. You wouldn't be able to get written up
> for *talking*. But if it's like you never shut up, then it's a different story.

In his Self-portraits Alberto showed a unique sense of humor as well an ability to think deeply about life. In How School Sees Me, Alberto makes the connection between his smarts and trouble. He also acknowledged throughout our interviews that, like

Rashard, that his behavior in school often overrode his ability and limited his academic mobility (Dei et al., 1997; Ferguson, 2000; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). For Rashard, his impediment to academic success was Silliness (the opposite of being docile). For Alberto it was Talking Back or Talking Out (the opposite of being silenced). As cited in the literature, students who speak out, act out, or question are pushed out and funneled into alternative schools, the streets or prisons (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003). Fine (1991) found "those most likely to leave high school prior to graduation carry with them the most crucial commentary on schooling" (p. 73). These two stories confirm this finding.

Alberto, like Rashard, viewed school as necessary to achieve his future aspirations of college. But when asked what he would change about it, he said, "School. School itself." How can we fix that? School, the very thing itself? This statement indicates that Alberto is "winnowing" more than Rashard (Hodgson, 2007). He had already accumulated a number of bad experiences with teachers, administrators, peers and schools as evidenced in his views on school. He admits that in order to have future success in school, he will have to be quiet and to keep his opinions to himself. This he is not willing to do. Even if he could stay quiet, the work tortures him. He will not stay in school if teachers continue to force him to put "words on lines all day."

It is possible that if Alberto connects with a caring, "funner" teacher or two who allows him to be a creative, independent, free thinker, he may stay in school (Cassidy & Bates 2005; Delpit, 1996; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McInerney, 2006).

(Funner teachers) know how to joke around but then be serious at the same time. They make learning fun so it's not like you sit in class and you do paperwork all day long. Um...That would be a funner teacher. I only had one teacher that was like that. In PS 27 back in Jersey. She was fun. She can laugh all day.

In the past when Alberto was bored and silenced in school, as with most students in this study, he "made it fun." "Making it fun" inevitably resulted in calls home, referrals, and suspensions. In the long run, these actions may lead to further alternative placements, dropping out and juvenile detention or incarceration (Christle et al., 2007; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). If Alberto continues to have his identity subjugated and continues to be silenced in school, he will not last long (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). He will be pushed out by a structure that asks too much of him and gives nothing in return (Fine, 1991; Noguera, 2003; McInerney, 2009). Schools are known to "banish the source of dissent" (Fine, 1991, p. 50).

Theme Two: Mean Teachers

they like to scream!

¡MEANIES!

Teachers, they yell at you and give you referrals. They are mean to you one day and nice to you the next.
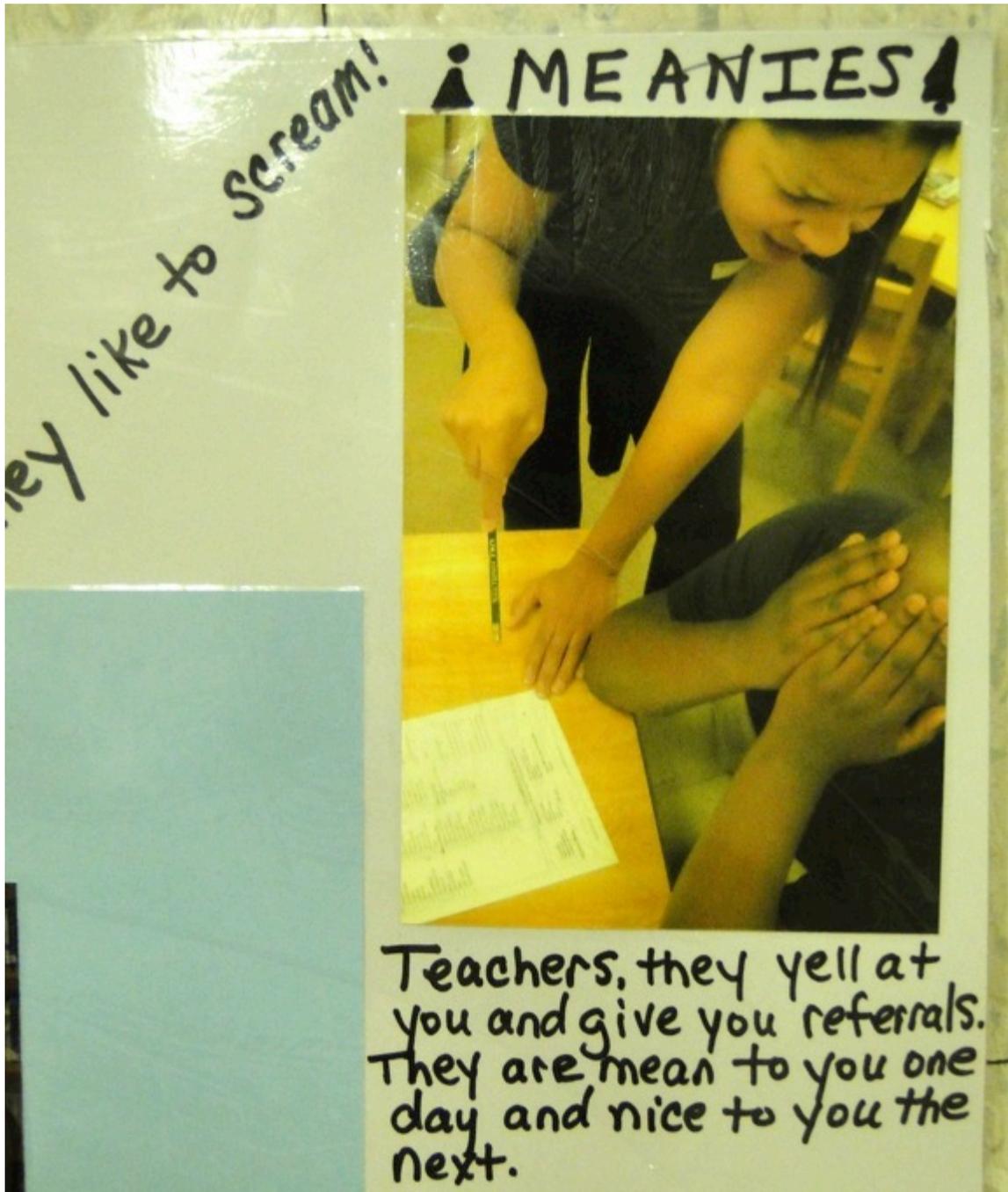
Theme Two: Mean Teachers

Teachers were the most prevalent single image in photos of school. Alberto's

thoughts on teachers exemplified this theme. According to Alberto, a teacher's job is to

make sure students do not have fun. Immediately when you enter school you are greeted

by "these people called teachers. This is what they look like. They are mean, with rulers.

They hit you with rulers if you don't listen." See Figure 103.
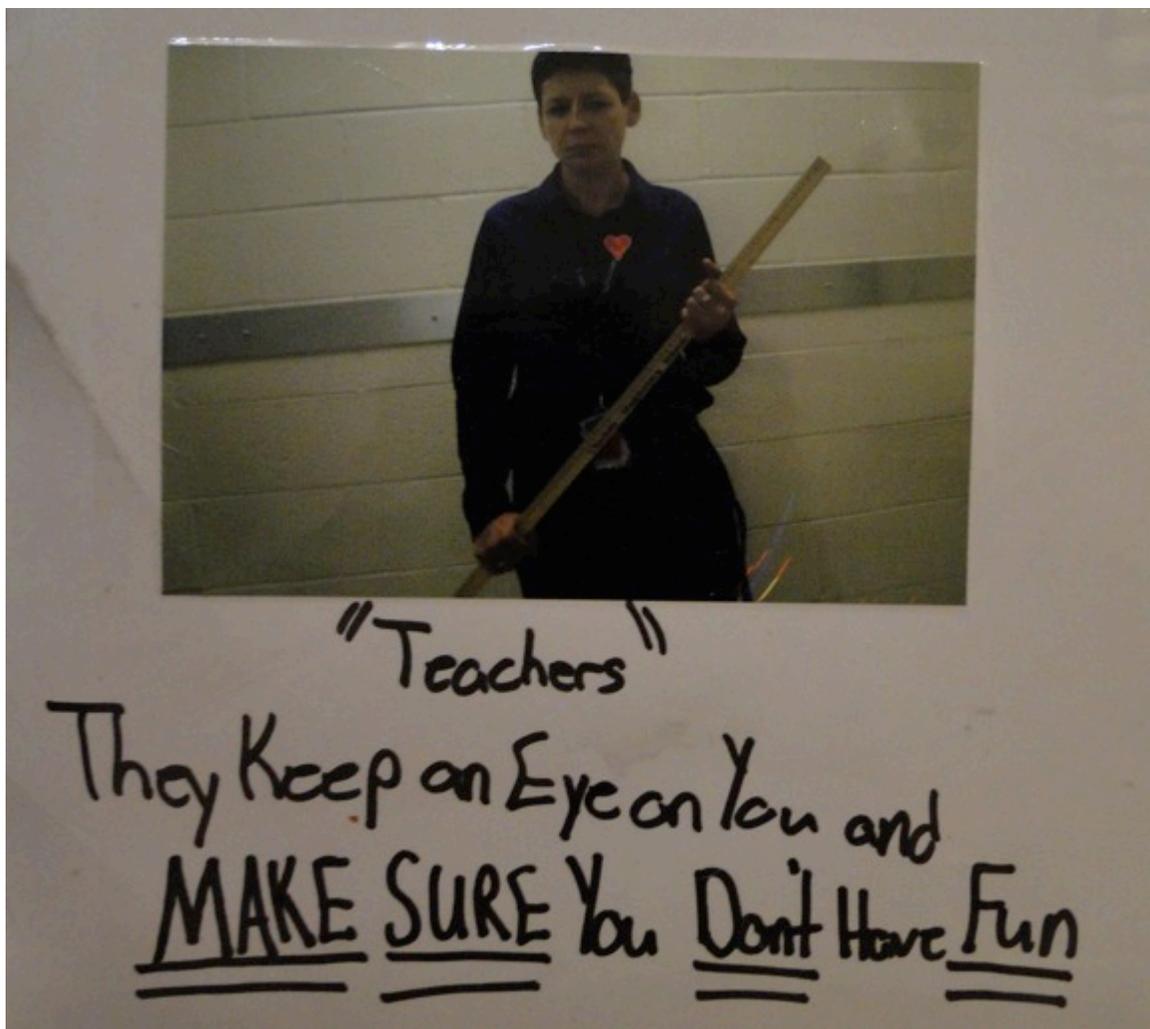
Figure 104. "Teachers"

Students identified teachers as boring, as no fun, mean, screaming, misunderstanding and highly unpredictable. Marcel said in an interview, "Sometimes teachers gonna be happy. Sometimes they gonna be mean." Other students agreed that teachers could not be trusted. "They are mean to you one day and nice to you the next. They fake." Students told me that to survive school you needed to "know how to deal with teachers."
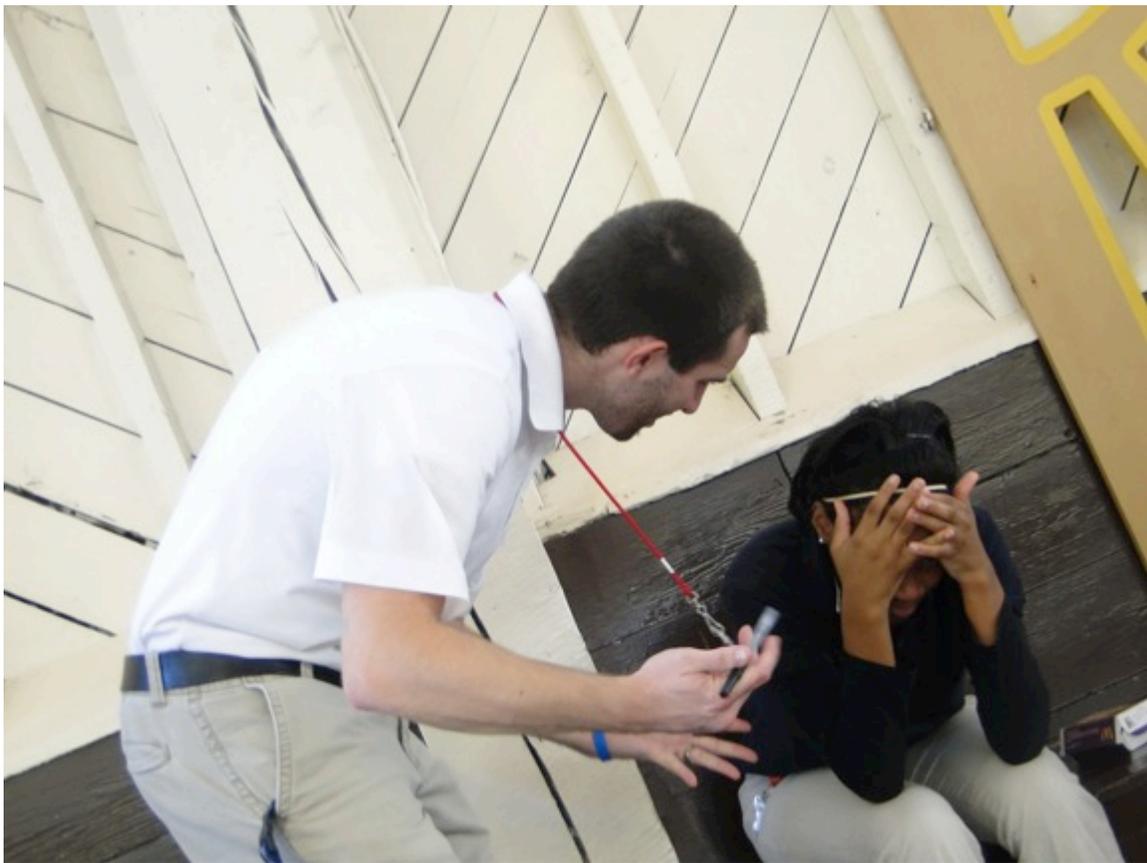
Can We Change Teachers?

When I asked students what one thing they would change about school, almost all of them said they would change teachers and or teaching. Only two students depicted teachers as neutral. One student wrote, "A teacher teaches kids and helps them when they

need help." The neutral student said, "A teacher is the one who teaches us different subjects." Yet even the neutral portrayals agreed that teachers were boring and unpredictable.

The rest of the students said that they would make teacher more fun and more understanding. Teachers would have a sense of humor, they would laugh at student's jokes, make jokes and not be so uptight. Alberto said, "Most teachers have the worst sense of humor…it's like a job description. You have to have like no personality."

Fun teachers would break up boring learning with periods of fun. Good teachers would teach, let us have fun "for like twenty minutes" then teach again. Fun teachers would be able to joke and understand silliness. Another student agreed that he liked teachers who are, "not too strict. Like they know when to have fun and when to be serious."

Several students, including Rashard and Alberto, identified themselves as "silly" or funny in their Self-portraits and in How School Sees Me. Most students in this study showed a clear sense of independence, uniqueness, and self will. Yet, according to them, school is filled with teachers who cannot make jokes, who don't laugh, who cannot be

flexible and do not have fun. Clearly this causes conflict for many students (Fine, 1991;

Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995; Smyth, 2006). It makes sense that students would want to

change teachers.

Teachers Scream and Get You in Trouble

"That's him screaming at me. My face is like, we don't even care." Rashard.

Figure 105. Rashard. "That's him screaming."

Screaming teachers was a common image. Almost all students mentioned teachers

screaming in interviews and many showed images of violent interactions with teachers

forcing them to learn (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005). One student called teachers

"meanies." To her, teachers actually liked to scream. "They yell at you and give you

referrals." Rashard said that teachers scream when you "don't do your work or when

you're doin' something you're not supposed to." Teachers "yell at you. They're mean. They like to scream. Like to scream for no reason, make you wanna cuss them out." Of course if a student "cusses out" at teacher, the student will suffer the consequences (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003).

