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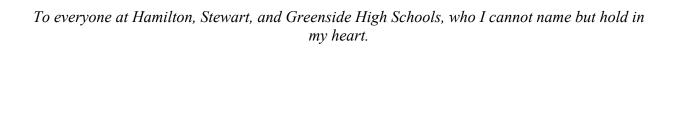

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Dedication

To everyone at Hamilton, Stewart, and Greenside High Schools, who I cannot name but hold in my heart.

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Abstract

High schools are spaces where adolescents learn, and their learning is not restricted to the official curriculum. During and after the school day, young people learn lessons about themselves, their peers, and the broader social world. These lessons matter not only for how they shape who young people become, but also for youths' experiences of schooling in the present. Much of the literature about high schools concerns the former, analyzing how features of adolescents' schooling predict outcomes like academic achievement and attainment, labor market outcomes, and interactions with the criminal justice system. However, these studies largely overlook the latter, which I center in this dissertation. I detail youths' school-based non-curricular learning experiences across two contexts: on extracurricular debate teams and in forbidden in-school snack markets.

Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2017-2018 and 2019-2022, I show that learning outside of the formal curriculum influences students' perceptions of themselves, of the formal curriculum, and of schooling more generally. Through debate team participation, students develop a strengthened belief in the importance of their own voice. They also use the skills and information that they learn in debate to improve their learning practices and make connections between the formal curriculum and other domains of their knowledge. In this way, students' learning outside of the formal curriculum can strengthen their engagement with the formal curriculum. On the other hand, through illicit snack markets, students learn that adults' strategies of discipline and control are misaligned with their assessments of risk and danger. While youth saw snack sales as harmless and appreciated their capacity to provide appealing food options (for buyers) and much-needed income (for sellers), adults linked snack markets to drug markets, producing a stigma around the activity and punishing kids for their

imagined, future failures. In scenarios such as these, students' learning outside of the formal curriculum can lead youth to disengage from the formal curriculum and resist the demands of schooling. Overall, this work considers the ways in which students' experiences of schooling relate to the official and hidden curriculum of the high school.

Chapter One

RESEARCHING IN HIGH SCHOOLS: AN INTRODUCTION

"I know nothing. I'm not learning anything." Emma sounded deflated as she reflected on her time at Hamilton High School, located in the near south suburbs of Chicago. Like many students at Hamilton, Emma generally liked her teachers; although she had complaints about certain school policies, like the swimming requirement in gym class, she thought of Hamilton as a pretty good school. Despite these positive – if bland – appraisals, Emma found herself frustrated at how little she learned in her classes.

A few miles away, Ebony was a student at Greenside High School, located in Chicago's far south side. Ebony had a similarly bleak assessment of her classes. "I don't come here for [my teachers.] I listened to first through eighth period. I hear all my teachers lecturing me." She spent most of the day zoned out, waiting for the hours to pass. However, Ebony could turn to something outside of the formal curriculum to satisfy her love of learning: "I just have to come to debate." A senior member of Greenside's debate team, Ebony felt that the activity was making her "more conscious of the world," and offered her the stimulating opportunity to "go inside [her] own zone and create."

Emma had no such intellectual refuge, but her claim that she "know[s] nothing" is clearly unfounded. She knows a lot: how to take care of her baby cousins; how to tend to her family's chickens; how to play the trumpet, the clarinet, and the flute. She knows how to support her friends through a bad day, and how to skip class without getting caught. These last two skills are related. Emma sometimes found herself with a choice: sit in a class where students are merely expected to copy notes from the projector, which "doesn't really teach me anything," or "ditch" in order to help a friend through emotional or physical distress. It was an easy choice. Her

friends came first.

Whether they are skipping classes, staying at school after class, or working on non-curricular endeavors during or between classes, adolescents learn a lot at school outside of the formal curriculum (Jackson 1968). In this dissertation, I explore students' learning in two non-curricular domains: as members of their schools' debate teams, and as informal vendors selling snacks during and between classes. I highlight the disjunctures that young people perceive between the formal curriculum that dominates the classroom (on the one hand) and the knowledge and skills they want or need to live good lives (on the other). Ultimately, I argue that efforts to improve schools are unlikely to succeed without first paying attention to how youth *experience* schooling. With the formal curriculum constituting little more than background noise for many students, educators and policymakers should turn their attention to the strategies adolescents use to make it through – and sometimes even enjoy – the school day.

Background

In their depiction of typical high school instruction, Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine note that "[t]eenagers are expected to sit for hour after hour passively listening and following directions but are seldom engaged in tasks that involve real choice and latitude" (2019: 39). School drags on, with hours turning into weeks, months, and years. It is drudgery. But young people are inventive – they find and create spaces and strategies for passing the time as pleasantly as possible.

Conversations about schools tend to focus on two things: inputs (like fiscal resources, teacher characteristics, and curricular models) and outputs (like GPAs, test scores, and college enrollment). The relationships between inputs and outputs matter deeply because they bring to light how inequities compound one another in American public schools. Yet a focus on these

metrics alone overlooks something important that happens between the implementation of inputs and the measurement of outputs. That missing piece is experience.

Kids spend a considerable portion of their lives in schools, and the experiences that they have while there influence who they are and who they become. Day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, youth shape and are shaped by their school environments. Their experiences cannot be reduced to inputs and outputs. They crack jokes, show off new styles, make friends, spread rumors, and form crushes. They figure out new parts of their identities and the workings of the social worlds around them. These experiences matter not only because they affect youths' developmental trajectories, but also because kids' daily lives are meaningful in their own right. As Jeff Guhin notes, "[s]chools are places with people, and those people are more than an aggregate of individuals to be measured and evaluated and prepared for a life to come afterward" (2021: 395). Unfortunately, youths' joys, frustrations, desires, and fears receive little attention in adults' discourse about schools.

Instead, nearly all of the education literature emphasizes schools' role in the reproduction of inequality. Over the past five decades, the sociology of education has been dominated by reproduction theory. Reproduction theory – stemming from Marxist thought and popularized by Bourdieu in the 1970s – argues that schools reward students inculcated by their families with high-status cultural capital, while punishing students who lack the cultural knowledge they demand but do not teach. This process results in the intergenerational reproduction of class- and/or race-based inequalities through systems in the schoolhouse (see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1977; and Willis 1977 for classical iterations of this argument; for more recent examples, see Eckert 2000; Carter 2005; Collins 2009; Lareau 2011; Crosnoe 2011; Stuber 2011; Dance 2012; Hardie 2015; Jæger & Breen 2016; Domina, Penner, & Penner 2017;

Cipollone and Stich 2017; Calarco 2018; Holland 2019).

Undoubtedly, schools' role in the reproduction of inequality is an important topic. Differences in the content and quality of available courses benefit high-socioeconomic status (SES) students (Gamoran 1987), who experience fewer interruptions than low-SES students in their pathways to completing post-secondary degrees (Goldrick-Rab 2006), while low-SES students on average complete fewer years of schooling (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson 2005), and attend less-selective universities and have less-prestigious career trajectories than high-SES youth (Mullen 2010). Race and class interact in ways that profoundly disadvantage poor Black and Hispanic students, further compounding stratified trajectories (Valenzuela 1999; Carter 2005; Best 2013; Hardie 2015). The sociological appeal of these stark disparities seems seductive, as scholars have flocked again and again towards research that highlights them. As Baker notes: "empirical inquiry in sociology of education, while technically impressive, is nearly *exclusively* focused on stratification and educational inequality" (2018: 61; emphasis added).

As portrayed by many scholars who employ reproduction theory, schools are akin to video games: students face a series of tasks and challenges to navigate, with rewards and sanctions doled out along the way. The paths that individual students follow are largely predetermined, their routes to success or failure made more or less direct based on player's profile set before the game begins. A wealthy, white student has more resources and faces fewer obstacles than a poor student of color, who begins the game with less room for error and a greater number of battles to be fought. Following the structuralist logic of reproduction theory, the player's final outcome can be predicted even before the game begins, but each step along the way represents a possible site for scholars to highlight the biases they face – often without bringing to the fore who holds those biases, and when and how they are activated.

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Of course, schools are not operated by algorithms; the same decision made by the same student at the same time on Tuesday versus Wednesday might be met with a dramatically different response. *People* respond to one another's actions, and those people occupy a variety of roles within the school. Teachers, social workers, security guards, counselors, administrators, aides – each of these people responds to students' (and other adults') behaviors in a variety of ways, with varying degrees of consistency. However, such nuances are largely missing from the literature. Consider the following portrayal by Domina et al.: "Schools create internal categories such as grades, classrooms, and academic tracks; adopt imposed categories such as accountability labels; and reinforce external categories such as race, class, and gender" (2017: 314). By posing *schools* as the actors in these processes, the individuals who make each decision (to assign grades, set up classrooms, determine or approve students' coursetaking plans, and so on) become invisible.

Changing our perspective from an inputs-outputs model to one centering experience reveals that the features of school that matter most to kids are ones that adults often overlook. How much rest can kids get while balancing demanding work schedules and early school start times? Is the food appealing, or at least decent? Can they wear clothes they feel good in? Do they get to see their friends, listen to music, or take a break when they need it? Do they feel like they are respected, encouraged, and trusted? How do they navigate confusing, and sometimes conflicting, demands from adults and/or their peers? Although young people grapple daily with these concerns, the inputs-outputs literature too often fails to reflect their significance.

Further, a recent and growing body of literature challenges the claim that schools' main relationship to inequality is one of reproduction. Recent "impact" studies, which leverage the seasonal nature of American schooling to to compare in-school learning with out-of-school

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learning, demonstrate that schools can actually serve to reduce certain class-based inequalities because gaps between in-school and out-of-school learning are greater for low-SES students than high-SES students (Raudenbush & Eschmann 2015; Downey and Condron 2016; Downey 2018; Downey, Quinn, and Alcaraz 2019). These findings suggest that schooling, despite persistent differences in school-based resources, has an equalizing effect as compared to a counterfactual world with no schooling.

Beyond these "impact" studies, ethnographic evidence highlights how schools can act as sites in which social inequalities are challenged. For example, Best details how high school students work to use events such as proms as spaces "where the hegemony of middle-class life can be contested, heterosexuality resisted, and adolescence redefined" (2013: 159). Similarly, Bettie describes girls "bored with their vocational schooling...[who] often brought heterosexual romance and girl culture into the classroom" – therein rejecting the supremacy of the official curriculum in favor of their own unofficial curriculum (2003: 59). As these instances illustrate, schools are sites where existing inequalities are interrogated and disrupted – perhaps *because* they are made so visible in these spaces. This literature makes clear that the deterministic nature of schools painted in the reproduction literature fails to capture the complexities of students' experiences in the high school. Adolescents may encounter the reproduction of inequality in their schools, but so too may they encounter resistance to inequality. Downey and Condron (2016) call a perspective which recognizes schools' *multiple* relationships to inequality "refraction," a lens which I employ in this research.

Angela Valenzuela (1999) notes that there is an important distinction between schooling and education. The two may (or may not) overlap, and the degree of their overlap varies for different students and across different contexts. Students who value education may resist the

demands of schooling, while those who can easily comply with the demands of schooling may receive little by way of actual education. She demonstrates how schools can take on a "subtractive" role, that is, how they "strip away students' identities, thus weakening or precluding supportive social ties and draining resources important to academic success" (1999: 10). Her work, which is highly attentive to student experience, underscores how student behaviors which appear on face to demonstrate a lack of engagement with school can be viewed as resistance to *schooling* that fails to satisfy the student's desire for *learning*.

Other work that centers experience brings attention to kids' power to shape their social worlds, despite the rigid structures associated with schooling. For example, in Barrie Thorne's portrayal of elementary school youth, she depicts "[t]he official agenda of the schools – the lessons, the rules, the overtly approved conduct – [as] like cement sidewalk blocks, and the kids' cultural creations like grass and dandelions sprouting through the cracks" (1993: 20). These sprouts matter not only in the moment, for their importance in kids' daily lives, but also because they represent "what is possible, doable, and imaginable for these young people" (Tokunaga 2018: 129).

In my research, I search for such "sprouts" as they grow around the formal curriculum. After-school activities are like gardens in this metaphor: kids have ample opportunity to enact "real choice and latitude" (Mehta & Fine 2019: 39) in what they participate in (i.e. which clubs to join), how to engage in the activity (e.g. how often or intensively to participate), who is in charge (e.g. electing team captains), what goals they seek to accomplish, and so on. Thus, chapters two and three of this dissertation focus on an extracurricular space, namely interscholastic debate. On their debate teams, students got to choose what research they conducted, what "cases" to deliver, which tournaments to compete in, how to train and respond

to feedback, and who they collaborated with. As I show in this dissertation, participation in these teams strengthened students' sense of the value of their perspectives (Chapter Two), and bolstered their feelings of engagement with their schools (Chapter Three).

"Sprouts" also blossomed during the school day, although they were fewer and further between. One practice that highlights students' capacity to improve the difficult-to-tolerate conditions of schooling is the sale of snacks, the focus of Chapter Four. Through underground snack markets, students were able to satisfy the needs and desires that the school itself fails to meet: obtaining appealing food throughout the day (for buyers), and earning money during the otherwise economically unproductive hours of schooling (for sellers). Although these markets met clear needs and could be viewed as entrepreneurial, adults' responses criminalized these student behaviors, producing a stigma around snack sales. Ultimately, such punitive orientations led some students to question the legitimacy of the school as a institution.

Through "sprouts" like extracurricular participation or engagement with the snack market, young people learned useful skills and information. This learning occurred within the physical walls of the school building, but existed outside of the formal curriculum – situating it precariously at the periphery of the school. For the young people involved in these activities, however, they were anything but marginal. They were portals into realms where they could enact agency and find success (Tokunaga 2018). They helped them form and maintain positive identities (Bettie 2003). They were what made it possible to endure the drudgery of schooling.

Research Sites & Methods

This dissertation draws on research carried out for two distinct yet related projects: an ethnography of two high school debate teams in Chicago carried out from 2017-2018, and an ethnography of a high school in Chicago's near south suburbs carried out from 2019-2022. Each

study draws on extensive observations and in-depth interviews with students and school faculty/staff. I selected ethnography as my main research method because of its capacity to illuminate social processes (Lewis 2003). Each of the chapters of this dissertation concerns processes in schools: how students develop positive attitudes about the value of their own perspectives (Chapter 2), how extracurricular activities help students bolster their sense of belonging in school (Chapter 3), and how adults' responses to student behaviors produce a stigma of criminalization around a seemingly-innocuous activity (Chapter 4). An ethnographic approach enabled me first to see *that* these processes were taking place, and second to investigate *how* they operated.

Studying Debate

The study addressed in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation took place in two Chicago Public Schools (CPS) high schools during the 2017-2018 school year. During this time, I observed after-school debate practices four days per week (two at each school), as well as weekend competitions approximately twice per month. One of the schools, which I call Stewart High School, is located on Chicago's west side; the other, which I call Greenside High School, is located on the south side. Stewart serves approximately 1,600 students, roughly three-quarters of whom are Hispanic and the remainder of whom are white (~20%) and Black (~5%). Greenside serves approximately 1,200 students, virtually all of whom are Black. I selected these schools with the help of the Chicago Debate League, which helped me identify teams which were neither exceptionally successful nor in the turbulent throes of their first season of competition. I conducted approximately 250 hours of observations across both teams, which I supplemented with interviews: one with each school's coach and six with members of each school's team, for a total of fourteen interviews. Due to restrictions imposed by CPS, I was not able to conduct

observations at these sites during the school day; thus, this study is limited to observations of debate activities after school, but interviews helped me understand how students and teachers compared debate as an extracurricular space to the official curriculum of the school.

Situating Hamilton

Hamilton High School is a capacious brick building nestled just a couple miles from Chicago's city limits. It is a large public school serving approximately 1,800 students, about two-thirds of whom are Hispanic, roughly thirty percent of whom are Black, and just under ten percent of whom are white. Over eighty percent of Hamilton students come from low-income families (meaning that the students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch, live in foster or group homes, and/or whose families receive public aid). The residential areas in the communities from which Hamilton (officially) draws its students are varied, including tidy bungalows, ramshackle ranches, stately single-family homes, squat apartment buildings, and densely-packed mobile homes. Some Hamilton students use the address of a relative in its attendance boundaries to attend the school, actually living in Chicago (to the north) or Indiana (to the east) and commuting each day to the school. Such arrangements were not officially permitted, but were openly discussed among adults at the school.

About twenty percent of Hamilton students receive special education services in accordance with their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Of students with IEPs, about half are Hispanic, forty percent are Black, and just above ten percent are white; Black students are overrepresented in this population relative to the student body as a whole, while Hispanic students are underrepresented. About thirteen percent of Hamilton students are designated as English Language Learners (ELLs), virtually all of whom are Spanish speakers. About three percent of Hamilton students drop out, with Black and white students more likely to drop out

(five and four percent, respectively) than Hispanic students (less than two percent). Chronic truancy — in which students have unexcused absences for five percent or more of school days during the year — is common at Hamilton, with nearly forty percent of students designated as chronically truant. Black students were most likely to be deemed chronically truant (nearly half), as compared to white and Hispanic students (roughly one-third each). Still, daily student attendance across all racial/ethnic groups matched district and state averages of approximately ninety percent each day.

In addition to its 1,800 students, Hamilton employs around 200 faculty and staff members. Roughly 120 of these are teachers; seven are administrators, four are social workers, eight are counselors, three are nurses, a dozen are security guards, and the rest are classroom aids, custodians, and lunchroom workers. Matching national patterns in the teaching workforce, most Hamilton teachers are white women, although of course there are many exceptions. The team of administrators was diverse, consisting of one Hispanic man, one Hispanic woman, one white woman, two white men, one Black woman, and one Black man. The social workers included two Black women, one Hispanic woman, and one white man. The counselors included four white women, two Hispanic women, and two white men. Among the security guards, around half were Black men, two were Hispanic men, one was a Hispanic woman, and one each were a white man and white woman; however, the security team underwent more staffing changes than other groups of adults in the building, so its composition varied throughout my time there. Consistently, though, it was predominantly comprised of Black and Hispanic men, the only group of adults in the school with such a composition.

Although there was no such thing as a "typical" day at Hamilton, some broad patterns helped define the day-to-day operations of the school. The first class began at 8:00AM, and

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classes proceeded in 54-minute increments throughout the day, culminating at the end of 8th period at 3:15PM. Six-minute "passing periods" let students and staff move through the building between classes. Teachers taught five classes a day, with one lunch period, one planning period, and one professional development/collaboration period. Students attended seven classes a day, with one lunch period completing their schedules. All students had at least one gym class each day. Some students had "study hall" periods, and a small number of seniors had late starts or early dismissals if they did not have a full slate of classes. Otherwise, students had no "off" periods akin to teachers' planning or collaboration periods.

State and district policies required students to earn the following credits: 4 English, 4 physical education (gym), 3 math, 3 social studies, 2 science, 1 music/art/language, and 6.5 additional elective credits. A common student schedule included an English class, a math class, a social studies class, a science class, a gym class, a language class, and an arts/music class. Schedules such as this were most typical in the freshman and sophomore years; in later grades, students were more likely to have multiple English, math, and/or social studies classes as they re-took courses they had previously failed. If a student failed their freshman year English class, for example, their sophomore schedule would include both English I and English II. As they completed the credit requirements, many stopped taking certain subjects, e.g. dropping math once they accumulated three math credits. Some students used summer school to make up missing credits, or to complete credits early so that they would have "easy" schedules their junior/senior years. For example, one student's schedule his senior year was the following: "I have robotics. I have [food & nutrition]. I have two gym periods back-to-back. And then after that I have coding, and that's my last period." Other times, students had to double-up on classes in the same subject in order to satisfy credit requirements. For example, one senior explained

that he was concurrently enrolled in two different English classes, not because he had failed one but because — for reasons that eluded him — he had not been assigned an English class his junior year. I often heard students express confusion and/or frustration about scheduling issues, including being placed in electives they had no interest in or *not* being placed in classes they actively wanted to take.

Classes were offered at four levels: "Transitional" (with the goal to "move students to the College Prep level"); "College Prep" (to "prepare students for post-secondary education"); "Honors" (which "incorporate[s] acceleration of the learning material"); and Advanced Placement (AP) ("designed to provide for more individual work and individualized performance"). Some classes, such as biology, chemistry, algebra, geometry, geography, and health, were offered as "ELL" (English Language Learner) options; these classes were not available at the Honors or AP levels. Across the subject areas, Hamilton offered a broad range of classes. Among them were: animation, African-American literature, app development, business law, ceramics and sculpting, Chicago history, guitar and popular music, popular novels, SCUBA, dance, and yoga. These course offerings, alongside the school's robust roster of faculty and staff, and its abundant amenities (a swimming pool, turf field, science labs, etc.), indicate that it is a relatively well-resourced school. As of 2019, Hamilton spent around $19,000 per pupil each year, surpassing the statewide high school average of ~$18,800 (ISBE 2022).

