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“There’s Still that Window that’s Open”: The Problem with “Grit”

Abstract: This narrative analysis case study challenges the education reform movement’s fascination with ‘grit,’ the notion that a non-cognitive trait like persistence is at the core of disparate educational outcomes and the answer to our inequitable education system. Through analysis of the narratives and meaning-making processes of Elijah, a twenty year-old African-American seeking his High School Equivalency (HSE) diploma, this case study explores linkages among dominant discourses on meritocracy, opportunity, personal responsibility, and group blame. Specifically, exposition of the figured worlds present in Elijah’s narratives points to the attempted obfuscation of social inequities present in the current educational reform movement and our broader society. This obfuscation present in the grit discourse and pedagogy aims to diminish the critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) that is needed to understand and improve educational opportunity and outcomes.

Keywords: non-cognitive traits, educational reform, urban education, narrative analysis, figured worlds, case study, high school equivalency

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...there’s a way. Even though it’s gonna be hard and the door may be closed. But there’s still that window that’s open. It may be hard to get to the window, but you can get there.

the only thing that they need help with is to see, like, you could overcome any challenges you have in your life. Like poverty, you can be poor, you can do anything.

--Elijah, age 20

Introduction

It was an afternoon in late March, and I was sitting in on a social studies class at The Opportunity Center¹, a storefront High School Equivalency² (HSE) program site in a large urban center in the northeast, when I met an impressive young man. The lesson was

¹ The names of all institutions and people are pseudonyms.

² I refer to the High School Equivalency (HSE) instead of the GED®, as the GED® is, as of January 2014, one of three examinations used nationally as the exit criteria for the High School Equivalency (Groen, 2014).

on propaganda used by both the Allies and the Axis Powers during World War II, and the young man, Elijah, drew powerful comparisons to more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. My notes from that day, intended to focus on teacher praxis and my role as a literacy coach, refer instead to how well-versed this young man was with socio-political discussions, and how determined he seemed to succeed through the program. After class, Elijah shared with me that he wants to enter the field of criminal justice, in part due to the unjust experiences he has both experienced and witnessed as a young man of color. He spoke in detail about being detained by police for ‘trespassing’ in a building where he was visiting a peer, and how he planned on fighting such injustices through future work as a lawyer. In my notes from that first conversation, I commented that Elijah seemed skilled in social theory regarding race and the vast inequities of our justice system, and that he seemed determined to achieve his goals. Privately, I wondered what had brought him to the High School Equivalency path. Certainly, this was a young man who possessed the trait commonly referred to as ‘grit,’ which has become ubiquitous in education reform circles³.

As I had with the other young men at The Opportunity Center, I invited Elijah to join the after-school men’s group that I had started at the local university, where I balanced doctoral studies with my work as a literacy coach at Elijah’s and other HSE Centers. Elijah was twenty years old at the time he joined the group, and self-identifies as a Black American. I am a White middle-class man who, at the time I met Elijah, was in my third year of supporting teachers as a literacy coach following my ten years of K-12 teaching. As a White middle-class educator working in urban working-class and poor

³ As one teacher wrote recently: “most educators can’t scroll through their social media feeds without seeing at least two or three articles about grit, the character trait that researchers say is a more reliable predictor of success than IQ”(Barile, 2015, p.8).

communities of color, I attempt to be an ally of youth in these educational spaces, and work in the broader field for educational equity, opportunity, and access. Through my position as a literacy coach, I supported what I hoped were meaningful learning projects grounded in collaboration and dialogue with my teacher colleagues and the program’s adolescent scholars. Through dialogue with Elijah, I learned more about the educational journey that had lead him to the HSE program: the previous year, he had been encouraged by his guidance counselor to transfer from his traditional high school in another area of the city, where he used to live. He was urged to enroll in the city-wide HSE network to complete his secondary-level studies. Elijah did so, studying at a central HSE preparatory site close to his new home and later at The Opportunity Center (HSE students in the program often move centers as their skills, as measured by practice tests, improve). When invited to join the after-school men’s group, Elijah seemed eager to participate, coming that same afternoon to visit an art gallery at the university with two regular participants in our twice-weekly group. Building off of Elijah’s voiced desire to become a lawyer, the four of us discussed future goals, and explored the different degrees and courses of study available to the young men after they completed their HSE preparation and exam.

During the few times that Elijah participated in the after-school men’s group, he continued to voice a powerful determination to accomplish his goals. This brought to my mind the recent conversations permeating the education world around ‘grit,’ the “trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals”(Duckworth & Quinn, 2009. p.66)⁴.

⁴ ‘Grit’ has been present in many recent publications and public discourses on education reform (e.g., Tough, 2013). In the words of one journalist, grit refers to ‘self-discipline wedded to dedicated pursuit of a goal’ (Tough, 2013, p.136).

In one conversation, he dismissed people who gave up on their life plans, saying “...there’s a way. Even though it’s gonna be hard and the door may be closed. But there’s still that window that’s open. It may be hard to get to the window, but you can get there.” What I knew of Elijah’s story supported the idea that he would never allow anything to get in his way: his move from the central HSE network site to The Opportunity Center was due to his improving performance on the regular practice tests that predicted readiness for the HSE exam. Elijah traveled two hours each day coming to and from The Opportunity Center, and voiced a desire to become a college student to engage his career path as soon as possible. Learning that he was dyslexic in elementary school, Elijah had relentlessly dedicated himself to his work with special education teachers to improve his reading competencies.

Elijah was invited to participate in my larger study on how young men of color in “second-chance” secondary-level programs understand themselves to be positioned within the deficiency discourses that are unfortunately prevalent in such programs, and agreed to participate in focus groups and individual follow-up interviews on his educational experiences and understandings. Despite his articulations of determination and a strong start, Elijah’s attendance at The Opportunity Center and our after-school group soon became sporadic, and after two months he stopped coming to the program. Wondering about the sharp contrast between his voiced determination and lack of continuing participation in the program, I delved into the audio-recorded narratives he shared, searching for insights that may help programs like The Opportunity Center to better support young people like Elijah.