There seems to be no reasonable communication between teachers and students (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Students are not clear what will make a teacher yell or "blank on them." For example, Rashard said, "if you get up (from doing your work) you will get in trouble." Another student said when you do "one little thing" the screaming begins. Another student agreed that you don't know when you'll "run into a teacher and your day will be over!"

The literature shows that good relationships with teachers are essential to keeping students in schools (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Fine, 199; Knesting & Waldron 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994). At the same time, negative relationships with teachers and unfair policies can push students out of school (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Why Am I in Trouble?

Several students said that teachers misunderstand student intention, actions and behavior (Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Marcel said, "One time, Mr. X was pulling me by the arm and I was like 'what?' cuz some teachers accuse you of something that you like didn't do and they don't understand what happened."

One student called the teacher student relationship "the madness." He explained that teachers "are evil. They will destroy you. They will break your pride." This is another example "dehumanizing forces that operate within and outside of schools" (McInerney, 2006). Many photos show students covering their faces in shame. They do not feel treated with respect.

Students said they get in trouble for "just doing one small thing…for throwing a piece of paper. A piece of paper!" Another student said, "teachers jump down your throat for the littlest thing." Another student said, "Teachers are mean. Some teachers get you in trouble and they don't even know."

When teachers get angry they write referrals and send students out of class (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). "Teachers yell at you, they give you referrals." There was no communication between teachers and students about events or about possible solutions. There was no negotiation or problem solving (McInerney, 2006). According to students, teachers hold all the power (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995).

In Figure 105, a student explains, "here is Mr. X screaming at me and telling me to get out of his class."

Figure 106. Student. "Mr. X screaming at me and telling me to get out of his class

Another students described the uncertainty about teachers in this way. He said

teachers were "evil X-predators of the school jungle." See Figure 106.
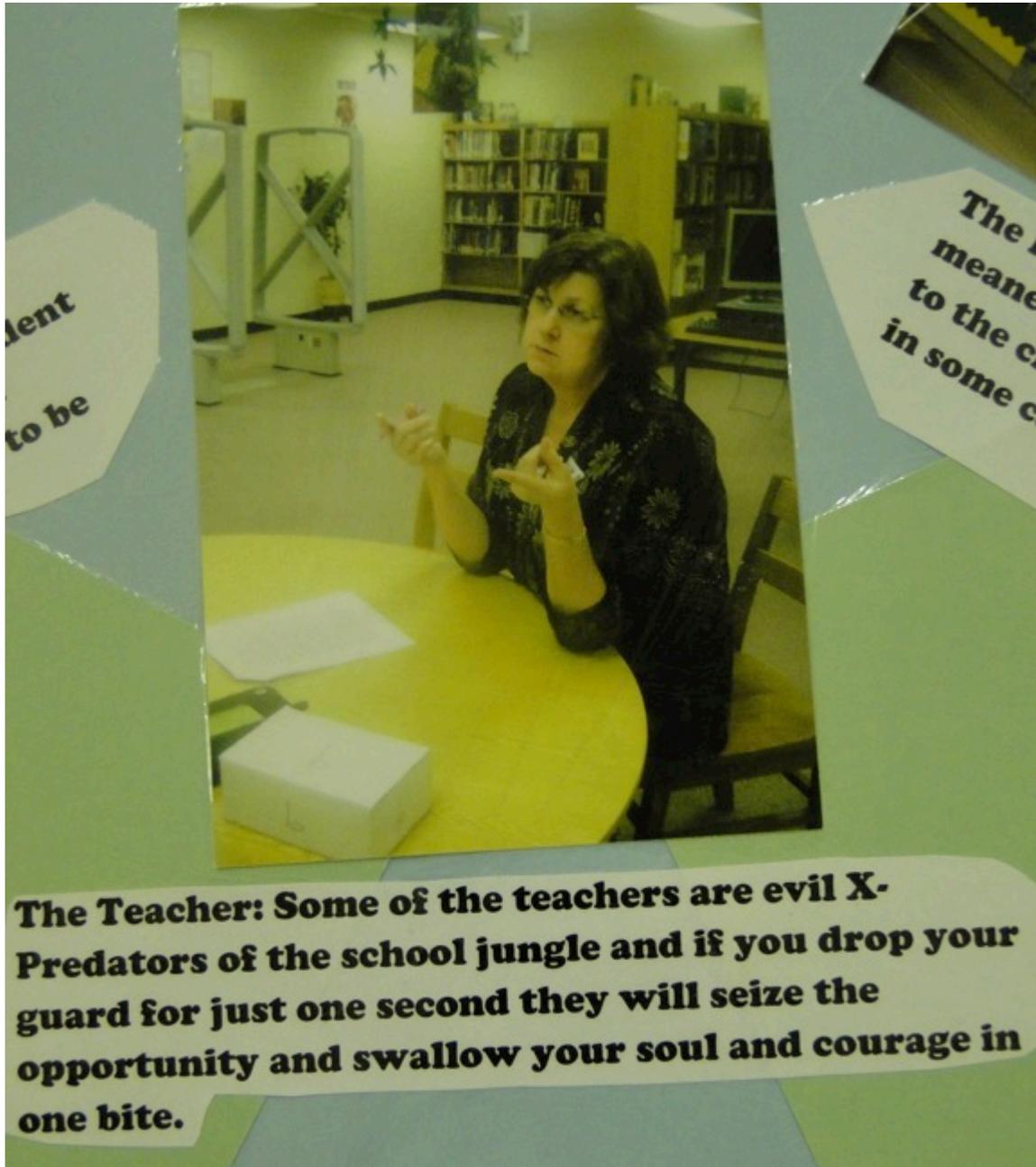
Figure 107. The Teacher. "Evil X- predators of the school jungle."

Teachers Keep the Silence

Just stay quiet. Don't forget…don't make contact with teachers. They will come up with something stupid and get you in trouble and they are getting paid to torture you for money.

Students told me that if they speak out "about anything," they get sent out of class or a get a referral. Teachers can "kick you out over stupid stuff." Another student said, "You get in trouble for stupid things like sharpening a pencil or speaking out of term (sic)." In the classroom the teachers hold all the power. Another student warned, "not to blank on the teacher." This means not to express your true feelings or emotions to teachers (Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991).

Many students cited "talking" as a main reason for referrals. Silence is most valued in the classroom (Fine, 1993; Wallerstein, 1987). Most of the students, including Alberto, said they struggled with staying quiet all day long. Rashard told the alien in his letter, "You have to be quiet all day and if you talk without raising your hand, you will get in trouble."

Alberto said he mostly gets in trouble for talking. "Talk in class, teacher asks you once to stop, you don't hear 'em and you're getting like 5-10 days outta school." If

students speak, they are removed from class and possibly from school all together (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). "Silencing is about who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled" (Cummins, 1986, in Fine, 1991, p. 33). In this case, students are unable to speak and certainly are not encouraged to question. This group of students has been taught to be silent, docile receptors of information (Delpit, 1996; Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005). If they do question, they are shut out (Monroe, 2005).

Another student said that his independence in the classroom gets him in trouble. "Because I'm always taking my own way. Cuz when teachers tell me no, you're supposed to do it THIS way. And I'm like no, just let me do it the way that works best for me." He told me teachers called this being a "smart aleck." See Figure 107.

Figure 108. "I'm like no, just let me do it the way that works best for me."

Another student warned the alien in his letter about school not to stand out. "Don't play around too much because one thing you do wrong can affect the whole school year…school takes place in jail. Where they let you in, but don't let you out."

How to Deal with Teachers?

In the end, the students agreed that teachers couldn't be avoided at school. As one student said ironically, "you can't let teachers keep you from education." Most students agreed that you have to be wary of Mean Teachers.

You have to listen to stankin' man who scream at you every second. If you come to school, treat them like nothing. These people are called teachers- another word for the devel (sic).

Discussion

To maintain control many urban schools resort to a stimulus-response framework based on accountability and consequences instead of one based on making students active agents who are capable of success (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Smyth, 2006). In this way, teachers maintain control over students by yelling, force, silencing and zero tolerance discipline measures (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 1995). This reduces trust and the ability to build community or build relationships (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Delpit, 1996; Wacquant, 2000). According to Knesting and Waldron (2006) in order to foster persistence in school, students must have meaningful connections and communication with teachers. Furthermore to stay in school students must feel valued, feel heard and feel that they have a voice in decision-making (Fine, 1991; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). These students clearly do not.

School is where students go "to be tortured" by teachers who force them to do "work." When students are not sleeping from boredom they are being yelled at by teachers to do work that has no meaning to them (McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). They are not allowed to talk, therefore, they must only comply or resist (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Smyth, 2006). If they talk, they are funneled out of the classroom (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). If they resist, they are labeled insubordinate, unruly, and uneducable (Ferguson, 2000; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). "When students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance or withdraw their assent altogether from school" (McInerney, 2009, p. 24).

Schools are the primary site for adolescent identity work (Smyth, 2006). Smyth says about this work that that schools can contribute to some identities but can become too difficult for some to negotiate if, for example, "school has effectively lost its potential to contribute to their life plans" (p. 290). In other words, at some points students may decide that the trade off is too great. As schools fail to engage students in critical readings of their own lives, alienation and disengagement increases (McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). School responses to alienation can range from attempts to create belongingness to more policies that control behaviors. As seen here, there is little relationship building between students and teachers. There is a great deal of controlling and silencing. The more "at-risk" the population, the more restrictive the policies become (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). The more restrictive the policies, the greater the resistance.

Story Three: Marcel

"It don't matter where I am I'm still gone be who I'm gonna be…on the inside. I think everywhere I go I think people see me as funny. They see me as playful. Athletic. They see me…they don't see me bad."

Marcel is a smiling, round-cheeked boy with spotty patches of black hair on his bald head. The first thing I noticed about him was his quirky humor. More than once he took on an Indian accent or any other gag to make others laugh. I have seen him hike up his shorts past his chest to race a student across the parking lot. I have seen him lie on the floor and cover himself with books. (Figure 108). I have seen him wear a fur-lined hood on his head without a jacket attached. One day he set his self-timer on his camera so that he could catch himself "levitating a book." (Figure 109). In Figure 110, he wore a feather under his nose all afternoon and made it wiggle while he talked. He asked a classmate to snap the photo. He likes to laugh.

Figure 109. Marcel covered in books. (Taken by me).

Figure 110. Marcel "levitating a book." (Self-timer).

Figure 111. Marcel with feather under his nose.

All the instructors in the program loved him, but *he* specifically loved Dr. Rachel. Dr. Rachel was the mother figure of the group, and Marcel sat with her whenever possible, sought her approval and pined over here when she was away at conferences. On his birthday, he proudly showed Dr. Rachel his new watch, the one he bought with the $10 gift card he earned as a novice photographer in the program (field notes).

Marcel views his sense of humor or "silliness" as one of his best qualities. However, his quirky humor could be trying at times to the LTP instructors as it was to his regular teachers. This was evident in his multiple suspensions for insubordination (field notes). One day during program he wore a feather under his nose for the entire afternoon and refused to take it off. It made talking to him hard and reasoning with him about his Self-portraits even more difficult, which was probably his intent. That day students saw their 8 x 11 self-portraits for the first time. These selections would be shown in Art Show One.

Marcel had selected photos one week earlier that he had felt showed him as "funny and playful." Yet, the day the photos came in, he pestered me non-stop, with the feather under his nose, insisting that he no longer liked them. "These aren't me," he kept saying. "Of course they are!" I shooed him off (field notes). His Self-portrait titles expressed his feelings. (Figures 111-112).
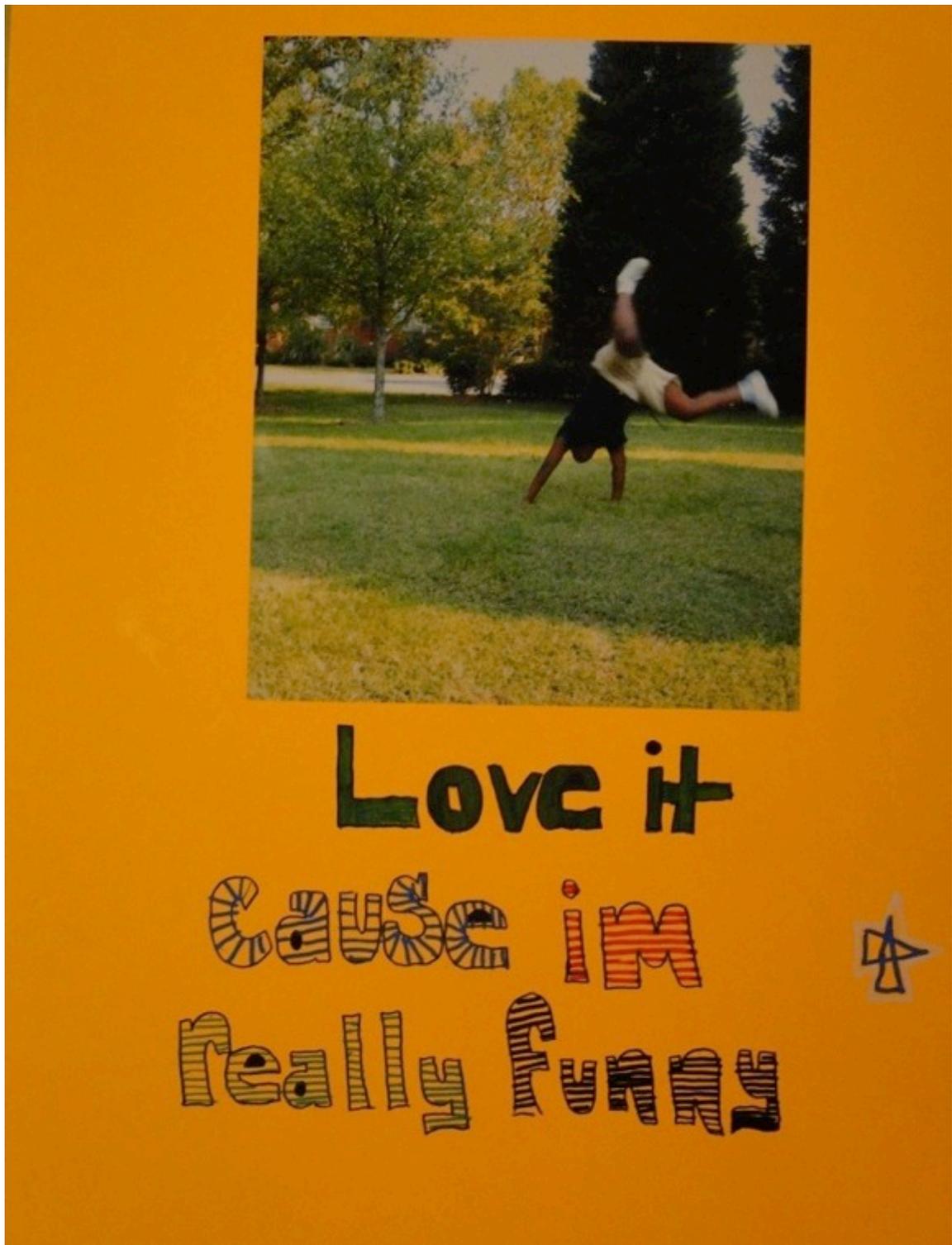
Figure 112. Marcel's Self-portrait 1. Love It! "Cause im really funny."
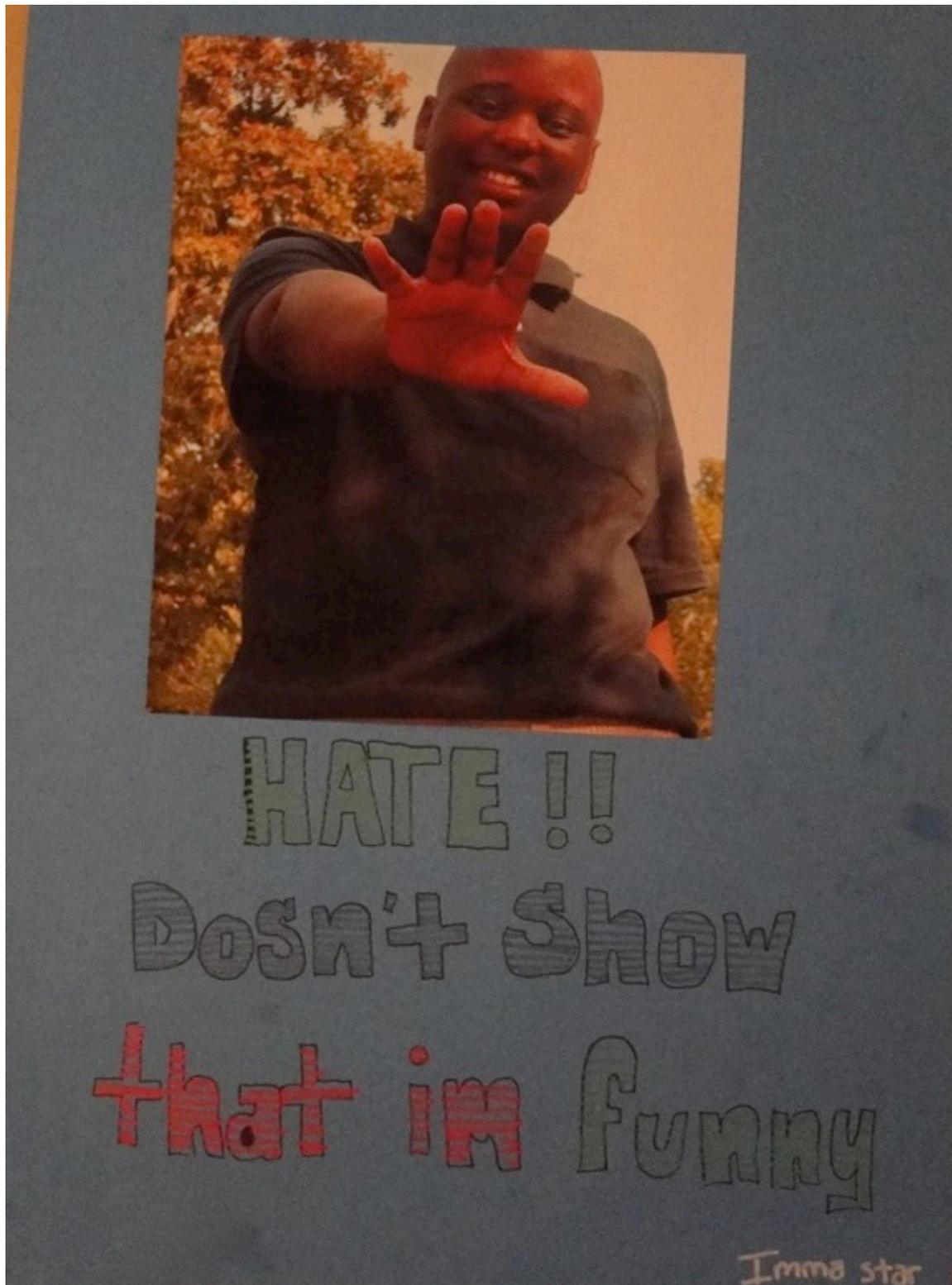
Figure 113. Marcel's Self-portrait 2. Hate It! "Dosnt show that im funny. Imma star."