Doing Research At Hamilton

Fieldwork at Hamilton was, at different times, hilarious, frustrating, boring, exhausting, joyous, worrisome, tedious, and hopeful. The three years I spent there included some of the typical celebrations of high school – graduations, homecoming dances, proms – and the very atypical conditions of schooling that arose after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. None of

my three years of research resembled the others, although certain themes such as the enduring

tedium of school remained constant throughout.

I began my research at Hamilton as a young-looking 27-year-old, outfitted in my

"uniform" of sneakers, jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies. I carried a beat-up old backpack with my

laptop, water bottle, pens, and snacks. I selected this "uniform" to optimize comfort and

maintain a casual, modest appearance. However, I quickly realized that it had the unintended –

though not necessarily unwelcome – effect of making kids and adults alike mistake me for a

student. I was yelled at to get to class, asked for hall passes, and given food in the lunch line.

These mistaken assessments of my status in the school came in part because I blended in with

students (in addition to my casual dress, my long hair and short stature suggested youthfulness),

and in part because I did not look like the adults (most were ten or more years older than me, and

although some dressed quite casually, many opted for smart-casual attire). I decided not to

change my presentation after I became aware that people were mistaking me for a student, as

this made it easier to build rapport with students and differentiate myself from the adults who

were presumed to be disciplinarians. However, I was quick to flash my badge reading "STAFF:

Researcher" and clarify that I was not a student, especially when kids were the ones who were

uncertain or incorrect about my status. I did not intend to mislead anyone about my age or role in

the school, and I hope that my quick corrections quashed misunderstandings before any ill

effects arose.

Such misunderstandings became less and less common throughout my time in the school,

largely because people came to know me as either "that lady writing a book about Hamilton" or

"the intern" with the security staff (discussed below), and (I believe) because my own aging

became more apparent thanks to gray hairs and wrinkles. I found out many kids described me as

"that lady writing a book about Hamilton" after the first day that I shadowed Alejandra, a quiet

band kid. I often hung out with her cousin Sofía, who reported the next that day Alejandra had

posted on Snapchat that she was in the driver's ed car with "that lady writing a book about

Hamilton" (we were passengers for another kid's first highway drive; I was terrified). I laughed

and asked if that was how people knew me, which Sofía confirmed. In later months and years, I

heard this phrase repeated often, and it became clear that kids talked about me in this way.

Around the same time that I shadowed Alejandra, I was spending increasing time with

the security guards. I began fieldwork with a heavy skepticism of them, as security staff at other

schools where I had worked were often rude and were viewed extremely negatively by students.

I planned to maintain careful distance from Hamilton's security guards. I quickly came to

understand that this was a poor plan. Unprompted, students I spent time with would brag to me

about how "tight" or "cool" they were with the security guards; close relationships with them

were an important form of social currency in the school. When I began formal interviews, I

found that students universally spoke positively about the security guards (although virtually all

of them would mention one or two exceptions whom they personally disliked). This pattern

continued across all three years of research. Once I felt confident that there were not segments of

the student body who disliked the security guards – I tried and failed to find such kids, a surprise

to me – I began to publicly spend time with the guards. I often stood beside them in the

hallways, hung out in their office, or sat with them at the main entrance. By the end of October

2019, my time spent with the security team had earned me the nickname of "intern," a title of

endearment that I held through the end of my time in the field.

My days of observation at Hamilton fell into three categories: person-focused, place-

focused, and "floating." Person-focused days entailed "shadowing" folks, following them

through their normal daily schedule. I typically asked someone permission to shadow them at some unspecified future time, like "later this week" or "sometime next week," to try to avoid attempts to change their routines on my behalf (e.g. dressing up when one usually dressed casually, showing up to school on time when they were regularly tardy, or having homework or lesson plans completed when they were usually done hastily during school). I then spent the entirety of a school day with that person, with the exception of bathroom breaks, time in the locker room (for students), and occasionally lunches or plan periods spent working alone (for teachers). Place-focused days meant spending the school day in a particular location, such as the cafeteria, the library, the gym, or the front desk. These days helped me to notice rhythms that flowed through the school day, like the relative calm of earlier lunch periods compared to later ones, or the stream of late arrivals and early departures in and out of the building. "Floating" days were the most common, and included elements of both person-focused and place-focused observation. For instance, I might spend first period in Ms. Park's English class observing her and a clique of students I knew well; second period in Ms. Kelly's choir class; third and fourth periods in the cafeteria, chatting with various kids and adults; fifth and sixth periods at the security desk; and seventh and eighth periods in the athletic stadium with gym classes. These days allowed me to briefly check in with a variety of respondents, following up on topics of earlier conversations and getting the latest updates on the goings on around the school.

While conducting observations, I tried to sit wherever I would be least obtrusive. This usually meant occupying student desks, ideally ones at the back of the room where my laptop screen could not be seen (to ensure the privacy of my notes). At times when no student desks were available, I sat on countertops (atop heating/air-conditioning units or in science labs) or – my least preferred option – at teachers' desks. I typically focused on between one and four

individuals in a given period of observation – not ignoring others, but knowing that I could only be attentive to so much at one time – and I did my best to take note of their words and behaviors as completely as possible throughout the period. Of course, I missed many things that people said and did, but ultimately felt that I had captured the important features of the school as they occurred day-to-day.

In addition to observations, I conducted interviews with students (47), teachers (18), administrators (4), security guards (4), classroom aids (3), and a social worker. These interviews helped me to understand how people thought about themselves, one another, and the school as a whole. Whenever possible, especially with students, I re-interviewed them at various points in time. Because of my interest in students' experiences of schooling, and especially how those experiences change over time, re-interviewing the same respondents multiple times helped me to understand how their attitudes and perceptions shifted. In total, I conducted 108 interviews, usually lasting around 45 minutes (roughly the length of a lunch period, excepting time to discuss interview protocols and walk to/from private interview locations); they ranged from a minimum of 33 minutes to a maximum of 1 hour and 13 minutes. Among the 108 interviews, 38 were with faculty/staff and 70 were with students. Thirty-one (31) were follow-up interviews with individuals I had previously interviewed, meaning that 77 different people participated in interviews (30 faculty/staff and 47 students). During these interviews, I asked respondents to describe themselves, Hamilton in general, different sets of people at Hamilton (e.g. students, teachers, administrators, security guards), their likes and dislikes about the school, and their perspectives about topics such as trust, belonging, and discipline in the school. In these semi-structured interviews, I allowed the conversation to flow as naturally as possible, turning to my interview guide at times when responses did not easily lead into further questions. People

seemed to enjoy the interviews as opportunities to be heard, to vent, and/or to share positive memories. Frequently, respondents recommended other people I should interview, and especially among students interviews came to be seen as a sign of "respect" or "care" for a person. I often returned to themes or stories from the interviews in informal conversations or follow-up interviews, which helped to establish a familiarity with respondents.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed both the nature of schooling and my research of it. On March 13th, 2020, a sunny Friday, I sat nervously in classrooms where bottles of hand sanitizer had abruptly appeared days earlier. People weren't quite sure how the disease spread — airborne, through surfaces, through physical contact with an infected person, something else? It was an anxious time, as the principal attested during an all-staff meeting that morning: "It's scary times, a lot of us are probably anxious, I'm anxious, I'm scared, we don't have all the answers, and sometimes when we don't have all the answers, it's stressful…Your kids are feeling the same type of anxiety, so let's be aware of that anxiety also." People tried their best to go through the school day as usual, but the atmosphere was anything but.

During fifth period, the announcement was made via email: school was cancelled the following week, and until further notice. There were a variety of responses to this news. In the English class I was observing, the teacher grimly confirmed this report to a student who had heard about it from a friend in another class. "It's true," the teacher said with a somber nod. She sighed, steeled herself, and raised her voice to reach the rest of the class. "Alright, I'll just do it: boys and girls —" and at that moment, a boy stood up and asked excitedly, "Wait, can I make this announcement?" The teacher gestured her approval, and the boy spoke. "Aight, on bro grave,[1] we have no school next week. It's blessings!," he declared, hands in the air. Some kids

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[1] "On bro['s] grave," or "on my [literal or fictive] brother's grave," meaning "I swear on my loved one's grave that this is true."

clapped; others looked around nervously. The teacher took on a more serious tone:

> In order for this to slow down, everyone has to stay put, slow down – we're not going to the mall, going on spring break. We need to hang out at home, watch TV, take care of your parents, your grandparents. Take a look at Italy: teenagers are being affected, 20 year olds, 30 year olds. It's growing rapidly. It truly is. You really have to take care of yourselves, for real.

Again, reactions were mixed. A few minutes later, I overheard a girl declare, "We're all about to die — we're just meme-ing it." Another student worried about the fact that he didn't have WiFi at home; his school-issued iPad would be of little use without internet access. During passing period, someone set off a smoke bomb in the hallway; the fire alarms rang, and everyone poured into the grassy fields surrounding the school. Kids were jubilant in the sunshine. The upcoming canceled week of classes combined with the following week of spring break meant they had at least two school-free weeks to celebrate. There was a palpable giddiness as they tossed baseballs and softballs; at the same time, there was fragile nervousness as they discussed the pandemic with their peers. When the bell rang at the end of the day, calls of "see you in two weeks!" volleyed across the hallways from students and teachers alike.

We did not see one another in two weeks. For the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, there was no school at Hamilton. Teachers uploaded videos and worksheets to Google Classroom; students were expected to complete the work at home on their own time. Few did. The district declared that any work done after the school's closure could only improve student grades, not be counted against them. Kids would keep the grades they had as of March 13th, 2020, with work filed through Google Classroom potentially improving those grades but with no penalties for uncompleted assignments. With no classes to observe, I pivoted to fully interview-based research, completing twenty-four interviews via phone from mid-March through late May.

The following fall, Hamilton pivoted to all-remote, synchronous instruction using the

Zoom video conferencing platform. Under this model, students were expected to log into their classes following a "normal" school schedule four days a week, with Wednesdays set aside for catching up on work and talking one-on-one with teachers. In this phase, I observed Zoom classes and continued interviewing students and adults via phone or Zoom. Later, the school began a partial physical re-opening, with students given the option to attend school in-person two days a week (continuing to use Zoom for the other two days each week). Other students remained fully remote. The next phase allowed students the option to attend school in-person four days a week, with other students remaining fully remote. During these phases, I used a mix of in-person and virtual methods to conduct interviews and observations.

Finally, during the 2021-2022 school year, the school returned to full in-person instruction five days per week with no remote option. Students and adults were required to wear masks until March 2022 (when Illinois' governor lifted the school mask mandate), although it was common to see masks worn incorrectly (e.g. not covering the nose, or worn on the chin without covering the nose or mouth). Even though I was allowed to attend Hamilton throughout the entirety of this school year, I took periods of time away from fieldwork when my university's guidance implied greater risk, for example avoiding the high school when the university required remote-only instruction due to the surge in cases associated with the Omicron variant. I continued to check in with respondents via phone throughout such periods. During this final year of fieldwork, I focused my data collection most heavily on observations in order to understand how patterns in the school had changed from prior to the pandemic, but interviews also continued to be a helpful feature of the work.

A key feature of the research I conducted at Hamilton is *time*. Other school-based ethnographies, although many of took place over the course of multiple years, give little

analytical weight to time. Given adolescents' developmental stages, I believe that the ways that their attitudes and actions change over time are especially relevant. How does a quiet, respectful sophomore become a boisterous, combative senior? How does an enthusiastic-but-shy freshman blossom into an outgoing and well-respected junior? Where, in their paths through high school, do students modify their goals – honing them into something more concrete, downgrading them in the face of challenges, or changing them entirely thanks to new information? Who are the key players driving these shifts? How do students make sense of changes in themselves as they progress through the years? Using ethnographic observations, frequent informal conversations, and repeated interviews with respondents across multiple points in time, I focused much of my research on change-oriented questions such as these. I tried to understand my respondents as individuals in context – not only in social contexts of family, school, community, and so on, but also in the temporal context of who they had been, who they were in the moment, and who they hoped to become, as well as how these answers changed as they proceeded through different phases of their identities.

Throughout all of the phases of research, there were moments which were difficult or awkward to navigate. One such situation arose when a student confided in me that one of his friends had been physically assaulted by her boyfriend. This information fell under mandated reporting requirements, and to the student's dismay (yet understanding, as I often reminded him and all respondents about mandated reporting procedures), I passed what little I knew onto a trusted social worker – in the student's presence – who then met privately with the student to gather additional information. Less heavy but significantly more common challenges arose when I had to navigate flirtatious advances from students and/or staff, not an uncommon experience among ethnographers (Hanson & Richards 2019). Such advances were awkward but relatively

easy to shut down from students: I simply mentioned my age or flashed my staff badge and they would laugh and say something along the lines of "oh, shit," then quickly change the subject. Advances from staff came mostly from security guards. Usually these advances were clearly made in jest, and while they made me uncomfortable, I tended to laugh along and hope the joke would pass quickly (it typically did). However, on one occasion – at a bar to celebrate another guard's birthday – a security guard behaved in such a way that I considered taking a break from fieldwork. He repeatedly tickled my waist, continuing despite my urgent requests that he stop. He eventually did stop, but then started repeating "I just want to tickle you so bad" over and over, while ogling my torso. I tried to avoid his attention, walking away to talk to others, but each time I found him by my side within moments. At one point, he put his arm firmly around my waist, and I maneuvered out of his grasp to seek refuge in the bathroom where I knew he could not follow me. Knowing that this guard carried a weapon, I feared for my safety; moreover, having previously thought of him in an avuncular way, I was grossed out and distressed by his advances. I left the party early, unsure how I would navigate that relationship moving forward. I kept my distance from that guard for the next two months, which he noticed and questioned. I explained that I had already shadowed him extensively and needed to spend time with others; then, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic guaranteed greater distance. When we resumed seeing one another after the school reopened in the fall of 2021, he made no further advances. Our dynamic returned to a friendly one, although I could never forget the disgust and fear I felt that evening.

Scenes from Hamilton

Students at Hamilton typically had 2-3 best friends, forming tight cliques around which wider friendship circles formed. I became close with five such cliques: the AP nerds, the football

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boys, the gossip girls, the library hangers, and the queer kids. On a warm spring day in her senior year, I interviewed Terri, a member of the "queer kids" clique. We shared a lunch of chicken tenders, french fries, and oranges in the shade of a small tree. She was counting down the days she had left in school – only four to go. It was a relief. To Terri, as to most students at Hamilton, school was a waste of time. She shook her head in disgust as she described it: "Why do teachers think putting notes on the board is teaching? It's not! I don't understand what [something] is just because I'm copying it down."

The dark circles beneath her eyes were a testament to the fact that she had more pressing concerns than copying notes. The fourth of six children, she was living with her older brother and helping care for her younger sisters in the wake of their mother's death a few months prior. She had started high school as a straight-A student, but was now barely scraping together the credits she needed for graduation. Still, her efforts would mark her as the first of her siblings to receive her diploma. She didn't feel like it meant much in terms of academic merit. "Some of the teachers *suck.* Some of the classes *suck.* They're not, like, well-formed, you know? You get nothing out of them."

I asked if she felt like she was learning, and she fiddled with one of her many piercings as she shook her head. "It's not [learning]. You have to *try* to fail some of these classes. Like, you genuinely have to try so hard to fail some of these classes. And it's like, you're not benefitting from that, you know what I mean?...You're not learning anything, you're not gaining anything." This frustrated Terri because she *wanted* to learn. As she explained, "I care about learning. I enjoy learning!...But I don't learn in these classes. Because, you're putting on a video and telling me to take notes. Like, what am I even supposed to take notes on, you know what I mean?" Again and again, she shook her head, tugging at the grass beneath us as she spoke. She

oscillated between disappointment and anger as she assessed the adults in the school. The worst

were the ones who belittled students. She mimicked a typical teacher's response to a student who

failed their class, sneering as she spoke: "Oh, you failed [this class]? Now you have to take it

again next year – and I hope you feel like *shit*. And I hope you feel so dumb. I hope you feel

dumb as fuck because you failed this class." She broke character to explain: "That's like, how

they throw it at you. And it's like, what the fuck?"

As the bell rang and we walked back to the building, her voice rose angrily. "Why are

you teaching me the same shit every year? All these classes are the same. I'm not learning

anything, I'm not gaining anything. It's just so repetitive." As she thought back on her time at

Hamilton, she realized that the most salient things she had learned were strategies to avoid the

drudgery of the school day:

> I've been here for four years and I couldn't even tell you a single thing that I've learned.
> Like, it's not like there's anything that stands out, nothing that stuck. It's all the same
> shit. I've been here for four years, I could not tell you a single thing that I've learned or
> gained. [Well, actually,] I know how to cheat really well. I know how to not get caught
> when I'm skipping a class. I know how to go to my friend's gym period every day in
> fourth period instead of US History.

Terri's experience was not at all atypical for Hamilton students. As I got to know them, I learned

that many had faced traumatic events in their families, held caretaking responsibilities and/or

paid jobs, and struggled with their own mental health. Still, they tried their hardest to care about

school. They believed in the achievement ideology – the idea that one needs a good education

and the accompanying credentials to be successful in life (Carter 2005) – and were willing to

work hard to improve their futures. But in the face of such dull, mind-numbing instruction, they

came to believe that the lessons really worth learning were the ones that enabled them to dull the

unrelenting boredom of schooling. Instead of school serving as a useful tool to help them get

ahead, it came to represent a dreaded test of endurance.

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One strategy kids used to overcome the boredom of school was to incite conflict with others. This strategy was rare, and the kids who employed it were few and far between – but their efforts had a way of enmeshing unwilling peers in a web of drama. Charlie was a student who tried his best to succeed in school, but his efforts met little reward. A tall, soft-spoken boy, he was quick to smile and liked talking to all kinds of people. He struck up a flirtatious relationship with a girl he knew, but he came to find out that she had a "toxic" ex-boyfriend who resented Charlie for getting her attention. The ex-boyfriend punched Charlie on his way into Spanish class one day, and Charlie decided to defend himself; he knew he wasn't supposed to, per school rules, but saw no point in letting himself get assaulted without any recourse. A teacher broke up the fight, both boys were sent to administrators, and Charlie got suspended, sent home for about a week.

Once he got suspended, two things happened: 1) he fell behind in his classes, and 2) his teachers were informed that he got in a fight, and they judged him for it. He cringed when his art teacher called him "fightin' Charlie" after he returned to school. He didn't think of himself as a fighter, but apparently his teacher did. He suspected his other teachers might also think of him as a troublemaker since he knew they'd been informed about his suspension. He did his best to explain to them what had happened – to clarify that he hadn't started the fight, that the other boy hit him and he wanted nothing to do with the situation – but he still worried they thought he was a bad kid. The time he spent attempting to clear his name with his teachers was time he wasn't spending on academics, but he still did his best to catch up on all of his work. These efforts were not entirely successful. His English grade fell to a D; he struggled to follow the lessons in his Architectural Design class.

When he saw what could happen if he fell behind for reasons outside of his control, he decided against taking AP Physics, for which he had been recommended the following year. He felt it was too risky to take such a difficult class if other kids' behaviors could put him in a situation where success seemed unattainable. He had wanted to take AP Physics because it could help him achieve his goal of becoming a mechanical engineer, but now he figured he'd settle for a "regular" class instead.

To be clear, Charlie did not like "regular" classes – they were boring. He was frustrated by his geometry class, which moved too slowly for him. He didn't even know why he was in it. He had earned a 100% in his algebra class the year before, and his teacher recommended him for honors. But when he received his schedule, his class was simply listed as "Geometry," no honors. In fact, he was in a team-taught geometry class that served both "regular" education students and those with "special education" designations. He didn't know why his class had two teachers; he just knew that they seemed to be going over the same material again and again.

In boring classes, trouble was hard to avoid; kids had little to pay attention to other than each other. They might "start something" because of who you talked to, or even where you looked. Charlie liked looking at the kids around him. He might admire someone's shoes, or wonder when they got a new tattoo. But what he had learned at Hamilton – the most pressing lesson the school had taught him – was to avoid other kids. He had to stay hyper-vigilant of his behavior. In Spanish class, for example, he sat a few seats away from the "right hand man" of the boy who hit him. That boy seemed to want to "start something" with Charlie, who himself just wanted to learn Spanish; he had always dreamed of being bilingual. Instead, he found himself managing his gaze to avoid further problems. "I try not to look over there no more. Just, I don't wanna start any problems before I leave." Like Terri, Charlie wanted to learn. Also like

Terri, he did learn – but not the lessons the school touted in its handbook. Instead, he was left with little education in the formal curriculum, and ample education in the patterns of conflict between students. For Charlie, school was even worse than a dreaded test of endurance; it was a minefield of potential trouble.

