

# Success in These Schools? Visual Counternarratives of Young Men of Color and Urban High Schools They Attend

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## Abstract

The overwhelming majority of published scholarship on urban high schools in the United States focuses on problems of inadequacy, instability, underperformance, and violence. Similarly, across all schooling contexts, most of what has been written about young men of color continually reinforces deficit narratives about their educational possibility. Taken together, images of Black and Latino male students in inner-city schools often manufacture dark, hopeless visualizations of imperiled youth and educational environments. Using photographic data from a study of 325 college-bound juniors and seniors attending 40 public New York City high schools, this article counterbalances one-sided mischaracterizations of young men of color and the urban schools that educate them. Specifically, visual sociology and critical race methodologies are used to construct anti-deficit counternarratives about boys of color and urban education.

## Keywords

high schools, boys, Black males, Latino males, visual sociology

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They are large, overcrowded, dark, and dangerous settings in which little learning occurs. Most educators find them undesirable places to work; hence, few apply for jobs at them, which results in perpetual shortages and a reliance on emergency certification initiatives. Teachers who end up there tend to stay only a year or two because the students are so apathetic and underprepared, there are too few resources, and incompetent leaders repeatedly fail to ensure safety and stability. Their highly qualified professional peers who produce outstanding results all work at suburban and wealthy independent schools with up-to-date textbooks, new technologies, highly engaged parents, and motivated kids. Comparatively, the neighborhoods in which these places are situated are trashy, drug infested, and violent. Residents, including students' parents, do not seem to care much about school or anything else. These factors largely explain why students in these contexts score so low on state exams, and why practically none are college-ready and college-bound. It is unsurprising that education reformers, politicians, and others eventually take over or shut down these places—too little about their character and performance justifies salvation. No one really seems to like these places or believe they can produce better results; anyone looking for success will not find it there. This is the master narrative about urban high schools in the United States.

They are the worst. Find them at the very bottom of just about every statistical metric of educational progress. They do not care about school, as evidenced by their absenteeism, apathetic dispositions, violent threats to teachers and others in their school settings, and disturbingly pathetic performances on most forms of assessment. Teaching them is tough because of their abrasive, oftentimes threatening communication methods. No wonder they are suspended and expelled from school at the highest rates. They surely scare most teachers, especially the White women who disproportionately comprise the education workforce. School environments would be so much calmer and safer were they not in them—they poison the learning experience for everyone else. Sagging pants with partially exposed underwear is their attire of choice. They also clearly care more about sneakers than they do about learning and their futures. The majority aspires to become professional athletes and rappers; few are interested in anything intellectual. No wonder they drop out of high school at rates higher than everyone else. Unsurprising is that so few continue onward to postsecondary education, and those who make it to college drop out more often than do their same-race female peers and students from other racial/ethnic groups. This is the master narrative about Black and Latino male students in U.S. schools.

The urban education literature is replete with studies that highlight several important issues: teacher shortages, apathy, stress, and turnover (e.g., Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; Haberman & Rickards, 1990; Ingersoll, 2001; Ng, 2003;

Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013; Shernoff, Mehta, Atkins, Torf, & Spencer, 2011); the inequitable distribution of highly qualified teachers (e.g., Eckert, 2013; Ingersoll, 2004; C. K. Jackson, 2009; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002); violence and unsafe cultures of disrespect (e.g., Basc, 2011; Hemmings, 2003; Kitzmiller, 2013; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010); and persistent patterns of student underachievement (e.g., Levin, 2009; Sander, 2001; Zhou, 2003), to name a few. Likewise, published scholarship on young men of color in and beyond urban schooling contexts repeatedly calls attention to their academic underachievement (e.g., Davis, 2003; Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Roderick, 2003; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2011; Toldson, 2008, 2011); misplacement in special education and disproportionate rates of suspension/expulsion in K-12 schools (e.g., Bennett & Harris, 1982; Ferguson, 2000; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Solomon & Palmer, 2006; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009); high school dropout rates (e.g., Caton, 2012; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; White-Johnson, 2001); and stagnant patterns of college enrollment and completion (e.g., S. R. Harper, 2006; S. R. Harper & Harris, 2012; Harris, Bensimon, & Bishop, 2010; Palmer, Wood, Dancy, & Strayhorn, 2014; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Strayhorn, 2009).

Many problems written about in these two bodies of literature are longstanding and pervasive. Thus, well-intentioned social scientists and education researchers continually study them and document their durability. Trends in these literatures reveal important realities that should not be ignored, as they are indeed alarming and in need of urgent redress. Notwithstanding, they are terribly one-sided. That is, research on urban high schools and young men of color focuses almost entirely on problems and underachievement. This has, perhaps unintentionally, sustained and advanced hopeless notions of certain young Americans in particular educational contexts. Some education scholars (e.g., Brown, 2011; Brown & Donnor, 2011; Carillo, 2013; Conchas, 2006; S. R. Harper, 2009, 2012; S. R. Harper & Associates, 2014; S. R. Harper & Davis, 2012; Howard, Flenbaugh, & Terry, 2012; J. F. L. Jackson & Moore, 2008; Milner, 2013) have called for the field to move beyond deficit-oriented research questions and study designs that cyclically reproduce knowledge about *underachievement*. Accordingly, too little effort has been devoted to seeking out *success* in urban schools or among Black and Latino male high school students, hence the purpose of this study.