After program that day, I found that the night before a member of Marcel's family had attempted to assault him with a pair of scissors (field notes). The police were called to the house. The only reason Marcel came to school that day, he told my source, was so he could attend LTP that afternoon. Was it possible that he didn't see himself the same as when he had taken the pictures a week earlier? Or maybe on the day after a traumatic event, he simply wanted a retake on his view of himself?

Self-portrait: I'm Gonna Be Me

Over the course of several photo elicitation interviews, Marcel reiterated a secure and clear sense of who he is:

It's how you see me personally. It don't matter where I am I'm still gone be who Imma be…on the inside. I think everywhere I go I think people see me as funny. They see me as playful. Athletic. They see me…they don't see me bad. They don't see me deceitful. They don't see me backstabbin'.

His graphic organizer planning for How School Sees Me showed consistency among all the circles. See Figure 113.
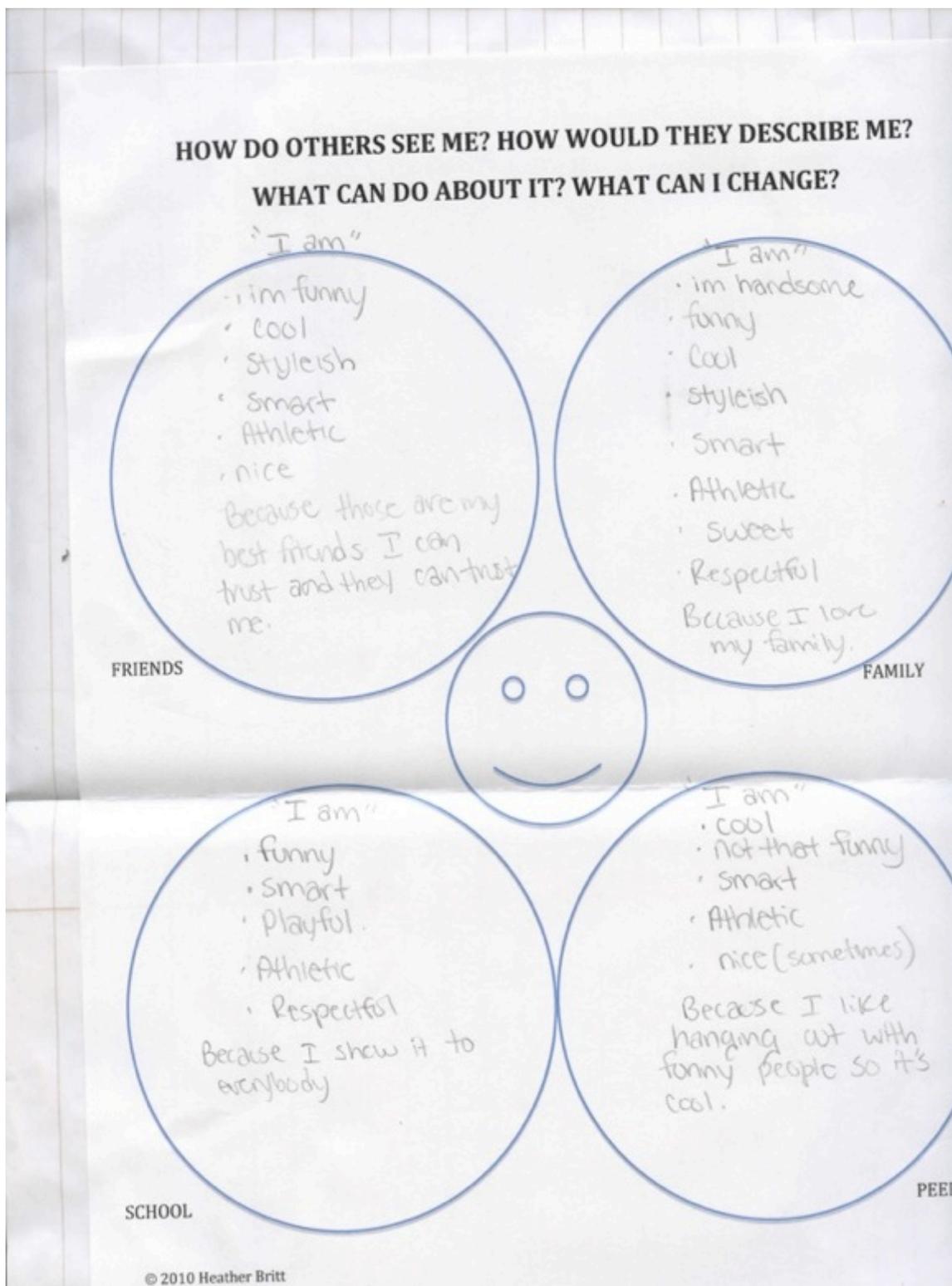
Figure 114. Marcel's Venn diagram.

His photos for How School Sees Me further exemplified his sense of self. They focused on his smarts, his athleticism and his humor. The picture of him reading on the court combined the first two descriptors (Figure 114).

Figure 115 Marcel's How School Sees Me 1. Smart: "On this one I did me on the court reading a Reggie Miller book and holding a basketball to who I love reading sports books and playing b-ball."

Figure 115 is Marcel's second selection and focused on his humor and ability to be "playful, funny and silly."

Figure 116. Marcel's How School Sees Me 2. Silly: "Well on this one I did me having fun by pulling H's pants down and laughing with it. And that's how school sees me."

No matter what the setting, his home school or New Leaf, Marcel remains confident in himself. There was little difference between how he saw himself and how he thought school saw him:

> Cuz all the schools I go to, I'm gonna be funny, I'm gonna be athletic like. I'm
>
> not gonna change. It's like that's who I am. That's who I am inside like. That's

how my God created me. That's how people see me. They see me as athletic, playful, smart. They see me as cool.

His sense of self helped him succeed in school as well. In an interview, he explained that at the "public school" (by which he meant his home school) there was a lot more opportunity to fool around or get distracted since the classes were so large. The classes at the New Leaf tended to be no larger than ten. In bigger classes, Marcel relied on his internal drive to succeed as well as support from home.

I never failed so even when the class is big and they is playin' a lot I still get my work done. When I didn't know how to do it. But I had my mom at home to show me what to do. So that's what kept me from failin'.

Because of his strong sense of self, Marcel anticipated that transitioning back to the big classes at the "public school" will be easy for him:

Interviewer: How will it go then when you transition back to the other classroom with 27 students?

Just be me. Go in there and do my work.

Interviewer: do you sit in front or in back?

I can sit outside and get my work done! (Laughs)

<div align="center">Views on School: New Leaf in Specific</div>

Marcel immediately said in our first interview that he did not really belong at New Leaf.

New Leaf is…it's not really a good place cuz it's a whole bunch of people that mess up in they life, that did bad things and…I'm a good person. I just got caught up in a situation. It's just fighting got me into a situation.

He described to me a "small fight" with another student in the dance room at his home school. According to Marcel, it was his one and only fight.

It's just like…it's just not good. I can't wait to go back to my old school like…(looks into the camera). I don't deserve to be here.

He has a plan to stay out of trouble, finish "his time," at New Leaf and return to his home school and not look back. He told me:

When I get out of here I don't think I wanna see this school again. I think when I drive by here…I think I won't even look at it. Cuz I think it so jacked up like the kids are so much negative thinkers yo. Like they think about how to sneak guns and stuff out like.

He went on to tell me that New Leaf "is like hell." When I asked why he said, "you don't wanna to go to hell. Cuz hell's a very bad place… They search you when you don't wanna be searched."

Interviewer: What was it like the first time you were searched?

When I first got here like, I was like, and what are you doing? Emptying my pockets? I ain't got nothing to hide. Wow. I was like this is the school I'm in? I was like…this is jacked up. I was like they don't trust these kids that much? I don't want them to think that's me. I'm just here for a fight. I'm not here for stealing. I'm not here for lying or cheatin'.

His mother was a recurring theme in his decisions. She played into the why and how he planned to stay out of trouble:

If I would've done any of those things I would've known what was waiting for me at home. Like my mom got a belt waitin' for me on the table at home right now (laughs). Like. I know. I couldn't do all that.

How I See School: Roll with It

The title of Marcel's poster, How I See School was The Exceptional Days of School. See Figure 116.
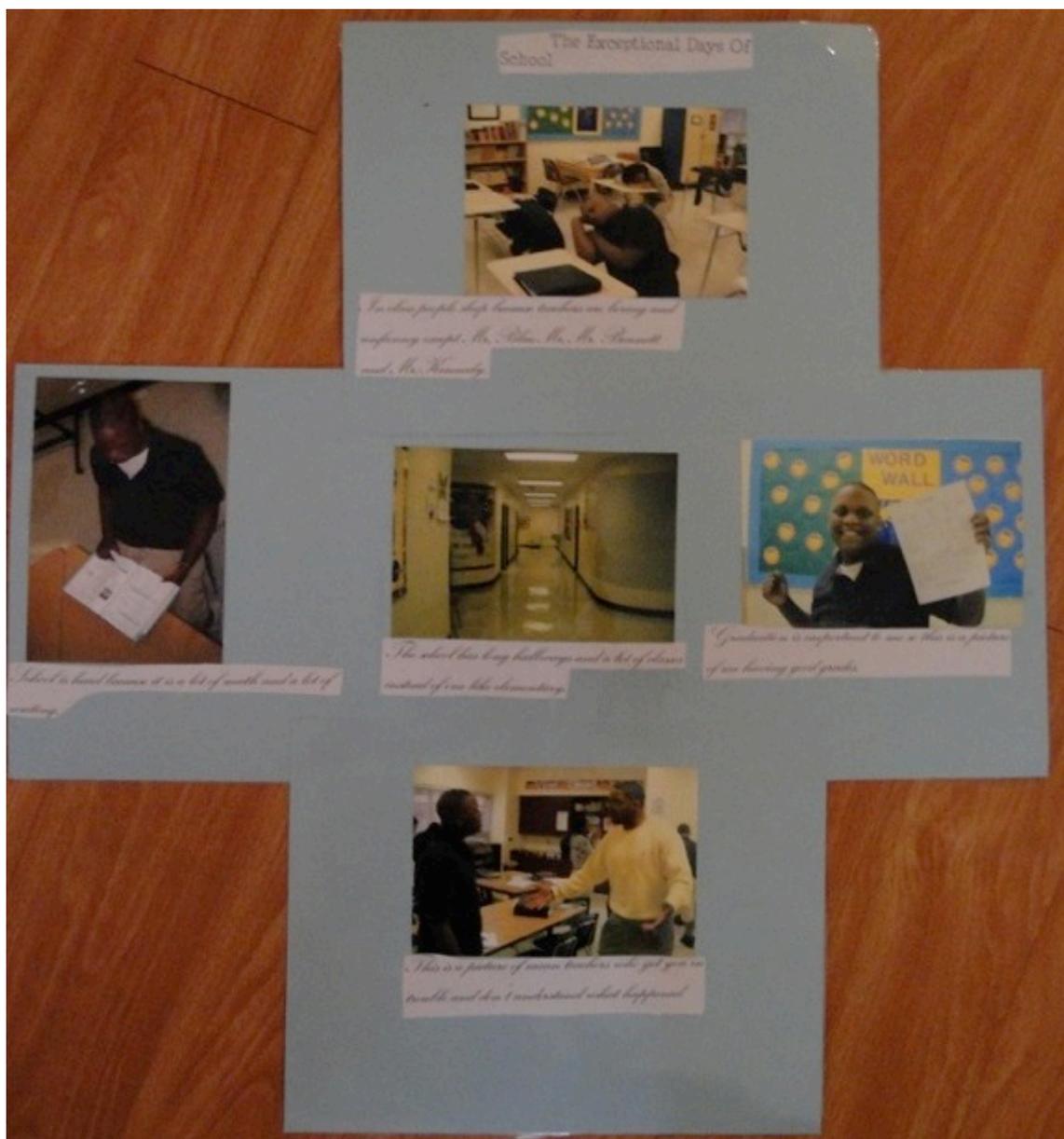
Figure 117. Marcel's How I See School. The Exceptional Days of School.

He intended it to mean that you have to *accept* (acceptional) the good and the bad

in school to survive. He explained in the photo elicitation interview:

Sometimes school is…sometimes school is… hard. Sometimes it's boring. You

just gotta deal with it because some times teachers get on your nerves, sometimes

they don't. Sometimes it rains. Sometimes it's sunny. So I named it Exceptional

Days of School, cuz sometimes teachers gonna be happy. Sometimes they gonna

be mean. Especially Ms. Y. Shhhh! (Laughs with other student).