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It wasn't only other students who could cause such trouble. Adults did, too. Marquise was an ambivalent student but a deeply committed member of the basketball team, and he was willing to do what it took to maintain academic eligibility. It wasn't easy. Marquise was homeless, shuffling between stints crashing with friends, family, and occasionally, his car. The car was a source of some difficulty (it broke down often), but it was necessary: each morning, Marquise woke before dawn to drive his brother to a warehouse job outside of the city. Then he'd head back to wherever he was staying, try to get a little more sleep, and get to school sometime during the first few periods of the day. He wasn't enthusiastic about school, but it was a chore he was willing to do. "I got to go to school: it's my senior [year] in sports, and my grades are already bad, so I got to go."

It didn't happen often, but sometimes the adults at Hamilton brightened his day. "You can simply make my day better by checking on me. Little things like that. Like Ms. Park, when she ask me how I'm doing, she's here for me. That warm me a little bit." Other times, they made an already-bad situation even worse. Marquise recalled a scene from freshman year, the morning after his dad had passed away. "I came to school, and I was angry. [No,] I wasn't angry, I was trying to get through it. I'm still at school [despite what happened]." To help ease his pain, Marquise turned to something he could always rely on: music. He stayed quietly to himself, headphones in, and headed to class. "All I heard was, 'Get out of my classroom, because you got

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your headphones in.' I was like, 'What? ...You could've just tapped me and tell me to take them off.'" He was taken aback. "You're doing all this, and I'm coming to school after my dad dying." He felt that he wasn't asking for much: "You could've just tapped on me to see what I was going through." It wasn't the last time an adult would fail to give adequate attention to how Marquise's life outside of school might shape how he came to school.

Three years later, now struggling to get by with his mom and brother, he came to Hamilton one morning exhausted. As usual, he'd driven his brother to work, slept a little more on the friends' couch he was crashing on, and headed to school. He was annoyed. The people he was staying with had smoked weed that morning, and he knew his clothes would pose a problem. "I know I smell like it, but I ain't got no cologne, so I'm like, 'Okay, I don't know how this gonna go.' But I went in there anyways because I got to go to school. And I was already ready for it." By "it," he meant the grief he would experience for how he smelled. Less than a minute after entering the school's door, an administrator stopped him:

> She's like, 'Come here, you reek.' I was like, 'Okay.' So she took me in there, she talked, she questioned me, 'Do you have anything?' They searched me. I was like, 'I don't have nothing. You can search my car, you can search me, you can search my socks, my shoes.' They did. There wasn't nothing in there.

Notably, Marquise knew to expect these invasions of his privacy, but he went to school anyway. He knew, too, that he would next be sent to the nurse for a physical evaluation:

> I already knew everything that was going to come. I literally thought out the whole process before I walked in the building...I knew everything they was going to do, and I knew they finna[2] do this [evaluation], [and] I'm finna pass it.

He did. "They check your blood pressure, your heart rate, telling you to breathe, check your pupils. She's telling me to breathe. I'm breathing. She said I had a normal heart rate. Blood pressure was okay...I passed the test." He felt vindicated. "You think I smoked, lets do it. I'm

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[2] Finna is an informal contraction of "fixing to," akin to "gonna" for "going to."

finna pass the test, now you're finna know I didn't smoke. I'm finna prove you wrong, so come on, let's do it. I'm all about proving you wrong so let's prove [you] wrong." He grinned as he recalled the scene. "I smiled after the test. I smiled so hard. I was" – he broke off into peals of laughter.

He didn't smoke that morning because he never smoked; he was too invested in his athletic performance to jeopardize it with drugs. His abstinence wasn't enough, though. After he passed the evaluation, the nurse "looked at me and she's like, 'Well either you're around people that smoked or you smoked yourself. I'm going to send you to [in-school suspension (ISS)].'" At the time Marquise was recounting this story, I already knew he had ended up in ISS that day, but I was still a bit stunned. "Did you tell her that you didn't smoke?," I asked. Marquise nodded. "Yeah, I told her that I didn't smoke, but you know, she gonna believe what she wanna believe. That test show her that I didn't smoke...But she knew I was around people that smoked... I was like, 'That's not my fault.'"

In ISS, adults continued to take actions that misaligned with Marquise's actual situation. He was assigned a "Behavior Learning Packet" about drugs. Part of it read:

> Going to school is like running hurdles in track. You are pointed in the right direction and encouraged to work hard. In school, your hurdle may come in the form of a challenging test or a paper. As you progress in school, the hurdles get higher, but you get better. When you finish high school, you have jumped the many hurdles and have proven yourself in many ways.
> Life can be challenging as is, without putting additional hurdles in front of you. Drugs and alcohol pose new and bigger hurdles for those who are involved. They make you miss your step and try to get you to fall. They make the regular school hurdles seem more difficult than they really are. If you don't put drug and alcohol hurdles in front of you to start, life's race will be much easier.

Marquise *hadn't* put the hurdles of drugs and alcohol in front of him, but "life's race" was still plenty difficult. On top of everything else, now he had this packet to complete. "You read it, it tells you why people do drugs, why people think drugs are cool, all that. I'm just like, 'I didn't

even do them, but okay.'" Admirably, he completed the packet, but in the meantime was forced

to miss out on a full day's worth of classes – all for an offense he never committed. It was

frustrating. Thinking about his time at Hamilton, Marquise mused, "I'm misunderstood all the

time." He wasn't alone in this sentiment.

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As the band played *Pomp and Circumstance*, Alejandra looked around the packed

gymnasium. She had gone to school with most of these kids since childhood. There were the

funny ones, the dramatic ones, the quiet ones. They had grown up together, first running around

the playground as little kids and now experiencing the first triumphs and trials of adulthood. The

graduates fussed over their caps and gowns, adjusting the shiny polyester and snapping selfies

once everything was in place. As the band director signaled the end of the processional,

Alejandra set down her mallets. She had no cap, no gown. She wouldn't be graduating with her

classmates today. Maybe next year, she hoped. She wasn't sure, but she'd try.

If it was uncomfortable to attend her class' graduation ceremony without graduating, at

least there was comfort in being there with the band. Alejandra loved band more than anything.

When the school re-opened after its pandemic-related closure, it was the first marching band

performance that made Alejandra feel like some normalcy had returned. "It just felt like a

dream," she recalled, "I was standing on the football field and looked up for a second like 'oh

my god, I'm back here again! Aahhhh!'" Her features softened at the recollection. "And then I

remember I started crying and everyone was like 'why are you crying,' and I was like, 'I'm just

so happy!'" Her eyes widened as she recalled the awe she felt in the moment.

Such happiness didn't come easily to Alejandra, especially in the wake of the pandemic's

many disruptions. Zoom school "took a big toll on my mental health," she reflected, but

resuming in-person school wasn't easy either: "It's really hard to just suddenly come back and be expected to go back to how I was sophomore year. Like, it's a big change. It's been a year, you know, it's been like forever." She wanted to do well in her classes, but it was hard to be invested in them when the instruction was so dull. "You know how there's teachers who, um, they'll kinda just show you a video, and then give you a worksheet? I just – I don't like that." It might have been easier for her to care about her classes if she felt that her teachers cared about her, but instead she was left wondering if they even noticed how difficult isolation had been for herself and her peers. "I feel like teachers and like staff don't really understand how hard it might've been for someone when we were in complete shutdown, quarantine. I wish they would understand a little more, you know what I mean? Or just try to reach out a little more." Since none of the adults acted like anything was amiss, Alejandra was left with the impression that they either didn't understand or didn't care. It was a lonely feeling. Even though she knew other kids must be struggling too, she was left feeling like she was "the only one."

Band, though, was a refuge – a space where she felt cared about, where her efforts paid off, where she could do her work and come away something to feel proud of. When I asked her what she liked so much about band, she paused for a moment to think, then took a deep breath. "Not to get all *sad* or *deep* or whatever, but, I mean, I'm not really good at school. I don't really like school. So like, whenever I go to band, like, I don't wanna brag, but like, I — I'm good. I'm good at what I do. I guess it's the one thing at school that actually makes me feel good about myself." It could have been easy for Alejandra's teachers to miss that she rarely felt good about herself. A quiet kid with full, rosy cheeks and a short stature, she sat docilely at her desk for the classes she actually showed up to; she skipped plenty, too, either coming to school halfway through the day or slipping into the cafeteria to avoid the classes that made her feel the worst.

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She was unfailingly polite, never disruptive, did not come off as sullen or angry. So, to teachers primarily concerned with ensuring orderliness and adherence to class norms, Alejandra became invisible. Standing at the back of the gymnasium, clad in all black with the rest of the band, this invisibility seemed cemented. Alejandra was quite literally left behind from the commencement – the beginnings – promised to her classmates.

At commencement, the very things these students so desperately sought were central, if only in the superintendent's words. "Peace, love, and understanding," he repeated throughout his speech, imploring the graduates to bring these traits into the world. It seemed like a cruel irony. They wanted to feel cared about, respected, and understood. They wanted to know that their teachers would listen to and value them; they wanted spaces where they could work through misunderstandings and conflicts with their classmates. But again and again, Hamilton let them down.

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Where Hamilton let them down, they picked each other back up. The library hangers were one of the first cliques I got to know, consisting of Lucas, Damian, and Sofía. I dubbed them the library hangers because of their daily habit of gathering in the library during their lunch period (and sometimes during classes that they skipped). Each was something of a misfit – Lucas, a comic book-loving senior who worked nights bussing tables and weekends as part of a demolition crew; Damian, a quick-witted and big-hearted junior whose remarkable intelligence was often overlooked due to the IEP that left him confined to special ed classes; and Sofía, a firebrand junior whose fierce protective impulses belied her deeply sensitive side, and who attended the district's alternative high school for half-days, coming to Hamilton only for the last few periods of the day. They didn't feel comfortable in the jam-packed cafeteria, where they'd

come across kids with whom they had various dramatic entanglements, so they opted to forgo

eating lunch in order to seek refuge in the relative isolation of the library. Each day, they sat

around a small table, sneaking bites of forbidden snacks, gossiping, venting, strategizing about

how to navigate social quagmires, and above all, laughing. Their time together in the library

exuded such joy that I magnetized towards it; even if I didn't intend to pass fifth period with

them, they'd wave me over, I'd tell myself to only stay for a few minutes, and before I knew it,

the period was over.

They laughed about uptight teachers. They laughed about former crushes. They teased

each other, and laughed at themselves. They laughed about other kids: the "stupid jocks" and the

"cheerleaders" and the "horny ones" and the "gays" and the "potheads." They laughed about

things that scared them: school shootings and accidental pregnancies and the pandemic. They

laughed about difficult circumstances in their lives, like how Lucas' and Damian's dad's weren't

around much, but each was missing a leg, so between them, they had "a full set of dad legs."

They were witty and irreverent and endlessly entertaining. It was a lifeline amidst the drudgery.

One day, out of the blue, Lucas told me, "This school broke my spirit sophomore year." I asked

if anything in particular had happened that year, and he shook his head. "No, it's just so boring.

They gotta tear this whole school down and make something else."

Lucas, Damian, and Sofía were one another's biggest supporters and biggest defenders.

When Sofía was threatened by a girl whose ex-boyfriend she was now dating, Lucas and Damian

escorted her to her classes, and hung out with her in the library when she skipped class to avoid

encountering the provocateur. When she went to visit her social worker, Damian often went too

(Lucas didn't, which everyone agreed was the right choice, so he didn't have to encounter his

own social worker unnecessarily). When she was caught vaping in the bathroom and was kicked

out of Hamilton altogether – now assigned to the alternative school full-time – they FaceTimed her from the library, keeping her a part of the community in a school which had pushed her away.

If there was joy to find in school, the lesson they learned was to find it in one another.

Chapter Overview

In this dissertation, I consider what and how students learn outside of the formal curriculum in high schools. In Chapter 1, I have examined the state of the literature and introduced the main themes that motivate this research. In Chapter 2, I explore how debate team participation can contribute to adolescents' growing stocks of cultural capital. Although youths' cultural capital is understood to come primarily from their families (Lareau 1987), schools also play a key role in the development of cultural capital (Jack 2016; Khan 2011), and extracurricular activities are no exception. I show that such activities are one avenue through which youth can acquire dominant cultural capital. Further, I develop the concept of *adaptive cultural capital*, or cultural capital that dominant institutions demand of youth from non-dominant backgrounds, but that is not required of members of dominant social groups. While both dominant and non-dominant youth require dominant cultural capital to succeed in dominant institutions (Carter 2003), non-dominant youth must also "manifest exceptional qualities in order to be channeled in this direction" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 83). I consider these "exceptional qualities" to be adaptive cultural capital. This chapter considers how debate team participation shapes adolescents' sense of themselves as individuals.

In Chapter 3, I consider how debate team participation influences adolescents relationally by focusing on their interactions with peers and adults on their teams. I draw on the concept of "cognitive engagement" from the psychological literature to understand why debaters have well-

documented advantages in terms of grades and test scores as compared to their non-debating peers (Mezuk et al. 2011). I find that extracurricular participation, such as joining a school's debate team, helps to strengthen students' school engagement in the form of cognitive engagement (working hard to learn) as well as emotional engagement (feeling like they belong), which in turn boost their behavioral engagement (answering questions, doing work). Through the activity, debaters developed strong relationships with peers and their adult coaches, and strengthened their appreciation for challenging aspects of the learning process. Although many debaters felt that the learning environment of the debate context was more stimulating than the learning environments of their classes, they nevertheless applied the skills and attitudes they acquired in the activity to the official curriculum of the school. These factors help explain why debaters have been shown to outperform comparable peers in terms of academic achievement and attainment (Mezuk et al. 2011; Peters 2009). I argue that cognitive engagement helps explain the positive impact of certain extracurricular activities on school performance.

In Chapter 4, I describe another realm of learning that exists outside of the formal curriculum, but in parallel to it (rather than after school, like debate). In this chapter, I present findings about youths' snack sales at Hamilton High School. Youths' affinity for snack foods is well-documented (Fletcher et al. 2014; Best 2017); in various contexts, they sell chips, candy, and other goods. Adults may frame such sales as either entrepreneurial or deviant, which can contribute to positive youth development (on one hand) or cycles of disengagement and criminalization (on the other). Drawing on ethnographic and interview data from Hamilton High School, I show how adults' criminalization of snack sales led the activity to more closely resemble that which they feared: drug sales. Snack sales constitute one way in which youth exercise agency in the face of broad institutional control, leading some to challenge the

legitimacy of the school overall. These findings represent a case of how youth experience "criminalized childhoods" in a school context (Dinsmore & Pugh, 2021).

Finally, in Chapter 5, I synthesize the themes introduced across these chapters, considering how a focus on student experience can improve high school research and practice alike. Further, I depict an area in which students experience joy – interactions with the disciplinary apparatus – and juxtapose it with the boring nature of the typical school day. I note that although students at Hamilton experience little joy in contexts of possibility (like classrooms, which could encourage them to pursue academic and professional interests and teach valuable skills), they do report considerable joy in contexts of restriction (like "the Block," or in interacting with security guards). This system thus works to deeply enmesh students in the school-prison nexus (Meiners 2007). Ultimately, I call for greater attention to how students experience schooling among both researchers and practitioners.

Chapter Two

"MY VOICE MATTERS": HIGH SCHOOL DEBATERS' ACQUISITION OF DOMINANT AND ADAPTIVE CULTURAL CAPITAL

Introduction

Schools in the United States are characterized by profound degrees of inequality such that low-income students rarely have the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers (Kozol 1991; Borman and Dowling 2010). Though many factors play a role in this disparity, a significant body of research has shown that youths' access to dominant cultural capital contributes substantially to the reproduction of structural inequality (Bourdieu 1973; Willis 1977; Bettie 2003; Lareau 2011). This is in part because navigating schools to make the most of educational opportunities is facilitated by dominant, middle-class cultural knowledge (Lareau 1987; Lewis 2003; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). As such, schools' potential to support their students' acquisition of dominant cultural capital is important for improving the educational opportunities of low-income youth, who often can only access certain information and skills at school (Lewis 2003). Though the frequently hidden, implicit nature of dominant cultural capital can make it challenging to obtain in school (Bourdieu 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977), there are certain aspects of cultural capital that can be taught, such as when to speak out and ask questions (Jack 2016), or how to navigate "dense," multifaceted relationships with faculty (Khan 2010: 64). However, schools that serve low-income youth are often ill-equipped to furnish their students with these skills, as they are less likely than schools serving wealthier students to employ highly-qualified teachers, offer a diverse and challenging curriculum, and provide a variety of extracurricular opportunities (Kozol 1991; Darling-Hammond 2006).

A substantial literature explores how the cultural capital that youth bring to schools shapes their opportunities to learn (Willis 1977; Lareau 1987; Bettie 2002; Lewis 2003; Khan

2010; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). Despite these efforts, little is known about avenues for low-income youth to acquire dominant cultural capital in under-resourced school settings. Further, while existing studies have documented how students from various class backgrounds are afforded different resources within economically diverse schools (Bettie 2002; Calarco 2018), and how low-income students who attend prestigious, well-resourced schools can gain dominant cultural capital (Khan 2010; Jack 2016), little work has been done to understand the ways in which diversity can arise in the cultural capital held by low-income students within under-resourced schools. Finally, although research has shown that members of marginalized groups are expected to have specific forms of cultural capital in order to access and thrive in dominant institutions (Berg 2010; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013), this work has failed to conceptualize the distinction between dominant cultural capital which both dominant and non-dominant students need, and what I term "adaptive cultural capital," which is only demanded of students from non-dominant social groups.

In this study, I address these gaps by drawing on six months of ethnographic observations and interviews with two high school debate teams in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). I find that participation in interscholastic debate enables racial/ethnic minority, poor and working-class students to acquire cultural capital that facilitates their success in schools. Debaters in the study developed dominant cultural capital in the form of comfort demanding critical feedback and deconstructing and analyzing complex ideas. Debaters also developed adaptive cultural capital in the form of building strategies for facing failure with resilience. While students enter school with existing stores of resilience, debaters viewed their debate experiences as contributing meaningfully to their ability to persevere. Because the habits and attitudes that debaters built are valuable for obtaining a high-quality education, I argue that competitive interscholastic debate

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constitutes one resource for non-dominant youth to thrive in dominant educational institutions. As increasing numbers of poor and working-class youth pursue post-secondary education, yet often struggle to complete degree programs (Berg 2010), it is important for researchers and practitioners to better understand ways that schools can prepare their students to effectively navigate dominant cultural institutions.

Background

Dominant and Adaptive Cultural Capital

A large body of literature has shown that students' class backgrounds shape their school performance, and that cultural capital mediates this relationship (Heath 1983; Lareau 1987; Fischer et al. 1996; Lewis 2003; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). This research, often guided by Pierre Bourdieu's (1973) early insights into schools, illustrates how schools benefit students with high cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, the public education system both rewards youth who possess dominant cultural capital and punishes those who lack it; as a result, schools are "bound to become the monopoly of those social classes" that define schools' dominant culture (1973: 181). This perspective is pessimistic about the prospects for social mobility among children from families with low levels of dominant cultural capital because it views schools as responsible for the reproduction, not disruption, of existing social hierarchies. In this view, culture is one of the overlapping and interlocking social systems that "differently prepare children to come to school and differently reward them once they are there" (Lewis 2003: 156).

Although many conceptions of cultural capital exist, common across them is the notion that cultural capital is one form of capital – along with human, social, symbolic, economic, etc. – through which individuals can exercise power in society. Building upon, but nuancing, Bourdieu's work, Lamont and Lareau define cultural capital as "institutionalized, i.e., widely

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shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) [directly or indirectly] used for social and cultural exclusion" (1988: 156). Throughout this paper, I utilize Lamont and Lareau's definition of cultural capital, specifically focusing on the attitudes, preferences, knowledge, and behaviors demonstrated by high school debaters. I refer to the cultural capital defined by Lamont and Lareau as "dominant cultural capital" in order to emphasize its connection to "high status cultural signals" (1988: 156) and to distinguish it from forms of "non-dominant cultural capital" that are less valued in educational settings (Carter 2003). In this paper, when I refer to the "dominant" culture in schools, and the "dominant cultural capital" which they value, I mean those cultural signals that are reflective of white, middle-class norms (Lareau & Horvat, 1999); non-dominant cultural capital, then, refers to cultural signals that reflect the norms and values of other cultural groups, such as communities of color (Yosso 2005; Carter 2003). It is important to note that dominant and non-dominant cultural capital can co-exist, and that the acquisition of one does not necessitate the repudiation of the other (Carter 2003). Youth of all social backgrounds bring meaningful forms of cultural capital to schools; however, certain forms of cultural capital are more valued than others by dominant institutions, and are therefore particularly useful for one's ability to thrive in a stratified society.