## Conceptual Framework

S. R. Harper's (2012) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework was adapted for use in this study. The framework was originally created for a qualitative study

of 219 academically successful, highly engaged Black undergraduate men at 42 colleges and universities across 20 states. Three decades of literature and theoretical perspectives from sociology, psychology, gender studies, and education informed the design of this framework. Functionally, it inverts commonly pursued research questions about Black male students' pathways to and through college. As previously noted, most of what has been published about them and their Latino male peers amplifies deficits and underachievement. The framework flips those research questions to pursue insights into achievement. For example, instead of asking a popular question such as "why do two-thirds of Black undergraduate men who start at public universities fail to graduate," the framework exposes individual, institutional, and other factors that help one third of these students persist through baccalaureate degree attainment.

Philosophically, the Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework is guided by a belief that despite what is consistently reported in media, peer reviewed academic journals, and research reports, there are many Black male students who enter postsecondary institutions with high levels of academic preparation, support, and motivation, which enables them to succeed academically, accrue social capital and activate it for personal and professional advancement, benefit in myriad ways from leadership and engagement opportunities on their campuses, and ultimately persist through degree completion. The framework is intended to identify policies, practices, and structures, as well as individual, familial, cultural, and communal resources that help Black men succeed educationally. Half of the participants in the National Black Male College Achievement Study were first in their families to pursue bachelor's degrees; 56.7% grew up in low-income and working-class families, nearly three fourths attended public high schools. The framework proved especially useful in understanding how students who were not afforded the same socioeconomic and schooling advantages as many of their college classmates (those typically labeled "at risk") managed to achieve.

Given its focus on pursuing insights into success among students who are commonly researched through deficit prisms, my 2012 Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework seemed appropriate for adaptation in a study of young men of color and urban high school contexts that educate them. Like the literature on Black male collegians, nearly everything written about Black and Latino male students in urban high schools emerged from deficit questioning. As was the case in the national study for which the framework was originally developed, it proved useful in seeing and understanding achievement in urban educational environments.

## Method

### *Data Source and Research Process*

This article is based on data from the New York City (NYC) Black and Latino Male High School Achievement Study. In fall 2012, administrators at the NYC Department of Education asked me to adapt my Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework for a study of Black and Latino male student success in 40 public high schools that were selected for participation in the Department's newly created Expanded Success Initiative (ESI).<sup>1</sup> The process began with the construction of a research team that included 11 Black and Latino male graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania, a Black male postdoctoral researcher from the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, and me. Our team met twice weekly over 2 months to design research instruments, rehearse effective interviewing and rapport building techniques, and work through logistics for data collection in NYC. Reflecting on our own educational histories as young men of color was an important first step. Much of this occurred in our first few team meetings, as well as in one-on-one interviews we later conducted with each other. We created structured opportunities for each team member to think retrospectively about many of the questions that we eventually posed to students in New York. Team members were also given journals for reflective memo writing throughout the research process. Seven men on our team graduated from public high schools in NYC, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Antonio, and Dallas.

Consistent with my 2012 framework, we began instrument development by identifying recurring topics in literature and media concerning young men of color in urban high schools. We then inverted commonly pursued, deficit-oriented research questions to explore the upside of achievement. For example, instead of asking, "Why do so many drop out of high school," we wanted to know what helps Black and Latino males graduate. Understanding how they resist pressures to join gangs, use or sell drugs, and skip school is another example of how we reframed questions repeatedly asked about these teens. In addition to administering the interview protocol to each other, we pilot tested it with young men of color who were currently enrolled in public Philadelphia high schools. The final protocol for the NYC high school interviews was 83 questions, including probes.

After receiving approvals from Institutional Research Boards at the NYC Department of Education and University of Pennsylvania, our team began contacting principals, assistant principals, and guidance counselors at the 40 ESI schools. Specifically, we asked these administrators to identify Black and Latino male juniors and seniors who maintained grade point averages above 3.0 (or

“B”), were engaged in multiple school clubs and activities, planned to enroll in college immediately after high school, and had taken a sequence of courses thus far that would qualify them for admission to a 4-year postsecondary institution. We also negotiated dates with these administrators for our team to visit their schools to conduct face-to-face individual interviews with students. We ultimately interviewed 325 high school students, each for approximately 90 minutes. All interviews were audiorecorded and professionally transcribed.

In addition to interviewing Black and Latino male achievers, team members used smartphones and iPads to take photographs in each school. Photographs specifically captured aspects of the school environments that seemed to contradict commonly held perceptions of urban high schools. Team members uploaded and shared pictures via GroupMe, a text messaging application that permitted us to simultaneously and instantaneously communicate with each other. GroupMe became a repository for 271 photographs team members took with their smartphones. In addition, 138 photographs taken on iPads were later deposited to Dropbox, a digital file sharing software program. Lastly, we hired a professional photographer to spend a full day following our research team in NYC. Of the 200 photographs he captured, 94 were shot inside schools we visited that day. Although the larger project yielded more than 12,000 single-spaced pages of verbatim interview transcripts, the 503 photographs team members and the professional photographer took comprise the data source for this article. Collectively, these images enabled me to pursue this research question: What good is evidenced in urban high schools that educate Black and Latino male achievers?

### *Methodological Approaches: Visual Sociology and Critical Race Counterstorytelling*

Visual sociology accepts the use of photographs and other digital media as empirical evidence, as they are documentations of observable and confirmable social phenomena that can be captured, theorized, systematically analyzed, and revisited over time (D. Harper, 1988; Newbury, 2011; Pauwels, 2010). Furthermore, Douglas Harper (1998) argued that photographic data could be useful in expanding or rethinking assumptions researchers commonly make in sociological contexts. In his book, D. Harper (2012) emphasized the importance of “seeing” in visual sociology; that is, the role of the researcher(s) in choosing to see various aspects of social contexts and determining how to make sense of photographically captured realities. Seeing depends on the social position of the researcher, which varies by race, gender, class, and other identities, Harper maintained. “Visual sociology leads to new understandings and insights because it connects to different realities than do

conventional empirical research studies” (p. 4). Our team endeavored to see young men of color differently and to present confirmable visual realities not often offered in empirical studies of urban high schools.