Marcel's Exceptional Days of School exemplified his attitude toward school. The

images are somewhat negative, yet he tempered the message with his trademark

optimistic attitude. "In class people sleep because teachers are boring" yet then he listed

some teachers who are funny. (Figure 117).
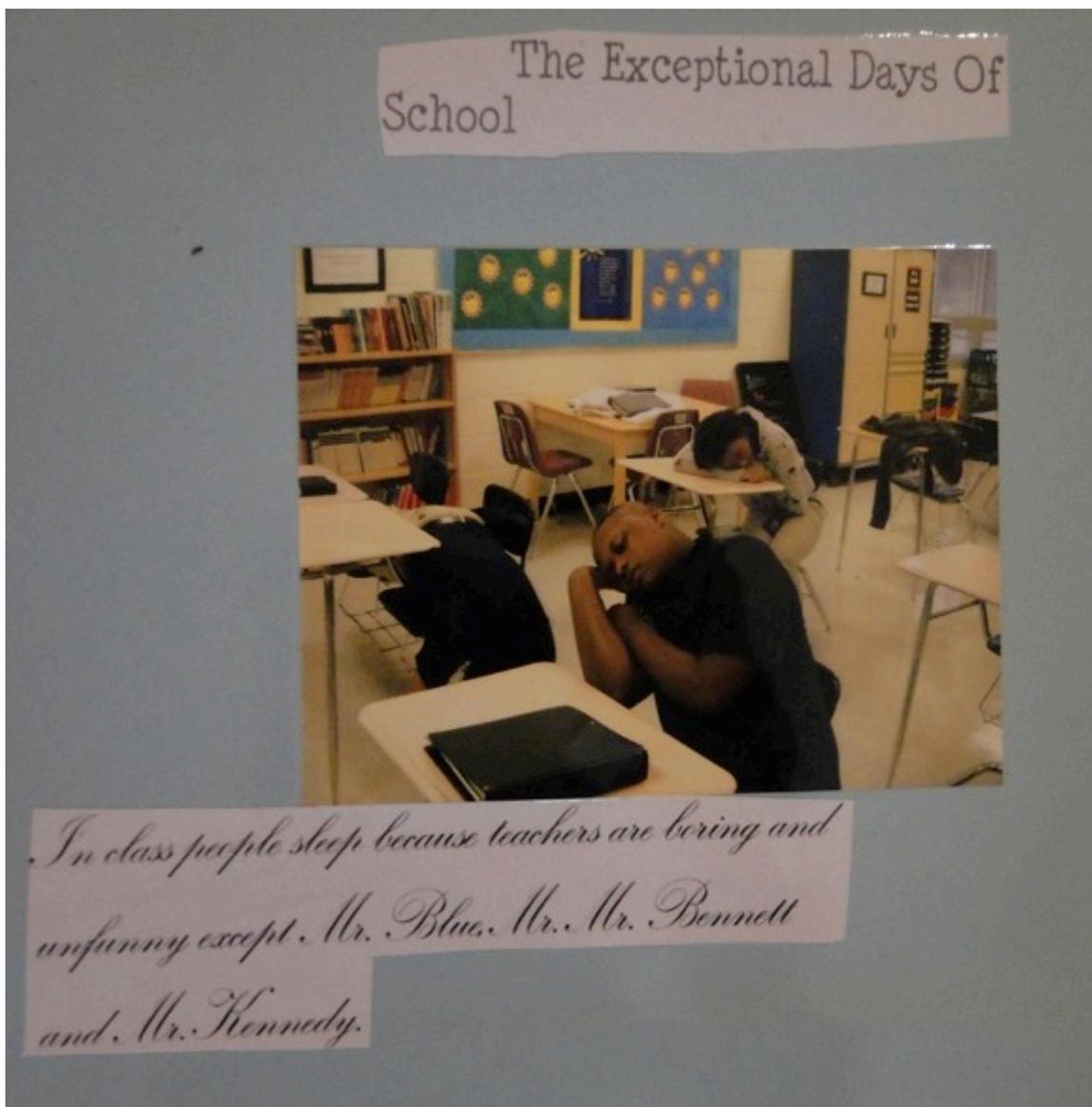
Figure 118. Class. "In class people sleep because teachers are boring and unfunny except some."

."

In Figure 118, he shows school "is hard because it is a lot of math and a lot of writing."
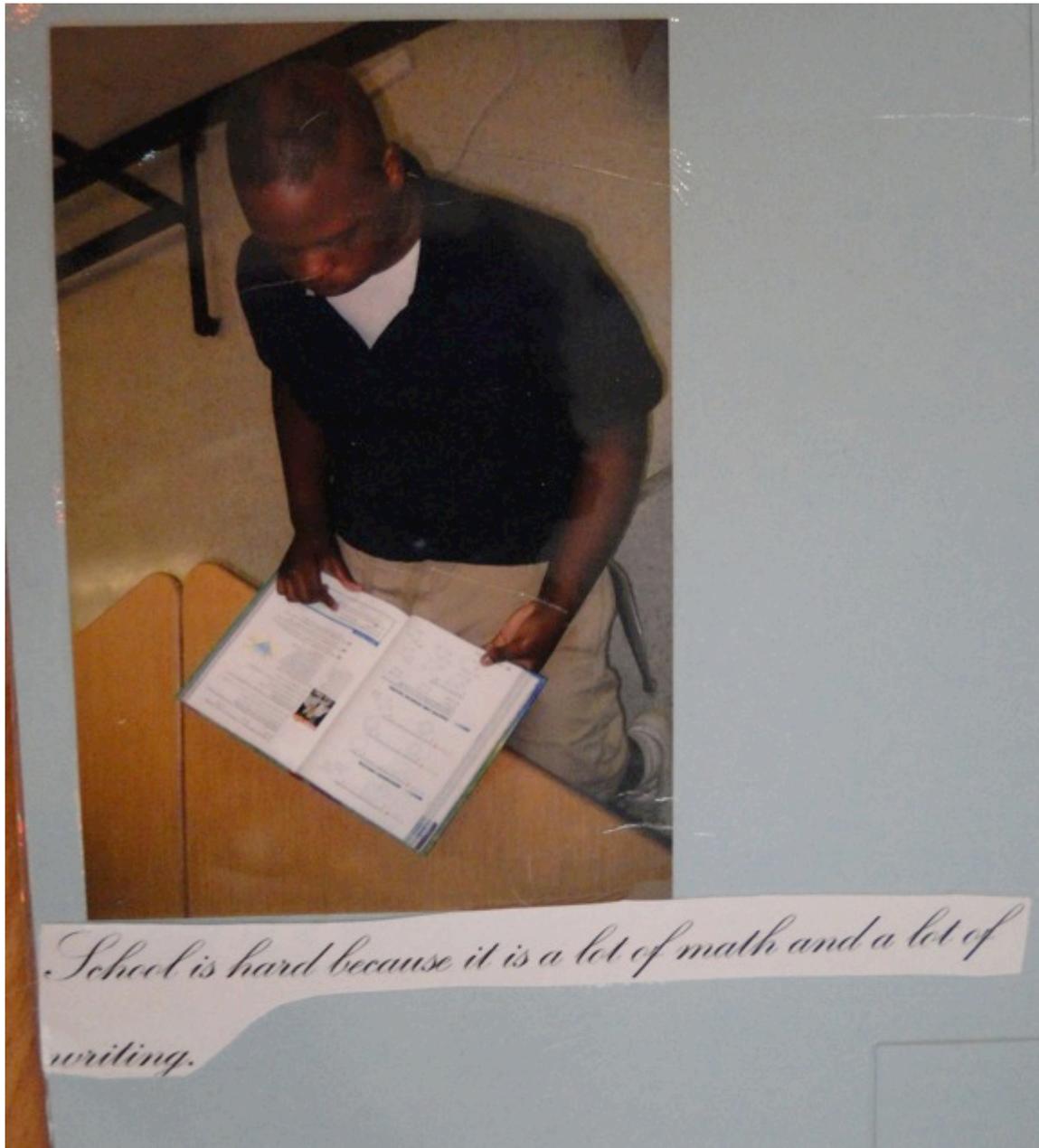
Figure 119. Work. "School is hard because it is a lot of math and a lot of writing."

Figure 119, shows there are mean teachers "who get you in trouble and don't understand what happened."
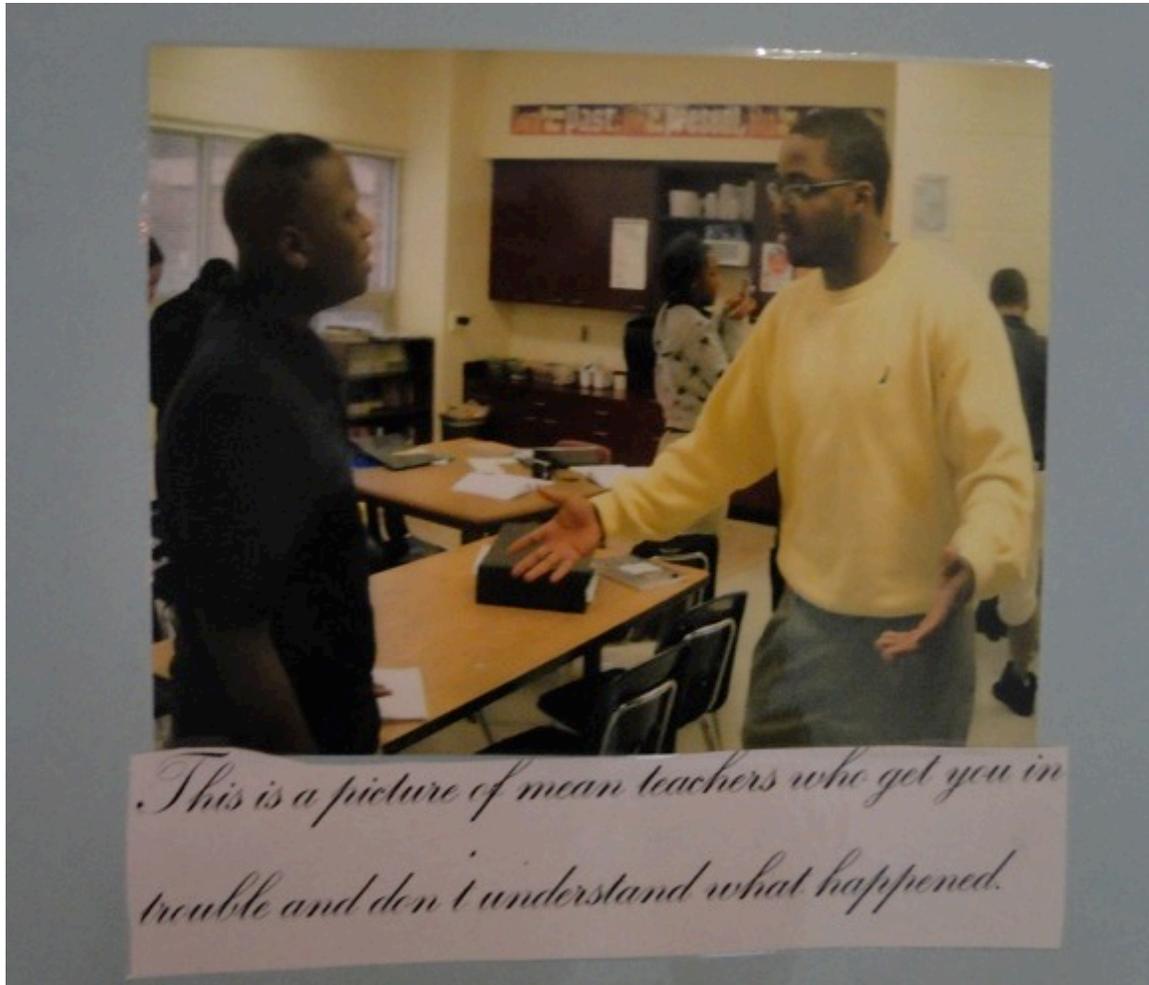
Figure 120. Teachers. "This is a picture of mean teachers who get you in trouble and don't understand what happened."

However, in the end, Marcel is smiling. He wrote, "Graduation is important to me so this picture is of me having good grades." (Figure 120).
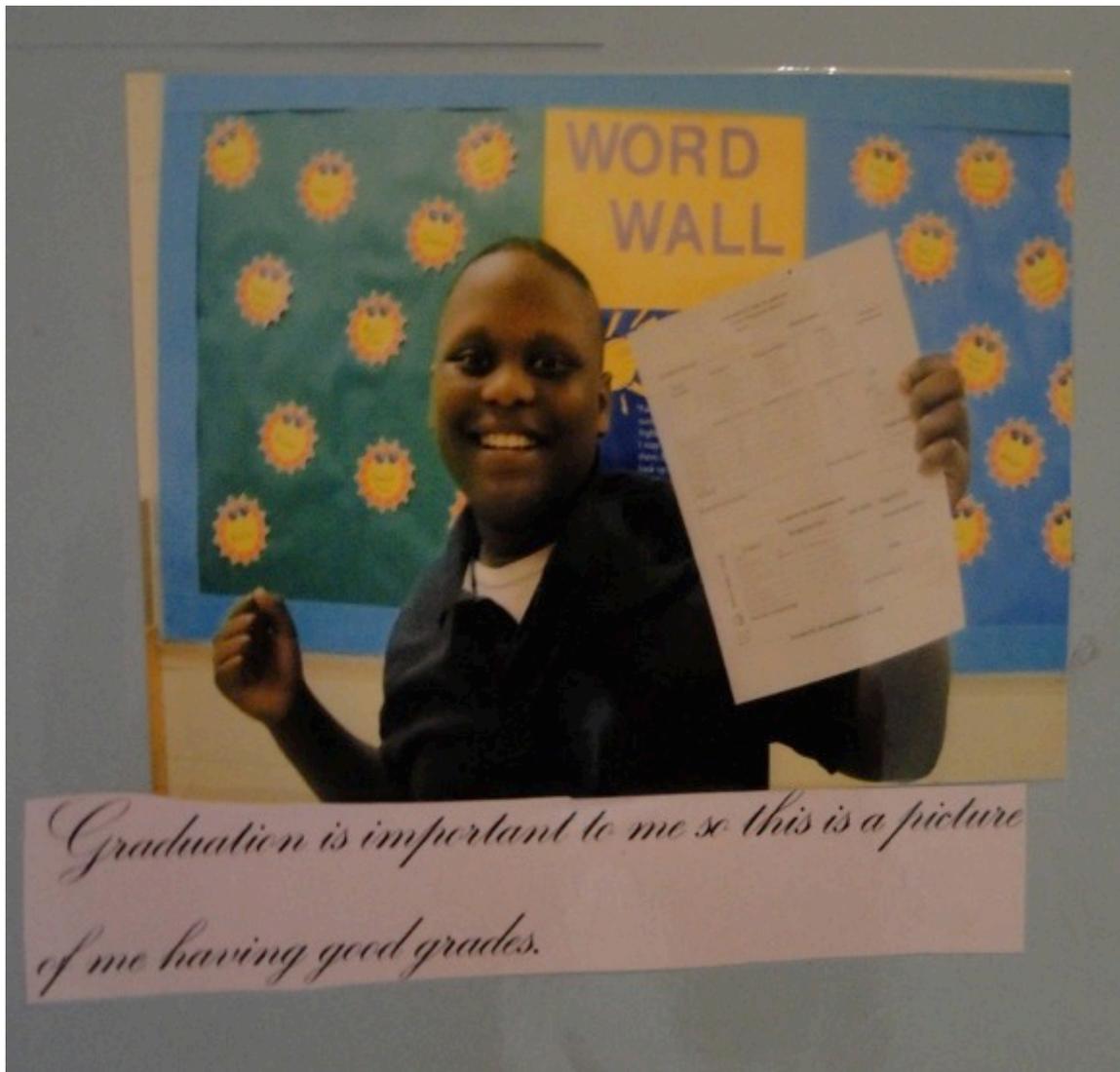
Figure 121. Graduation. "Education is important to me. This is my picture of me loving education because I love doing good work."