Recent sociological work has supported Bourdieu's early perspective by outlining how adolescents who lack dominant cultural capital struggle to engage effectively with authorities in institutional settings such as schools (Khan 2010; Lareau 2011; Jack 2016; Calarco 2018). For example, Annette Lareau argues that middle-class children learn to demonstrate a "sense of entitlement" which empowers them to demand customized interactions with authorities such as teachers and doctors, while poor and working-class children learn to display a "sense of

constraint" marked by compliance with institutional rules and practices (2011: 6). Similarly, Jessica Calarco differentiates between middle-class children, whose parents teach them to navigate problems at school using "strategies of influence," and working-class children, whose parents teach them to navigate problems at school using "strategies of deference" (2018: 22).

Beyond the K-12 setting, Jack (2016) describes middle-class undergraduates as being at ease in interacting with instructors, as contrasted with the discomfort displayed by "doubly-disadvantaged" students who come from low-income families and attended distressed neighborhood high schools. However, Jack (2016) extends beyond Lareau's (1987; 2011) dual class-based framework to argue that the "privileged poor" — low-income students who attended high-quality selective high schools — behave more like middle-class students than other poor and working-class students due to the cultural capital they acquired in elite secondary schools. Overall, Jack's work demonstrates two keys points: that there is heterogeneity in the cultural capital held by low-income students, and that cultural capital is crucial in framing how young people engage with educational institutions.

Dominant cultural capital is used by the gatekeepers of dominant educational institutions in order to exclude those not deemed fit for admission. Dominant cultural capital draws upon both racialized (white) and classed ([upper-]middle-class) tastes, preferences, and behaviors (Lareau & Horvat 1999). Dominant cultural capital is necessary, but insufficient, for members of both dominant and non-dominant social groups to gain admission to dominant cultural spaces. However, members of non-dominant social groups must surpass the expectations held for members of dominant social groups in order to access and navigate dominant spaces (Berg 2010). They must possess not only dominant cultural capital, but also what I call "adaptive cultural capital."

Adaptive cultural capital is a form of cultural capital that is required of members of non-dominant social groups seeking access to, and success in, dominant social spaces. It is unequally demanded: members of dominant social groups need not possess or demonstrate adaptive cultural capital (though they may), while members of non-dominant social groups must. For example, low-income college students typically must have formal knowledge about when and how to apply for financial aid, while higher-income students need not. Such knowledge is required for low-income students to access and persist in dominant educational institutions, but is not neither needed nor common among the dominant classes who typically receive substantial parental financial support (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). This knowledge – what Yosso (2005) terms "navigational capital" – is one example of adaptive cultural capital.

Another example of adaptive cultural capital is "educationally profitable linguistic capital" (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977, 116). Bourdieu & Passeron use the case of linguistic capital to argue that working-class children who reach higher education have undergone "more stringent selection" than upper-class children because they have to meet the standards for linguistic competence set by upper classes (1977: 73). They argue that lower-class children meeting these standards developed their (educationally profitable) linguistic competency outside of their families, in contrast to the alignment found by higher-class children between language developed in the family and that demanded by institutional gatekeepers. While even the earliest work about cultural capital has noted that non-dominant youth "have had to manifest exceptional qualities in order to be channelled in this direction [towards a historically upper-class trajectory] and to persist in it," (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977: 83), the nature of these "exceptional qualities" has remained unclear. Here, I consider them "adaptive cultural capital."

To be clear, adaptive cultural capital does not refer to the notion that dominant social

institutions must adapt to the needs of non-dominant members. Adaptation in this direction happens only occasionally; it is optional (Berg 2010; Mullen 2011; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Instead, it refers to the idea that non-dominant actors must adapt to the expectations placed upon them by dominant institutions in order to gain access to and successfully navigate these spaces. Adaptation in this direction is a necessary (but insufficient) precondition to access; it is required. Adaptive cultural capital enables certain members of marginalized social groups to thrive in an unequal and exclusionary society, contributing to the appearance of a meritocracy and apparently legitimizing its functions despite durable inequalities.

Like all forms of cultural capital, adaptive cultural capital can be understood only in relation to the field in which it functions (Bourdieu 1985). In the table below (Fig. 1), I describe the necessary or optional nature of various forms of cultural capital for members of different social groups *in order to access and navigate dominant educational institutions.* The necessity, or lack thereof, of the forms of cultural capital for different groups varies based on the field being analyzed.

Fig. 1: Forms of Cultural Capital Required to Access and Navigate Dominant Educational Institutions

		Social Group Membership	
		Dominant	**Non-Dominant**
Forms of Cultural Capital	**Dominant**	Required	Required
	Adaptive	Optional	Required
	Non-Dominant	Optional	Optional

Here, I build on the cultural capital literature to illustrate how some low-income youth in under-resourced schools manage to acquire institutionally-valued cultural capital that can facilitate their success in dominant institutions, in this case through participation in competitive

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debate. In doing so, I outline one avenue for schools to support the acquisition of both dominant and adaptive cultural capital among their students, and more generally document how diversity can arise in the cultural capital of "doubly-disadvantaged" adolescents. Much of the existing literature about social class and education portrays poor and working-class students – especially those in under-resourced public schools – as uniformly uncomfortable, constrained, and/or deferential in their interactions with school authorities. However, I argue that some such students can learn strategies for "negotiating advantages" with ease (Calarco 2018), despite their economically-disadvantaged home and school contexts, if given adequate opportunities to do so in the school.

Debate, Extracurricular Activities, and Social Class

Class both affects how students interact with institutional authorities and works to enable or constrain opportunities for students within educational settings. In extracurricular activities generally and debate specifically, working class and poor students are less likely to participate than their upper- and middle-class peers (Fine 2001; Weininger, Lareau, and Conley 2015), a gap which has implications for adolescents' social and academic development (Mueller 2007). The costs of extracurricular participation explain some of the gap, but this view tells an incomplete story; Weininger et al. (2015) found evidence for both material and cultural explanations, in which limited financial resources could constrain adolescents' extracurricular participation, but cultural dispositions about parenting also contributed to lower participation among poor and working-class children. Thus, class backgrounds influence both whether and how much adolescents are able to accrue advantages from extracurricular participation.

While research shows that extracurricular participation is generally beneficial for schooling outcomes, debate in particular has interesting promise. Although a thorough detailing

of debate activities is beyond the scope of this paper, Fine (2001) and Miller (2006) each offer rich descriptions of high school debate practices. Historically the domain of wealthy suburbanites, competitive high school debate has increasingly become available to students in cities since the creation of the first Urban Debate League (UDL) in Atlanta in 1985 (Fine 2001; Mezuk 2009). UDLs spread across the country during the 1990s, reaching Chicago in the form of the Chicago Debate League (CDL) in 1997 (Chicago Debates n.d.). Today, the CDL is the largest UDL in the country, serving roughly 1,400 students from approximately seventy-five schools in the Chicago Public Schools district (CPS) (Chicago Debates n.d.). Compared to non-debaters in their same schools, CDL debaters are more likely to qualify for free/reduced price lunch, are disproportionately female, and have above-average school attendance in 9th grade (Mezuk et al. 2011). Mezuk et al. (2011) found significant gains in GPA, ACT scores, and graduation rates among 1,900 CDL debaters versus 7,245 comparable peers. Importantly, Mezuk et al. used propensity score matching to account for self-selection into the activity. Elsewhere, Barfield (1989) and Peters (2009) found improvement on SAT and ACT scores (respectively) for debaters as compared to non-debaters. While test-score improvements among debaters have been consistently documented, little is known about the processes contributing to these advantages. Understanding how debate works to confer academic gains to participants would be helpful for harnessing those processes for more students and designing effective policies to maximize students' opportunities in school.

Debate, like other extracurricular activities, helps children build cultural capital in the form of "subtle micro-interactional skills" that afford advantages in school and the workplace (Weininger et al. 2015: 497). Better understanding what these skills are and how they operate in practice is one objective of this study. Debate also can provide students with opportunities to

form relationships with adults who can serve as their guides and advocates in educational settings (Mueller 2007; Lareau 2015). Specifically, debate coaches may recruit underperforming students who show promise as debaters but struggle in traditional classroom settings, therefore instilling in those students a sense of connection to their schools that they may otherwise struggle to find (Miller 2006). Debate teams often serve "as a home space for [their] participants – a space of powerful and intense relationships" (Fine 2001: 134). Within this setting, debaters can develop "dense" relationships with their coaches and teammates (Khan 2010, 64), which may in turn improve their comfort in educational institutions overall (Miller 2006). The "embodied interactional resources" that students cultivate in activities like debate become important aspects of their developing cultural repertoires (Khan 2010: 20).

Debate also offers a unique opportunity for adolescents to gain valuable cognitive skills because of their exposure to challenging academic material. This exposure can help debaters achieve success in academic and professional settings. First, competitive interscholastic debate is premised on the idea of "switch-side" advocacy in which teams must defend both sides of a given topic (switching sides each round over the course of a tournament, which can consist of anywhere from three to approximately twelve rounds). Thus, unlike other advocacy-based activities such as student council or Model UN, debaters must make arguments that directly contradict positions they advocate for during other parts of the competition, and that may even contradict their own deeply held convictions. Fine argues that this practice carries advantages for debaters' social and critical thinking skills, because "taking a position contrary to one's beliefs helps one to appreciate the perspectives of opponents...and increases one's awareness of counterarguments" (2000: 12; see also Munksgaard and Pfister 2003). These switch-side advocacy skills can help individuals approach "complex, multifaceted, and technical topics that

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do not lend themselves to reductionist, formal analysis" even beyond the school setting (Mitchell 2010: 97). Broadly, then, the literature suggests that there are advantages associated with the formal structure of competitive interscholastic debate.

Additionally, competitive debate exposes adolescents to academic authors from Agamben to Žižek; most UDL debaters are at least somewhat conversant in feminist and anti-racist literatures, and can utilize these materials to become self-advocates in the face of unjust educational and social institutions (Miller 2006). Debate can help adolescents cope with unfairness in their daily lives by affording them a space in which to critique unjust adult behaviors, ranging from broad federal policies to localized behaviors within the debate community (Warner and Bruschke 2001). These advocacy skills may empower students to request customization in their interactions with institutional authorities, which can pay off in the form of access to more challenging opportunities, more individualized attention, and/or stronger interpersonal relationships (Lareau 2011). As I document below, debaters' "capacity to act in a way that produces meaningful change in oneself or the environment" reflects their growing agency, a key aspect of meaningful efforts to incorporate student voice into school structures (Toshalis & Nakkula 2012: 27). Overall, I argue that debate represents one context in which students can develop skills that facilitate their success in dominant institutions.

Data and Methods

Field Sites and Data Sources

The data in this study come primarily from six months of observational fieldwork with two debate teams in the Chicago Debate League (CDL). I worked with the CDL to identify two field sites in neighborhood schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), where debate was offered as an extracurricular activity and where the team was not in its (often tumultuous) first year of

existence. One school, which I call Greenside, is located on Chicago's South Side. Its student

body is roughly 98% Black, and it has approximately 1,200 students. The other school, which I

call Stewart, is located on the city's West Side. It is nearly three-quarters Hispanic, with the

remainder of the student body comprised of white (~20%) and Black students (~5%). Stewart is

home to approximately 1,600 students. Both schools are ranked level 2+, the median of five

possible quality rankings assigned by CPS (CPS n.d.). In terms of percentage of low-income

students (around 75%), freshmen on-track rate, student attendance, 5-year graduation rates, and

average SAT scores, both schools perform average to slightly-below-average as compared to

other schools in the district (CPS n.d.). Thus, I treat Greenside and Stewart as typical

neighborhood public schools akin to those that Jack's (2016) "doubly-disadvantaged" students

attended. Like their peers in these schools, and like debaters in the CDL overall (Mezuk et al.

2011), the vast majority of debaters on Greenside's and Stewart's teams were low-income

students of color. All of the Greenside debaters were Black; most Stewart debaters were

Hispanic, with some Black and white students also on the team. Greenside had approximately

ten members on its team, while Stewart had roughly fifteen. These numbers fluctuated a bit from

practice to practice and tournament to tournament, but they represent student attendance on a

typical day for debate activities.

Over the course of six months during the 2017-2018 CDL debate season, I attended

practices and tournaments with both teams. All members of each team were invited to participate

in the study, and students were allowed to continue participating in debate if they chose not to

participate in the study (a very small number of debaters from each school did so). In a given

week, I observed practices four weekday afternoons (two at Greenside and two at Stewart), as

well as one weekend tournament per month with each school. Laptop use is common in debate,

and both Greenside and Stewart debaters used computers from their coaches' laptop carts during practices, so I was able to use my laptop to take field notes without disrupting the typical flow of activities. I took notes about both debate- and non-debate-oriented conversations, and I asked debaters and coaches about any terms or topics that were unclear to me. In total, I conducted approximately 250 hours of observations.

After becoming familiar with typical patterns of activity in my field sites, I began conducting interviews with debaters and their coaches during months four through six of fieldwork. Interviews took place in libraries, hallways, and empty classrooms – anywhere I could find a quiet space to talk – and typically lasted for thirty minutes. They covered issues like the challenges students faced in the activity, how debate compares to other activities, and what changes debaters saw in themselves from before they joined the activity to the present. I selected students for interviews based on regular practice attendance (i.e., I did not interview debaters who only attended competitions and not practices, or those who attended practices only once every couple of weeks) and scheduling availability. In total, I interviewed twelve debaters, six each from Stewart and Greenside. I also interviewed the coaches from each team, for a total of fourteen interviews. Four student interviewees were freshmen, four were sophomores, two were juniors, and two were seniors. This grade-level distribution among interviewees roughly reflected those of the debate teams overall. Four interviewees were boys, and eight were girls, reflecting the gender distribution of participants in the CDL (Mezuk et al. 2011). I used these individual interviews to probe students about themes I had noticed over the course of my prior observations, and to better understand students' ideas about their personal experiences in debate. In other words, interviews were intended to supplement my observations, and were not my primary mode of data collection.

Data Analysis

Over the course of this study, I produced preliminary write-ups of my findings every two months in order to help synthesize my data and identify key themes in my notes. Based on these write-ups, I reoriented my observations and questions to focus on the areas that emerged as central for the study, particularly those "observational surprises or puzzles" that challenged my prior understandings and assumptions (Timmermans & Tavory 2012: 169). In order to keep track of the significant patterns and themes in my data, as well as how I shifted the focus of my observations over time, I produced analytical memos multiple times per week while in the field. Data collection and analysis were thus interactive and co-informing processes (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Woods 2005).

After completing observations and interviews, I coded my field notes and interview transcripts using the Dedoose qualitative coding application. I used open coding during initial rounds to identify themes and patterns in the data, moving to focused coding in later cycles (Saldaña 2015). During the coding process, I kept analytical memos and compared these memos to those I produced during fieldwork. These analytical memos helped clarify consistencies across the observational and interview data. After identifying key themes and defining codes, I re-read chronologically through my field notes in order to become more familiar with specific debaters' experiences over the course of the season. I then (re-)coded these individual stories to help me better understand how students' ongoing experiences in debate contributed to changes over time (Corbin & Strauss 1990). In order to protect the identities of participants, debaters are identified only by a pseudonym, their school name (also a pseudonym), and their grade level.

Researcher Positionality

Because I revealed to participants that I was a debater in high school, students sometimes

approached me with questions about the activity, and coaches occasionally turned to me for advice about topics with which they were less familiar. I answered such questions when asked, but often reminded participants that I was "just there to take notes" to allow myself to exit these conversations and focus on conducting observations. Still, because I am both an adult and knowledgable about the activity, debaters viewed me as an asset; one remarked early in my fieldwork that I was "like another coach, like, another resource for us to use." To them, it made little difference whether I was a researcher or a coach: I was able to explain many of the idiosyncratic conventions and jargon of the activity, and therefore my presence was a resource to draw upon. As will be demonstrated in my findings, this enthusiasm about taking advantage of the resources available was a common trait among debaters in this study.

As a young, middle-class white woman, I am demographically similar to many of the teachers in these students' schools. However, students read my attire and comportment as noticeably un-teacher-like. I dressed casually, sat in student desks, and mostly kept to myself while taking notes. In my first few days of fieldwork at each school, I was asked by multiple students whether I was a new student. I worked to maintain distance between myself and teachers/coaches, for example by sitting among groups of students rather than adults, and not admonishing students when they spoke to me about provocative or taboo subjects such as sexuality or minor rule-breaking in school. While I often noticed their relative candor with me as compared to their coaches, my status as a middle-class white woman clearly affected what students shared with me. During one tournament, a group of girls from Greenside expressed surprise that I did not object when a debater stated that white people homogenize the racial/ethnic identities of people of color, for example by viewing her as Black rather than by her family's countries of origin. As this exchange made clear, my racial status influenced how

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participants in this study felt they should interact with me. However, because the other adults

present during the majority of my observations – Stewart's and Greenside's coaches, and many

judges during tournaments – were also white, I do not believe that my presence significantly

changed the nature of the behaviors that took place in the debate space.

Findings

Dominant Cultural Capital

Debaters in this study acquired two key sets of attitudes and behaviors that contributed to

their stores of dominant cultural capital: confidence demanding feedback, and strategies for

evaluating complex ideas.

Demanding Feedback

Debaters I observed learned to demand and adapt to critical feedback from peers,

coaches, and judges. Comfort placing demands on figures of authority – such as requests for

"assistance, accommodations, and attention" – is a form of dominant cultural capital that is

highly valued in educational settings (Calarco 2018: 9). Debaters learned, through repeated

interactions with peers and authorities in the debate space, to request high-quality feedback that

they could use to their own advantage. Feedback was seen as crucially important to improving

one's debate skills, and strategies for responding to it were seen as valuable beyond the debate

setting. As Olivia, a sophomore from Stewart, told me unprompted during a tournament early in

the season:

> I need all the criticism I can get. I used to not like it; my novice [freshman] year, I was
> like, 'you don't like my speaking, I'm so bad.' But now I take it as, 'cool, I can improve
> my speaking, I can improve my arguments.' I want to hear all of it.

She echoed the same sentiment in her interview at the end of the season:

> Before debate, criticism was weird for me, 'cause it was still very pessimistic. 'Cause
> when I hear 'criticism' I was like, 'that's a negative connotation.' You carry that idea

around criticism. But now I'm just a lot more open with it, and I'm like, 'criticism may not be so bad!' 'Cause that's how you progress as a person. You hear what you need to work on, and then you take that feedback, and you re-work it into something positive.

For Olivia, learning how to accept criticism productively and respond to it effectively are skills she gained over time as a debater. At both Stewart and Greenside, debaters rarely completed an exercise without seeking feedback from anyone who would give it. It was not uncommon to see a coach and a student engaged in conversation about strategies for improvement over the course of twenty or thirty minutes – a signal from coaches as dominant authority figures that debaters' demands for their input was both appropriate and important.

When feedback was given, it was rarely accepted as adequate. "Anything else?" was a constant refrain from debaters after receiving criticism. In fact, receiving prompt, thorough feedback was considered so crucial for debaters that a visiting judge (a coach of a university debate team) asked four high school debaters permission to send them feedback via email later (rather than providing it verbally on the spot). The students acquiesced, but still took advantage of the opportunity to chat with the judge about the possibility of joining his college debate team in the future. They did not seem surprised that the coach felt he needed their permission to send his feedback later – reversing the typical direction of permission-seeking between youth and adults – even though he represented a significant figure of authority as both a judge and a college coach. The students seemed unfazed despite his elite status and his ability to affect their futures through his influence on the admissions and scholarship processes. The debaters felt entitled to immediate, thorough input about their performances; the coach's request for permission to provide feedback later signaled the validity of this expectation, demonstrating that for debaters to receive feedback at the judge's convenience was the exception rather than the rule.

Debaters were so comfortable demanding extensive, high-quality feedback that they disparaged judges who failed to provide it. After one tournament, I watched Stewart debaters and their coach leaf through ballots (papers where judges record their decision, how they reached their decision, and brief comments for each team). I heard debaters and the coach bemoan "crappy" ballots and excitedly show off "good" ones. Initially, I thought that these distinctions might be based on whether or not the judge said positive things about the Stewart debaters. However, when I asked a junior named Julian what made a ballot "good," he told me that it had "a lot of good feedback on it." He showed me – the ballot was covered in extensive notes. Then, for comparison, a "crappy" one – sparse. I was struck by the fact that some of the "good" ballots were marked as losses for the Stewart team, and some of the "crappy" ones were wins. Later, at Greenside, a freshman named Sharlene made a similar distinction between "good" and "bad" feedback. To her, "good" feedback included both recognition of a debater's strengths as well as specific, actionable areas for improvement, while "bad" feedback was overly vague and typically brief. As with the Stewart debaters, Sharlene was more concerned with receiving high-quality feedback (that she could leverage for her own improvement) than with receiving empty compliments or critiques. It is worth noting that these ideas about good and bad feedback were not isolated to one team; debaters from both schools shared these attitudes.