Analysis of Elijah’s narratives shared during his brief participation in the study show a tension between a deep awareness of social and structural inequities outside of school and a fervent acceptance of self-reliance, meritocracy and group blame inside of school. This tension highlights problems with the education reform movement’s recent fascination with grit and other ‘non-cognitive’ traits, which are defined broadly as “attributes, dispositions, social skills, attitudes, and intrapersonal resources, independent of intellectual ability”(Shechtman et. al, 2013, p.v). Traits like grit, along with other non-cognitive characteristics like resilience and self-regulation, are, this framing suggests, what allow some people to achieve success while those who lack these qualities fail. This narrative analysis case study focuses on how Elijah understands success and failure in formal education through analysis of the identity work he does as he tries to position himself for success. Further, the study illustrates the ways that institutional and societal policy failures can take root in individual people as group blame, disavowal of group identity, and the reproduction of deficit models. Most importantly, this piece challenges our field’s recent fascination with grit and other non-cognitive traits as the determining factors of academic and life success.

“Grit” in Education

Why is the education world’s recent fascination with grit problematic? Grit, “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p.1087), has been identified in recent years as the essential trait necessary for success for both students and educators in recent studies (e.g., Duckworth, Quinn, & Seigman, 2009; Seider, Novick, & Gomez, 2013; Shechtman et. al, 2013). It has been argued that grit and other non-cognitive traits are particularly the answer for “second-

chance” students like Elijah who are preparing for the HSE and beyond, and that educational programming for these students should focus on these traits (Heckman et. al, 2006; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). A recently commissioned report by the U.S. Department of Education focuses on grit, asserting that “if students are to achieve their full potential, they must have opportunities to engage and develop a much richer set of skills,” and that these opportunities stem from “‘non-cognitive’ factors⁵ (Shechtman et. al, 2013, p.v). A focus on grit, resilience, and other ‘non-cognitive’ factors is framed as necessary, precisely what learners need to succeed in and through education and a competitive world.

Further, this focus is often associated with learners in urban schools and contexts. In research, practitioner, and popular discourses on education reform, there is an enduring discourse that ‘urban’ students, often code for students of color (Watson, 2012), lack the ‘discipline,’ ‘culture’, or intrinsic traits necessary for academic and life success (Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). The popularity of what I and others call the “grit narrative of success” as the answer to systemic issues and needs in urban schools and communities is of deep concern. Urban school communities, understood here as chronically-underfunded education systems serving high numbers of linguistically-, culturally-, ethnically-, and racially-minoritized learners, with entrenched bureaucracies that eschew community participation in decision-making (Weiner, 2000), cannot ‘overcome’ inequitable funding patterns and structural opportunity gaps through adoption

⁵ The U.S. DOE study does state that “Importantly, we are deliberate not to treat these factors as residing only within the student” (Shechtman et. al, 2013, p.v), though much of the study and existing use of non-cognitive traits in educational research and reform does exactly this, paying scant attention to structural issues and lack of equity. Further, circular reasoning is used in defining ‘grit’ as “trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals”(Duckworth & Quinn, 2009. p.66), and then asserting, as the U.S. DOE study does, that “these factors are essential to an individual’s capacity to strive for and succeed at long-term and higher-order goals, and to persist in the face of the array of challenges and obstacles encountered throughout schooling and life”(Shechtman et. al, 2013, p.v).

of the grit narrative. Analysis of how these discourses live in people’s sense-making of social worlds reveals that the recent fascination with ‘grit’ is extremely problematic. The framing implicit in the grit narrative pushes researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners away from generative political action for a meaningful educational reform movement that works for equity and access.

The Need for (and Erasure of) Critical Bifocality

The fascination with ‘grit’ encourages researchers and educators to turn off what has been called critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012). Educational research focusing on “individual lives of resilience/despair as divorced from structural constraints” contribute to “frameworks [that] reproduce the fantasy that institutions or people survive in hermetically sealed spheres, that inequality gaps have no effect on teaching and learning”(Weis & Fine, 2012, p.173). Critiquing both research that offers a solitary focus on structural oppression and research that offers a solitary focus on individuals’ lives, scholars Lois Weis and Michelle Fine offer a “bifocal” framework that seeks to “make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals”(p.174).

What, then, are the linkages between individuals like Elijah and structural conditions? Within which discourses is Elijah embedded; in what social systems does he participate, negotiate, or resist? Most importantly here, how might we understand the grit narrative, and the recent fascination with it, in the context of these linkages? Saltman (2014) argues that the grit narrative is deeply embedded in systems of control that depend on fervent belief in meritocracy. This narrative is “predicated upon a promise made to

poor children that if they learn the tools of self-control and learn to endure drudgery, they can compete with rich children for scarce economic resources”(p.44). Emerging from a wedding of the “culture of poverty” arguments of the 1960s (Harrington, 1966/1997) with a contemporary scientific veneer of objectivity on the psychological and biological effects of poverty, poor people are seen as suffering trauma as a result of their circumstances, trauma that can be overcome through discipline and self-control. Saltman argues that grit can be understood as “a new apolitical form of character education in which becoming educated is explained through instrumentalism, efficiencies, and above all submission to authority”(p.44). In this, the grit narrative “continues the longstanding political project of the right to not merely individualize responsibility for social conditions and life chances but to emphasize promises of subjective control and agency”(p.44). Drawing on the discourse of meritocracy and grit does not lead to this subjective control and agency: instead, the gaze towards privilege, oppression, and gross inequities is shifted to self or group blame.

The pedagogy at work in the grit narrative is one that seeks to erase awareness of inequities and critical consciousness of power inequalities. What counts as knowledge becomes reified as the dispositions valued in labor markets, a set of attitudes, content, and skills that are seen as fixed, transmittable, and able to be evaluated through seemingly-neutral testing metrics. The notion of high expectations for all learners is a co-opting of calls for educational equity in the service of rendering invisible deep differences in opportunity for participation in economically-desirable educational processes. It is a deepening of what Darling-Hammond (2013) has identified as a shift from a focus on input gaps to output gaps in education reform, a shift that began in the

1980s⁶. When the focus is solely on output gaps, easily measured by positivist quantitative means that assume the status of truth, the conversation becomes framed as an achievement gap as opposed to an opportunity gap (Milner, 2010) or education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006b), leaving individuals as well as entire communities to assume the blame for not ‘achieving’ in what is framed as a neutral playing field. The grit narrative is one that seeks to erase the fact that students of different classes have access to widely varying pedagogies, curricula, and epistemologies, and that education often focuses on obedience and social control for working class and ethnically-, racially-, culturally-, and linguistically-minoritized learners (Anyon, 1981; Luke, 2009).