School: Why Go?

When I asked him in our last interview why he comes to school, he said simply "for education and for learning." He added that sometimes he comes "to play with my friends and stuff like that…and going to PE" but his main focus in coming was "education!"

Interviewer: What would you change about school?

Some kids say they don't care about their education. So I'm sayin' change that to turn it to, 'I like my education!' turn it to positive thoughts instead of negative ones.

Only Marcel said he wanted to change the way his peers think, behave and thus that would mean the way they were treated by others:

I mean, yeah, you messed up in your life but don't let other people think that's who you are. Like I was thinking about Alberto's picture and it's showin' him bein' a thief and like, and he trying to get the school to think he's a thief? I was just thinking…I was like, why would you want people to think you a thief? They could keep their stuff away from you at all times. They wouldn't trust you at all. So why do search and everything. Let security and everything trust you. Like people not trust you, like. A lot. You make them think you lie, you cheat, and you steal. You gotta prove 'em. You gotta do the right thing. That's why I would change the check in. No checking us down like this. (Pats himself down).

He told me he wants to attend "UNC. Cuz it's a good college and Michael Jordan went there."

What will he study? "Architecture (counts on fingers), owning a business and basketball. Well, I could own a business of architecture. I just got it! Oh my, gosh! I could retire!" (Laughs).

Interviewer: Is there anything that would keep you from coming to school?

It ain't bullying…(laughs). But if it snows, I ain't coming! (Laughs).

Fronting

Marcel seemed younger and more sheltered than his peers at New Leaf. In a workshop on hip hop music, for example, he was the only student who asked the instructor what "moving bricks" meant. After his peers laughed at his questions and she explained that it meant selling drugs, he said, "Oh! I knew that!" During his time at New Leaf though, he learned to toughen up and to "front" more and more (personal communication, 2010). He began to talk a bigger game about his life outside school and his life before moving perhaps so that he could fit in with his peers who he perceived to be more streetwise.

During an activity taking photos of Life Back Home, Marcel insisted on reenacting a scene where his "homeboy died in his arms of a gunshot wound." He colored his hands in red marker and had another student lay in his arms. It's possible that the event occurred, but it felt over exaggerated and for attention. It seemed he was trying to gain credibility among his peers.

<center>Discussion</center>

Based on his Self-portraits and How School Sees Me, Marcel does not see himself as bad or at-risk yet with more and more time at New Leaf he may take on that persona (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). As he said, he made one mistake that earned him a seat at New Leaf. Still he holds a firm belief that people can change their negative thinking to positive and thus change their situations. He has a strong sense of self and agency (Freire, 1970). He also has a sense that other students ("real criminals") can even change others' perceptions of them. For example, he worried that Alberto was harming himself by telling others in his photos that he steals (field notes). Like Alberto and Rashard, Marcel described himself as "silly" and believed that school sees him as

"silly" but at the same time, he does not see this as an impediment to success. This may be because he also described himself as "smart" and he sees himself as smart in all realms of his life.

Like Alberto and Rashard, he sees going to school as an "exceptional" necessity for the future. His willingness to go with the flow, belief in personal agency, and strong future make a strong case for his persistence in school (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Luttrell, 2003; Way, 1998). More than the other two boys, Marcel seemed willing to accept school, the ups and downs, and the searches to meet his long-term goal: college. Each time he mentioned a frustration with school, he countered it with a positive example. He was the only one who showed himself graduating in his photos.

It appears that Marcel who "didn't truly belong at New Leaf," has not accumulated a number of negative experiences at school that would cause him to disengage (Hodgson, 2007). Also, unlike Rashard and Alberto, he did not perceive the school policies to be unfair (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Ferguson, 2000). Instead, he placed responsibility in the hands of students, who he felt created a negative impression of themselves with those in power. He told me, "I mean, yeah, you messed up in your life but don't let other people think that's who you are."

Theme Three: Breaking the Boredom

"That's why other schools aren't boring cuz there's always somebody doing something."

Marcel
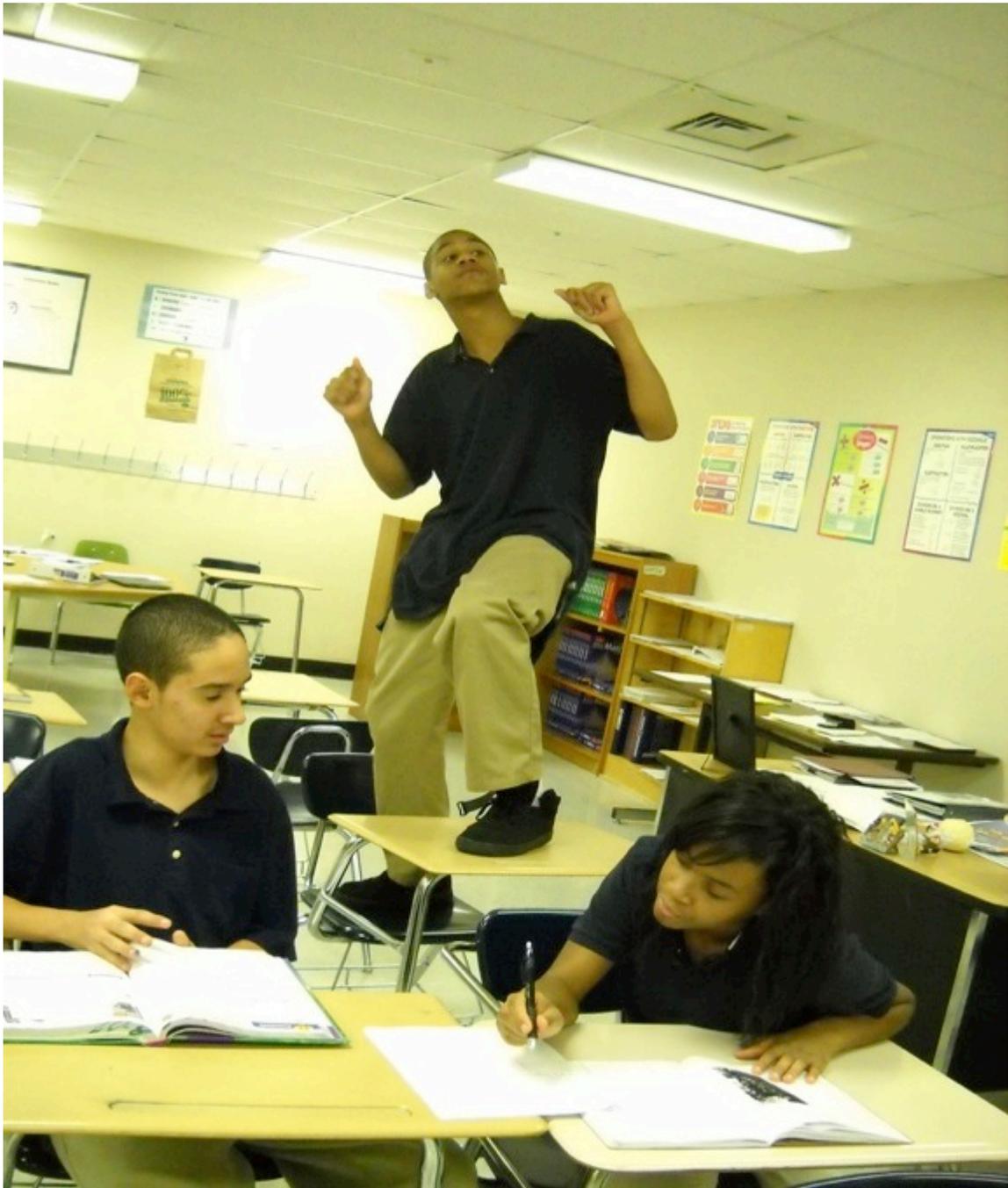
Theme Three: Breaking the Boredom

This theme encapsulates many of the findings of this study. It represents the implications of School is Boring and Mean Teachers. It is how students contend with these two constants. In a strong collective voice students told me that this is how they survive (Greene, 2007).

In their Self-portraits, writing, interviews and photos, many students described themselves as athletic, active, silly, funny, creative and independent. According to students, the rules of school include: sitting still, being silent, being bored to sleep, doing meaningless work, avoiding confrontations with unpredictable teachers and having no fun. The classroom turns students into zombies "with no soul." It also forces students to deny parts of themselves that they liked such as outspokenness and independence (Lesley, 2008; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Smyth, 2006). That means school requires students to be someone that are not. If they follow the rules.

The students told me that activity and movement made the time go faster. Yet, activity and movement were not part of the school day except for physical education (PE) every other day. Aside from PE, students had to be silent, docile, passive and still.

Students told me that playing, humor and joking could break up the day as well, but teachers and administrators often misread these behaviors as troublemaking and disrespect (Fine, 1991; Monroe & Obidah, 2004; Noguera, 2003; Smyth, 2006).

For these students then Breaking the Boredom means breaking these rules. As Alberto said, "all the schools have been boring until I made it fun…when you didn't do what you were supposed to."

Define Trouble

The photos below on the left come from How Students See School. The photos on the right come from How Students See themselves. Take a minute and notice the difference. This helps set the stage for the discussion to follow.

Define Trouble?

Several students, including Alberto and Rashard, talked about doing well in school but also about "getting in trouble," which set them back academically (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005). No matter how well students did academically it appeared that "getting in trouble" overshadowed academics (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). When I asked students if the "trouble" they got into in school was fighting, many said that it wasn't. They described it more as silliness or joking. I also observed and heard in interviews that "trouble" came from speaking one's mind, expressing dissent, disagreeing with authority and doing things differently than directed (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006; Wallerstein, 1987).

One student talked about his independence, which caused trouble:

Interviewer: To you independence is positive but does it gets you in trouble at

school sometimes?

Sometimes? Most of the time.

Interviewer: But you like it about yourself?

I LOVE IT.

The same student described his energy as being "too en-thu-sia-stick" at times, which he said gets him in trouble with teachers.

Others talked about causing "mayhem with jokes" so much so that the teacher "can't control the other students." See Figure 121. Again, since teachers are "no fun," these actions by students end up in referrals and suspensions (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003).
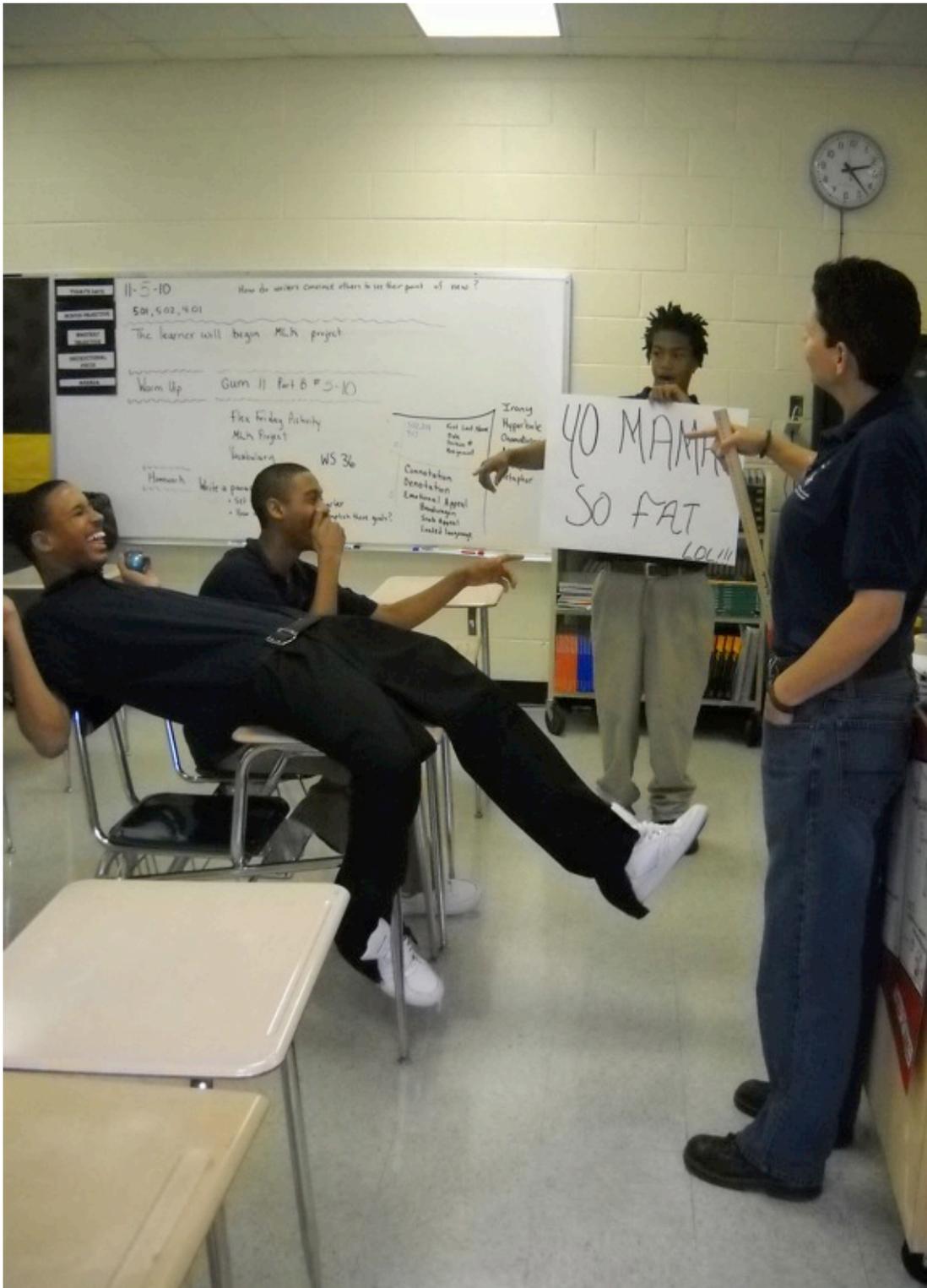
Figure 122. "Mayhem with jokes."

Marcel talked about his home school being less boring than New Leaf because of the larger classes where there is always someone clowning around and "that keeps you laughing." He went on to say, "that's why other schools aren't boring cuz there's always somebody doing something." In this way, students break up the monotony of boring pedagogy and meaningless curriculum that is disconnected from their lives and causes them to disengage (Delpit, 1996; Lesley, 2008; McInerney, 2006).

As students described earlier there is little communication between them and teachers. Teachers kick them out of class over everything without explanation. Teachers would most likely read these actions (making jokes, clowning around, laughing) in the classroom as insubordination, disrespect, lack of dedication for learning (Monroe & Obidah, 2004; Noguera, 2003; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006).

Silliness and joking in the classroom are not accepted or supported. As we saw earlier, silence is valued and enforced in the classrooms described by these students (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005). When students feel that their needs for expression and creative outlets are not being met they will react and could leave school altogether (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991). This restrictive school environment can create what are known as "push outs" (Fine, 1991). This contests the idea that dropping

out of school is a singular bad decision made on the part of a student. Instead leaving

school early could be in response to an overly restrictive and silencing school structure

(Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Hodgson, 2007; Lee & Burkam,

2003; Wehlage, 1986; Smyth, 2006). It could be in response to curriculum and pedagogy

that bores them and is disconnected from their lives and interests (Delpit, 1996). When

one looks through the lens of these students, the environment combined with the utter

lack of engagement and connection for students makes prime circumstances for dropping

out (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991)

Being Allowed to Be Physical

Students major break in the day was physical education (PE). It was the highlight

for almost all the students even if they were not particularly athletic or interested in

athletics. I observed many PE classes, which took place in the old gym across the street,

which had a different feel, smell and openness than the main building. The two PE

teachers are young, athletic laid back men. Rules still applied in PE, but there was a sense

of freedom, silliness, and energy that was not present in the regular school building.