Legal scholars and critical race theorists (e.g., Bell, 1987) have artfully used counterstorytelling to present alternate, race-conscious interpretations of legal and social phenomena. Storytellers also present, from the viewpoints of persons of color, realities not commonly acknowledged in courts, policy-making, and publishing. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) adapted the approach for use in educational research. They deemed it a useful means by which to examine, critique, and counter master narratives (also known as majoritarian stories) composed about people of color. Master narratives are dominant accounts that are often generally accepted as universal truths about particular contexts and groups (e.g., all urban schools are dangerous, nothing good happens in Compton or Camden, and Latino families do not care about education). These narratives almost always portray people of color and the communities in which we live (and are schooled) in a hopelessly one-sided fashion. Solórzano and Yosso note that research and theoretical models that seek to “objectively” explain inequities and assorted educational achievement differences cyclically reinforce deficit-oriented majoritarian narratives. Personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories are three types of counternarrative approaches they highlighted. This article is an example of the second type, as I use photographs to tell counterstories of urban contexts my research team and I encountered as visitors. My ultimate aim is to disrupt master narratives concerning these school environments and the 325 young men of color we interviewed in them.

## *Research Sites*

The 40 public high schools at which data were collected are located across four NYC boroughs; ESI included no Staten Island schools. Moreover, no charter schools were eligible for participation in the Initiative; hence, this study includes only traditional public schools. Presented in Table 1 are select characteristics about the schools, students, and personnel. As previously mentioned, these were not the 40 highest performing high schools in NYC; they were selected because of the relative strength of proposals their leaders and teachers submitted for participation in ESI.

## *Data Analysis and Methods of Verification*

Visual sociologists know from their own experience that it is no less difficult to take theoretically meaningful photographs than it is to make useful observations

**Table 1.** Select School Characteristics.

School characteristic	M	
	<i>n</i>	%
Borough		
Bronx	9	
Brooklyn	17	
Manhattan	9	
Queens	5	
Average student enrollment	487	
Black and Latino students		93.9
Students eligible for free lunch		66.9
Four-year high school graduation rate		74.9
College enrollment within 6 months post graduation		51.3
College enrollment within 18 months post graduation		61.4
First-year teachers		6.8
Teachers absent 10 or more days the prior school year		27.6
Fully licensed/certified teachers		86.4
Full-time counselors	1.7	
Students to teachers ratio	16:1	

or to identify relevant variables. The camera is merely a means through which an informed vision can be made concrete. (D. Harper, 1988, p. 60)

Analysis of the 503 photographs was informed by the theoretical constructs of my 2012 Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework. The full catalog of photographs included images of the team navigating through train stations, on NYC streets, in the hotel meeting room where our team held its weekly meeting, and at our weekly Thursday night celebratory dinner—those pictures were not included in the data set for this article. Instead, in the first phase of analysis, I only selected images that conveyed something about Black and Latino male students interviewed and the school sites at which our study was conducted. In the second phase, I clustered these photographs into two discrete thematic categories: people and environments. Next, I looked within categories to identify patterns; two subthemes were apparent in the environments category. “What does this image convey about young men of color and inner-city schools,” was the question that guided this sorting exercise. The anti-deficit lens through which my collaborators and I designed the study undoubtedly shaped the way I chose to see and interpret the photographs.



Newbury (2011) offered guidance for making analytic sense of and arguments with visual data. He emphasized the importance of making clear the purpose photographs and other images serve in published scholarship. Newbury elucidated three different purposes: illustration, analysis, and argument. The first involves using visual data to complement written discussions of social phenomena and contexts. To determine illustrative strength, researchers should ask, "What happens if you take the image away" (p. 654). The text would be less powerful in the absence of the illustrative image. Analysis focuses on deconstructing the image itself; it should be able to stand on its own without accompanying text. That is, readers should be able to ascribe meaning to the image in the absence of words. The final purpose weaves together a series of images to advance a particular argument in the written text. "If the images were taken away, there would quite simply be nothing to discuss" (p. 655). This study of 40 public high schools in NYC simultaneously exemplifies all three purposes Newbury described.

Eleven photos were selected for inclusion in this article. They are not extreme or "best case" examples of arguments I make in the Findings section of this article. To assess illustrative strength, I wrote the text alongside the corresponding images and then later removed the photographs. In my view, points I conveyed seemed a lot less convincing without the visual accompaniments. To assess analytic strength, I shared the images, without text or verbal explanation, with an audience of 92 educators during a workshop. I gave them 10 minutes to think about what the series of images conveyed. With no cues of my interpretation, the audience agreed the images conveyed nice, bright young men in good schools that promoted college attendance. To be clear, they arrived at this collective interpretation by seeing the images. The argument purpose of visual research that Newbury (2011) described was assessed in this study by sharing the text I wrote with a group of 20 graduate students in a course. All but three agreed the text was less credible without confirmable evidence of phenomena described therein.

As a form of member checking, I sent the "Findings" section of this article (the full written version of text along with all 11 photographs) to 10 participants representing one quarter of the urban high schools at which data for this study were collected. I invited their reactions to and input on strengthening the accuracy of my interpretations. These young men, each of whom had graduated from high school and were presently enrolled in college, responded with additive, but not corrective suggestions. I incorporated their feedback into text that accompanies the photographs. Each confirmed that the photos selected for publication in this article do not misrepresent him or overstate aspects of the public high school he previously attended. In addition, D. Harper (1988) and Pauwels (2010) suggested that repeat photography

strengthens trustworthiness in visual research. Findings presented below emerged from analyses of pictures 13 Black and Latino male researchers independently and repeatedly took across 40 different school sites. Hence, what is offered as evidence in this article did not emerge from single snapshots in one context through a lone researcher's lens.