Structures in Lives: Identity and Figured Worlds

Ethnographers have documented the ways in which some marginalized people internalize discourses of personal responsibility, placing undue blame on themselves even when acutely aware of subordinate locations in class and other social structures (Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Macleod, 2009). Meaning-making practices allow people to both reproduce and agentively challenge hegemonies and structures. Scholars have used various concepts to explore the individual and group-based meaning-making practices’ complex relationships with structures, including habitus (Bourdieu, 2008), culture-as-tools (Swidler, 1986), and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2013). The concept that I engage here is that of the figured world, a “socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others”(Holland et al., 1998, p.52). Engaging elements of social constructivist and culturalist approaches to

⁶ She writes: “The Reagan era introduced a new theory of reform focused on outcomes rather than inputs—that is, high-stakes testing without investing—that drove most policy initiatives. The situation in many urban (and rural) schools deteriorated over the decades.” (Darling-Hammond, 2013, p.iii)

identity, figured worlds can be understood as “the contexts of meaning that people construct, contexts entailing a certain conception of characters, events, actions, and artifacts”(Vagan, 2011, p.49). In and through their figured worlds, “actors conceptually come to construct identities by placing themselves and their actions in relation to socially produced and culturally constituted activities”(p.49). Thus, people may have widely different understandings or identity enactments depending on the particular interpretive realm that is invoked: one may be an agentic and talented artist in a community-based arts program but a troubled ‘at-risk’ student in a seventh period middle school art class. Figured worlds offer individuals particular subject positions within particular contexts, ones that can be negotiated but are always in relationship with other discourses, social structures and cultural meanings.

Method

Narrative analysis is well-suited to exploring and documenting negotiated identities within figured worlds (Riessman, 1993, 2008). It offers a means of acknowledging the tensions that are often present as people work to negotiate their identity through position-taking practices. Embracing this complexity, narrative analysis offers a means of exploring human agency *and* structural limitations. People take up dominant discourses in nuanced ways as they make sense of their positions within figured worlds. In this case study, Elijah’s narratives can be read as “stories... both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances...include(ing) the possibilities for self and reality construction that are intelligible within the narrator’s community, local setting, organizational and social memberships, and cultural and historical location”(Chase, 2010, p.214). Narrative, understood here as a “recounting of

things spatiotemporally distant,” with those things being a “perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events,”(Toolan, 1988, p.2), is a rich data source that embodies the complexities of both cultural understandings and lived realities. Like the figured worlds that can be explored through narrative analysis, narratives are always in relationship with dominant discourses. Indeed, people often draw upon institutional discourses in their everyday narratives as they make meaning of their positions in particular interpretive realms (Souto-Manning, 2014).

Analysis of Elijah’s narratives shows the ways he perceives pathways to success and failure as he makes sense of multiple social spaces. This analysis is done using a framework inspired by the work of Catherine Riessman (1993, 2008) and James Gee (1991, 2011). Elijah’s narratives, shared during audio-recorded Men’s Group sessions and individual interviews, were transcribed and rendered into stanzas (Gee 1991, 2011), facilitating a focus on both the themes and organization of his narratives. Stanzas, a naming Gee borrows from the realm of poetry, are groups of “idea units about one important event, happening, or state of affairs at one time or place, or it focuses on a specific character, theme, image, topic, or perspective”(Gee, 2011, p.74). When the idea units shift to a new or different focus, the narrative is partitioned into a new stanza. Each idea unit is made into its own line within a stanza. Analysis of the themes and order of these units serves as the basis for arguments on Elijah’s understandings of inequities and inequalities in figured worlds in and outside of school, as well as the relationship between these understandings and wider conversations on the role of grit in education and life outcomes. Particular attention is also paid to deitics, pointing words that are context-dependent, as the use of these terms can shed light on implicit assumptions, power

relationships, agency, and belonging.

Setting: Program Structure and Embedded Inequities

Elijah’s educational program, The Opportunity Center, is a storefront alternative education program that is part of a High School Equivalency network serving between eight and nine thousand learners each year and run by the city’s Department of Education. At the time of the study, spring 2012, my work as a literacy coach in this network brought me to multiple centers, including The Opportunity Center where Elijah and I first met. Though my role was to mentor teachers and offer support in designing what I hoped would be meaningful project-based learning, I realized that there was little space for strong relationships and meaningful dialogue between educators and students at these centers. Pedagogies in the program are often a “back to basics” approach that emphasizes obedience and rote learning. Classes in every discipline revolve around worksheets and skill drills, and professional development conversations often centered on the challenges of attempting deep learning projects in an environment of sporadic attendance and rolling admission.⁷ The students in the program are ages 17-21, and were and continue to be overwhelmingly male, of color, and poor or working class. Based on the dominant pedagogies of routines and basic skill work, these adolescent scholars are positioned as walking deficits to be fixed. Evaluation of student progress is done every six to eight weeks in the form of skill-based standardized tests meant to track progress towards successful completion of the HSE exam.

To attempt to remedy the lack of dialogue, meaningful content, and embedded

⁷ This is not to frame the teachers as villains, as is common in the current educational reform movement, but to point out the very real constraints on enacting situated learning and project-based pedagogies in this and similar programs. These constraints come from lack of resources, limited opportunities for teacher collaboration, and the testing regimes that define and measure learning.

learning activities available to these adolescent scholars, I worked with colleagues to reinvigorate the men’s group program that had once existed at The Opportunity Center. The group provided opportunities for the young men to dialogue with their teachers on what constitutes a meaningful and powerful education. Overall, the goal was to collectively create a space through which the young men could build solidarity through discussion of experiences, aspirations, and understandings of the role education was playing and could play in their lives. Like Elijah, many of the young men in the group agreed to participate in a series of audio-taped sessions around their educational experiences, and seemed eager to participate in a project aimed at documenting their understandings and experiences of educational inequity. The educational opportunity and resources afforded these adolescent scholars was a far cry from that which was available to students in other communities in this large urban center.

From a quantitative standpoint, these inequities were and are painfully obvious not through a review of the program’s output (e.g., graduation statistics, college attendance rates, etc.), but, more importantly, through reviewing the program’s inputs and structure. This can be seen from the attendance data: it was not rare for a center to have over 150% of the maximum number of students that would fit in the building registered for the program; it was expected that far fewer students would attend each day. In essence, the program was designed for the absence and failure of the adolescent scholars. As I have written elsewhere (Golden, 2014), the program functions as a school in every way but name, a distinction that allowed, and continues to allow, the city’s Department of Education to report data in ways that suggest system-wide improvement and academic

growth.⁸ Many of these students, including Elijah, describe being ‘pushed-out’ of their traditional high schools. When asked about his pathway to the HSE world, Elijah says: “I was really trying to get reinstated back in school, but somebody told me, like, as much credits as I was missing, might as well just take your GED. So, it’s like, I got started with the GED program.” It was Elijah’s high school guidance counselor who encouraged him to leave high school for a High School Equivalency program. His guidance counselor did not discuss the support he would have or need as he prepared for a HSE diploma: “she just told me it would be faster to get your GED than it is to basically try to get all one, all these credits in one year. It would just be easier to get your GED.” This was a decision that Elijah quickly came to regret due to the lack of support in his HSE program, declaring: “It was like signing one of them contracts and that’s in the fine print... I wish I woulda known... I probably just woulda... try to jam pack everything in that one year. But, it’s, like, over now. So it’s, like, too late for me to go back to high school.”