Figures 122-123 are a series of photos of students being allowed to be physical in

PE. While there I observed laughing, screeching, jumping, tackling, screaming, cussing,

yelling, and non-stop movement (field notes).

Figure 123. Being allowed to be physical.

Figure 124. Being allowed to be physical.

This was the place where Rashard, and others, could be "jumping off the walls" without repercussion. This was the space where students could be what they described primarily in their Self-portraits as "athletic" and "silly." This space was the opposite of the classroom, which according to students was boring, silent, and demoralizing (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Fine, 1991; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Given the context of New Leaf where student mobility is espeicially limited this outlet was very important to students (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003).

What Kinds of Things Break the Boredom?

I have divided the next sections into different types of activities students engaged in to Break the Boredom of school. Some of the photos are what I call unassigned. That

means these are photos students took when they had free time, when they were not

photographing how they see school, how they see themselves, or in response to any other

question posed by instructors. These photos represented emerging themes as they showed

what students did when they had the freedom to be themselves.

Play fighting.

Many photos of Breaking the Boredom show play fighting and some included real

fighting. See Figures 124-125. Several students explained to me that teachers often

misunderstood play fighting as real fighting (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; White,

2009). Play fighting, as students saw it, was just that--playing. It was a way to interact

with friends, to move around, to release energy and to pass the time. Still, I observed

many students get referrals for this kind of "fighting" (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003;

Patterson et al., 2008; Wacquant, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Figure 125. Play fighting.

Figure 126. Play fighting.

Excitment, play and silliness.

Breaking the Boredom photos also show excitement, play and silliness. Figures 126-127. They show a lot of laughter, movement and smiles. If we look back at student descriptions of the classroom and How I See School, teachers scream for no reason, and "you can get in trouble for sharpening your pencil." These photos show the opposite of

the classroom. They show children playing. They show children being children. It is clear

that the following types of activities would not be allowed in the classroom.

Figure 127. Excitement.

Figure 128. Excitement.

Silliness is Not Troublemaking

The difference between how kids see their actions and how adults see them became evident when I worked with Rashard and another student on co-constructing themes for How School Sees Us. One afternoon we sat together and looked at all the students' photos for How School Sees Us projected on a screen. I asked the boys to make categories for the pictures they saw and I did the same.

After we viewed all the pictures twice, we discussed what we saw and our categories. The most interesting moment was when the three of us compared our titles for one category of photos. Both Rashard and the other student called this category "silly" or "playing." I called the same group of photos "troublemaking" or "misbehaving" (Fine,

1991; Ferguson, 2000; Patterson et al., 2008). We looked more closely at the images. I

pointed out a couple of examples of what I (and I assume most teachers like me would

call) misbehaving, trouble making, maybe even insubordination. I asked the boys about

the images in Figure 128.

Figure 129. Silliness.

The boys reaffirmed that these photos go under their "silly" category and that these were examples of "having fun" and "making school go faster." I asked them if they thought sometimes these things got them in trouble. Rashard answered, "Maybe. But it's just being silly!"

Discussion

Given the restrictive, silent, passive alienating school environment described by the students in this study, it is surprising that they attend school at all (Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005). Their primary outlet during the school day was physical education. It allowed them to express their "silliness" and their individuality, which were suppressed in other parts of school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). However, when students attempted to carry over silliness, joking, physicality and humor into the regular school day they suffered disciplinary consequences (Christle et al., 2007; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Wald & Losen). These consequences have serious long-term effects for their educational futures, which they are not entirely aware of as evidenced by Rashard's naïve answer above (Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Wald, & Losen, 2003).

Furthermore, the disconnect between what teachers define as disrespect, insubordination and trouble making and what students define as silliness, playing and Breaking the Boredom is one that needs to be addressed (Delpit, 1996; Lesley, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). For example, when a teacher screams at a student for making jokes during her lecture, it might be helpful to understand that the student is responding to boring pedagogy and not a dislike for the teacher (Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2006; Monroe & Obidah, 2004). Yet when that teacher

sends the student out of class for insubordination (which is what he wants= a break from the boredom) and he gets suspended from school (even better= longer break from the boredom), then we all contribute to the cycle of unequal outcomes that undermine the educational opportunity promised to all students (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Wacquant, 2000).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

We Want Freedom

The montage preceding this chapter shows a sample of the many photos of

students taking photos. These pictures remind us that this study was done through

student's eyes and also through a particular theoretical lens.

On one of the last days in program we gave students photocopies of fifteen

random photos (one from each of their cameras) and asked them to put the photos

together to tell a story. Students spread out across the media center with the photos,

markers and butcher paper and began their creations. It was one of our best days in LTP.

We noticed that students were particularly engaged by working each other's photos and

by creating their own stories with them (Delpit, 1996). This makes sense since this group

was tired of being bored to sleep in school and when given a chance to enter a project

from their vantage points, they thrived (Delpit, 1996; Freire, 1970). Although they

worked separately, a collaborative thread resonated (Greene, 1995). Almost all of the

students combined the photos to tell their own stories of rebellion in school, searches for

expression, desires to be free, and personal freedom (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Greene,

1995; Hodgson, 2007).

Rashard's story was particularly striking. It combined all of the themes from the

study and solidified the rising community voice. Obviously Rashard has never attended a

class on educational theory, yet he aptly applied the critical feminist lens through which

this study was conducted. As he said, "It's how school really is…we see it different, school, than teachers and parents. This is how kids see school." Rashard's story was called We Want Freedom. See Figure 129.
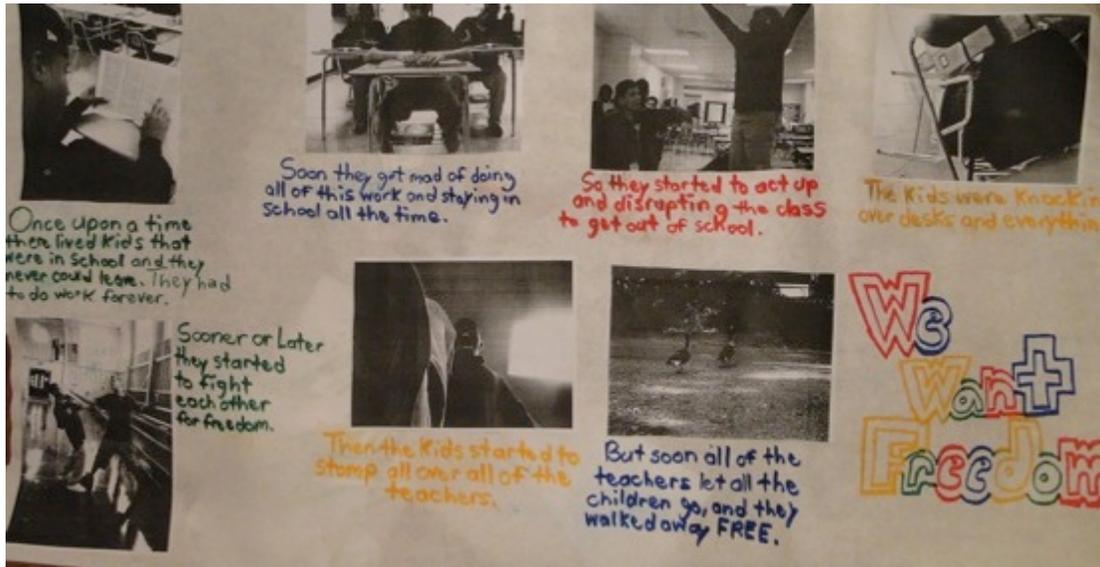
Figure 130. We Want Freedom.

Freire (1970), Fine (1991) and Greene (1995) would agree. The discourse on school and dropouts has been limited by this very fact. The studies, articles and projects have not been "how kids see it" but rather how "parents and teachers" see it. Let me be clear here. Whether or not what students share in this project about school is true, valid, quantifiable or verifiable, it is "how school really is" to them. Through their lenses and eyes. This is what matters. This is the purpose of Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), collaborative research, transformative education (Freire, 1970) and feminist methodology (Fine, 1993; Greene, 1995; Torre et al., 2007). We can find plenty of studies that explore how school is seen through the eyes of teachers, principals and researchers, but if we are to engage in meaningful reform efforts that make a difference to students like those in this study, then we must look through their eyes, listen to them and take action (Fine,

1991; Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995; Kozol, 2005). A feminist approach turns a critical eye toward what is and what could be (Fine, 1993). This project did just that.

In the next section, I will use Rashard's story as a way to summarize the theoretical lens through which this study was conducted and analyzed. To maintain his voice I will also use many of Rashard's words. For example, he calls the students in the story "kids," and I will do the same.

Theoretical Lens Applied

We Want Freedom tells the collective story of school through the eyes of kids (Freire, 1970; Fine, 1991). The story shows what happens when students enter into school with good intentions (getting an education, learning, opportunity, graduation, college) and soon become disenchanted, trapped and frustrated by their lack of voice, powerlessness and restriction (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; McInerney, 2009; Smyth 2006).

In Figure 130, the story begins innocently with a "Once upon a time…" The kids come to school hopeful but are quickly confronted by a restrictive situation (Freire, 1970). Notice that the kids in this story are locked in and "could never leave" and have to "do work forever."
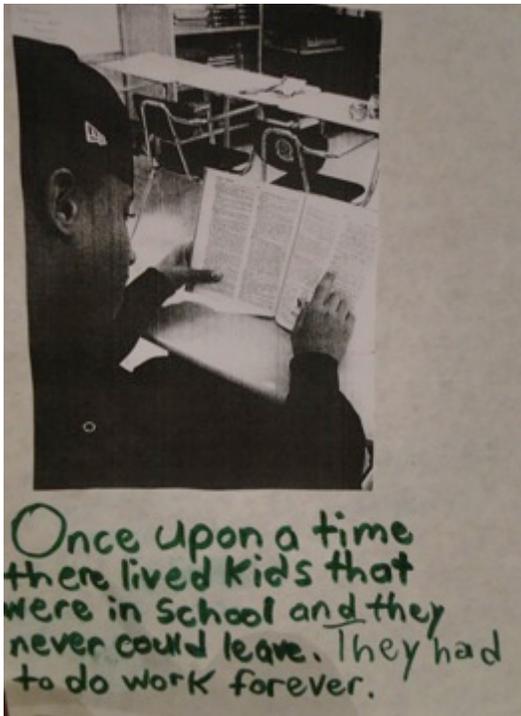
Figure 131. "Once upon a time."

As students showed in this study, the work of school is meaningless, disconnected from their lives and useless (Delpit, 1996). They are alienated from the work of school. They have no part in what they do, what it means or why it matters. Figure 130 is an excellent example of Freire and critical theory applied. School is a thing that is already in existence (who knows how it came to be) and it's unchangeable (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995). In Rashard's view the kids are "just in school." He never explains how they get there or why they are there because it's just a fact. It is an accepted fact that kids go to school. At the same time, it's an accepted fact that they could never leave and "had to do work forever."
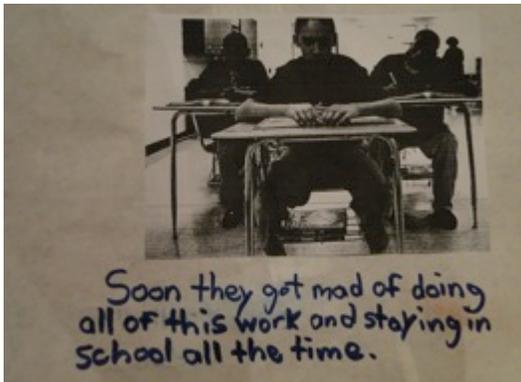
Figure 132. "Soon they got mad."

As seen in Figure 131, the kids in the story and in this study are disconnected and alienated from the work of school (Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005; Smyth, 2006). They appear to be workers on the factory line—or for them—workers who put words on lines all day long. Rashard's story is a perfect example of the banking model of education in which students are recipients of the curriculum but have no active engagement with what is being taught or why it is important (Freire, 1970). It is also an excellent example of curriculum that is not culturally relevant or engaging (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The work of school holds no meaning for the kids, but at the same time it is the only purpose for school. Soon they start to "get mad" at "doing all this work and staying in school all the time." (Figure 131). As Hodgson (2007) calls it, the "winnowing" begins. The disconnection and the disengagement from school has begun (Dei at al., 1997; Fine, 1991). Freire (1970) may call this realization conscientization or re-humanization. Greene (1995) may call this imaginative release. Others might call this fading out, acting out or expressions of educational apathy (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Monroe, 2005).

When students come to school they essentially make a contract to trade their time and their freedom in exchange for education, enlightenment, access, and preparation for a prosperous futures (Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970). They do not agree to become silenced and trapped workers forced to do meaningless tasks (Delpit; 1996; Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). The contract students make to come to school is broken. At this point it seems the kids realize that the school is not keeping its end of the bargain, and they are "mad." But what power do they have to change or express their discontent (Fine, 1993; Freire, 1970; Smyth, 2006; Wissman, 2007)? What happens when the kids "get mad" or fed up with the system and nothing changes? Through this theoretical lens, students do not have the time, space or vehicle to express discontent. Therefore, their efforts at liberation are thwarted (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1995).
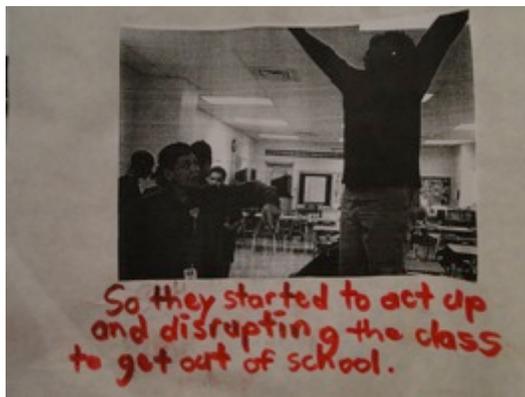
Figure 133. "So they started to act up."

As seen in Figure 132, the students start to "act up" and they disrupt class "*to get out of school"* (Christle et al., 2007; Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Noguera, 2003; Wallerstein, 1987). In this way, the kids get suspended to show their resistance in the only way they can (Smyth, 2006).

Figure 133 shows the non-verbal resistance as students become violent by "knocking over desks" in a continued attempt to show their resistance and to get out of

school (Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2009; Smith, 2006). Can we also imagine that "knocking over the desks and everything" would result in more Mean Teachers and increased office referrals described earlier in this study?

Figure 134. "The kids were knocking over desks."

Let's pause the story for a moment and open this space. This is an opportunity, as Freire (1970), Greene (1995) and others argue that could be channeled into liberatory efforts for school reform and change. When dissention like the situation that Rashard is describing occurs in schools, how do we respond? In most urban schools and in alternative schools like New Leaf, rules, restrictions, and punishments increase excessively (McInerney, 2006; Noguera, 1995). These students, these bad apples, these at-risk kids, are pushed out, funneled out and expelled into what is often referred to as the pipeline to prison (Christle et al., 2007; Noguera, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). Instead, as critical theorists suggest, this dissention could be seen as an opportunity to examine the leadership, pedagogy and curriculum and its (dis)engagement with students (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Kozol, 2005). It is a moment of conscientization, according to Freire (1970), which is the antidote to the banking model of education and thus to alienation (McInerney, 2006).

Let's return to Rashard's story where intervention, unfortunately, does not occur. It's important to point out here the difficulty we encountered in the LTP program with Agency Artwork when we asked students to re-imagine how school could be. The students' inability to re-imagine what school could be points to the entrenchment of school and schooling as an immovable institution (Green, 1995). When we asked students to show us with their cameras what school could be, they looked at us like we were crazy. What do you mean *could be?* It's school. It is how it is, they told us. We found out that students were as resistant as teachers when it came to breaking with the existing visions of school even when students described school as boring and torturous.