### *Researchers' Positionality*

As previously noted, D. Harper (2012) explained that visual sociology relies heavily on what one chooses to see. There was much that our 13-member research team could have chosen to photograph in the 40 NYC high schools we visited. We chose to look for indicators of positive school environments that promoted certain messages (e.g., college enrollment). Also, in our criterion sampling approach, we chose to seek out Black and Latino young men who reminded us of ourselves. We did not deem other students unimportant, but our aim on the days we were in the 40 school buildings was to see and interview those who are least represented in published scholarship on young men of color: college-bound achievers. There are at least three explanations for this: (a) We knew there were young men who could tell us much about success because they have been successful; (b) we knew that even in contexts that were 94% Black and Latino, which was the average across the 40 ESI schools, there were young men who had developed postsecondary aspirations and were serious about enrolling in college immediately after high school; and (c) we were individually and collectively frustrated by reading nothing but bad news about ourselves, our brothers, our mentees, and other young men of color.

Despite these commitments, there was some inadvertent slippage at the beginning of the project. Unlike seven of my teammates, I did not grow up in an urban context. Prior to the start of data collection, I had not spent much time in inner-city schools. When we arrived at the first school site, I was surprised that there were no metal detectors, the halls were so bright, so many posters about college aligned the walls, and the principal's office was so quiet. It became instantly apparent that several team members and I had been misled by the one-sided mischaracterization of urban high schools in the media and research literature. It was during that first school visit that we began taking pictures on our smartphones and iPads; doing so was not part of our original research plan. Photographically capturing aspects of inner-city schools that most people would find surprising became a systematic activity in every school we visited from that point onward. Consistent with my long-standing quest to help the world see young men of color through an anti-deficit lens, I became similarly committed to disrupting one-sided majoritarian narratives about urban high schools.



**Figure 1.**

## Findings

I present in this section a series of photographs that represent key findings that emerged in my analysis. They are substantiated by descriptions of what other members of the research team and I saw in the 40 urban high schools. I found compelling Chaplan's (2006) recommendation that photos "be released from their positivist cage and made more autonomous in relation to words" (p. 50). Hence, I decided against including captions alongside the 11 images presented below. I want the pictures to speak for themselves should readers choose to examine and imaginatively engage them before considering my interpretations.

### *Where Are the Apathetic Thugs?*

The image in Figure 1 was not a staged photograph; the two people in it were not posing for the camera. Instead, it captures one of several moments during an interview between a high school student and Keon, a Ph.D. student on our research team. Note how the study participant (on the left) appears happy and engaged. It seems that he is enjoying the conversation—he is not slouching, looking away from the interviewer, or nonverbally conveying disrespect. He wore a tie for the interview because he wanted to; doing so was not a

requirement for participation in our study. We met 324 others just like him at the 40 schools in this project. One key difference is that few wore ties. No principal had to shove a student into an interview room with us; each came happily and enthusiastically. Likewise, with the exception of a few young men who were clearly shy, all seemed to enjoy the experience of talking with us about their experiences in and outside school.

We only had permission to photograph students who were being interviewed for our study. However, it is worth noting that as we peeked into classroom windows, we did not see Black and Latino male students sleeping, harassing teachers and peers, or postured in ways that loudly communicated disengagement. Moreover, during lunch and transition periods between classes, we saw few with their pants sagging and underwear exposed. There were no fights in any schools in our sample on the days we visited. We did not see gang members or other young men physically or verbally tormenting anyone. We did not hear much foul language as we walked the halls. Principals and other school leaders were not yelling at students through megaphones. Some were more boisterous than others, but on the whole, young men we saw in these schools (including those who were not participants in our study) seemed nice and happy to be at school.

Figure 2 is a candid photo taken in my interview with Vashane, a student at Central Park East High School. I was not telling him a joke or instructing him to smile for the camera. Ours was a fun, yet incredibly informative conversation. When Vashane entered the principal's office (which is where our interview was held), he shook my hand, said "pleased to meet you," thanked me for taking time to meet with him, and presented his business card to me. "Wow, you have a business card," I exclaimed. Vashane was a low-income student with a 3.7 grade point average who would be first in his family to attend college. He also was a fellow in the Opportunity Network, which is where he got the business cards. In the interview, he explained that the Opportunity Network not only provides assistance with college applications and free standardized test prep, but also teaches students how to network with influential adults they encounter. Vashane clearly profited from his participation in the program. I found him to be personable, intellectually impressive, and professionally astute. He was no thug.

Israel sent Collin, a Ph.D. student on the research team who interviewed him, a text message several hours after we left his school (see Figure 3). Collin screenshot the message and shared it with our team via GroupMe. As indicated therein, Israel appreciated their conversation. It meant much to Collin to have received such a thoughtful text message. Several other participants sent e-mail, Facebook, and text messages to our team members. One mailed a handwritten note to me. On occasion, they followed up for advice on



**Figure 2.**

their college search and application processes. But most were simply writing to convey their appreciation for our visits to their schools and interest in their lives. These gestures, combined with numerous others, consistently confirmed that there were nice Black and Latino young men in the urban high schools we studied. They were not thugs.