Elijah’s guidance counselor also failed to make explicit what Elijah would be giving up by transferring from a Department of Education high school to a Department of Education HSE program. What he gave up, and what prompted him to compare his transfer to the fine print of an unethical contract, was nothing short of his federally-mandated⁹ educational rights regarding instructional support for dyslexia. The distinction

⁸ Learners with many strengths and talents who had low test-scores were treated as “bad data,” and encouraged to leave traditional high schools to attend the alternative HSE program. These “bad data” were not reported while the students were in the alternative HSE program, only surfacing if the student earned a HSE diploma, leading to a sudden reappearance in the city’s graduation calculation. In short, data were and are arranged in a way that highlights the positives while obscuring the negatives, conveying a narrative of progress that makes the system appear stronger. As I have argued, this is akin to the hiding of risk in financial markets before the crisis of 2007-2008, when risky investments were hidden through derivatives, creating the appearance of a healthy marketplace. The education world is truly adopting the practices of the business world with such accounting, and with the lack of accountability to the public.

⁹ I am referring to the (1975) Educational for all Handicapped Children Act (EHA), which was renewed and amended as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Skrtic, 1991).

between the legal responsibilities of a ‘program’ versus a ‘school’ allows the HSE alternative education program to eschew expensive special education supports. In Elijah’s words: “with the dyslexia? With GED, there’s no help.¹⁰” Upon transferring from a high school to the HSE program, students were required to sign a waiver detailing that they understand that they are forgoing these federally-mandated educational rights; Elijah does not recall signing the statement or having this explained to him, though he acknowledges that it was likely part of the transfer paperwork. Students eighteen years of age or older may sign this waiver for themselves, and an unofficial lexile® score¹¹ of the waiver shows that its text complexity is beyond the high school level, a reading comprehension challenge that is beyond the vast majority of incoming students based on the program’s own diagnostic tools. Perhaps following the letter of educational rights law, this clearly violates its spirit, a truth underscored by the fact that the Department of Education district that runs Elijah’s HSE program focused far more on skirting legal requirements than providing pedagogical support. The Opportunity Center, the site of the program where Elijah studied, had 24.3% of its incoming student population classified as special education learners with pedagogical accommodations detailed in Individualized

¹⁰ During the time Elijah was a student in the program, the waiver stated “Please be advised, if you choose to enroll in this High School Equivalency (HSE) program [that] HSE programs do not provide Individual Education Program (IEP) mandated special education services...because an IEP is developed to help a student move towards graduation with a regular or IEP diploma in an elementary or secondary school setting. A HSE program is not a secondary school setting leading to a high school diploma.” While limited improvements in support have been made since the time these data were collected, primarily due to the insistence of teachers and representatives of the teachers’ union, the special education support remains a far cry from the federal mandates in the HSE program. These are ways to apply for special education support and testing accommodations through the state education department, a laborious process of which the majority of teachers I mentored were unaware.

¹¹ This lexile® score was generated by <http://www.lexile.com/analyzer/>, the same program used by the city’s Department of Education to assess text complexity for pedagogical purposes. Elijah’s incoming reading comprehension score at the time of his transfer places him at roughly the seventh-grade level for comprehending academic texts.

Education Plans (IEPs) the year these data were collected, as were 17% of incoming learners in all centers of the program city-wide.¹²

Due to the program’s overcrowding-by-design and lack of supports for learners with specialized learning needs, it is likely not surprising that, based on data from the time of the study, over sixty percent of the learners who enter the HSE program leave without an HSE diploma within two years. Learners who earned their HSE diploma in those two years range between eleven to fifteen percent. Surely, these structured inequities (i.e., the vast differences in ‘input’) must be understood as a core reason for the “achievement gaps” of Elijah and other adolescent scholars with similarly constrained educational opportunity. Analysis of Elijah’s narratives shows a striking difference between awareness of the role these sorts of inequities play in the figured worlds in and out of formal education, a difference we must trace to dominant discourses regarding meritocracy, opportunity, investment, and widely varying outcomes.

Findings

The findings are organized into three areas that emerged from analysis of Elijah’s narratives: his awareness of structural inequities in his figured worlds outside of school; his belief in meritocracy and group deficiency discourses within the figured world of school; and the lack of support or accommodations evident within the figured world of school. The tensions between Elijah’s awareness of inequities outside of school and his fervent acceptance of meritocracy within school, as well as his desire for greater solidarity within formal education, highlight how this young man has internalized

¹² This may also be due to the fact that there is gross overrepresentation of learners of color in the special education referral process, which may be due to a lack of recognition of cultural processes, a prevalence of negative stereotypes about young people of color, and broader social structures (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). While an extremely important part of research on educational equity, my focus here is on the denial of what may have been an important support or testing accommodation for learners like Elijah.

institutional shortcomings as group or individual deficiencies. My discussion of this tension and desire for solidarity focuses on Elijah’s strategy of drawing on discourses of meritocracy as he attempts to position himself for success, a strategy that I argue is aligned with contemporary discourses on ‘grit.’ Included in my analysis are examples of Elijah’s narratives that evidence his understandings and identity negotiations as he navigates the world of formal education and works to achieve his goals.¹³

Awareness of inequities in figured worlds outside of school

Analysis of Elijah’s narratives shows that he has a deep awareness of inequities outside of school. Further, he attempts to separate himself from a tarnished group identity as a means of positioning himself for success. During an individual interview, he shared more about his desire to become a lawyer, saying “I always wanted to be like something higher, and...I just like lawyers, they can become into a judge.” When asked why, of all of the desirable professions, he wanted to become a judge, Elijah responded: “so like, I could actually be fair when somebody, like, when a person of color come to court, it can be more fair to them than just having a judge don’t know nothing about your background and where you come from.” Elijah’s life experiences have lead to his belief that the culturally-constituted activity of being called to court is not just nor fair for people of color. Within Elijah’s figured world of court appearances, there is great bias against people of color, and this social reality requires systemic change through greater representation of people of color as judges in the legal system.