So since students have no voice, and they feel that they have no agency to change the institution of school, they turn on each other and "fight each other for freedom." See Figure 134.
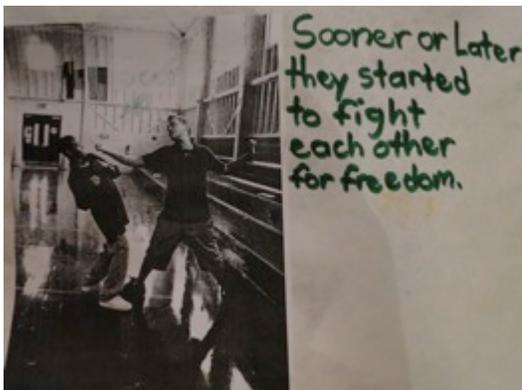
Figure 135. "Sooner or later."

To fully gain freedom, the students have to eventually confront the teachers. See Figure 135. Teachers are, after all, the most prevalent image in school. They are everywhere and they are the students' most powerful allies. Again though, the students are silenced, marginalized and literally bored to sleep (Fine, 1991). So the kids start to "stomp all over all of the teachers." The teachers represent both a powerful oppressor and

a powerful agent of change if they work as collaborators with the kids (Fine, 1991;

Freire, 1970; Greene, 2007; Kozol, 2005).
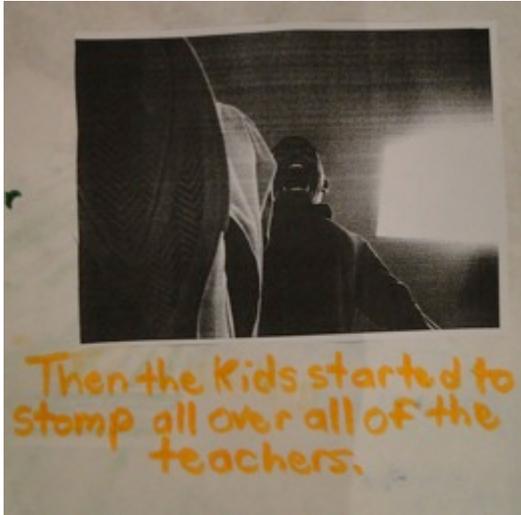
Figure 136. "Stomp all over all the teachers."

In Figure 136, Rashard's story ends like all fairy tales-- happily. We might

attribute this to his age, his development or his still strong belief in the American Dream.

To Rashard education matters and school is important. The teachers "let all the children

go and they walked away FREE."
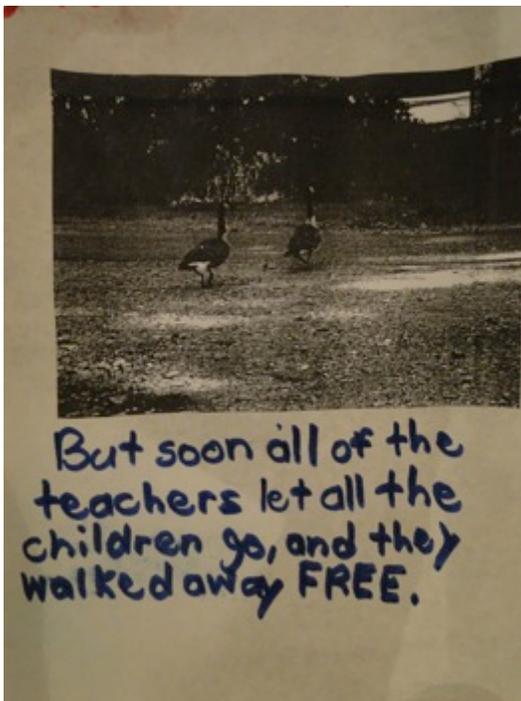
Figure 137. "They walked away FREE."

Unfortunately, the story does not end happily for students who walk away from school (Orfield, 2004; Schott, 2011). The research shows that students who drop out of school are not free, as Rashard suggests, but instead are more likely to become limited and restricted by low paying jobs and often thrust into the pipeline to prison (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Removing Their Consent

In We Want Freedom school is the enemy. "School itself," as Alberto said. Students who "once upon a time" came to school to learn are turned into zombies with no soul. They get mad, but even before a full rebellion, students subversively act up (stand on desks, make jokes, talk out, act silly) in order to assert themselves. To be heard. These moments are opportunities for teachers, administrators, and leaders to listen and to intervene. Eventually it is the structure of school that creates the outcome in this story. It

is a structure of silence, marginalization, alienation and docility that drives students to act out and eventually leave (Dei at al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Freire, 1970; Noguera, 1995). In this story, and in this study, if we listen and place students as the knowers and if we stop questioning their ability to be makers of knowledge, there will be moments and opportunities for teachers, administrators, and leaders to intervene.

These acts, according to students in this study, are simply ways to Break the Boredom of school and to assert some personal freedom (Fine, 1991). They are also ways that they have learned to deal with Mean Teachers who are no fun, who scream for no reason and who do not communicate rationally. These acts, which students repeatedly call silliness, result in getting out of the classroom for a bit and sometimes out of the school through suspension. These actions Break the Boredom but do not change the system itself, which hurts these students most of all (Christle et al., 2007; Fine, 1991; Noguera, 1995; Schott, 2010; Wald & Losen, 2003).

The Research Questions Summarized

By all definitions this group of labeled at-risk middle school students represent the most dangerous violators of the school district's discipline policy. They are such repeat offenders, such threats, such bad apples that they have been removed from their home schools and placed in an alternative setting (Monroe, 2005; Noguera, 2003). However, when asked, "How do you see yourself?" they told me that they do not see themselves as at-risk, as trouble, or as all bad. Furthermore, they do not think that school sees them as violent or as future dropouts (Fine, 1991).

There is, however, a disconnect between how they see themselves and what is expected of them at school. This disconnect causes most of them to continue to get in

trouble at school (Farrell, 1990). If they continue to accumulate suspensions, retentions, referrals and negative experiences in school, it's very possible that they will disengage entirely over the next couple of years (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Fine, 1991; Dei et al., 1997; Finn, 1989; Hodgson, 2007).

How can we account for this difference in self-image, school image and the at-risk label and alternative placement? If this study were done on the high school side of New Leaf, I predict that this segment of the findings would be greatly different. These 12, 13, and 14 year olds have not accepted this persona of being bad and therefore, still believe that school leads to future dreams. Perhaps most important for the literature on dropouts is that they still show up to school on a regular basis—they persist (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). They also do not think school has given up on them. In every interview, when asked why they come to school, they cited future plans, college, and careers. This is hopeful.

Interviewer: So why do you come to school?

- To have my education and everything. Because education is important to me.

- Education and learning.

- Education, of course…to get the knowledge I need so that I can have a better life for me and my children and all that stuff.

- Learning and to get an education. I don't wanna be stupid.

- Cuz I wanna go to a good school. Not a great school. So I can get some props.

- Cuz I wanna to college, play football and own my own restaurant…it's really saving the rest of my life.

- I have to…I wanna be an engineer.

- I know that waking up at five in the morning is gonna be worth it at some point in my life.

- So I can learn. Cuz if you don't learn then you won't know anything. And if you don't know anything, then how you gonna get a job?

- You can get a job. A job. Then you can go to college and you can get a degree. And that will open doors for you to get a job and stuff.

- Because we have to if we want money and power. And we want to have cars and we need to have awesome…giant houses.

- I know I gotta go through high school just to get in college.

- I don't know. Go to college?

- Cuz I don't wanna be stupid.

So they recognize the importance of school, but how do they actually see school? When we apply a critical, feminist lens to this data, to these stories, we see a critique of school that is quite specific in its complaints. School includes excessive boredom, stillness, silencing, and subjugation of identity (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Dei et al., 1997; Ferguson, 2006; Fine, 1991; Freire, 1971; Smyth, 2006). It is run by Mean Teachers who are boring, who force students to do endless amounts of work (also boring and alienating) and who are capricious and unfair in their discipline tactics (Ferguson, 2006; Luttrell, 2003; McInerney, 2009; Smyth, 2006). Whether it's regardless of or perhaps in spite of

these Mean Teachers and Boredom, students attend school. They have not *yet* fully removed their consent. This is hopeful.

These young people have given us a glimpse into their lives and into their views on school with their cameras and their words. What they have shown us is honest, heartfelt and at times discouraging, but always hopeful. The hope that comes from this study is: 1) This group of labeled at-risk students do not see themselves as such. 2) They want and value an education. 3) We have a chance to intervene before they entirely disengage from the schooling process.

They are self-defined as bright, focused, energetic, and smart. And they are still here. They are still in school and still willing to learn. It is our charge as teachers, teacher educators, professors, administrators and policy makers to create classrooms and schools that are responsive to their needs and requests. It is our charge to focus on these younger students, these middle school students, and to work alongside them so that we can catch them before they fall off that "crazy cliff" and leave school entirely (Salinger, 1951, p.173).

<div align="center">Larger Implications for the Field: Are We Listening?</div>

If we are truly listening, and I am, then we are moved to work alongside these young people to change the places they spend a great deal of their lives—School. This study has placed a bright spotlight on these strong voices and we are obliged to listen to them and to act with firm convictions based on their recommendations. Throughout the study we have seen and heard in powerful ways from students regarding their perceptions of school. I believe that the implications for the larger field can be found throughout this

dissertation. The findings have significant implications for the field of school reform specifically regarding dropout prevention, pedagogy and school leadership.

It is clear from this study that the middle school years offer a moment in time that is ripe for intervention. Therefore monies that are spent on dropout prevention or prevention programs could be best used in these earlier years while students still have aspirations for graduation and are still connected to school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Brown & Rodriquez, 2009). Furthermore, reform efforts need to address the basic and important issues raised by students in this study: boring curriculum and pedagogy, lack of meaningful relationships with adults at school and students' feelings of marginalization and silencing, which ultimately lead to fading out and dropping out (Fine, 1991; Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993). In the large form, these topics can be tackled in schools of education that train teachers for urban settings, in federal and state agencies that create/constrict/free curriculum choices for schools and in school buildings through site based leadership decisions regarding how schools are run (Christle, et al., 2007; Swanson, 2004). In an effort to take the larger ideas to the practical daily life of teachers and leaders, I would like to now show how the implications for the field become a part of one school's effort to create change. I firmly believe that it is with one school at a time that we will create a grassroots educational reform in this country.

What to Do Monday Morning: Putting It Into Action

Upon graduation I will work as an administrator and teacher at Kennedy Charter Public School (KPCS) in Charlotte, NC. The students and parents who attend have chosen Kennedy as an alternative school in this large urban district. It is quite possible that these families have left their home schools as a sign of their discontent with what

was occurring there. I chose the position at KPCS because it will allow me to directly

address the issues raised by the students in this study both individually in their stories and

collectively in their themes. In the sections below, I will take each implication for the

field drawn from the study's findings and address it in the context of my new position.

To Rashard school is boring= design and implement relevant, engaging

curriculum.

As we saw in the study, school can be a place that confines, restricts and dampens

the natural abilities and energies of the students (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991). It is so

boring, we were told, that it puts students to sleep. Our students also said that the work of

school is unconnected to their lives and it entails "putting lines on paper" all day long.

When this happens, students respond with various modes of shutting down, fading out

and eventually dropping out (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; Smyth, 2006). Rashard's story

showed a young boy who was capable and willing but who was discouraged by the

restrictions of "being tied to a chair" all day long. He liked to write and was eager to

please, but had a hard time corralling his silliness and energy for what was expected at

school all day...sitting still and being quiet.

Often the seriousness of school increases as students move from middle to high

school. The courses become more difficult and the stakes higher. Students are given less

and less creativity and freedom as they move into high school. At the same time, the

likelihood of dropping out of school increases in the transition from 8th grade to 9th grade

(Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004). It's important that this

pivotal time be supported with strong academics as well as engaging and relevant

curriculum that energizes students as they enter the first phase of high school (Cassidy &

Bates, 2005). The literature shows that if student academics and social needs can be met in the 9th grade, then the likelihood of dropping out of high school is greatly lessened (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004). This is the Summer Bridge Program I will lead at Kennedy Charter School.

The Summer Bridge Program for rising ninth graders will employ education majors from all over the country as interns to teach science, English, math, electives, history and service learning during a four-week period. These young, energetic teachers will live on the Kennedy campus for two weeks and plan the curriculum with Master Teachers and then, under the Master Teachers' supervision, teach students for four weeks. The courses will be hands-on, interactive, student led and project based. There will be little sitting and certainly no time to be tied to chairs. The daily schedule will include regular physical activity and movement. It will foster the natural energy and joy these young people bring with them every day (Delpit, 1996). Fridays will be devoted to travel or community immersion based on developing curriculum themes (Meier, 2002; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). At the same time, the Program will focus on the key academic strands in the 9th grade that tend to give students trouble in the transition year. For example, the English class will focus on memoir for most of the summer so that students entering 9th grade will have a strong understanding of its key elements. This increases the likelihood of their success in this class.

The Summer Bridge Program meets several goals. First, it introduces transitioning 8th grade students to a high school curriculum and *culture* that is both rigorous and engaging and also interesting and relevant. This fosters strong relationships, interest and persistence in school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Christle et al., 2007). These students

want to come to school. Second, the Summer Bridge Program models interactive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy, which will become a staple for teachers and teaching at KPCS. The Summer Program will train new teachers in this pedagogy, teachers who may become full time educators at KPCS in the fall. Also, as these recent graduates of strong education programs work with Master Teachers, they will infuse new ideas and energy into the existing staff. Finally, the summer-like atmosphere of the Bridge Program—the excitement, the interest, the joy, and the love of learning-- will extend into and beyond autumn's leaves. Why not? Why can't students continue to follow their interests within existing areas of study? Why can't students and teachers in small cohorts plan projects that meet the NCSCOS for their content area together? Why can't Fridays be reserved for action-oriented learning and praxis? And if it was like this, just what might happen to school (Darling-Hammond, 2006)?

Rising 9th graders will enter high school with a solid academic base and have greater confidence in the course work that often causes a good number of students to drop out (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005; Schott, 2010; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). They will have a cohort of friends and experiences from the summer to bond them socially. The Summer Bridge Program sets a culture of academic rigor and an individual interest that helps students engage and want to stay awake in school. Above all, students will have a voice and they will be heard (Fine, 1991; Greene, 1995; Wang & Burris, 1997). In the end, school would not be boring and students like Rashard might stay. They might make it to graduation.

To Alberto teachers are mean = create and support an ethic of care.

Continuing with the culture of the Summer Bridge Program, the 9th Grade Academy will build upon the strong relationships students and teachers have built over the summer months. The Master Teachers from the Summer Bridge will be the core teachers in the 9th grade Academy. As we saw in this study, students need consistency in expectations and interactions, positive peer and teacher relationships and small caring classrooms in order to persist in high school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Students in this study talked about how they did not feel heard and did not feel they could trust teachers. It's important that these perceptions be changed.

As Alberto underscored, relationships with teachers matter. He said it was all about a sense of humor, but what he and most of the students really longed for was teachers who listened to them and who actually heard what they said (Fine, 1991). In order to hear each other there must be the time and a willingness to build relationships (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1996). As I witnessed in the LTP Program this year, time and consistency are important in building trust, as is flexibility. Alberto said time and again (and showed time and again) that he will get the work done, but in his own way, and why not?

The social transition to high school is as important as the academics (Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005; Schott, 2010; Wheelock & Miao, 2005). To persist or to stay, students must feel valued, heard and free to express some of their individuality (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). In this study the students showed time and again that they felt school was asking them to give up who they were in exchange for too little (McInerney, 2006). This negotiation of identity is unavoidable but less negative when teachers and students have the time and space to build relationships, as well as to

be flexible in responding to each other (McInerney, 2006; Smyth, 2006). This comes back to hiring and training a teaching staff that is responsive and culturally relevant (Delpit, 1997). When teachers know their students, really *know* their students, they know the best way to reach them and they also understand the ways in which they need to stretch those students to grow (Ladson-Billings, 1997). …and they know when to give that student a day off.