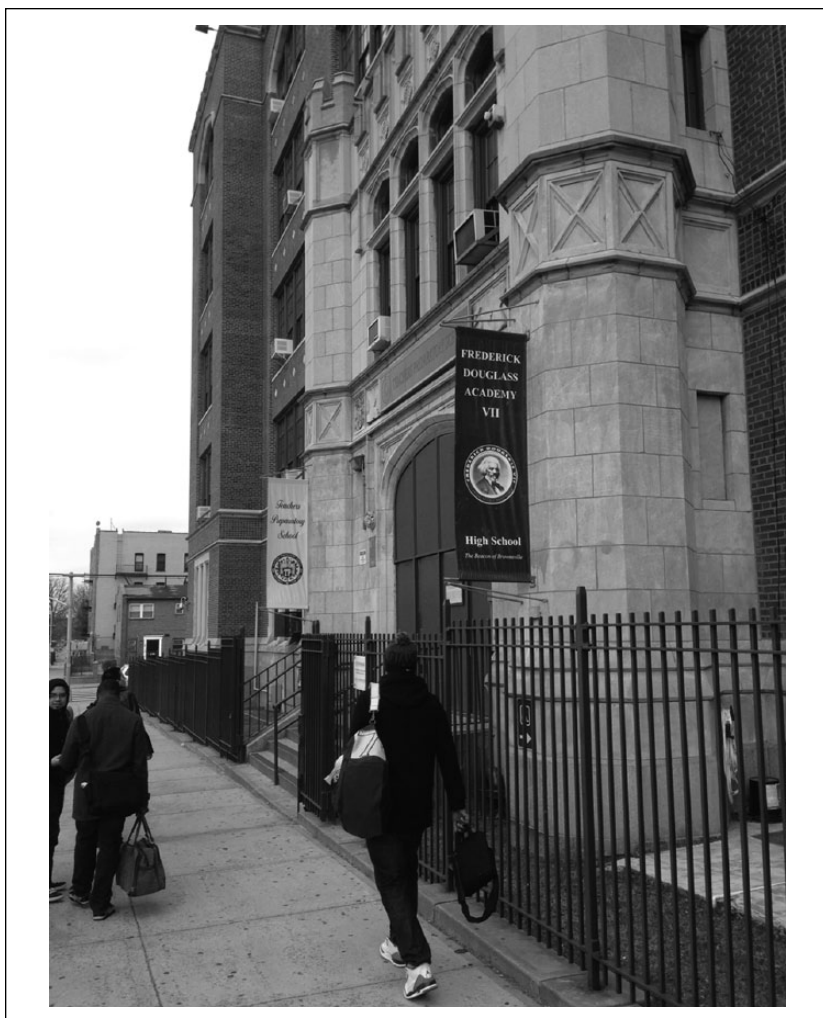
### *More Like Prisons Than Schools?*

No high school student was interviewed via telephone or a video platform (e.g., Skype). Instead, the 12 research team members and I visited all 40 schools. None of us were shot, mugged, or otherwise harassed. Figure 4 is a photograph taken of our team members outside a co-located school building that houses Frederick Douglass Academy VII and Teachers Preparatory School.<sup>2</sup> Note that the street is not trashy. There are no security guards or police cars outside. Our team members were not running into the building



**Figure 3.**

because we felt unsafe. We were walking, we felt safe. We entered these buildings with a collective sense of optimism and hope, sometimes feeling surprised by how nice-looking they were. Most were situated in the heart of low-income and working-class communities. Notwithstanding, the buildings did not look like dilapidated prisons—they looked like schools.



**Figure 4.**

Shown in Figure 5 is the entrance to five co-located high schools, two of which were in our study (Brooklyn Academy of Science and the Environment and Renaissance High School for Musical Theater and Technology). Each school environment (including the three we did not study) felt safe to us. We did not observe chaos during our two visits there. Black and Latino men we





**Figure 5.**

interviewed did not describe cultures of violence and instability. Across the 40 school sites, none told stories of dodging bullets within or immediately outside their school buildings. Also noteworthy is the beauty of the five wooden doors in Figure 5. Like other buildings we visited, this one was well kept. There were no broken windows, doors hanging off hinges, bullet holes in walls, or trashy hallways. Despite enrolling so many Black, Latino, and low-income children, most buildings were nice and clean.

At one school, the principal gave me permission to use his office to conduct interviews with Black and Latino male achievers. He warned me, though, that some students not involved in the study might occasionally pop in to borrow books from his shelf; he assured me they would not be disruptive. I asked some version of the following question for clarification: “So, you are saying it is okay for students to come in here and take things?” The principal explained that the school did not have space for a library; therefore, his office and classrooms throughout the building operated as book borrowing spaces. He also went on to say that an environment of trust had been fostered in the school; thus, he was totally comfortable having students wander in and out of his office throughout the school day. I took a photo of the bookshelves in the principal’s office (see Figure 6). I could not help but





**Figure 6.**

notice there were several seemingly confidential documents on his desk, which was located just a few steps away from the bookshelves. At this particular school and elsewhere, study participants reflected on the mutually respectful cultures of trust that were shaped and understood by members of their school communities. Consistently, they also noted that a few (but not



**Figure 7.**

the majority) of young men of color occasionally disrespected these cultures, misbehaved in classes, and sold drugs, but these behaviors were not commonplace. “Only 5% of guys here act up. They get a lot of attention, but they don’t define the culture here,” a Latino male senior at New Design High School contended. Participants elsewhere also offered this 95/5 (or at worst, a 90/10) split between well-behaved and disruptive young men of color in their schools. Accordingly, 90% or more of their peers consistently cooperated and collaborated with adults to sustain safe, positive, and respectful school environments.