¹³ Due to space limitations, not all narratives will be shared in full, though two narratives— in the second and third sections— will be shared in full, and rendered for structural, thematic, and deitic analysis to make overt the analytic process.

Elijah’s response lead to a conversation on the gross discrepancies and lack of equity and unjust outcomes for people of color in our legal system: Elijah shared that he has witnessed “a lot of cops abuse their authority,” and that he had been stopped and frisked multiple times without cause. Interestingly, his peer group, in and of itself, deserves suspicion in Elijah’s eyes. He asserts that being in a group is cause enough for police officers to stop and frisk people, yet individuals who separate themselves from the group should not suffer the intrusive (and, of course, illegal, as per the fourth amendment) searches without sufficient probable cause. Elijah explains what he sees as justified and unjustified stops, stating:

Um, like, for a stop and frisk you just can’t stop nobody just walking down the street, minding their own business by themselves. You just—to me, I feel like you just can’t stop nobody. *Now if you see a group of people walking down the block I can understand*, but just one person, like, why would you just stop them? They’re not doing nothing to nobody and they’re just minding their own business, listening to music.

Within Elijah’s awareness of gross inequities in the justice system based on race, there is an implicit assumption within the figured world of “walking down the block” that his peers in a group constitute a legitimate stop. This is an indication of Elijah’s desire to separate himself from the group, to draw on discourses of individual overcoming and self-reliance as he works to position himself for success. Yet even though he is often on his own, which in his eyes should prevent the indignity of stop-and-frisk, he has been stopped “numbers of times.” When asked to describe the most recent time, he recounted a narrative of an incident two weeks prior, when he was stopped on his block in his new neighborhood:

Um, I got stopped and frisked. And even though I was cooperating, the cop was still being, um, negligent. He was, like, saying a whole lotta stuff for no reason. I showed him my ID; I got searched and they wanted to run

my name and stuff. Ask me if I have warrants and stuff. I told ‘em no. It’s just like a whole long process of— I don’t understand why they do it.

Elijah stated that the incident took place right on the block where he lived, which also happened to be on the same block where his HSE Center was located, where he studied after moving and before transferring to The Opportunity Center. He went on to explain that there were extremely different “rule systems” in the two communities.¹⁴

Well it’s just like — when I was living in [his old neighborhood], I never got stopped and searched or nothing. But like I lived around houses and the majority of people around there was Caucasian. So it’s like different when you move to, like, a neighborhood a majority of Black — it’s like different rule systems with cops. I don’t know, like, things change. Like, I never got stopped, I never got frisked. And they, like, they more friendly when you’re in that type of neighborhood, a Caucasian neighborhood. But when you in like a, uh, majority Black neighborhood, they attitude is like, completely different. They think that every Black person’s a criminal or something. Like, every Black person’s not a criminal.

During the most recent incident, Elijah asked why he was being stopped, and was told that he looked “like a man off a wanted picture” and that “you fit the description of a person we looking for.” Elijah had been stunned when first approached by the officer, who was in plain clothes and “came out of nowhere and grabbed [him].” Elijah complied with the requests for his name and address, but recounts that he asked the officer “how come every time when I’m in this type of neighborhood, I always fit a description, but when I used to live in [his old neighborhood] I never fit, I never fitted a description?”

In our interview, Elijah volunteered that there was a possibility that he bore a resemblance to someone wanted for questioning, but that he had never committed a crime

¹⁴ Elijah’s old neighborhood is a more suburban part of the city, and roughly sixty percent of its inhabitants are Caucasian. Its demographic composition is roughly seventeen percent Hispanic, ten percent African-American, and seven percent Asian-American. The percentage of people living under the poverty line is roughly fifteen percent. In contrast, Elijah’s new neighborhood has high population density, roughly ninety-nine percent of people are African-American or Hispanic, and roughly forty percent live below the poverty line.

in his life, so he knew it could not have been him. He tries to understand why police officers engage in stop-and-frisk tactics, saying “maybe if I did understand why they do it, I could relate more. But I really don’t know why, what’s the purpose of it.” He is attempting to understand the position and accompanying challenges that the officer, who was White, faces, yet receives racist and negative positioning in response to his question on fitting the description. In Elijah’s words, he [the officer] “was just like, you just do. You all look alike. That’s what, that’s what, that’s what caught me, like, *we all look alike.*”

Elijah is positioned here as the ‘you’ who fits the description; he is framed as a criminal while in his own neighborhood. When asked how the officer’s comment made him feel, Elijah said “I was like, there’s still racism in this day and age. I was, like, ‘we’re not over that?’” When asked if he had an opportunity to vocalize these feelings to the officer, he began to repeat himself, saying “I didn’t want — I didn’t want” before saying “I didn’t say nothing. ’Cause I didn’t want to step too far over the line, and I might get locked up. And they might go farther than when they have to go. So I just took that, ate it and just went home.”

This is the situation in which Elijah and many other young men of color find themselves: criminalized, assumed to be up to no good, positioned as deviant. While Elijah feels in this moment that he has little in the way of an outlet to respond to these race and class-based positionings, he names these abuses and expresses the injustice inherent in them. He closes this narrative with: “So that’s why I feel like some cops overuse their, like, they overuse their authority as well. You— you’re supposed to be here to protect us, not to make me feel as a criminal in my own environment.” There is no

doubt that this is, to say the least, wrong, and no confusion regarding the locus of the problem: “different rule systems” that correspond to raced and classed communities, and officers who abuse their authority. These systems give rise to figured worlds of identity where young men like Elijah are hyper-aware that they will be treated unjustly.

Interestingly, Elijah’s father is a police officer, and told Elijah that the stop-and-frisk incident was “totally unprotocol.” Elijah stated that his father “actually wanted me to report it and, um, I can’t remember the cop’s badge number or his name so, it was basically we can’t report it or nothing.” Asked how he felt about his father being a cop, given that there are police officers who say things like “you all look the same,” Elijah said “It makes me feel like I’m happy that my father’s a cop. At least I have somebody that I know that’s on the force that can relate to, like, where I’m coming from.” His father works to support Elijah and help him process these continuing violations of his rights in ways similar to other African-American fathers exercising agency to support sons experiencing bias and negative positioning (e.g., Allen, 2012). Elijah asserts that the “different rule systems” that exist between places like his old and new communities evidence a need for greater understanding, an awareness of where people like him are “coming from.” In short, he is painfully aware of the deep inequities grounded in race and class (Milner, 2010), and of how his own positionality shifts depending on social “rule systems” tied to raced and classed spaces (Nelly & Samura, 2011). Yet when his narratives shift from figured worlds outside of school to the social spaces of formal education, Elijah engages discourses similar to those of the grit narrative: he draws on cultural stories of personal responsibility, meritocracy, and group blame that frame widely disparate outcomes in educational and life trajectories within the figured world of

formal education.