Late in the season, I asked students from both schools directly about what constituted "good" versus "bad" feedback. All of the debaters agreed with Sharlene, who said "good" feedback must be specific and actionable while "bad" feedback is overly vague. When I asked debaters for examples of bad feedback, the most common answer I received was "good speaking." It is significant that, to these students, receiving a vague compliment – without specific information about *what* was good about their speaking and *why* it was good –

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represented "bad feedback," because it did not provide any information that they could use to their advantage. They did not demand feedback to earn compliments or boost their self-confidence; they sought to identify areas for improvement. Ali, a freshman from Stewart, exemplified this attitude in her interview. I asked her for an example of bad feedback, and she offered this:

> 'Good speaking. Nice organization. Nice use of prep time. So yeah, that's all, good round guys.' Like, that doesn't give me anything! 'Great time management, I like the way you use your voice.'…Tell me actual feedback on the content of the round, you know? I want to get better, I want more information in my head as to how I can improve the content of our debates.

Ali's teammate Monica, a sophomore, agreed. She described bad feedback like this:

> [It] will be like, 'okay, you had good speaking' — and I already know I'm a good speaker — and 'you had some good arguments, alright, I'm gonna leave.' It's annoying, 'cause like, I wanna know what I did wrong. And I can take constructive criticism, so if you give that to me, I can work with it.

For Monica, what is important about feedback is whether or not it includes information that she can "work with." Similarly, at Greenside, a senior named Promise distinguished between bad feedback and critical feedback. She said that critical feedback, unlike bad feedback, is valuable because it can help her improve: "I feel like even bad feedback — well, *not* bad [feedback], but feedback that's saying you're doing bad in this part — [it] helps you as a debater. Because you know what you could have said, and it like, makes you more prepared in another round." For these debaters, bad feedback represented a missed opportunity to gain valuable information that could help them improve.

Since most of these students are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, they may be especially unlikely to receive high-quality feedback from teachers (Harber et al. 2012). Therefore, debate may pose a unique opportunity for them to acquire meaningful feedback from adults. As Omari, a freshman from Greenside, explained during his interview:

The feedback in debate, they point out what you could've done better. The feedback in school — I've never gotten feedback in school, not really…Some feedback, it doesn't really help you understand, because a lot of teachers don't tell you personally what you did wrong, what you did right…So the feedback in debate, it can be better, it can be more personal than the feedback in school, because not every teacher's able to connect to you.

Michele, a freshman at Stewart, agreed during her interview:

In debate, it's like, 'oh, you lost a round, okay. Well, this is what you need to do to not do that again.' In class, if you get a problem wrong or you don't answer a question correctly, it's like, 'oh, you got that wrong. It should've been this answer.' And that's what happens a lot. 'It should've been this.' And they just tell you what it should have been, not what you could do differently to stop yourself from confusing the answers. And so I think that debate really is helpful in that sense.

To Michele, debate is "helpful" because it offers her the opportunity to learn how to avoid repeating mistakes; in this way, it is unlike school, where mistakes are pointed out but feedback about how to avoid them is absent.

Michele's – and other debaters' – attitudes towards feedback demonstrate an ability to adapt to critical feedback and use it to their advantage, a key intrapersonal skill that may allow them to improve their performances in educational and occupational settings after high school (National Research Council 2013). Debaters' ease in demanding feedback from adults in positions of authority suggests that they have gained valuable interactional skills as compared to other "doubly-disadvantaged" students (Khan 2010; Lareau 2011; Jack 2016). These interactions give debaters opportunities to gain favor and advance their own agendas; for example, seeking advice on how to improve their debate performance echoes how a conversation might take place with a professor about how to improve a paper (Jack 2016). In this way, learning to demand feedback affords debaters dominant cultural capital as they develop comfort interacting with figures of authority.

Evaluating Complex Ideas

As debaters progress through the activity and are exposed to more complex arguments,

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the ideas they engage with become correspondingly more challenging. As a result, debaters develop strategies for deconstructing and analyzing difficult new concepts. These cognitive abilities – learning "ways of knowing...ways of thinking [and ways of] relating to the world" rather than "facts themselves" – are "marks of the elite" (Khan 2011: 120). Whereas "knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of the elite... the important *decisions* required for those who lead are not based on knowing more but instead are founded in habits of mind" (Khan 2011: 119). In other words, certain "habits of mind" represent dominant forms of cultural capital. Although Bourdieu and Passeron contend that "the capacity to decipher and manipulate complex [logical or aesthetic] structures" depends on linguistic skills formed the family (1977: 73), I argue that debate experience affords students a unique opportunity to build and practice sophisticated skills of interpretation and analysis outside of both the family and the traditional classroom. For example, Amanda, a Greenside senior, demonstrated her well-honed analytical tools during practice one afternoon. She was reading an argument which claimed that any new federal policies regarding public education would fail because states lost trust in the federal government after the Great Recession. As she read, she walked to the whiteboard to jot down some notes. First, she divided the argument between its empirical claims (that states lost trust in the federal government) and its predictive claims (that this lack of trust means that future federal interventions will fail). Next, she wrote the definitions of terms in the argument that she was unfamiliar with, or a bit unsure about: implicit, consensus, federalism, enumerated. Finally, when she felt that she sufficiently grasped the argument, she turned to her coach and – in a one-on-one exchange that would be unusual in her classes – stated her interpretation of the idea to confirm that her understanding was correct. He affirmed it.

Familiarity with complex literatures, as well as the strategies debaters use to understand

them, sets these students up for success in challenging courses throughout high school and college. Debaters often talked about how their classes seemed easy compared to the work they did in debate. In her interview, Amanda from Greenside mentioned that debate helped her approach problems in courses ranging from her proof-based geometry class to her English class. As she described it, "[Debate is] helping me think better." Olivia from Stewart, in her interview, expressed a similar sentiment. She felt that debate helped her learn how to articulate her ideas in all of her classes: "Debate gave me the feeling that I could link things together that I didn't think of before. Or like, I could ask questions that [are now] possible for me to ask, but I never knew I could use that [term] in a sentence, or use that word, you know, I could formulate that [idea]." Thus, debate can both provide much-needed intellectual stimulation for under-challenged students, and can help build the foundation for students to approach difficult ideas in the future. Much like privileged students in elite schools, these debaters are not only (or even mostly) learning facts or pieces of information; they are learning "how to think" (Khan 2010: 158).

Some of the intellectual stimulation that debaters experience comes from the necessity of debating both sides of every given topic, or switch-side debating. Ebony from Greenside explained that in debate, "you have to argue both sides, even if you don't agree with it…If you look at both sides of it, and then you look at the evidence that you've actually done the research for, then you can make the clear decision for yourself." She explained that by defending both sides, debaters have to challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, and that they have to tailor their arguments to their audience: the judge. Debaters agreed that the switch-side format of debate is beneficial, as illustrated in an interview with Promise from Greenside:

> I feel like, for you to have the ability to argue both sides, you're gaining a new perspective…Being able to switch sides, it's like, you're not just stuck to one thing. You're forced to think about new perspectives. 'Cause debate, it's about you educating yourself.

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Monica from Stewart agreed:

> You actually get someone else's point of view. Because you're not just stuck in this rut where, 'oh, I believe this, and only my way is the way.' There's a lot of kids that are like that these days....And that's how I used to be, so that's why I'm glad I get to argue both sides.

The perspective-switching that exists in debate has academic payoffs; Omari, a Greenside freshman, explained how switch-side debate helped him in his classes:

> Debate, it makes you think about, 'how might this person think?' So I can address that. Like, in my math class, I explained the answer to a problem [about] the breaking [break even] point — where they [the lines] intersected [in a supply-demand problem]. Some people didn't know what a breaking point was... So I just like, tried to 'debate' it real quick. I explained what the breaking point was. I was like, 'I'm gonna explain to the class how we got our answer.'... So I broke it down into pieces... That's one thing I did [that was] like debate.

Interestingly, for Omari, to "debate" something in front of his class did not mean arguing about opposing sides of the issue; it meant developing a shared understanding of the relevant terms and explaining his thought process and perspective to the group.

This is not to say that debaters' arguments are all well-informed or enlightened. They struggled to grasp dense subjects, and it was not uncommon to hear debaters misunderstand the concepts they tried to utilize. For example, Sharlene and Omari, two Greenside freshmen, in January attempted to use the concept of "biopower" (Foucault 1977) to prove a point about the collection of student data; they could not define the term when their opponents asked. They realized that they did not understand their case well enough, and spent the next few weeks working on learning more about the concept. By mid-February, both Sharlene and Omari had independently asked their coach to grill them about biopower in training exercises, and each was able to passably (albeit imperfectly) articulate the concept. Their experiences in debate over the course of the season had helped them learn how to approach what is typically a college-level

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concept.

Struggling with complex ideas, or arguing in favor positions one believes to be untrue, are practices that debaters prize. As Sasha from Greenside explained, "In the classroom, you get one [leg] up, because you already know how to dissect a passage or something, and understand why it's valuable or not valuable. [You're] not just stating your evidence, but actually giving analysis on it." For her, the strategies she learned in debate gave her an advantage over her peers because she knew how to approach unfamiliar ideas and could identify the assumptions at work in arguments she disagreed with. In other words, even trying and failing to understand Foucault (or any complex literature) gives debaters an edge over their peers who are never afforded the opportunity to grapple with such ideas at all.

Learning to learn – even (or especially) when facing challenging material – constitutes a valuable set of attitudes and behaviors for students who pursue higher education. Debate exposes students to a pedagogical model that mirrors those found in elite educational institutions. Khan describes such a model: "The point is to develop a voice, and interpretation, and a way of articulating it...It's not about knowing those [concrete] things for these kids. It's about this vague, intangible way of knowing that becomes embodied ease" (2011: 123). "A voice, and interpretation, and a way of articulating it" could easily be a description of what one gains from debate; these ideas percolated consistently through interviews with debaters and coaches alike. The cognitive tools debaters develop reflect these conceptual ways of knowing, granting them dominant cultural capital which they can activate across institutional settings.

Adaptive Cultural Capital

Beyond the dominant cultural capital that debaters developed, they also gained adaptive cultural capital in the form of resilience. Resilience is a key cultural trait demanded of students

from non-dominant social groups. For example, Berg notes that administrators frequently state that "self-motivation is a required element of successful low-income students" because they can only overcome the obstacles they face if they are sufficiently motivated (2010: 66). In this lens, cultural attributes are expected to overcome structural challenges; resilience is seen as the way to respond to obstacles. Non-dominant students are expected to have the dominant cultural capital required of all students *as well as* the adaptive cultural capital needed to overcome structural challenges. For example, a student who faces little adversity may meet and exceed institutional expectations without having to draw upon their resilience; a student who faces much adversity cannot (see Fig. 1). In this section, I describe how debaters build resilience – beyond what they already possess – thus acquiring cultural capital which is not characteristic of dominant social groups but which is nevertheless institutionally-valued.

I view resilience as distinct from, but related to, grit. Grit refers to individuals' passion and perseverance towards a long-term goal or set of goals (Duckworth 2016). Resilience is a part of grit, but refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from a specific setback. Although some debaters spoke about long-term goals, my data do not allow me to assess their capacity to meet those goals. As a result, I cannot evaluate debaters' grit. However, the more immediate nature of resilience enabled me to observe debaters demonstrating the attitudes and behaviors that constitute it. In coping with losses – a frequent occurrence in an activity in which 50% of participants lose each round and each competition includes multiple rounds – debaters had little choice but to bounce back from their frequent setbacks.

Debaters learned to view losing as a valuable experience. While they sometimes became frustrated after losing certain rounds, they overall tended to express appreciation for the losses they faced. For example, Sasha – a junior from Greenside – told me in her interview that losing

"is like, a learning experience…You're not always gonna win in life, you're not always gonna be number one, you're not always gonna be the top, the best, and get everything. So when you lose, you got to learn how to take that losing and know what to do with it." Winning many debates was not the goal most students in this study explicitly sought to achieve; instead, they hoped to learn. Olivia from Stewart summarized this attitude well, while waiting for the judge's decision after a challenging round that she suspected she lost:

> I'm learning now that I can win and lose debate rounds equally — like, regardless of what the ballot says, I can be winning and losing at the same time. So I don't really care that much about my record. I mean, I do care how I do, of course, but I just learn so much going against good debaters. Like [my opponent] is great, he's so smart and such a good debater, so I can learn from that. I don't look at him and think, 'oh, he's a jerk' or whatever. I think, like in this round, 'I just learned so much going against him.'

For Olivia, the chance to "learn so much" meant that she was "winning," even if the ballot recorded a loss. Importantly, she explained that she was coming to see things this way now, after a year and a half in the activity; it took time for her to learn how to build such a perspective.

Debaters encouraged one another to view losing as a valuable experience. In this way, they transmitted adaptive cultural capital among themselves as peers. For example, while walking to the cafeteria after a round, Monica from Stewart asked her teammate Ali whether she was planning to attend the state championship. Ali said no, because she was tired from having competed all season. Monica pushed her to reconsider:

> But you learn so much! You hit [compete against] these suburban schools and you get [to hear] all these new affs [affirmative cases] and it's great. I mean, I cried when I went, but then I thought, 'I learned so much, and we'll do better at cities [the city championship tournament].' And I did!

Monica's strategy was one that would be compelling to Ali, who – at a previous tournament – had approached me between rounds to share something about her opponents: "We keep going against seniors, and I'm really excited about it! Because I figure, if we're going to lose, we might

as well lose really badly so we can learn what to do better." It is worth noting that Monica promoted the value of the state championship tournament to Ali with the expectation of losing. She had found competing in the state championship tournament to be worthwhile not because she thought she had any chance of winning many (or any) rounds, but rather because it meant she got to learn new arguments.

As for most debaters, it was not the case that winning and losing were irrelevant for Monica. She cried after losing repeatedly at the state tournament the previous year. She had believed that attending state championships would give her more competitive success at the city championship, and she was happy to report that it did. Debate is more fun when one wins, and less fun when one loses – each of the debaters in this study agreed about this. All twelve debaters who participated in interviews reported that winning is "fun" (a statement nearly always accompanied by a sheepish smile), and that losing is a learning experience. Omari, a Greenside freshman, illustrated a typical perspective in his interview:

> I had more losses in debate [this season] than wins... I think losing the debate helps you because it makes you more focused and it makes you learn from your mistakes, so you'll be able to do better at the next tournament. When you win the rounds, it feels good...[But] you can learn from losing because the judges, they write ballots. So you'll learn what you did bad... So that's how my losses help me.

Developing the mindset of losing as a learning experience can be a challenge for new debaters. Michele, A Stewart freshman, discussed the difficulty in her interview:

> Something hard in debate is understanding why you lose a round…I'm trying really hard to stay humble and say 'okay, I lost because of these reasons.' And like, during feedback after a round, I always ask the judge, 'what can I do to be better?'…I want to further myself in debate, and so I know that I need to stay humble in order to do that.

Michele helped highlight a change that debaters undergo in the activity; while none of the more experienced students mentioned continuing to struggle with losses, this novice debater was still "learning to learn" from the experience of losing (National Research Council 2013:31). Still, in

her view, losing was valuable (despite being emotionally difficult) because it offered her an opportunity to improve.

Even the most winning debaters in this study lost often, and all of the debaters I observed developed strategies for coping with – and taking advantage of – their losses. Two different partnerships, one from Stewart and one from Greenside, demonstrated distinct strategies for facing a difficult situation. At city championships, after the first four rounds, each pair believed they held two wins and two losses. The Greenside debaters were both freshmen, Sharlene and Omari, and they encouraged one another to stay positive and not give up. They continually reassured one another that they were trying their hardest, and that they would continue to do so. They were concerned about their record, but pointed to their wins as evidence of their success, and were steadfast that they would not quit in the face of losses. This strategy is noticeably different than that of the Stewart team, both sophomores – Aleks and Olivia – who displayed a more sophisticated response to their 2-2 record. They spent their time between rounds sitting in the cafeteria, or standing in hallways, strategizing with their coach and with judges. They were hardly concerned with their record, instead preferring to dig deep into the mechanics of their rounds. They reported their win-loss status to anyone who asked, but said it with a shrug and immediately dove back into discussion of the content of the debates. Because they had been debating – and therefore losing – for longer than the Greenside freshman, the prospect of giving up did not need to be explicitly dismissed because it was not even considered a possibility. Instead, Aleks and Olivia maintained a forward-facing perspective, considering how the rounds they had already debated (whether they had won or lost) could inform their future strategies. While Sharlene and Omari used their existing stores of resilience to explicitly reject the possibility of quitting, Aleks and Olivia could draw upon their more extensive experiences in the

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activity to avoid the necessity of this explicit rejection and instead develop a more future-oriented strategy.

Learning to face losses with resilience, and to learn from one's mistakes, represent valuable attitudes upon which debaters can draw in academic and professional contexts (Dweck 2006; National Research Council 2013). For example, compared to students whose parents attended college, first-generation college students demonstrate a greater fear of failing in college (Bui 2002; Jury, Smeding, and Darnon 2015). This fear may contribute to an avoidance of contexts in which they fear they may be out-performed by others (Sommet et al. 2015; Jury et al. 2015). Because more advantaged students are less likely to face this fear, the ability to overcome it may not be necessary for their success. While resilience may be helpful for these students, it is not obligatory. However, resilience does represent a necessary resource for non-dominant students to successfully access and navigate dominant educational institutions (Berg 2010; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). In this way, resilience represents a form of adaptive cultural capital. I argue that debaters build their resilience through their growing comfort facing failure. Thus, debaters build forms of institutionally-valued cultural capital that go beyond dominant cultural capital.

Using Their Skills

Dominant and adaptive cultural capital are valuable because of the benefits they afford individuals in accessing and navigating dominant institutions. Debaters in this study drew upon the tools they developed in the activity to advocate for themselves and others, both within and beyond the debate setting. For example, they used their confidence interacting with authority figures to demand high-quality, tailored instruction from their coaches. The debaters at Greenside often interrupted their coaches to ask for clarification, or to check whether their

understanding of a topic was correct. If they felt unsure about a certain concept, they asked the coach to explain it again, sometimes requesting that the coach use specific strategies such as writing on the whiteboard or using examples from their texts. Similarly, at Stewart, the coach was so accustomed to receiving feedback from his debaters that he often solicited their opinions about the drills and activities he had planned. Usually, the students suggested modifications, to which the coach almost always agreed. Instructional customization had thus become an ingrained part of Stewart's practices. These demands for tailoring and customization demonstrate a "sense of entitlement" in educational settings that Lareau (2011) argues are more typically characteristic of middle-class students than the poor and working-class students in this study.

Beyond the debate setting, debaters displayed advocacy skills that enabled them to critique practices in their schools and classes. Olivia, a Stewart sophomore, noted that since joining debate she had become more critical of her teachers:

> I'll ask some pretty [tough] questions…'cause I actually think about things that we're learning. I used to not think about it, I used to be like, 'oh, they're a teacher, they should be qualified to give me stuff [to do].' But now I sit there and I'm like, 'hm, is this really what we're supposed to be learning?' I actually ask stuff, so it [debate] has definitely created a lot for me when it comes to questioning...It gave me the ability to be like, 'my voice matters,' you know? Like, I can say anything I want in that classroom, and I don't care whoever thinks that it's important, *I* think it's important...I have the power for myself.

Since joining the activity, she has felt empowered to stand up for herself not solely in the classroom, but across various contexts:

> Not only in class, but like, in and out of my life...I speak a lot more fluently, and I have a lot more confidence about myself — even though I didn't know I had that confidence, I [now] know I have it for some reason — because of debate. There's been given so much power to me, because of the voice that now I have, from the platform that debate is.

Like Olivia, many debaters used their newly acquired cultural capital in ways that extended beyond their classrooms. Omari, a freshman at Greenside, explained it as such:

Debate…It gets you more engaged. And it helps you more in real life. 'Cause in real life, you will need the speaking skills, and like, building up your presence when you're talking and stuff. And that's how debate can better help you.

A Stewart debater demonstrated these real-life advocacy skills early in the season. One afternoon, the coach announced that he'd be ending practice with some good news. After he gathered everyone's attention, he shared:

Aleks [a sophomore debater] was able to go to the LSC, local school council, on Monday and he said that we needed some money for laptops and they approved us for $10,000 a year for the next two years for laptops [for the team].

As mentioned above, this team already had access to a laptop cart in their coach's classroom; however, the debaters often complained that they were too slow or outdated. Thus, Aleks used his membership on the team to obtain better technology for himself and his teammates.

Debaters also used their participation in the activity to gain scholarships and admission to competitive colleges. Aleks told me excitedly during a tournament early in the season about the former captain of the team: "Dominic — the old captain here, he graduated now — he goes to the University of [State] now for debate…He got a $45,000 scholarship, full tuition, for debate." A freshman Stewart debater named Ali recounted the same information to me in her interview, and continued: "And like, that's a lot of money. If I don't get scholarships, I'm not going to college. So I kinda have to survey what I'm good at and figure out what's gonna get me into college. And if it's debate, it's debate!" Many of the students on both the Greenside and Stewart teams saw similar futures for themselves: they expected to earn debate scholarships and continue debating in college, or to earn merit scholarships on the basis of their grades and extracurricular involvements (including debate) that would allow them to attend selective and expensive schools that would otherwise be beyond their means. In other words, many of these students viewed debate as their ticket to college. They intended to draw upon the skills they developed in debate

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and use them to justify their belonging in dominant educational institutions.