### *Students From There Go to College?*

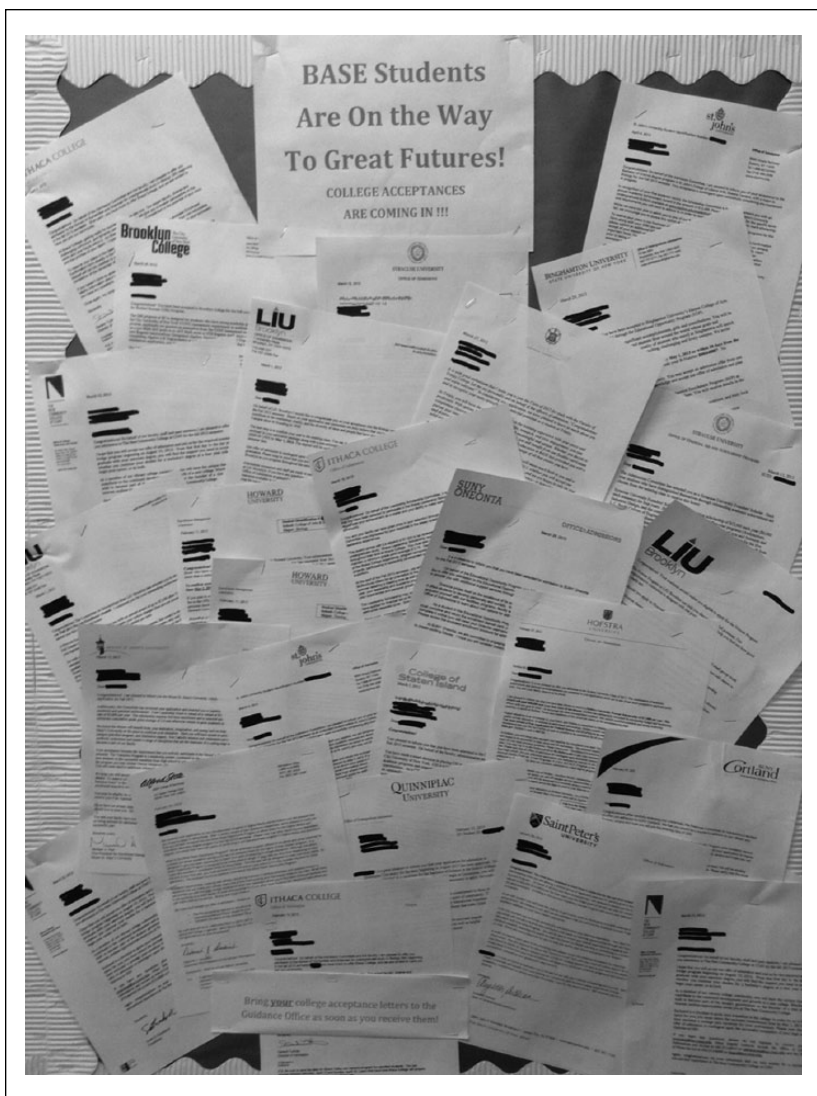
The hallway photographed in Figure 7 looks bright, clean, and orderly. It also looks as if it is located in a well-resourced independent school or perhaps a charter school with a serious college focus. Few would mistake it for a traditional public school located in a low-income neighborhood. It is a traditional public school located in a low-income neighborhood. Striking to other research team members and me was that every square inch of upper wall space throughout this school (including classrooms) was covered with a



**Figure 8.**

college or university pennant. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Penn, Columbia, University of California, Indiana University, University of New Mexico, New York University, and dozens more were included. College and university admissions offices sent these pennants at no cost to the school. My team and I thought this made the environment look and feel like a prestigious college preparatory academy, as there literally was college messaging everywhere. Although no other school had as many, most had some college pennants, banners, and paraphernalia prominently displayed in classrooms, cafeterias, hallways, principals' offices, and elsewhere.

Other schools used creative, low-cost strategies to foster and reinforce the development of students' postsecondary educational aspirations. One example is captured in Figure 8. At this school, laminated sheets of paper were placed above each classroom door. Each included the names and logos of colleges and universities teachers who taught in those particular classrooms attended. In several instances, these placards included multiple logos, as teachers had earned more than one degree. Students were encouraged to ask their teachers questions about their alma maters; teachers were urged to talk often about where they went to college (and graduate school), offer to help students learn more about those institutions, and leverage their contacts on behalf of students who ultimately chose to submit applications to those places. We saw and photographed similar placards in other schools we visited.



**Figure 9.**

Shown in Figure 9 is another example of a commonly used college promotion strategy we photographed in many buildings. School leaders prominently displayed letters of acceptance on bulletin boards in high-traffic areas. In one school, letters lined the hallway for what I estimate to have been at least 40

yards. At another, students placed colored dots along a wall every time they received an admission or financial aid offer; information about the colleges and universities from which they had received such notices were written on the circles. They, too, occupied considerable wall space. Alongside this display was a piece of paper on which the cumulative sum of scholarship money students received that year was written. It was replaced each time the number increased, which, according to the assistant principal, was several times each week. The total was \$1,890,724 the day our team conducted interviews in this school building. Across the other sites in our study, we saw several displays of graduating seniors' admissions and financial aid offers. Young men we interviewed routinely noted how seeing this when they were freshmen and sophomores strongly signaled to them that going to college was normal and expected in their schools. Also, seeing the range of postsecondary institutions to which others in their schools had been admitted oftentimes compelled them to apply to those same places.