Belief in meritocracy and group deficiencies inside the figured world of school

When asked if the “different rule systems” that were in play in his home communities were also at work in schools, Elijah began to report overcrowding at his traditional high school. Describing Curtis High, the high school he attended when living in his old neighborhood, he says: “it was too much students cram-packed into one class. So it was, like, you can’t really get that much focus.” He quickly shifts from this observation of overcrowding to commentary on his peer group, adding “then there’s a lot of people talking. *There’s only a handful of students that wanna learn* and you gonna get distracted. There’s like, hard to like, try to learn something, keep your head when a whole bunch of people’s talking about nonsense.” What perhaps began as an indictment of under-resourced and overcrowded schools moves to an implicit blame on a group of learners purported to not be interested in learning: within the figured world of school, only a few people “wanna learn.”

Elijah continues his narrative by discussing the issue of teachers, saying “and then some of the teachers really don’t care if you pass or not. It’s like very few teachers that care if you go on about college and stuff like that.” This indictment of teachers’ lack of care also quickly shifts to the emerging theme of group blame. Elijah gave an example of one teacher, Mr. M., who would not help students. When asked for help by a student in the high school classroom, he would simply state that the answer was in the reading, and that the student should “look it up if you don’t know it.” Elijah rationalizes the teachers’ reticence to work closely with and support students, suggesting that it is grounded in the students’ widespread lack of engagement and deficiencies. He says “I felt like you should

at least give an effort to try to help the students...even though there was a lot of people that don't wanna learn, there's still a handful of people that do wanna learn, and it's not right that they get neglected for the people that don't wanna learn.” Within this framing, what ruins educational opportunity for invested learners like Elijah is the majority of learners, the ones he identifies as not wanting to learn.

Curious about how Elijah understands this group within this figured world of identity as well as his relation to the group, I asked him about the people who want to learn and those who don't want to learn. Here, Elijah positions himself in this narrative as distinct from those he identifies as the core problem in educational opportunity. He begins by saying that “you have some people, like some people, they just go to school to play around.” He immediately works to separate himself from these people in what I term Elijah's “Who Belongs in School” narrative.

Elijah's “Who Belongs in School” Narrative

Stanza One: Those who don't want to learn

1. You have some people/like some people/they just go to school to play around//

Stanza Two: People who want to learn and make their life better

*2. then you have/ and people like me/that really go to school to learn try to get their GED
3. and make their life better// that's what they wanna do/and that's the people that really
4. do need help//*

Stanza Three: Stuck in their mindset and wasting our time

*5. and there's some people that's just stuck in they own mindset and their own way that I
6. don't need this/ I don't need that//
7. so I was just like you wasting our time by coming here/ you might as well just not come
8. to school period//*

The core problem in formal education is, for Elijah, those who are “stuck in they own mindset,” people ruining educational opportunity for people who want to learn and are working hard to make their lives better. Elijah is working in his narratives to distinguish

himself from this group, and he draws on discourses of personal responsibility and parental accountability. Similar to the grit narrative, non-cognitive factors like ‘mindset’ are the chief culprit of limited opportunity or poor outcomes.

This work of separation from people with this inadvisable mindset in and through Elijah’s narratives continues. Asked what had allowed him to avoid the mindset of “some people,” he replied “it was my parents, my parents is hard on me... school is a main important thing in my family.” In contrast:

some people parents, they don’t really care about they children... that’s how some people grow up to be messed up, like not messed up, uh— that’s how some people grow up to be like, they don’t wanna go to school, they don’t wanna learn. ‘This is my life.’ Like, that’s not your life, you can make it better if you try hard.

Of these other young people who attend school but are not, in Elijah’s eyes, interested in learning, he says: “I don’t understand why they just go to school and they not there to learn. Like, I don’t understand the point of that at all.” The challenges stemming from inadequate schooling are, at their core, derived from those who do not want to learn or do not take school seriously within this figured world of identity.

The remedy to this problem, as Elijah frames it within his narratives, is that “they [the other learners] really need it to be broken down to them. Like, you can do better with you life. Like, they really need to be taught, like, you can do better with your life.” When asked to elaborate, Elijah explained:

...just make sure that everybody in school basically got have— you got to have the mindset that I wanna get out of here I wanna do better with my life to even go to school. So I’m thinking, if you go to school, if you attempt to go to school and you have that mindset...so the only thing that they need help with is to see, like, you could overcome any challenges you have in your life. *Like poverty, you can be poor, you can do anything.*

In short, people can decide to overcome challenges through tenacity within the figured world of school, a discourse similar to the popular grit narrative. In contrast to those in school without the proper mindset, Elijah positions himself as a striver who is working to overcome no matter the odds. He asserts:

...even after all the troubles I went through with school, I didn't even thought about giving up on school. I'm still here, I'm still trying my hardest and my best to pass and to get it over with. To go to college and make something better of myself. That should let everybody know there, like, I'm not a statistic. I'm not just gonna live off of welfare for the rest of my life, I want better.

Here, it is clear that Elijah is working in his narratives to shed unfortunately prevalent negative discourses about people of color; namely, the idea that people who look like Elijah do not work hard and are content to “live off welfare.” Implicit here is the notion that our society is a meritocracy, that people's life stations are solely the result of effort and gumption or the lack thereof. Speaking of the time when he had academic difficulty upon transferring to his HSE program, Elijah says “I was like, ‘oh my gosh,’ it's, like, hard. ‘How'm I gonna get my grades up?’ Like, I really sat down, stopped partying, *stopped being with my friends*. Like, you gotta make sacrifices.” The answer to the question of how one succeeds through school is, for Elijah, to separate himself from others. In short, Elijah works in and through his narratives to separate himself from a tarnished group identity. To do this, he draws on discourses of meritocracy, group blame, and personal responsibility to make sense of inequitable educational opportunity and life outcomes.