Is It Debate?

It is possible that the skills demonstrated by debaters in this study are skills they would have gained even without participating in competitive debate. There is evidence that debaters enter high school with higher eighth grade test scores than non-debaters (Mezuk 2009), perhaps suggesting that they are an unusually talented group of students. However, in their own understandings, it is debate – not school – that drives their acquisition of these new skills and attitudes. Sasha at Greenside told me about her "debate brain...that's where my whole mind turns on; it like, sucks everything up." Significantly, she felt that her "debate brain" only "turns on" at tournaments, not at school. In her view, debate "works at your mind," while her classes failed to offer intellectual stimulation. Michele at Stewart and Omari at Greenside felt similarly, each articulating that the feedback they received in debate was more valuable than the feedback they received in school because it was specific and actionable (see "Feedback and Adaptation" above). For these debaters, the opportunities they received in debate were meaningfully different from the ones they received in school, and their in-school opportunities alone would not have led to the same acquisition of cultural capital. Moreover, debaters demonstrate academic gains in relation to peers who enter high school with similar prior achievement and attendance (Mezuk et al. 2011). I argue that the dominant and adaptive cultural capital that debaters acquire can help explain these gains, as debaters become better-equipped than their non-debating peers to navigate the dominant cultural contexts of their schools.

It is important to bear in mind that students do not randomly select to participate in debate. Rather, debaters are students who opted — for a variety of reasons — to join an academic extracurricular activity. Some debaters were aware of the social advantages it could

afford them, and joined the activity because of its potential payoffs in the future. For example, in interviews, a few students mentioned "college" as one of the reasons they decided to join their school's debate team. However, a much larger proportion of debaters was unaware of these advantages when they initially joined the team. Instead, the most common response for why they joined was "because I like to argue." Many debaters mentioned being tired of getting in trouble for arguing with teachers in class, so they joined the team as an outlet for their argumentative dispositions. Other reasons given for joining the team were "to try something new," encouragement from parents or siblings, having friends on the team, and because "[the coach] seemed cool." Regardless of their reasons for joining the team, debaters in this study viewed themselves as typical teenagers. Outside of debate, some participated in sports teams and others held part-time jobs; many struggled to get to school on time every day; some cycled on and off the team as peer groups and family obligations shifted, while others treated debate as constant foundation in their lives. In general, then, while some debaters represent an exceptionally talented and motivated group of students who would be likely to succeed regardless of their participation in the activity, many appear to be typical adolescents who gain unique opportunities as a result of their debate participation.

However, it is important to note that even if all of these debaters are driven, motivated, pro-social, and academically excellent students, the key finding presented here still holds: it is possible for certain "doubly-disadvantaged" students to gain dominant and adaptive cultural capital within their under-resourced neighborhood schools. Contrary to much of the existing literature about low-income students, and unlike many of their peers, debaters developed ease and comfort in demanding assistance and instructional tailoring from their teachers. These skills stand in contrast to portrayals of low-income youth as uniformly uncomfortable, constrained,

and/or deferential in their interactions with figures of authority. Debaters' self-advocacy skills are likely to pay off as these youth encounter new institutions when they enter into young adulthood, a transition period during which many of their peers will likely struggle (Lareau 2011; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). Moreover, by learning in an environment that emphasizes "ways of knowing rather than...the facts themselves" (Khan 2010: 159), debaters are given opportunities to build cognitive strategies that otherwise tend to be absent from their under-resourced school contexts.

Discussion and Conclusions

As these data demonstrate, participation in competitive debate enables low-income youth from under-resourced public schools to gain dominant and adaptive cultural capital that is valued in dominant institutions. While researchers have known for decades that students' extant cultural capital shapes their opportunities to learn, research has largely neglected to examine how low-income youth can acquire institutionally-valued cultural capital within under-resourced schools. Additionally, while researchers have documented that debate participation predicts increases in academic achievement and attainment (Barfield 1989; Peters 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011), the mechanisms producing these results have been unclear, hindering our ability to extract theoretical or policy implications from the case of interscholastic debate. This project addresses these gaps by analyzing the specific attitudes and behaviors debaters develop in the activity, the ways in which they acquire these dispositions, and the contexts in which they put their new skills to use. I argue that debaters' development of dominant and adaptive cultural capital might be one factor contributing to documented gains in their academic performance.

I found that debaters became comfortable demanding high-quality, actionable feedback and actively worked to improve their debating on the basis of the feedback they received. They

developed strategies for analyzing novel concepts, and learned how to rigorously consider ideas from multiple points of view. They also learned to approach losses with resilience, as an opportunity to adapt and persevere. Their growing stocks of cultural capital were demonstrated in their advocacy for themselves and others, both within and beyond the debate setting. They built these skills over time, and spoke often of the differences between their confidence and capabilities before and after joining the debate team. In their own perspectives, debate was a crucial factor in their ongoing development.

The findings presented here demonstrate that debate participation may have important implications for students' success in college and the workplace. For example, while Jack (2016) notes that many low-income students from under-resourced neighborhood schools feel uncomfortable attending office hours and seeking feedback from instructors, debaters in this study demonstrated confidence and skill in similar activities that might translate into college. Because the data in this study are limited to the high school setting, more work should be done to investigate whether such payoffs occur in higher education. Further, as so-called "growth mindsets" have been linked to improved academic achievement and attainment, debaters' resilience and their desire for actionable feedback predict strong academic performance (Dweck 2006). Future research should further explore whether debate participation is linked explicitly to growth mindsets and their corresponding beneficial outcomes. More generally, research should be done in other academic extracurricular activities to investigate whether students develop similar or different cultural tools within those contexts. This work can help identify features of activities that promote strong academic outcomes, enabling practitioners to reproduce those features in other curricular and extracurricular settings.

The skills and attitudes that youth develop in debate may be especially important for

scholars and policymakers committed to student voice efforts, which seek to incorporate young people as experts in decision-making processes at the school and classroom level. Student voice research indicates that in order to both be prepared to succeed in the future and to effectively navigate their present realities, youth need to develop confidence, connections, and competence (NRC/IOM 2002) — common features of debate teams. Skills such as "the ability to recognize the problems in their environment" and attitudes such as a desire "to change them" are necessary for students to participate meaningfully in student voice efforts (Mitra 2008: 89). As shown here, debate trains students to identify problems and propose strategies to address them; debaters thus become both critics and novice policymakers. Debate may therefore be one avenue to help students develop the skills and attitudes which can allow them to become effective change-makers in their educational landscapes.

The findings presented here do not suggest that debate participation is a viable strategy for promoting social mobility among large swaths of non-dominant students. As Bourdieu (1973), Carter (2003), Lewis (2003), Lareau (2011), Jack (2016), Calarco (2018) and many others demonstrate, youth still face an educational system that privileges those who already possess high levels of dominant cultural capital. Participation in activities like debate may be an effective strategy for certain individuals to develop cultural tools that can enable them to get ahead, but it does not work to change broader social inequalities. Put differently, competitive debate is a way for some students to acquire dominant and adaptive cultural capital, but it is not a means of shifting the educational system's biases away from favoring privileged classes. With this study, I document heterogeneity in the cultural capital that adolescents acquire within their high schools in order to illustrate diversity in the educational experiences of so-called "doubly-disadvantaged" students (Jack 2016).

Overall, this study demonstrates that extracurricular activities can be a site for students from under-resourced schools to gain new forms of cultural capital. I show that certain attitudes and behaviors that comprise dominant and adaptive cultural capital can be taught within under-resourced public schools, if such settings are organized to afford students meaningful learning opportunities. I argue that certain structural features of debate, such as its switch-side design and frequent exposure to losses, contribute to its ability to afford participants institutionally-valued cultural capital. These findings offer a perspective into one way that school-based learning opportunities can be leveraged to afford participants new forms of cultural capital.

Chapter Three

***IN SCHOOL FOR AFTER SCHOOL: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
EXTRACURRICULAR PARTICIPATION AND SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT***

Introduction

School engagement is a predictor of academic achievement and attainment (Alexander et
al.1997; Archambault et al. 2009), and the social environments shaping students' opportunities to
learn influence their levels of school engagement (Fredricks et al. 2004). Extracurricular
activities expose students to learning opportunities different from their classroom learning
environments, potentially shifting their levels of school engagement. Extracurricular
participation is one type of "behavioral engagement," a form of school engagement (along with
cognitive engagement and emotional engagement) that predicts academic outcomes
(Archambault et al. 2009; Wang and Eccles 2012). The effects of extracurricular participation on
students' academic achievement vary across activities (Fredricks and Eccles 2006), suggesting
that there are certain features of extracurricular activities that drive whether and how those
activities contribute to students' academic success.

A large body of literature has established a positive relationship between behavioral
engagement and academic outcomes (e.g. Chase et al. 2014; Fredricks et al. 2004; Fredricks and
Eccles 2006; Johnson et al. 2001; Li et al. 2010; Ream and Rumberger 2008; Wang and Eccles
2012). However, little work has been done to detail the *mechanisms* linking behavioral
engagement to improved academic performance. Additionally, while research has shown that
behavioral engagement is a stronger predictor of academic success than emotional engagement
(Wang and Eccles 2011), the ways that connections can form between behavioral engagement on
the one hand and cognitive and emotional engagement on the other remain less clear. Although
existing sociological literature has largely failed to disaggregate the three domains of school

engagement identified by psychologists, two recent areas of attention in the sociology of education – "identity projects" (DeLuca et al. 2016) and "deep learning" (Mehta and Fine 2019) – highlight the need for a more nuanced perspective.

In this paper, I draw on approximately 250 hours of observation and fourteen interviews with debaters and coaches from two teams in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to show how debate team participation can strengthen peer relationships among students (emotional engagement), strengthen relationships between students and adult coaches (emotional engagement), and influence participants' beliefs about the "student" role (cognitive engagement). This paper offers two main contributions to the literature. First, I introduce the concept of "cognitive engagement" to sociologists, describing how it relates to the forms of engagement (behavioral and emotional) that appear more frequently in the literature, and explaining its relationship to academic achievement. Second, I propose cognitive and emotional engagement as mechanisms that help drive debaters' academic gains relative to comparable peers. Prior studies have demonstrated that debate team participation is associated with positive outcomes for middle and high school students (Mezuk 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011; Shackelford 2019). However, explanations for these results have been under-theorized. In this paper, I contend that cognitive and emotional engagement contribute to debaters' changing attitudes about, and performance in, their schools. Through a locally-situated perspective of the bidirectional relationships between debaters (as individuals) and debate teams (as developmental contexts), I argue that debate supports positive youth development by building debaters' emotional and cognitive engagement in their schools.

Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement in School

Regardless of the ultimate aims of schooling, student engagement is necessary to achieve those ends. Fredricks et al. (2004) describe school engagement as a multifaceted concept made

up of three components: behavioral, and emotional, and cognitive engagement. *Behavioral engagement* refers to students' conduct, including positive participation in activities during/after school and the absence of disruptive behaviors. *Emotional engagement* refers to students' affects, or feelings towards individuals (teachers, classmates), activities (classroom learning, after-school clubs), and school in general. *Cognitive engagement* refers to students' investment in learning opportunities, or their willingness to exert effort in order to learn and improve. These three domains separate the broad idea of "engagement" loosely into actions, feelings, and thoughts (respectively).[3] Each of these three domains of engagement is malleable, and can be influenced by social and/or academic experiences, undertaken individually or in groups, in formally-organized or informal in- and out-of-school settings.

Researchers have shown that behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement can influence one another. For example, Voelkl (1995) finds that student perceptions of school "warmth" (emotional engagement) influenced students' participation in the classroom (behavioral engagement), while Finn (1989) argues that students' participation within and beyond the classroom (behavioral engagement) improves their sense of identification with school (cognitive engagement). Similarly, Archambault et al. (2009) find that virtually all students with high cognitive engagement also demonstrate strong behavioral engagement via their avoidance of rule-breaking behaviors. In short, it is well-established in the psychological literature that the three domains of school engagement are "mutually reinforcing and synergistic" (Appleton et al. 2008: 377). Their relationship to one another may be direct, or mediated through academic outcomes. For example, Travis and Leech note that:

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[3]   For the sake of clarity, I use the same terms as Fredricks et al. However, other authors use different terminology to refer to these concepts (e.g. "psychological engagement" for cognitive engagement, or "affective engagement" for emotional engagement).

As students feel more secure in their belonging in school and form better relationships with peers and teachers, these become sources of support that promote feelings of belonging and academic success later. When students achieve success beyond what they thought possible, their beliefs about their potential may change, leading them to invest themselves more in school, further improving performance and reinforcing their belief in their potential for growth. (2014: 103)

In other words, emotional engagement can contribute to academic success, which in turn can play a role in strengthened cognitive engagement. Relationships between the other domains of engagement and academic success may be similarly indirect or direct.[4]

In this paper, I demonstrate how one form of behavioral engagement – debate team participation – can foster increased emotional and cognitive engagement. These findings help to explain why the specific case of debate, and the more general concept of behavioral engagement, predict higher academic achievement (Mezuk et al. 2011; Shackelford 2019; Wang and Eccles 2011). I show that debate team participation, as one form of behavioral engagement, fosters both cognitive and emotional engagement in school, and that these factors play a role in debaters' school performance. The centrality of cognitive engagement in this relationship underscores the need for sociologists of education to more rigorously theorize "engagement."

Sociologists often refer to "school engagement" as an important factor in school success, but either use "engagement" as a monolithic concept (encompassing everything from attendance to feelings of connection to an interest in learning [e.g. Mehta and Fine 2019]), or refer only in passing to the multiple domains of engagement (e.g. Plank et al. 2008). When sociologists *have* taken up the issue of school engagement as a multifaceted concept, it is in the context of a dual (behavioral-emotional) framework. For example, Johnson et al. (2001) differentiate between

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[4]   However, Archambault et al. (2009) also find that high levels of one aspect of engagement do not always predict high levels of other forms of engagement; for example, students who follow the rules (behavioral engagement) do not always have high academic motivation (cognitive engagement). In other words, there is heterogeneity in the effects of the various domains of engagement both on other forms of engagement and on academic achievement.

school "attachment" and "engagement." They refer to "attachment" as "the extent to which students 'feel' that they are embedded in, and a part of, their school communities" (2001: 4), a concept analogous to emotional engagement. They refer to "engagement" as students' participation in the school, including attendance, homework completion, avoidance of disruption, and extracurricular participation – a concept analogous to behavioral engagement. Johnson et al. thus use a dual behavioral-emotional framework, as do Stearns et al. (2007) in their theorization of "academic" (being punctual, attending class) and "social" (extracurricular participation) engagement. More recently, Pyne also mirrors this two-pronged perspective, differentiating between the "behavioral components" and "emotional components" of school engagement (2019: 3). Missing, then, from all of these frameworks of engagement is cognitive engagement; indeed, Johnson et al.'s call for research that examines "the greater psychological investment of [more deeply] engaged students" speaks to the need for cognitive engagement to enter the sociological conversation (2001: 19).

It is important to emphasize that the contexts in which students may or may not be engaged are not equally structured to promote positive outcomes. Guided by relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory, positive youth development (PYD) models seek to understand whether (and how) youth thriving can be promoted by "aligning the strengths of young people with the resources for positive development found in their ecological settings" (Lerner et al. 2017: 7). One such model is the Five Cs Model of PYD, which defines "thriving" as the growth of competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner et al. 2015). In this perspective, alignment between the youths' strengths (such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in school) and the resources available in particular developmental contexts (especially the "Big Three" of positive and sustained adult-youth relationships; skill-

building activities; and youth leadership opportunities) are predicted to promote youth thriving (the 5Cs) (Lerner et al. 2017).

Adolescent development occurs both within and beyond the classroom, and certain extracurricular activities may be especially well-positioned – relative to other ways youth spend their out-of-school time – to promote positive development (Eccles & Gootman 2002). Yet their effects vary; for example, Bundick (2011) finds that PYD is positively associated with participation in student leadership and volunteering, and negatively associated with participation in the creative arts. These differences may stem in part from the extent to which a given activity offers the "Big Three." Further, the PYD literature emphasizes that "engagement" concerns alignment between individuals (students) and contexts (such as schools and out-of-school activities). Such alignment is not equally likely across youth-context relationships in part because certain contexts are less likely to recognize and reward the engagement of youth from non-dominant social classes (such as Black and Hispanic youth, youth from low-income families, and sexual minority youth) (Bettie 2002; Carter 2003; Lareau 2011; Morris 2007). Research has shown that youths' background characteristics do indeed predict their school engagement (Wang and Eccles 2012), reinforcing the idea that educational contexts differently promote students' engagement. In this paper, I argue that these debate teams' provision of the "Big Three" helped develop low-income, majority-racial/ethnic-minority youths' strengths (namely cognitive and emotional engagement in school).The findings presented below highlight the dynamic nature of "alignment" between youths' strengths and the resources of their developmental contexts, and reflect the bidirectionality of influence between individuals and contexts (Lerner et al. 2017).

High School Debate

High school debate teams have been the topic of some scholarly analysis (i.e. Fine 2001; Gorski 2020; Mezuk 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011; Shackelford 2019) and journalistic investigation (Miller 2006) over the past two decades. In general, these accounts agree that debate team participation is associated with positive outcomes for youth, ranging from improved academic performance (Mezuk 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011; Shackelford 2019) to opportunities for positive identity formation (Fine 2001; Miller 2006; Mehta & Fine 2019) and developing new forms of cultural capital (Gorski 2020). On debate teams, students research topics assigned by national or local organizations; prepare speeches both supporting and challenging the assigned topic; and participate in competitions during which they compete against teams from other schools using a combination of their prepared speeches and extemporaneous commentary to respond to their opponents' positions. During after-school practices, they hang out in classrooms where they work on laptops to research and write arguments, rehearse and refine speeches, use speaking drills to build speed and clarity, discuss their own and others' "cases" (pre-written speeches), and devise strategies for responding to other teams' arguments.[5] Debate is a time-intensive extracurricular activity with a highly specialized set of skills and jargon, which may contribute to debaters' close relationships to one another (Miller 2006). The connections that debaters form and the identities that they develop help make the team a sort of "home space" (Fine 2001: 134), building participants' sense of belonging within the institution of the school.

The past three decades have seen a proliferation of debate teams in urban public schools as a result of the growth of Urban Debate Leagues, from the first in Atlanta founded in 1985 to over twenty-two leagues serving nearly 11,000 students across the country today (AUDL n.d.).

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[5] For a more thorough description of common activities in debate teams, see Fine 2001.

However, still little is known about the qualitative experiences of urban debaters. Fine's (2001) work offers a rich analysis of the social world of high school debate teams, yet this work is limited to a suburban, middle-class, mostly-white context that reflects the historical racial/ethnic and class patterns in the activity. The unique experiences of debaters from under-resourced urban public schools are significant because of the impact of social class on students' experiences in (and, more immediately, opportunities to participate in) extracurricular activities (Weininger et al. 2015). Additionally, because these youth often face sub-par learning environments marked by limited resources, documenting avenues for promoting school engagement despite these obstacles is particularly important. While there is ample literature aimed at addressing the shortcomings of under-resourced urban public schools, understanding the characteristics of policies and programs that *are* effective is of equal urgency. Unlike how "many ethnographies of youth from disadvantaged origins portray lives awash in serious delinquency and crime" (DeLuca et al. 2016: 62), in this paper I document a social space that becomes a source of stability, success, and belonging for its participants.

There is strong quantitative evidence that debate teams are effective at promoting academic achievement and attainment in urban public school districts. Using propensity score matching, Mezuk et al. (2011) found that debaters in Chicago Public Schools were more likely to graduate high school, earned higher ACT scores on all sections of the test, and had higher cumulative GPAs than their comparable non-debating peers. Upon high school entrance, debaters were more likely than non-debaters to be female and to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch; they also were more likely to take honors classes as freshmen, had lower eighth-grade absenteeism, and had higher eighth-grade test scores. Importantly, Mezuk and colleagues found significant gains for debaters versus non-debaters even when accounting for these differences in

baseline characteristics.

Recent evidence also shows that debate team participation predicts improved test scores and higher attendance among elementary and middle school participants in Baltimore (Shackelford 2019), suggesting that debate may have payoffs for students across the educational trajectory. Yet these studies fail to explore how these advantages form; for example, Shackelford notes that his findings "do not illuminate specific mechanisms" and calls for further research addressing potential mechanisms (2019: 154).[6] In this paper, I propose one possible mechanism producing debaters' academic successes: school engagement. In other words, I show that debaters in this study strengthened their cognitive and emotional engagement, which they applied to their classes. It is important to note that other benefits of debate, such as participants' acquisition of new forms of cultural capital, may also contribute to their academic success (Gorski 2020). Cognitive and emotional engagement are not necessarily working alone to boost academic outcomes. However, the results presented below highlight a significant finding – that the unique learning environments of extracurricular activities can nurture students' cognitive and emotional engagement, which students can draw upon in the classroom context. I suggest that extracurricular activities' differences in opportunities to build cognitive engagement (e.g. football players might interrogate the logic of their decisions less often than chess players) can help explain why certain activities promote academic achievement and positive youth development more than others (Broh 2002; Bundick 2011; Fredricks and Eccles 2006).