Prior to the start of each interview, we asked participants to complete a four-page demographic questionnaire. On the final page, they were instructed to list colleges and universities they had visited, those to which they had applied (seniors) or were intending to apply the following year (juniors), and those to which they had been offered admission (seniors). All 325 participants listed schools in the first two categories; and every graduating senior had been offered admission to at least one postsecondary institution; hence they all wrote something in the last section of the questionnaire. The back page of one participant's form is shown in Figure 10. To have so many colleges and universities listed was not uncommon. He and others explained that their teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and college access program officials routinely took them on campus tours. Furthermore, applying to several different schools—even if they all were in the City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY) systems—was emphasized over and over again at their high schools, participants said. A few were in dual enrollment programs at local community colleges.

The final photo (see Figure 11) was taken at East Bronx Academy for the Future. Beneath each flap was an explanation of the term. Participants there, all but one of whom would be first in their families to attend college, each talked about how useful the bulletin board was in demystifying key terms pertaining to higher education, particularly admissions and financial aid. Another bulletin board at this same school included an oversized spreadsheet that listed each graduating senior's name in one column. Other columns were used to track whether students had taken the SAT or ACT; applied to CUNY schools, SUNY schools, and other postsecondary institutions; submitted the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), as well as applications

List the college/university campuses you have been on:

<u>Georgetown University</u>	<u>SUNY <del>at</del> University at Buffalo</u>
<u>Rutgers University</u>	<u>SUNY New Paltz</u>
<u>Northeastern University</u>	<u>Tufts University</u>
<u>Boston University</u>	<u>SUNY Buffalo State</u>

List the colleges/universities to which you have applied (or plan to apply):

<u>Ithaca College</u>	<u>Utica College</u>
<u>Le Moyne College</u>	<u>Hartwick College</u>
<u>Iona College</u>	<u>St. Johns University</u>
<u>SUNY Buffalo State</u>	<u>John Jay College</u>
<u>College of Staten Island</u>	<u>Niagara University</u>

List the colleges/universities to which you have been accepted:

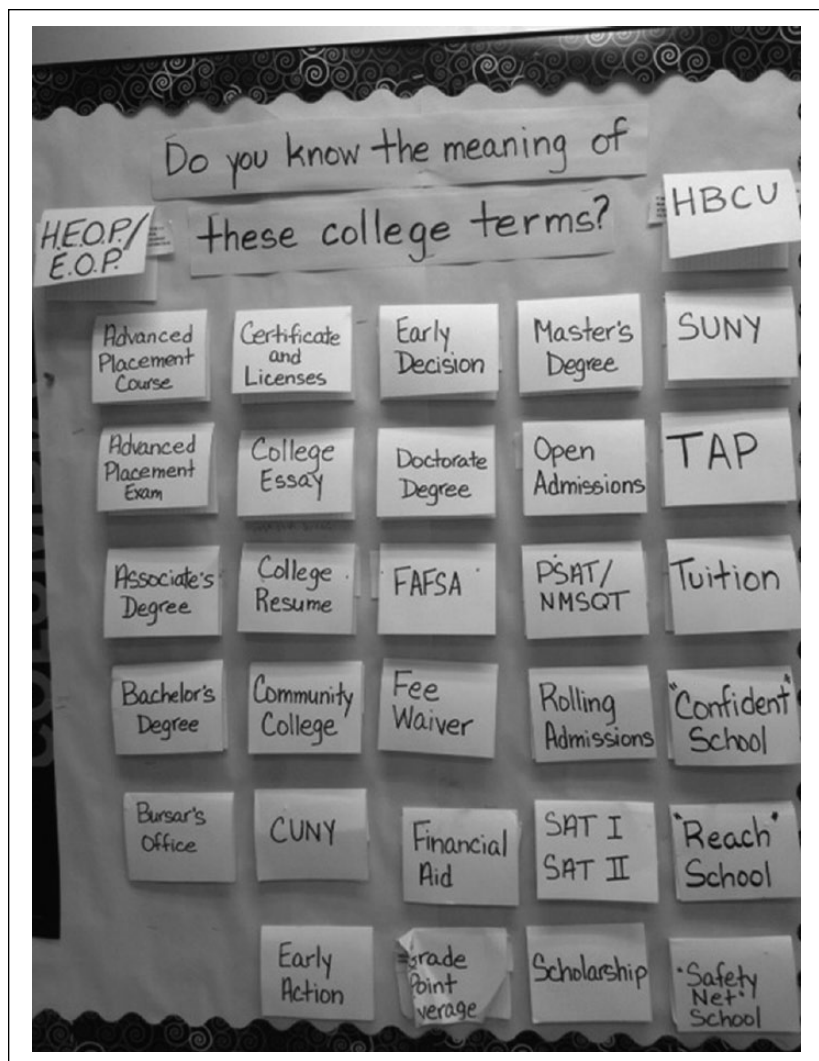
<u>Ithaca College</u>	<u>Utica College</u>
<u>Le Moyne College</u>	<u>Hartwick College</u>
<u>Iona College</u>	<u>St. Johns University</u>
<u>SUNY Buffalo State</u>	<u>John Jay College - full ride</u>
<u>College of Staten Island</u>	<u>Niagara University</u>

Took a Sociology  
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Figure 10.

for scholarships and other forms of financial aid (e.g., New York State's Tuition Assistance Program); and had been accepted to college. Students received large checkmarks in each column after one of these college-related activities had been completed. Fascinating to us was that almost every student listed on the spreadsheet had a near-complete row of checkmarks next to her or his name. That the spreadsheet was so large and so public also amazed us. The guidance counselor explained that teachers, parents, and peers often





**Figure 11.**

interact with the bulletin board; if they saw a student had not done something on the list, they would ask (and sometimes harass) her or him about it. These examples from East Bronx Academy are just two among dozens we saw across the 40 schools that publicly conveyed the importance of attending

college. They also confirmed that students attending these schools possessed postsecondary aspirations, and had applied and were offered admission to several colleges and universities.