Desire for solidarity and support

Despite his work to separate himself from a collective identity, analysis of Elijah's narratives supports the notion that group solidarity and support are integral to his

individual success. This is evident in the stark contrast in the ways he talks about his academic learning and participation in school athletics. The figured world of earning a secondary-level diploma is, for Elijah, framed as a completely solitary activity, while the figured world of being a football player is one of collaboration, support, and solidarity. Elijah links his challenges in football with his difficulties at his high school in his old neighborhood, explaining that an injury forced him off of the team. This shift in his social location and group participation and support led, he suggests, to his challenges in the academic realm. No longer seeing a potential future with a football scholarship to college, Elijah describes himself as “discouraged with school....I didn’t want to go to school or nothing.”

In several narratives, Elijah compares the experience of being a student and being a football player. Being a football player “was the best to [him].” He elaborates:

You have a lot of friends that’s on the same path as you. A lot of people got the same goal of ‘I wanna go to college and play football for the rest of my life.’ So you got a lot of people that have the same goal as you. It helps you wanna get to your goal, it helps you to, uh, struggle. It helps you fight for your goal more.

In contrast, the figured world of being a High School Equivalency student is highly individualistic, offering little solidarity or support:

I feel the GED is on yourself. I feel like the GED is more on yourself than as in a lot of group people, because if—if you really want it you can get it. But if you wanna follow the people that just wanna sit there, play around, don’t do they work...it’s more of them that there is people that do their work and wanna go to school, you know, and finish. So it’s more easier to get to the side that you don’t wanna do this no more. You just wanna have fun, play around, then I want to go to, I wanna do work, put in hard work and dedication and get to my goal. So, like, it basically comes down to the individual themselves. And, like, a lot of people don’t have the willpower to overcome stuff.

Not earning the GED is a function of not “really want[ing] it” because it all comes down to the individual, to one’s personal responsibility and willpower. Again, there is more than a passing similarity here to grit, the “passion and perseverance for long-term goals”(Duckworth et. al, 2007, p.1087). There is no group or team for support if one wants to earn a HSE diploma, but this is not due to any external or structural force: it is the fault of members of the group themselves. Elijah’s peer group, in this figured world of identity, “just wanna sit there, play around, don’t do they work.” Within this framing, it is his peers who make it difficult to focus on school; Elijah draws on discourses of group blame along with discourses of meritocracy.

The contrast between Elijah’s experiences in the figured world of athletic participation and the figured world of school can be seen in a narrative I have entitled his “Football vs. School Comparison Story.” Using the deitic tool of narrative analysis (Gee, 2011), analysis of Elijah’s use of pronouns reveals much about where he has support and agency, and where he is positioned as a generalized ‘you’ or ‘they.’

Elijah’s Football vs. School Comparison Story

Stanza One: Football was a Team Effort

*1.Football just made **you**/like football was fun/ like/ it made **me** just have fun/ it was just
2.fun/ **I** loved the sport/**I** loved playing the game/ and every time **I’m** out there **I’m**
3.having fun/ **I’m** with a group of my friends/**we** all playing the same team sport/ and
4.we all have the same attitude as **we** wanna win/ **we** gonna help each other win//
5.so it’s basically like a team effort/*

Stanza Two: There’s No Team In School (It’s All on You)

*6.but like/when **you** like you in school/ it’s like/ there’s really no team/ it’s just really
7.based on **you**/ like the majority of people that’s in school don’t wanna get their
8.education/ **they** don’t wanna get— even be there/ **they** wanna party all the time//
9.so it’s easier to fall in that/ and people that do wanna do their work and go to school
10.**they** really don’t talk to nobody/ **they** really keep to themselves//*

Stanza Three: People Get Sidetracked Because of the Group

11.so it’s harder to make a group of people that wanna go to school/than it is to make a

*12. group of people that don't wanna go to school//
13. so that's where a lot of people get/ that's where a lot of people get sidetracked then//*

When engaging the figured world of athletic participation, Elijah uses the pronouns ‘we,’ ‘I,’ ‘I’m’ and ‘me’ ten times, demonstrating that, within this space, he has agency, a sense of belonging, and a generative collective identity. In this stanza, he only refers to athletic participation in the second person, ‘you,’ one time. Elijah’s agency here is intertwined with his collective belonging and social location within the figured world of athletic participation. In contrast, when he begins to explore how school is different from athletic participation, we see an important shift: Elijah refers to participants in the schooling process as ‘you’ or ‘they’ six times, completely eschewing the first person. Thematically, Elijah explains that “there’s really no team in school,” but this can be seen through his use of the second person as well. Elijah is ‘I’ or part of a ‘we’ when participating in athletics, but a ‘you’ or ‘they’ when participating in academics. Group identity within the figured world of schooling is negative, a ‘they’ who do not take schooling seriously, choosing partying over the work necessary for success. In an attempt to succeed in the figured world of school, Elijah draws on discourses of self-reliance, meritocracy and individuality as he reproduces prevalent negative framings of group identity for minoritized youth.

When discussing opportunity and social mobility, Elijah asserted: “there’s a way. Even though it’s gonna be hard and the door may be closed. But there’s still that window that’s open. It may be hard to get to the window, but you can get there.” Of his peer group who do not take schooling seriously, he maintained that they needed to “see, like, you could overcome any challenges you have in your life. Like poverty, you can be poor, you can do anything.” Despite these articulations of overcoming and resilience, and for

reasons unknown to me, Elijah stopped coming to The Opportunity Center by late spring, and did not continue his studies towards his High School Equivalency diploma. It is worth wondering what the sort of solidarity and positive group identity that he had in his athletic endeavors might look like and do for Elijah in an academic context.¹⁵ Indeed, recent research has shown the power of such support (Watson, Sealey-Ruiz, & Jackson, 2014).

Discussion

This narrative analysis case study began with an exploration of our field’s recent fascination with ‘grit.’ Elijah’s articulations of strength in the face of adversity fit within narratives about the importance of grit and resilience for learners to fight their way to success in and through our contemporary educational system. Given the circular reasoning present in the ‘grit’ narrative – grit is the trait of perseverance and the passion for long-term goals, so anyone who does not succeed must not have, by definition, enough grit – subscribers to this framing would likely argue that Elijah just did not possess what it takes to succeed. They might argue that the stresses of poverty have damaged him (e.g., journalist Paul Tough’s work, currently popular amongst many education reformers), or that his teachers have not provided the right sorts of challenges to build ‘grit’ (e.g., Shechtman et. al, 2013). Or perhaps there are deep problems with the grit narrative, and significant cause to question why it has become popular in the neoliberal education reform movement.