Data and Methods

This study draws on ethnographic observations and interviews with two high school

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[6]　Further, Shackelford shows that debaters display gains in math scores, suggesting that "debaters may gain skills that aren't explicitly practiced in the activity indirectly through increases in school engagement outcomes," but does not explore them further (2019: 152).

debate teams in Chicago Public Schools. During the 2017-2018 academic year, I conducted

approximately 250 hours of observations with the debate teams at schools I call Stewart High

School and Greenside High School. Stewart and Greenside are both neighborhood public

schools that primarily serve students of color who live in the low-income communities

surrounding the schools. I worked with the Chicago Debate League (CDL) to identify these

schools, seeking field sites that were fairly typical of schools across the league, in which the

debate teams were not in their first year of existence (during which time many teams face

significant disruption). I attended debate team practices four days per week (twice each at

Stewart and Greenside), as well as weekend competitions once or twice per month depending on

the competition schedule during the 2017-2018 debate season (October to April). In months four

through six of fieldwork, I supplemented my observations with interviews with twelve debaters

– six each from Stewart and Greenside – and their coaches, for a total of fourteen interviews.

These interviews were intended to offer greater detail about the themes that emerged from my

observations, and were an effective way to clarify debaters' and coaches' ideas about the patterns

that I had documented throughout the season.[7] While interviews included only a portion of each

team, observations included the vast majority of debaters across the two schools.

Stewart High School is located on Chicago's West Side, and serves approximately 1,600

students. Its student body is roughly three-quarters Hispanic, with the remaining quarter of the

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[7]   I selected students for these supplemental interviews based on regular practice attendance
     and their after-school availability; I was not able to interview students who infrequently
     attended debate. While I did try to interview some less-frequently present debaters, these
     students did not schedule interviews, cancelled, or simply forgot. The interview sample
     did not result in a representative set of debaters, as each team had some members who
     participated only rarely; however, the interviews that I was able to conduct enabled
     clarification of some of the patterns that arose in my observations. While the absence of
     interviews with peripherally-involved debaters is not ideal, these debaters were present in
     the bulk of my data, which came from observations throughout the season.

study body mostly made up of white (~20%) and Black (~5%) students. Greenside High School is located on Chicago's South Side, and serves approximately 1,200 students. Greenside High School students are virtually all Black. According to Chicago Public Schools, both schools were ranked level 2+ during this study, the median of five quality rankings assigned by the district (CPS n.d.) The schools' status on a slew of metrics – such as percentage of low-income students, freshmen on-track rate, student attendance, 5-year graduation rates, and average SAT scores – were close to the district averages (CPS n.d.). I therefore take these schools to represent fairly typical neighborhood public schools in CPS. The debate teams at Stewart and Greenside generally reflected the racial and socioeconomic breakdowns of the larger student bodies in their respective schools. They also reflected the overall gender distribution of the Chicago Debate League (CDL), with more girls than boys (Mezuk et al. 2011). At both Stewart and Greenside, the coaches were white men in their first decade of teaching who taught core subject classes.

I took field notes using my laptop during my observations of the teams' practices and competitions, which mirrored the widespread laptop use in high school debate. Because debaters and coaches moved frequently during debate-related activities, whether to talk to different students/teammates or to shift to a new exercise, I was also able to vary my locations in order to capture a diversity of behaviors and interactions. I typically arrived at Stewart and Greenside a few minutes before debate practices formally began so that I could already be present in the room when practices started. When possible, I also tried to stay at practices as long as possible, leaving only when the coach emptied the room of students and locked the door behind him. These moments before and after the official start/end times of practice gave me the opportunity to observe how debaters interacted with each other and their coaches during times that were less governed by formalized objectives and norms.

After completing fieldwork and interviews, I analyzed interview transcripts, analytical memos, and fieldnotes using NVivo. I read through these materials in full during an initial round of open coding. After identifying themes in my data, I used second- and third-order coding in order to focus my analysis. I also used the analytical memos I recorded during fieldwork to understand how my thinking about certain topics shifted over time. I produced preliminary write-ups of my data in months two, four, and six of fieldwork, which were helpful in identifying early themes in my data and in reorienting my observations to address issues that remained unclear. In order to protect participants' identities, they are identified using only a pseudonym, their school's pseudonym, and their grade level.

Dynamics in the Field

I introduced myself to the teams as a researcher interested in high school debate, but I also mentioned my own experience in debate as a high school student. I participated in a different form of debate than that practiced in the CDL, but am familiar with many of the conventions of the CDL format (policy debate). This insider/outsider status allowed me to occasionally use my knowledge to gain access to certain conversations, while at other times using (or feigning) ignorance in order to learn from the study participants. Debaters at Stewart and Greenside referred to me as "like a coach" or a "resource," because I occasionally offered feedback or advice. However, I attempted to keep my input generic and brief, pivoting as quickly as possible to ask students their own perceptions of their performance.

The Stewart and Greenside teams were quick to accept my presence and make me feel less like a stranger than like another member of the group. At a tournament a few weeks into my fieldwork, I noted that I already felt like a part of the Stewart crew as students whispered to me about judges' controversial decisions, swapped tips about how to connect to the internet, and

offered snacks between rounds. These almost conspiratorial moments made me feel that I was not seen as an authority figure to be avoided. Because I am a young, white woman, I appear similar to many of the teachers in these students' schools, but at both sites I was asked early in my fieldwork whether I was a new student. (This was particularly surprising at Greenside, where virtually all of the students are Black). I took these interactions as signals that my efforts to differentiate myself from the teachers/coaches – by dressing casually, sitting in student desks, not reprimanding students, and generally keeping to myself – were relatively successful.

For all of my observations of debaters, they of course observed me in return. At one tournament, a student asked if we should bring our belongings (coats, backpacks, etc.) to a room where we were going to watch a debate round. I shrugged, and told her that I always brought all of my things with me. The student chuckled and remarked, "Yeah, I've noticed." Another time, a group of students were joking around, doing nothing in particular, and I sat – as usual – a few desks away typing notes about their interactions. A student looked up, and noticing my note-taking, he laughed. "Karlyn, are you getting all of this?" he quipped, apparently amused that I found their absent-minded chit-chat worthy of record. As these moments made clear, my presence certainly influenced the nature of the behaviors and interactions I observed. However, because coaches, judges, or other adults were also present during the vast majority of my observations, I do not believe that my presence led to any systematic changes in debaters' behaviors in ways that affected the findings presented below.

Findings

Debaters at Greenside and Stewart often viewed their membership on the debate team as a significant part of their identities, which connected them to their schools. Although many debaters expressed surprise or humor about the fact that they joined the team, framing their

membership as a sort of happy accident, they came to build strong relationships and identify

more deeply with the learning process; ultimately, in their perspectives, their thoughts about

school in general were changed. Even though the formal curriculum of their schools remained

under-stimulating (Mehta and Fine 2019), debate equipped students with perspectives and skills

that helped them become more deeply engaged in their classes.

Emotional Engagement: Peer Relationships

Strong peer relationships are a core part of students' emotional engagement in school.

Friendships help youth feel connected and positively attached to their school environments.

Debaters felt that their experiences in the activity helped them to build stronger relationships

with their peers on the team, and to navigate their relationships with peers not on the team. They

reported feeling a sense of belonging, and often likened the team to a "family" or a "home."

Olivia, a sophomore at Stewart, recalled in an interview how she felt upon her first encounter

with the team:

> I showed up the first day and I liked the aroma, and like, the *feel* that debate gave me.
> It's like, a homey feeling – like, it's really weird because the debate family is like my
> family away from my family. So it's kind of an awkward thing where I'll be like, 'yeah,
> I have two families, actually.'

This metaphor of the debate team as "family" signifies the strength of Olivia's connection to the

team. While many debaters used similar metaphors to express their ties, others who avoided such

strong claims still expressed a deep connection to their team. Amanda, a sophomore at

Greenside, viewed her ability to unwind after school with the debate team as an important way

to cope with the bad days she had at school:

> My freshman year [in debate], I was able to meet people who I'm able to call my
> friends, and I'm able to have – maybe like, an outlet. Because, school isn't the best every
> single day, and sometimes you're gonna have bad days, but to go home — not, not to go
> *home*, but to go after school and to have the team – and you have all these people just
> smiling and laughing, telling you about their day. It's a break from what you've been

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through for the last eight hours. It's pretty cool to be a part of.

While Amanda clarified that she did not view debate as home, her statement indicates a certain sense of comparability between these spaces. For Olivia, Amanda, and their teammates, the debate team gave them a space to feel comfortable and emotionally connected to others in their schools. They thus formed a "sense of belonging" with the team that is characteristic of adolescents' meaningful "identity projects" (DeLuca et al. 2016).

Significantly, it was not only being around like-minded peers that enabled debaters to build strong relationships; rather, they valued the opportunity to interact with peers who might otherwise fall outside of their social circles. Ali, a freshman at Stewart, explained that being on the team helped her make friends she otherwise might not have:

> Debate kinda gives me a new setting as to where I can meet new people, and I've made friends through debate, like Olivia and Aleks – I never thought that I would have these friends, but I do! ...And like, yeah, maybe not everybody in debate likes me, and maybe not all the teams like me, but we don't really care anymore. And it's like, at the end of the season we can all put our differences aside, and if you threw every single debater ever into a room, we could all – it would be the best party ever!

For Ali, the fact that she might not be universally liked was not a significant concern because she felt secure in the friendships that she did form; she was part of a "we" who could collectively not care about her detractors. Her enthusiasm about her relationships on the team stood in stark contrast to her general opinions of her non-debating peers, who were often met with an eye roll or a disparaging remark ("I hate high school") when they behaved rambunctiously such as by shouting, running, or fighting in the hallways.

Beyond becoming close with their peers in their schools, debate also represented a unique chance for students to interact with youth from other schools. To Ebony, a senior at Greenside, these opportunities carried particular significance due to the racial homogeneity of her school:

My school isn't very diverse. So at the debate tournaments, I see people of all different races and ethnicities. So it's not just African Americans that I'm debating with. It's usually people that I really don't hang out with, like white people and Hispanics and Latinos. So the fact that it brings me out into a diverse field — everyone likes to debate, everyone has arguments. And I like that about debate.

Debate, like other extracurricular activities, thus represents a way for students to develop relationships with peers who they otherwise might be unlikely to encounter or become close to.

The peer relationships that students developed on their teams were an important part of their experiences in school. One basis on which these relationships formed was through students' collaborative skill-building efforts, highlighting the importance of the "skill-building activities" component of the "Big Three" of PYD (Lerner et al. 2017). For example, Ebony's teammate, Promise, felt that the relationship she developed with her partner via their improvement efforts directly contributed to their academic successes:

My partner, she's strong where I'm weak, and vice versa. We help each other out, and I feel like when we practice together, or when we go into a tournament together, the way we go about an argument, we think about, 'oh, you should [speak first] because you're good at this.' Or, 'you should [speak second] because you're better at rebuttals' or something like that. And I felt like the whole aspect of like being able to, you know, strengthen each other's weaknesses also comes into play in like real life. Like when we study, it's like, 'oh I know you're not that good at this topic, so let's go over it later,' or something like that. Like, that helps.

Promise and Ebony thus used the interpersonal dynamic they honed in the debate setting to strengthen their studying skills when working within the formal curriculum of the school. For Michelle, a freshman at Stewart, the friendships students gained from debate were a significant perk, which worked in tandem with academic benefits to afford participants a sense of pride in the activity:

We're all one, in a sense, and that's a really good thing... It can be a pride thing, and it gives kids something to look forward to, and something to be excited about and proud about. It gives them something to say that they've accomplished, and at the same time, it gives them something to say, 'I learned this today.' In debate, you can never say that you didn't learn anything, because you're constantly learning. And I think that debate is

really awesome in that sense where it's helping you understand that you're learning, and not just making mistakes.

Like Michelle, Amanda felt that debate could afford participants a sense of belonging:

> Debate has made me feel more a part of school…Like, this is what [made me be] like, 'okay, I'm okay to be a [Tiger].' And then, any other time, I'm like, 'I really don't care. Like, I just go here.' And there's definitely a lot of laughter in there [the debate room], and a small team. Everybody knows each other. It's no type of, 'I don't really know you,' or you know — we all really *know* each other. We all laugh and we have so many inside jokes and we just plan on continuing that...You know, it makes me feel a part of [my] school. A part of something.

Amanda juxtaposes the sense of connection to her school that she feels when she is surrounded by her team with the flippant attitude she feels "any other time"; what happens after school is what makes her feel like she belongs in the school at all. Thus, debate team participation – a form of behavioral engagement in the school – helped connect students with their peers, deepening their emotional engagement in their schools and thus helping to establish the sense of community needed for deep learning (Mehta and Fine 2019).

Emotional Engagement: Relationships with Adults

In conjunction with the strong relationships they developed with one another, debaters formed strong relationships with their coaches. These relationships worked to enhance debaters' emotional engagement in school, and demonstrate how debate provides the "positive and sustained adult-youth relationships" that constitute one of the "Big Three" resources that can promote positive youth development (Lerner et al. 2017). Debaters got to know their coaches in deeply personal ways, demonstrating a level of familiarity that is often more typical in middle-class school settings (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011). For example, debaters learned about their coaches' quirks, as Aleks and Olivia (sophomores from Stewart) illustrated while talking about their coach, Mr. Smith, during a tournament.

Aleks glanced over his shoulder and remarked, "Oh, Smith's doing his nervous walk."

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Olivia agreed: "Yep, walking around the area, scoping out the people." Aleks turned and explained to me, "After breaks [when the teams advancing to elimination rounds are announced], he always puts in his headphones and walks around, like – he's so nervous for us." Olivia gushed, "It's so nice! He's so invested! For [the former captain] he actually like, got mad. Ten out of ten, [I] would have [him] as a coach again." Aleks and Olivia giggled.

In this scenario, Aleks and Olivia showed that they were familiar with Mr. Smith's behaviors and used them to interpret his feelings; they read his mannerisms as an investment in their own success. Contrast their belief in Mr. Smith's investment in them with Omari's (Greenside, freshman) attitudes about why he was struggling in his math class: "It's not the class, it's the teacher. Well, she's not the teacher. She's the giver. Khan Academy's the teacher." For Omari, his math teacher was so dramatically detached from his success in the class that he stripped her of the "teacher" title, demoting her to "giver" (of work). The sense of connection that debaters formed with their coaches were markedly different than the transactional relationships they had with many of their teachers.

As a result of their close relationships with their coaches, debaters felt empowered to demand specific learning activities that they felt would benefit them. For example, Sharlene – a freshman at Greenside – was walking with her team from one building to another during a tournament one morning. These few moments on foot struck her as an opportunity to make sure she and her partner Omari were prepared for their upcoming round, so she turned to her coach and asked "Do you want to test us on biopower?" More insistence than question, Sharlene felt empowered to make this demand on her coach's time. Her coach agreed, and began questioning them about the concept. Debaters' feelings of entitlement to their coaches' time stemmed in part from the coaches' behaviors. The coaches at both schools often asked for students' permission to carry out certain activities, soliciting their input about pedagogical strategies, timing, and assignments. For example, Mr. Smith at Stewart outlined his plan for practice one afternoon,

then said "We may not stay 'til 5, if that's okay with you. Would that be alright with you guys?" (The students agreed to this modification.) Similarly, Mr. Moore at Greenside asked his students one afternoon to return "the memo you were supposed to make, with the suggestions you had for what you wanted to do during practice." These formal requests for input by coaches demonstrated to students that their input about learning activities was both valued and respected. Alongside these solicited opportunities for input, students provided unsolicited feedback to their coaches. They asked for specific instructional tools (i.e. "Can you write that on the board?"), clarifications ("Can you elaborate on that?"), and activities ("Can we do speaking drills?"). These requests for "tailoring," more typically seen among higher-income students (Lareau 2011), were common during practices and competitions alike. In other words, debaters learned to adopt behaviors aligned with middle-class expectations of the "student" role, equipping them with attitudes and skills that help students successfully engage within the dominant cultural context of public schools (Gorski 2020). Moreover, these instances allowed students to exercise leadership within the debate context, illustrating another of the "Big Three" contextual resources that can promote positive youth development (Lerner et al. 2017).

Students at both schools likened their relationships with their coaches to familial ties, comparing Mr. Smith at Stewart to a dad and Mr. Moore at Greenside to an older brother. These familial metaphors were not common among most students and teachers in the schools I studied. The coaches accepted these roles with pride and a bit of amusement. For example, one student at Stewart informed Mr. Smith that he would call him "dad" when he substitute-taught the student's first period class the following day. The student had, moments before this exchange, mentioned kissing a girl; Mr. Smith quipped, in mock-seriousness and affecting a deeper tone of voice, "well, as your father, I'm concerned about who you're kissing." The students and Mr. Smith

laughed. At Greenside, Mr. Moore compared his relationships with debaters versus his non-debating students:

> I'm more open with debate students, 'cause like, some of these kids I've known — they're like a younger sibling or something, you know? I've known them for the entire time I've been [teaching] here. So yeah, I'm more casual, or open with my personal life with those students… At first, I don't really think about it. But then when students say it to you, and you kind of think back on it and you're like, 'yeah, I guess we do kind of have that relationship,' right? Like yes, I'm their teacher, and I'm their coach, but I'm — some of them, in some way, view me as like an older brother or something like that, you know?

These intimate relationships helped establish the debate team as a space for vulnerability, where participants could make mistakes, acknowledge them without fear of being reprimanded or mocked, and learn from them. For example, at the first practice after a tournament mid-season, Mr. Smith at Stewart led his team in recognizing areas for improvement. He said,

> I think we have a long way to go. I have a couple observations, but um – we'll talk about those in a minute. I was prepping for class on Sunday, right after the tournament, and I came across this quote from Malcom X, and it made me think about the debate team. So this is the question I'm gonna pose to you. He says, 'anytime you find someone more successful than you are, especially when you're both engaged in the same business' – in this case, debate – 'you know they're doing something you aren't.' So, what are other people doing better than what we're doing, and how can we get to that point where we can out-do them? What did you notice others doing that were especially good?

Debaters listed a slew of skills, and after each one, the coach nodded, often asking for examples or prodding students for more detail. Afterwards, he gestured to the ballots where judges had written feedback for debaters, and told students to "mark these up" (annotate them) to help them identify their own shortcomings. Through their emotional connections to their coaches, students became more comfortable with one of the difficult aspects of the learning process – the open admission of mistakes – signifying a deepening of their cognitive engagement.

These moments of vulnerability were intentional on the part of coaches. Mr. Moore at Greenside explained,

> I try to do more of like, emotional feedback, maybe. I'm not quite sure how that sounds, but clearly these kids get very frustrated sometimes, like Omari and Sharlene: they're new debaters, and they get like, fourth place at a tournament, and they're upset about it… But it's like, you know, I'm trying to make them realize it's still something to be positive about… I try to give them feedback in the sense that they're making progress, or overall what they're doing is positive, and I — I think they're getting something out of it.

Here, Mr. Moore recognizes that being "new debaters" means that Omari and Sharlene may not have the well-honed emotional skillset of more seasoned debaters, but explains how he works to help them develop positive perspectives. These efforts were recognized and valued by debaters. For example, Michelle (a Stewart freshman) felt that "coaches telling me things like, 'just because you lost doesn't mean you didn't know what you're talking about,' or 'you need to take that and learn from your mistakes,' [that] will help [me] in college and all." Moreover, debaters felt that they could use their coaches as resources to help them overcome obstacles in school. For instance, when Sharlene at Greenside was telling me about her day one afternoon, she shared this: "I forgot to do my Spanish homework, so I went to Mr. Moore and had him open up the computer cart, and I did the homework there before class." She was not afraid of being reprimanded by Mr. Moore for this slip-up, and entrusted him to help her. In this instance, Sharlene leveraged the emotional connection she had with Mr. Moore to help her complete an aspect of the school's formal curriculum, demonstrating how emotional engagement can directly influence academic achievement.