## Discussion and Implications

Perhaps this article would have been more aptly titled, *Seeing Success*. Much of what we saw in the 40 NYC high schools was hiding in plain sight. Literatures on young men of color and urban education are incontestably lopsided. I am not arguing that problems researchers explore and consistently document are unimportant and unworthy of ongoing pursuit. Several policies, practices, and structures that undermine success for Black and Latino young men (and their same-race female schoolmates) are in need of urgent redress. Likewise, scholars should continually raise consciousness about the racism, politics, resource inequities, and other social forces that routinely disadvantage inner-city schools. But as I have argued elsewhere (e.g., S. R. Harper, 2009, 2012; S. R. Harper & Associates, 2014), those who wish to better understand success have much to learn from young men who have been successful and from schools that prepare students for college, maintain safe and respectful urban school environments, and retain committed teachers and effective leaders. As this study shows, success can be seen in the unlikeliest of places if scholars, educators, and others choose to set aside deficit lenses.

I remain unconvinced that schools in this study were extreme outliers. Like other urban schools, they too had problems. I am certain, however, that every urban high school in the United States does some good that can be seen, documented, and explained by students, teachers, and leaders. Even schools that are perceivably among the worst in a city annually send some students to college—who are these students, how did they manage to thrive in educational settings with high levels of violence and teacher turnover, and what role did school officials play in the development and actualization of their college aspirations are just three of several questions that should be pursued in these contexts. Participants in our study did not characterize their 94% Black and Latino schools as bad. I could not help but wonder what their peers in other cities would say about the urban high schools they attend—would they characterize their schools as failing, or would they offer more nuanced analyses? What would high school students choose to see if we asked them to photograph goodness in their schools and communities? In their book, *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education*, Alonso, Anderson, Su, and Theoharis (2009) demonstrated the power of having students analyze their own educational experiences and offer appraisals of the schools that educate them.



Future studies should engage youth, as well as teachers and school leaders, in the powerful exercise of photographically capturing success, not just challenges in their educational settings.

I am afraid that the one-sided way urban schools are discussed in media and education research cyclically reproduces several problems; I address three of them here. First, policymakers, highly qualified teachers, and others who only hear bad news about these schools and the people in them come to erroneously conclude that nothing good happens therein. Who invests in something that is perceivably all bad? Who wants to work at places that are persistently (mis)represented as violent, chronically low performing, apathetic, and unstable? Teach for America corps members, candidates in traditional teacher education programs, and beginning teachers recruited through alternative certification programs who read only negative perspectives on urban education, yet choose to work at inner-city schools, enter those settings with what cultural assumptions and expectations for student success? It is likely (or at the very least, plausible) that those who are only familiar with the pair of master narratives presented at the beginning of this article approach policymaking and practice through deficit prisms.

Second, master narratives ultimately harm students who attend these schools. Here is an explanation offered in S. R. Harper (2013):

The near exclusive focus in media, popular discourse, and published research on Black male underperformance, disengagement, and maladaptive behaviors cyclically reinforces a caricature of them that is best described by one of the most racially derogatory terms in American history: Niggers (S. R. Harper, 2009) . . . “Niggering” [is] the process by which stereotypes about Black boys and men shape people’s low expectations for their success in schools and society. It is a repetitive activity through which Black women and men are constantly reminded of their longstanding subordinate standing in the U.S. economy, political systems, and myriad social structures, including schools and colleges. (p. 191)

Students of color who are exposed to positive messages about themselves, their schools, and their communities often develop healthier identities and higher educational aspirations (Spencer, Noll, Stolzhus, & Harpalani, 2001). Making anti-deficit presentations of urban schools and communities of color more widely available and accessible to youth of color could bolster their success.

The final consequence of one-sidedness I have chosen to offer in this article pertains to learning. Schools that disproportionately educate Blacks, Latinos, and low-income students are denied essential opportunities to learn from each other’s success when researchers and others only highlight

problems. Several practices we saw in the 40 public high schools across NYC were innovative and extremely low cost. Educators in Los Angeles and Chicago, for example, will know more about these and other effective practices if greater balance is brought to the literature on urban education. I am not suggesting that educators haphazardly adopt what we found in the NYC schools, as their cultures likely will not permit exact replication. What I am calling for is the production and amplification of instructive practices that will inspire educators in other contexts.

## **Conclusion**

They are bright, hopeful, and safe places that educate a disproportionate share of the city's Black, Latino, and low-income youth. Very few people have been shot or attacked inside or immediately outside these places. They do not have post-apocalyptic appearances; there are no shattered windows or other apparent signs of vandalism. The overwhelming majority of their Black and Latino male students obeys the rules and does little to disturb the respectful environments that have been collaboratively fostered. Several young men of color in these settings (at least 325 of them) are nice, thoughtful, ambitious, and smart; their futures are incredibly bright. College attendance is aggressively promoted there; visual messages about higher education are seemingly impossible to escape and ignore, as they are pervasive and multifarious. Hence, some of their students (including Black and Latino young men) graduate and immediately enroll in postsecondary institutions. This is my counternarrative about 40 traditional public high schools in NYC. The anti-deficit lens through which we photographed them enabled 12 Black and Latino male researchers and me to see success in these schools.

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## Notes

1. Expanded Success Initiative (ESI) is the education component of the New York City Young Men's Initiative. Through a competitive application process, 40 traditional public high schools were selected to participate in ESI. Few were among the highest performing schools in New York City. Eagle Academy for Young Men was the only single-sex school.
2. As part of the small schools movement in New York City, several large high schools were divided into smaller schools that are co-located in one building. Each school typically occupies a different floor and has its own staff and culture.

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