Completely absent from Elijah’s narratives situated within the figured world of schooling is any reference to the “different rule systems” that he is deeply, painfully

¹⁵ It had been my hope that the newly-reinvigorated men’s group would serve as such a space for Elijah, but the fact that Elijah did not remain in the HSE program for the remainder of the academic year shows that this was not the case.

aware of outside of school. While he is acutely aware of social inequities in his new neighborhood, he attempts to avoid the effects of these inequities by drawing on the notion of the individual striver, spending time alone and positioning himself as outside of a problematic group identity. Particularly within the figured world of school, Elijah sees his peer group as a primary driver of academic and social inequities, and discourses of group blame are salient as Elijah makes sense of his schooling experiences. Within his narratives, it is primarily the fault of peers who do not want to learn or take school seriously when he experiences overcrowded classrooms and underprepared and/or under-supported teachers. Elijah's critical consciousness regarding structural inequities in his education gives way to a focus on his peers as the locus of the problem or educational 'crisis.' Absent are spaces of solidarity and meaningful support through positive group identity. Absent in his analysis is discussion of the denial of his federally-mandated special education rights to academic support for his dyslexia. Absent is outrage for being pushed out of a high school and into a HSE program that, due to a legal technicality, is not required to provide these services. A focus on 'grit' and other non-cognitive individual traits as the determining factors necessary for academic and life success masks these absences and deep inequities in educational and other social systems.

It is important to be clear: this work does not intend to fault Elijah for drawing on the cultural stories that he has been taught are associated with success. Elijah is exercising his agency through his drawing on discourses that the neoliberal education reform movement and our broader society propagate. The figured world of school is rife with associations of meritocracy, personal responsibility, grit, and other non-cognitive traits; it is not surprising that Elijah would draw upon these discourses. I do, however,

fault the poverty of our *collective* imagination and analysis of race, class, and opportunity. The cultural logic of the grit narrative encourages minoritized and marginalized learners to separate themselves from group identity and sites of solidarity as they shoulder extreme personal responsibility rhetoric, rationalizing away social inequities. Simultaneously, these learners are encouraged to cut themselves off from the collaboration and solidarity needed to work against, and transform, these social inequities. Elijah is not unique in being encouraged to switch off his critical consciousness when engaging the figured world of school. While a case study cannot purport to speak for a generation of learners, I argue that the systems of logic that Elijah is drawing on here are dominant discourses that many learners are encouraged to draw upon as they frame their life goals and educational trajectories. Young scholars, along with other participants and stake-holders in educational processes, are motivated to frame the pursuit of knowledge and institutional capital as an individual struggle. Each learner is viewed as a human being divorced from society, encouraged to discipline him or herself, and offered discourses of self or group-blame that mask severe gaps in opportunity and an astounding lack of equity. Neoliberal education and economic reforms privatize and fetishize individual responsibility, vastly diminishing support from the state (Bourdieu, 1998; Saltman, 2014). This eroding of state support is framed in such a way that “the draconian disciplinary apparatus of the neoliberal age [becomes] invisible” and “these schools...make it seem like individuals are failing rather than social supports and public investments”(Saltman, 2014, p.49) Indeed, scholars young and old are encouraged to turn off the critical bifocality that is so needed now during this, the apex of neoliberal reform and discourses of personal responsibility. Seemingly neutral ‘market-driven’

policies in education and other social systems work to render invisible the privilege that opens doors for some while social and economic dispossession engenders increasingly insurmountable barriers for (many) others. Young people like Elijah are encouraged to see systemic failure as their own, persuaded to go for “that window that’s open,” tantalizingly just beyond reach as they find doors to opportunity closed or closing. Within the reform movement that fetishizes ‘grit’ as the answer to deep inequities, marginalized scholars are being encouraged to reach for windows that are being moved further and further away.

Implications

This case study serves to remind researchers and practitioners of the need to shift the way in which educational opportunity and outcomes are framed. Critical bifocality, the understanding of how larger structures and discourses are “woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals”(Weis & Fine, 2012, p.174), is urgently needed as we work for more equitable inputs in our educational system, a shift that is needed if we truly want academic excellence and expanded life trajectory options in all communities. The grit narrative, and the pedagogy that emerges from it, can serve only to mask the pathways we need to traverse in our research, policy, activism, and pedagogical practice. Challenging the grit narrative is a central way that scholarship in urban education can work for ethically-grounded reform, naming injustice and rendering overt “obfuscations of the realities of race and class bias...[and] the discrimination and inequities that are deeply embedded in the pervasive grammar of the traditional treatise on urban education and its reform”(Dantley, 2015, p.624).

The Schechtman et al., 2013 U.S. DOE report on the role grit plays in educational outcomes argues for learning activities that promote ‘grit’ and other non-cognitive traits, stating that “these factors can be just as important as intellectual abilities for success”(p. v). In lieu of this approach that emphasizes determination and persistence while masking severe inequities, an ethically-grounded urban education reform movement needs pedagogies that promote critical consciousness and awareness of the radically different inputs into the education of different communities (Milner, 2013). Adolescent scholars like Elijah possess and exercise agency in the various social spaces they engage; this agency can be constrained, though, through propagation and lack of critical interrogation of discourses that frame the challenges they face as an intrinsic lack of determination. To foster and support minoritized adolescent scholars’ agency, we need to promote sites of solidarity and resistance to harmful discourses that suggest that educational success is simply a matter of individual responsibility, determination, merit, or, when not attained, the fault of group identity. To be sure, the figured worlds of school that frame merit and group blame in these ways are discursive; they can and should be challenged. To support adolescent scholars like Elijah, we must offer pedagogies that resist reductive notions of ‘data-driven’ teaching and learning to include learners’ cultural understandings and lived realities as meaningful data that inform praxis (Golden, 2014). Rather than a grit pedagogy of obedience and intrinsic determination, critical pedagogies and literacies can offer sites of resistance and solidarity that allow minoritized adolescent scholars to bring themselves closer to the doors and windows they seek, and allow the bifocals needed to trace the pathways of opportunity gaps.

Author’s Note: Transcribed Narrative Conventions

Each stanza, or idea unit, has been given a title to represent what I see as its central theme, and words or phrases that we said with emphasis have been underlined. As the narratives are rendered here, “/” indicates a non-final intonation contour, “//” marks a final intonation contour, a comma indicates a pause, and “–“ represents a moment when the narrator breaks off to say something else (Gee, 2011, p.111).

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