Here's a good example: Fast forward to May and the last art show of the year, one that happened a full semester after the data collection for this dissertation had ended (an art show that concluded the grant which funded this project). We asked all of the students for a quote about what art means to them so that we could make large posters of their words from brown butcher paper. This was to be displayed floor to ceiling near their work as a way of introducing them to visitors. All the students except Alberto complied. First he said, "Let me think on it." Then eventually he said, "You know. I don't know what art means to me. I mean I do, but I don't think I will feel the same way Thursday. Besides…what does it matter? I'll be standing there. They can just ask me." So for Alberto's poster we wrote his name and nothing else. Was this a big deal? He was right. He was standing there to answer questions. He eloquently spoke on art and what it means. His ideas probably did change from Tuesday to Thursday. His lesson is well taken, as it reminds us to be flexible and to see purpose through the lens of the student.

Teachers need to ask themselves, why am I requiring students to do this or that? What do I need or want them to learn or show? Are there other ways of knowing that they can show? Is this a battle worth fighting? What else is really going on here? Ah, but then we would be back to not having a boring school, wouldn't we? And we would be back to

the idea that these stories and themes, and thus solutions, are quite complicated and overlapping (Way, 1998).

As the theme Mean Teachers showed, students struggle with uncertainty over rules and discipline and this struggle plays out between students and teachers (Noguera, 2003). As teachers and leaders we need to be clear and, better yet, collaborative in rule-making with students. This comes through establishing why we are here at school in the first place (to learn, to learn what) and what we would like to do while being here (how we will learn, when, for how long). We then return to the idea of school not being boring. If the curriculum and pedagogy are less boring, then teachers no longer need to be mean. If teachers and students have meaningful relationships, then they can communicate and not argue. If teachers know families or moms or aunties or sisters, then there is a collaborative approach to student success. Relationships take time and space. A dedicated 9th Grade Academy staff and space will foster this relationship building. It will allow time for good conversations and discussions. It will allow for a lot less "screaming" and a lot more laughing.

We will dedicate a separate space at KPCS to the 9th Grade Academy and the teachers. I will oversee administration as well. Core teachers for math and English will be dedicated solely to the ninth graders. This lends itself to more solid relationships, as well as consistent communication with families. Furthermore, the Academy teachers will have common planning periods so they can discuss curriculum and student progress (Meier, 2002; Nowicki et al., 2004; Wheelock & Miao, 2005.) Students will have advisors who follow them through a minimum of their first two years. These teachers will become their coaches, friends, and mentors instead of the person to be avoided or "the

evil x-predator of the jungle." All of these factors will help create a web of support and caring during the school day that will make it less likely that students will leave school early (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Fine, 1991; Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

Students survive school by Breaking the Boredom = provide excellent leadership with clear communication.

The miscommunication that occurs in this study between students and teachers is disheartening. What students call silliness is too often to teachers insubordination and grounds for expulsion (Noguera, 2006; Monroe, 2005). Furthermore, it perpetuates a cycle of labels and failure that has serious consequences. Simply put—students will be less likely to Break the Boredom of school if school is interesting, engaging, relevant and managed by adults who care about the students' interests, who listen to them, talk to their parents with respect, and who have hopes and plans for their futures that are in concert with their own (Dei et al., 1997; Delpit, 1996; Fine, 1991).

Other approaches to avert students Breaking the Boredom are to stop silencing and marginalizing students at school (Fine, 1993). For example, create school schedules that allow students to eat at appropriate times, that allow them snack, drink water and use the bathroom when they need to, that allow them a good amount of physical activity, sunlight and time outside, that allow them to shape and form what the school looks like and how classrooms are organized, that allow them to decide what they wear, and what kinds of reward systems have meaning for them. Let's create a school that does not turn students into zombies, does not feel like jail and does not require silence, docility, stillness and subjugation of self (Dei et al., 1997; Fine, 1991; McInerney, 2006).

Overall, a system of responsive leadership begins with classroom teachers who spend the most time with students, and it trickles directly up to academic facilitators, assistant principals, leadership teams, principals and others. As Fine found (1991), when teachers feel empowered, then students do too. When students feel empowered, school is a good place. It's a culture of caring and listening that will yield amazing results.

All students want some freedom= offer programs that allow for creativity

Students need outlets of all kinds within the school day and beyond. The students in LTP showed up two times every week because they learned a new skill, they had a creative outlet and they were being heard (Ewald, 2001). The imaginative release and counter-space created in this after school program reached far beyond what has been recorded here in this dissertation study (Greene, 1995). I hope to infuse the LTP ideas throughout the school day, but it is important to maintain program in its entirety as well. I am currently seeking funding to do this at KCPS. The curriculum units are written and well developed for extension and expansion based on Ewald's (2000) work in Durham. In addition, many new ideas of what we would do differently were born this year and credit for those ideas goes to the students whose stories are told here. This work must continue since there are so many more stories to be told. Then when the Kennedy students critique what's happening there, we can use that information to inform our administrative and curricular decisions going forward (Freire, 1970; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Why Did LTP Work?

Here is what I know for sure. We held this program after school two days a week for an entire school year. Students received no credit. If a student stayed for LTP he often wouldn't arrive home until after 6 PM. When he came to program we asked him to do a

lot. A lot of thinking, a lot of reflecting, a lot of picture taking, a lot of sharing and a lot of writing. It wasn't meaningless work. It wasn't easy work. We almost always had 100% attendance. Why? Why did the students keep showing up? I asked them time and again. Why do you keep coming? And the answer was almost always a variation of the same: Because you ask us what we think and because you care what we say. This is the lesson for each of us to take away.

In brief, the program on which this study is based employed engaging, relevant curriculum that allowed students the freedom to enter and move about the work as they saw fit. In addition, the instructors were culturally responsive teachers (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995). They were flexible, responsive and engaged in the lives of these students (in and out of program).

Curriculum and instruction.

As described earlier, the curriculum goals were broad enough that we could mold and shape them in response to students. At one point after winter break, energy and engagement were clearly lagging. We called a group meeting with the students and asked them: What's going on? They told us. We keep doing the same thing. Come in, write, talk, and take a picture. It's boring. It's starting to feel like school. So we generated a list of project ideas from students under the new theme of Neighborhood. We asked them: What would you like to do? How could we understand neighborhood, community? We took their ideas and compared them to our curricular goals, revised our lesson plans and moved on.

Real audiences.

Nothing can replace a real audience for student work (Delpit, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1995). For the program we had four formal art shows where students displayed their photography and writing as well as spoke to visitors about their process. The last art show was at the university affiliated with this study. While there the students in this study, who remember are considered high-risk for dropout, truancy and violence, engaged university students, professor and deans in conversations about their artwork. They stood next to their art in the atrium of the school for over two hours without one complaint. They invited strangers who walked by to "come to our art show."

What made this successful was that students were genuinely engaged with the process of creating the work and thus with sharing their work with others (Delpit, 1996). It is an example of culturally relevant curriculum in action. We did not prepare student to talk about their work but if you listened to them, you would think we had rehearsed many times with them. They were articulate and interested because the project mattered to them personally and so how they talked to others about it mattered. The audience was real (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

<div align="center">Future Research: More Than a Nice Story</div>

By the end of the year all the students in this study transitioned out of New Leaf and back to their home schools. This is success. Still I wonder about the kind of school environments they will return to and what supports will be there for them. I wonder more about their futures than about the future of the research.

It is my hope that four, possibly five, of the students in this study will follow me to KCPS next fall. I encouraged them and their families to apply soon after I was offered the position. Clearly, this offers a very immediate and interesting opportunity for

continued research. What will happen as these students move forward into a mainstream school but under the wing of a caring connected adult? In addition, they will be entering a school in which I have some control over the curriculum, pedagogy and leadership. If there were every an opportunity to put my theory into practice, it is here. I will have four honest critics on my heels every day telling me how school is going for them, what is working, what is not. Maybe this is what we all need to keep us true to our word.

For others in the field interested in this topic, the opportunities for future research using collaborative methods such as Photovoice with students are abundant. If I had more time and resources I would have liked to incorporate more from the family and neighborhood unit in this paper. The connections between home and school are discussed in the literature but not in the visual way presented here. There is much to be seen and learned by having students take cameras home and sharing these images with those at school. If these photos and stories can be looked at from a culturally rich perspective as opposed to a deficit perspective, the outcomes of this research may greatly improve student's attachments to school. On another front, a collaborative project with both teachers and students using Photovoice to document the entire group experience of school may offer a more complete picture of the schooling from all angles. Together students, teachers, administrators and support staff could tell a detailed account of life at a particular school.

<div align="center">Limitations of the Study</div>

There are several limitations to the study that should be considered. First, the sample size and context of the study is very specific. Second my subjectivity and

relationship with students is complex. Third my race and class are quite different from the students. (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998).

Sample Size

The sample of at-risk middle school students in this study was very specific, as was the setting in which we did the work. As I described in detail, life at New Leaf is unique. It is an alternative school for labeled at-risk youth who have been suspended from their homeschools. At the same time some would argue that many urban schools operate under similar restrictive parameters (Kozol, 2005; Monroe, 2005). Some who read this study may consider the findings limiting if they consider that the students here are far from the norm. I would argue, however, that the stories students share here are not much different from disengaged students in urban schools or dropout factories across the country (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). This is certainly an area for future research.

Relationship

My relationship with students and its affect on my subjectivity is complicated (Coles, 1997; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). More than the other instructors, I was a regular part of our students' lives in and out of the program. During my extended time in the field I shared my own experiences at home growing up, my struggles in school, what brought me to this project, and why I cared so much about what they think (M. Greene, personal communication, August 3, 2010). I forged relationships with the students, which I intended to be supportive and non-judgmental (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). By the end, I had student's home phone numbers and knew many of their family members well. I talked with mothers, grandpas and aunties on the phone about progress in school, high school plans and summer programs. At times, these relationships were trying and at times

they were wonderful. Students in the program continued to fight, continued to talk back to teachers and continued to get suspended. They also made the honor roll, performed at poetry slams, stayed out of the Principal's office and reconnected with school. I wondered if what I was doing mattered and how much. I acknowledge these emotions whole-heartedly.

As I was writing this section of the paper, a close mentor brought up my subjectivity. She was concerned that my close connection to these students would not allow me to report objectively on the program or the data. I do not propose a specific dropout prevention program here or argue that this program can keep kids in school. I do propose that we listen closely to what these students are saying, look closely at what they are showing us, and read closely what they have written. The research questions I answer were about this group of students and their relationship to themselves and school. To get to these complex issues, I believed that I needed to be a present, available and consistent part of their lives.

I also walked the line in the school. I wasn't a teacher; I wasn't an administrator. I was a volunteer. I held a lot of power with students but no real power in the school. I was first the curious "lady with a camera." Then eventually, I became the popular "Ms. Heather." I brought lunch, prizes, fun projects and an energetic staff that seemed to energize the school each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. My job was easy, and I could feel the teachers beginning to resent me.

My relationship with these students might pose some issues (such as lack of sleep, lack of money, lack of time), but these issues do not affect what we found. I believe our relationship created a safer space for them to be honest about these deeply personal issues

(Merriam, 1998). I could be wrong. The relationship might have changed what students said and showed because they cared too much about what I thought (Glesne, 2006; Greene, 1995).

Race and Class

It is impossible to act as if there are no differences in power, race, class and gender between the students and me (Fine, 1991; Torre et al., 2007). As I stated, the majority of students in the program were minority males living in impoverished homes. There was one minority female who also lives in poverty. I am a white woman, who just turned 40 from a working class family. I worked hard to attend an Ivy League school for a master's degree and am now finishing a doctorate. We seemed miles apart on the surface. What broke down barriers was a camera—the greatest equalizer-- and lots of time in the field (Glesne, 2006; Harper, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Wang & Burris, 1997).

I think that most of my students came to know my dedication to them and to the project, and they soon forgot that I was "the white lady with the camera" (Coles, 1997). They mostly stopped questioning my ulterior motives. They came to know my heart. The way this happened was with time, consistency and openness about the situation in which we were interacting (Ferguson, 2001; Glesne, 2006). And a camera.

Still at the end of each day, I went home and so did my students. We went home to very different living conditions. I also went home *as an adult* with great agency over my own life, and they went home as children to parents and families who made decisions for them without their consultation or consent. There was nothing I could do except empathize, tell my own story and hand them their cameras each day when they came back.

Bowls of Candy

This study began with a story about me, a child stealing snacks at school to illustrate how school means so much more than books and grades. So it seems fitting that it ends with a story as well.

Looking through this long piece of work I noticed that stealing is a smaller theme that runs throughout. I stole snacks, my students talked about stealing, about being called thieves, about being checked and searched upon arrival at school. In the middle of this journey my laptop computer was stolen and my students helped me recover. But what is stealing really about? In my experience stealing has ultimately been about not having enough, about lacking, about limited access and about fear.

At our final Art Show Dr. Rachel, who was always feeding the students and instructors, put bowls of candy on the tables in front students' art work. The candy was for visitors and for students too. The bowls were filled with chocolate-- yummy, yummy chocolate. You would expect that bowls of candy would not last for five minutes around a group of ten middle school students, but this is not an ordinary group of middle school students. Let me share a couple of stories about the bowls of candy.

Story One: I was helping Rashard set up his table and his artwork. Another student came by and gave him his bowl of candy for his table. Rashard's eyes widened. He couldn't believe it was for him and for his table. Not a minute passed and Alberto complained that he didn't get a bowl. He asked Rashard if he could have his bowl of candy? Without hesitation and without me telling him I'd get him another, Rashard said, "Sure." Alberto swept off with the bowl. Thirty seconds later, Dr. Rachel came by and

say, "Rashard, you don't have a bowl? Here you go!" and plunked another down in front of him. He smiled that huge smile.

Story Two: I walked by Alberto's table to check on him. He and I had a running joke about his stealing habit but also about his candy hoarding habit. Whenever we brought snacks to program, I'd see him sticking them in his sleeve and pockets. One time I told him he didn't have to do that; he just had to ask and he could take as much as he wanted. He wasn't the only student who did this. Time and again, all the instructors reassured our students that they never had to take anything from us, from the program, and that if they ever needed or wanted more to just ask. From that day forward nothing ever went missing again. When I came to Alberto's table his bowl was full. He had not put a piece of candy in his pocket or his sleeve that day.

Story Three: I noticed one student walking around from bowl to bowl and doing what I thought was searching for Reese's to eat. Before calling him out, I waited and watched. He went from one bowl on one table to another bowl on another. I couldn't figure it out. Finally I asked him, "What's up?" He said to me, "I'm just making sure everyone's bowl is full, Ms. Heather." Sure enough, he was.

It was time to break down the Art Show. I explained to students the plan, how to go about putting their art away, and where to put it so we could pack it up to leave. The kids and the instructors got to work cleaning up. After everything was packed up, I looked down at the last table and saw three full bowls of candy. We had been in the lobby of the college for over two hours. I assumed there wouldn't be any left.

Alberto asked me what we should do with them. I said, "Why don't you go around and give a little to each student?" He said, "Ok!" and did. I watched him walk

around, like the Easter bunny handing out candy to his classmates, his friends, and his teachers.

Closing Thoughts

That day no one needed more and no one had to steal. Students left full that day. We all did. They felt like artists who were valued for their creativity, energy, silliness and humor. Not like criminals who had to be patted down and searched. This was our day at school.

This study and these students show us that the *schooling experience* is much more than books and grades, and remind us that we need to dig deeply to understand what motivates student behavior and attachment to school. As a child in school, all I wanted was to share what was happening in my life both in school and out, to have someone hear me, to affirm me and to maybe even fix me. My emotional attachment to school sustained my academic and personal success. I continued to attend and eventually graduate in spite of an at-risk label. School was snacks. School was mom. School was family. School was safety. School was what I did.

We must remember that students are so much more than labels, suspension, bad decisions and acts of silliness. The stories students carry with them to school and home again too often go unheard. It's time that we really listen.

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