Contexts like debate where youth have the potential to engage in deep learning must balance the need to be "simultaneously safe enough that people feel open to taking risks and expressing vulnerability, but exacting enough to create real standards and give, when necessary, critical feedback" (Mehta and Fine 2019: 302). In the debate context, strong student-coach relationships worked to enable the exchange of high-quality feedback. For Olivia, a Stewart

sophomore, her coach's attention to her as an individual meant that the feedback he gave her was immensely more valuable than the feedback she received from other teachers. She explained,

> When you're in a classroom, there's like fifteen other people, or around thirty, whatever. They [the teachers] are just like, 'you guys need to speak up more.' That's 'you guys.' But like, when you're hearing from a judge, from a coach, it's more like *you*, you as a person. Like, they specifically point it out to you. And you don't get that a lot in a classroom, 'cause typically the CPS classroom, it's one teacher, 30 people [students]. It becomes annoying because you don't get either personal time with that teacher, or you don't know what you're struggling with, because it's a generalized thing. So then you feel like your*self* is generalized, you know? So you don't know exactly what to do in that instance.

While Olivia used student-teacher ratios to justify the difference in the quality of feedback she receives, this understanding could not account for the fact that the Stewart debate team had around fifteen members, but Mr. Smith was still able to provide each of them with feedback that was personalized and meaningful. While the student-teacher ratio was certainly lower on the debate team than in the 30-person class she mentioned, it remained unclear in this explanation how Mr. Smith could manage to give substantive feedback to all fifteen debaters. Omari, at Greenside, initially offered the same explanation for differences in feedback between coaches and classroom teachers, but later identified a different cause of the distinction:

> [The coach] gives feedback, like he gives you pointers. But some feedback, it doesn't really help you understand, because a lot of teachers don't tell you personally what you did wrong, what you did right. They try to address that as a class, because the class size is too big for the person to [tell] like, each student, what they did wrong and what they did right. So the feedback in debate, it can be more personal, it can help you better than the feedback at school. Because not every teacher is able to connect to you.

Here, Omari identifies the crux of the issue: it is not only student-teacher ratios that determine whether or not feedback is useful, but also the *connections* between students and teachers. As these teams demonstrate, it is possible to form strong connections between one teacher and larger groups of students, and these relationships mean that feedback can feel personalized even

when it is delivered in a group setting (like a practice). These examples demonstrate how emotional engagement can help to influence academic achievement via the exchange of high-quality feedback and trust among participants.

Cognitive Engagement: The Hard Work of Learning

Through of their experiences in the activity, debaters deepened their cognitive engagement in school – their willingness to work hard towards the goal of learning. Debaters often made disparaging references to times their teachers expected mere compliance rather than critical thinking, for instance when they were told to "just read." Unlike these classroom experiences, debate exposed them to interactive and challenging opportunities that led them to value the hard work of learning. For example, self-directed learning was a key feature of debate practices. At Greenside one afternoon, I observed the following:

> They all seem to be doing their own things a lot – using their phones, taking notes, chatting, playing with their clothes or hair. No one scolds them for any of this. A detached observer might think that they were unengaged or not learning, but every now and then they'll each hear something [about the debate topic] that they disagree with and bubble into a lively conversation all across the room. It's clear that even when they appear not to be listening, they are.

This unstructured work environment, something I observed time and time again during debate practices, allowed debaters to complete their work on their own terms. For example, a Greenside freshman, Sharlene, was researching independently one afternoon so that she could better respond to an argument she had recently heard. She told her coach what she was doing, and he nodded. After a moment of silence, she said to no one in particular: "I just – I gotta be prepared. I did *not* like when I was in the room [debating] and I didn't have anything to say against them."

Sharlene's motivation to complete work for her own benefit – rather than because she was instructed to – was common among debaters, according to Mr. Smith at Stewart:

> I think they [debaters] want to know things for the sake of knowledge. I think they see

knowledge as something that they can *use*, as opposed to just something that they need, that they'll be tested on, or something that someone else expects them to do. They see knowledge as a tool for themselves. So I mean, I'm not saying there aren't other students who see it that way, but I think being involved in an academic project like debate kind of makes 'em see knowledge in a different way.

In his understanding, debate was significant in helping some students develop an appreciation of the "learning for understanding" that is characteristic of deep learning (Mehta and Fine 2019).

The cognitive engagement that students developed through debate helped them to become more ambitious in their schoolwork. In describing one student, Mr. Smith recalled that she initially did not want to take courses with a heavy workload, because "she didn't want to do that extra work." However, at the time of my interview with Mr. Smith at the end of the season, the student had recently completed a major project for a high-level course she had elected to take. Mr. Smith told me, "I do think that debate played a large role in motivating her to be a student who is more interested in knowledge for the sake of knowledge." In her interview, this student seemed to confirm Mr. Smith's assessment. She told me that she felt she had changed as a result of her experiences in debate. I asked her how she had changed, and she said: "Now it's like, I *like* getting to learn from things... I appreciate the experience, and I appreciate the knowledge, and the practice. I guess those parts are just a lot more fun to me now." For this debater, learning became associated with a set of activities she valued, rather than extra work to be avoided. Debate helped students to become "more willing to commit themselves to the hard work entailed in learning" – the heart of cognitive engagement (Furrer et al. 2014: 106).

Debaters often became deeply engaged in their work, and many described their experiences as having a sense of "flow," or complete immersion in the tasks at hand (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). For Sasha at Greenside, it was her "debate brain... that's where my whole mind turns on." For her teammate Ebony, debate felt similar to the creative arts because in

both activities people can "go inside their own zone and create." These moments of total

immersion were often more rewarding than their typical schoolwork. For example, Rebecca at

Stewart confessed to me: "I've noticed sometimes that I've done debate work rather than

schoolwork because like, it's more interesting to me." However, she still felt that the skills she

learned in debate had helped her become a better student, since she could bring her newfound

love of learning to the classroom:

> To my friends, I'm this goofy person that's not really smart. I'm just like 'uhhhh.'
> But when I'm in my debate mindset, in my classroom mindset, I change. Completely
> different. And like, we're [debaters are] different because — I'm trying to be a
> debater, always. And they're [non-debaters are] just *them*, like they're just their own
> personality. And having debate, it's just a better experience, I think.

To Rebecca, being in her "debate mindset" meant stepping outside of the "goofy" persona her

friends associated with her. Her explicit connection between "be[ing] a debater" and her

"classroom mindset," both juxtaposed with "this goofy person that's not really smart," illustrates

that her behavioral engagement in debate helped foster her cognitive engagement in the

classroom. For Amanda at Greenside, the changes that came with being a debater meant a deeper

connection to the things she was learning:

> I've grown to be more confident, and also like, to be more passionate about things.
> Because debate, it takes time, it takes time to understand what you're learning, and
> then you take time after school to practice and stuff like that. And it's making a
> change in my everyday life. Like I'm taking time to do things that I like, or taking
> time to really read and understand these things.

Like Rebecca, Amanda pointed to debate as a key site in which she learned to shift her

orientation towards learning, such that now she is "taking time to really read and understand"

materials. Thus, debate helped students find personal value in academic pursuits, rather than

simply viewing them as a series of tasks to complete.

Coaches and debaters alike differentiated between the learning experiences students

encountered in their classrooms and those in debate. For example, Mr. Moore at Greenside believed that debate carried unique social currency in the school because it meant that participants were exposed to high-level learning opportunities that their peers lacked:

> There's a different type of bragging rights involved with debate. Like, if you're good at [sports], that's cool. That's good for you. But if you're good at debate, other kids, I feel like, view that — it gives a type of image, right? They think like, 'oh, this student is smart,' so it probably makes them [debaters] feel good about themselves too. Because, a lot of students are not happy with their school, or their teachers, and things like that. So I think, when they're getting something that is specifically like, intellectually rigorous, I think that is something that they get specifically to debate that they wouldn't get in like [soccer] or basketball or whatever.

Mr. Moore notes that many students at Greenside were not satisfied with the overall quality of their education, but that the more "intellectually rigorous" atmosphere debaters were exposed to gave them a reason to "feel good about themselves" – a clear articulation of the relationship between deep learning opportunities and positive identity formation. Debaters agreed that the learning opportunities they had in debate were unique compared to what they experienced in their classes. For example, Destiny, a senior at Greenside, explained that one of the most important differences between the knowledge she gained in debate and the knowledge she gained in school was how to apply that knowledge to a variety of contexts: "[In debate,] anything you're thinking about, you have to be able to apply it to another situation. You just can't think whatever you're taught...You can apply it to different situations." She contrasted the portability of the knowledge she gained in debate with the localized knowledge emphasized in her classes: "We were taught all these things at school, but we don't know how to apply it or we don't know when to apply it." Because of debate, she explained, she understood how knowledge could be portable, and worked to apply that idea to her classes, even if her teachers did not. Thus, even when confronted with the same set of learning opportunities as before she started debate, Destiny found new ways to connect with the formal curriculum of the school.

Differences between classroom learning and debate learning were highlighted in conversation one afternoon when Greenside debaters were discussing the concept of a marketplace of ideas. They played out a scene that began much like the cheesy fare of after-school specials, but ultimately turned into a biting critique of their school. One student, referring to the marketplace of ideas, exclaimed "that's what debate is!" The debaters chatted about the value of the ideas they were exposed to in debate, and two students high-fived; one remarked, "we're going somewhere!" (The implication that their classmates were not went unstated). However, as the conversation continued, they all agreed that their school – and the district in general – did not teach students "how to think." There was no marketplace of ideas in their classrooms. As one later quipped while shuffling playing cards at a tournament, "*this* is what Greenside taught me." Their judgment of their (typical) classes matched many of the classrooms Mehta and Fine observed, which were "spaces to sit and passively listen" (2019: 4). Through debate, though, students learned about ideas that helped them engage more – even in these lackluster learning environments. Michelle, a Stewart freshman, gave one example of how knowledge she gained in debate helped her engage in class:

> [In] discussions, I speak because I know what I'm talking about...I'm getting to know the details that I never would have known without these things that I'm reading, without all these [debate] files. [Before,] I wouldn't know some of the statistics for some of these numbers, for some of these quotes and facts. And so now in discussions and in talking to other people, I'm educated about what I'm talking about, and that's a huge sense of pride for me.

In other words, even though her teachers were unlikely to have changed their curricular and pedagogical strategies to account for Michelle's new knowledge and skills, Michelle had adapted her own strategies in the classroom in order to get more out of the learning environment. Mr. Smith, at Stewart, felt that debate helped build certain skills that he didn't feel could come from "school as it is now." He explained,

A research paper unit could give kids a lot of the same skills, but then again, there's always this idea that 'I need to finish this so I get a grade,' and that doesn't happen in debate. It's like, 'I'm doing this so I can win, so I can have a good time, and feel like I'm improving myself.' So that intrinsic motivation, I think that provides — I don't know if you could call it intrinsic, because you're still doing it to win, but it's a more authentic goal that you're aiming for.

Mr. Smith brings attention to an interesting tension: whether students' efforts can be considered intrinsic motivation if their ultimate goal is to win debates. However, even if their motivation is external, their cognitive engagement is likely deepened because of their self-endorsement of the extrinsic goal which they adopted of their own volition (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Ebony, at Greenside, gave one example of how debate helped her stay engaged in school via her deepened cognitive engagement:

Debate is making me more conscious of the world. I'm reading this book called Native Son in English, and one of the quotes she [the teacher] asked us about today was being conscious, being conscious of the world – it forces you to be enraged. So like, you knowing the truth about the world, should you always be mad about it all the time?… You know, some people really want to be oblivious to the fact that they don't — they don't want to know. They want to remain ignorant. And, [in] debate? You can't do that. You can't remain ignorant.

In her own view, Ebony's experiences in debate helped her form an understanding of "the truth about the world" that she felt some of her peers lacked. Some students described a similar sense of heightened awareness when describing their experiences with switch-side debating, or the practice of alternating sides of the assigned topic over the course of a competition. Aleks, a sophomore at Stewart, described how this had helped him value learning for its own sake:

I think just it's building your, what's the word? It's more like — resilience, I guess? Determination, maybe? — to learn and be determined to keep up with what you're dealing with. It's almost like a block that you're building, like your foundation to being structured and understanding. I don't know what's the word, like understanding that it's okay to go against what you believe. Like it's okay if you disagree with some things just for the purpose of learning, if it's for educational purposes, and you get something out of it — not even just like a reward or something, like getting a sense of, 'hey, I learned something because like I took another stance' or like, 'hey, it opened my mind to something else.'

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Thus, students' experiences in debate helped them to become familiar with and committed to the (often difficult) learning process, rather than being passive actors subjected to a series of tasks that merely require compliance. In other words, debate helped them develop cognitive engagement in their schools, which helps to illustrate why certain extracurricular activities are especially impactful in improving school performance (Broh 2002; Fredricks and Eccles 2006). Overall, the emotional and cognitive engagement that debaters developed through their behavioral engagement in the activity equipped them with skills and attitudes that they and their coaches felt benefitted them in the core curriculum of the school.

Discussion and Conclusions

Whether the purpose of schooling is to equip students with cognitive skills, or civic knowledge, or any other end, its efficacy is hampered if students are not engaged in the process. Fredricks et al. note that diverse efforts to improve schools – for instance, those aimed at improving the relevance and rigor of curricular practices, or creating more welcoming environments – all "explicitly or implicitly focus on engagement as a route to increased learning or decreased dropping out" (2004: 61). While promoting school engagement alone is not sufficient to ensure students' success, it remains a necessary aspect of any efforts to improve schooling. Beyond academic outcomes, engagement also constitutes a strength that youth bring to their developmental contexts which can promote positive development (Lerner et al. 2017).

In this paper, I demonstrate how one form of behavioral engagement can promote emotional and cognitive engagement. Specifically, I show how debate team participation can foster stronger emotional engagement via deepened relationships with peers and coaches, and cognitive engagement via a greater appreciation for, and commitment to, the challenging learning process. Through their experiences on the debate team, students in this study became

more deeply engaged in their schools. In their own understandings, debate was transformative for their feelings of belonging (emotional engagement) and attitudes towards learning (cognitive engagement). These findings help clarify the mechanisms underlying the demonstrated improvements in the academic performance of debaters versus their non-debating peers (Mezuk 2009; Mezuk et al. 2011; Shakelford 2019) by highlighting how debate can foster cognitive and emotional engagement – which past evidence suggests contributes to academic success (Chase et al. 2014; Fredricks and Eccles 2006; Johnson et al. 2001; Wang and Eccles 2012).

However, it is important to recall that the relationships between various forms of engagement, across different contexts and among diverse individuals, are heterogeneous (Archambault et al. 2009; Wang and Eccles 2012). In other words, researchers and practitioners should not expect to see payoffs in cognitive and emotional engagement from all extracurricular participation, nor are gains in any particular form(s) of engagement guaranteed to bolster students' academic achievement. Researchers should explore how the relationships between the three domains of school engagement (on one hand) and school success (on the other) differ across individual-context relationships. Additionally, in this paper I treat one form of behavioral engagement as a given (akin to an independent variable) – students' participation in debate – in order to examine its effects on cognitive and emotional engagement (akin to dependent variables). Future research should consider the reverse pathway to examine whether and how emotional and cognitive engagement might influence behavioral engagement. For example, it may be the case that students' increased emotional engagement through sports teams contributes to increased behavioral engagement in the classroom via participation in discussions. In this paper, I focus only on how debate team participation, as one case of behavioral engagement, deepens certain students' cognitive and emotional engagement in school.

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It is also possible that students who are inclined to join debate teams would find ways to feel connected to their classes regardless of whether they had the opportunity to become debaters. However, the fact that so many of the students in this study explicitly differentiated between their experiences in debate and their experiences elsewhere in their schools – both in their classes and in other activities – signifies that they took unique meaning from debate. PYD posits that positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, skill-building activities, and youth leadership opportunities are contextual resources that can help promote positive development for youth (Lerner et al. 2017); I show that the debate teams I studied are contexts in which these features were present. The extent to which these features exist in classrooms and extracurricular activities varies widely, which may help explain why the effects of extracurricular participation on students' academic achievement also vary widely (Broh 2002; Bundick 2011; Fredricks and Eccles 2006). More generally, some of the features of debate discussed here – such as its switch-side structure or the exchange of intellectual feedback – are relatively unique to debate, while others – such as its "homey feeling" – are not. Future work should systematically examine how the organizational and social structures of activities relate to school engagement. Such research can help inform efforts to develop learning environments that are well-positioned to nurture adolescents' connections to their schools.

While this study is undoubtedly limited by its small sample size and focus on a singular activity in one context, the broader point remains: that sociologists must be attentive to all three domains of engagement, taking seriously cognitive engagement alongside behavioral and emotional engagement as predictors of academic achievement. Moreover, the nuances of individual-context relationships and the bidirectional influence that individuals and contexts exert on one another underscore the need for such narrowly-situated perspectives. By drawing on

the domains of engagement identified in the psychological literature, sociologists can improve the conceptual clarity of research about students' behaviors, feelings, and attitudes towards school – research which tends to be plagued by the interchangeable use of terms that differ in nuanced ways, such as "attraction to school," "attachment to school," and "engagement with school" (Hallinan 2008). In this paper, I work to disaggregate the domains of engagement by demonstrating how one form of behavioral engagement (debate team participation) helps foster cognitive and emotional engagement. The consequences of sociologists' varied uses of the term "engagement" (and related concepts) are not merely semantic; they call into question how schools can best support students' learning. As sociologists consider efforts to improve students' experiences of schooling, more attention should be paid to the interplay between behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Chapter Four

"YOU SELLING?": SNACK SALES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANCE IN A HIGH SCHOOL

Introduction

Doritos, Takis, Cheetos, and Skittles: despite their nutritional shortcomings, these snacks offer captivating tastes, interesting textures, and a sense — no matter how fleeting — of satisfaction. It is unsurprising, then, that they are popular among students in the near south suburbs of Chicago who attend Hamilton High School (a pseudonym). Yet Hamilton's administration has prohibited snack sales in the school, penalizing sellers with a range of punishments. Undeterred, some enterprising youth continue to hawk their wares.

Adult responses determine whether these sales are labeled as deviant or entrepreneurial. Such decisions have durable consequences, as youth sanctioned for "deviant" behaviors in school are more likely to become enmeshed in the criminal justice system as adults (Mowen et al. 2019; Sampson and Laub 1990). In this paper, I use the seemingly-innocuous case of snack sales to demonstrate how Black, Hispanic, and poor white youth experience "criminalized childhoods," contributing to the classed and racialized stratification of childhood wellbeing (Dinsmore & Pugh 2021: 13). Detailing how adults' responses to snack sales shape students' perceptions of their schools and themselves, I argue that school authorities "manage" the imagined, potential failures of marginalized youth via concern about youth moving from snack sales to drug sales (Gardner 2010; ACLU 2017). I show how adults' punishment of snack sales make the activity more closely resemble that which they feared – drug dealing – with youth using elaborate strategies to hide sales, build networks of sellers, and develop a verbal shorthand around the market. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate how adult responses to youth behaviors can produce a stigma of deviance around activities that, in other contexts, are

permitted or even lauded.

Background

      Youth spend a considerable portion of their lives in schools, and inevitably need to eat while there. School-provided meals are an important source of nutrition for many students, yet are infamous for their poor quality (Ruis 2017). Some students, dissatisfied with the school's offerings, bring outside food – either for sale or their own consumption. For example, in the UK, Fletcher et al. describe the presence of snack "black markets" arising after new restrictions on school food (2014: 506). Beyond their obvious appeals, these "black markets" offer "a new source of identity, 'thrills' and opposition to school" (Fletcher et al. 2014: 507). Food constitutes an important social and cultural object for kids, at different times representing a "gift, identity marker, and object of play," as well as a way to differentiate themselves from adults (Best 2017: 3).

      Food represents a key domain for moral regulation because its consumption is universal yet highly varied; everybody eats, but norms, patterns, and beliefs about food are wide-ranging. In schools, snacks are a well-documented site of moralization, ranging from parents' choices about what goes into their children's lunches (Harman & Cappellini 2015), to teachers' efforts to enforce "healthy" eating (Oncini 2021), to youths' use of snacks to establish or cement friendships and demarcate group boundaries (Thorne 1993; Nukaga 2008; Oncini 2020). Food's variable meanings present kids with additional challenges, such as potentially facing ridicule over consuming school-provided lunch (Bailey-Davis et al. 2013). Food is thus one of the many domains in which young people must negotiate their relationship to sociocultural institutions. It is unsurprising, then, that snack sales faced significant regulation at Hamilton.

      Schools are not alone in their authority to limit what their charges can consume; prisons

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also restrict the sales and consumption of foods. In prisons, "covert practices aimed at diluting or circumventing prison power structures" are common forms of resistance (Gibson-Light 2018: 204). One such practice is the use of ramen noodles as informal currency. Attempts to control individuals' consumption habits in these contexts represent efforts to repress their agency; individuals' strategies for subverting these efforts thus constitute important ways of re-asserting their agency and working to change the very systems that criminalize them (Rios 2011). Prisons and schools both feature "architecture and management...which are aimed at reducing hostility and maintaining tentative calm," thus "facilitating subtler forms of resistance" such as the sale of comestibles (Gibson-Light 2018: 207). Defiance of food rules challenges the prevailing power structures of the institution. In other words, while food sales may initially seem trivial, they in fact represent an important strategy of resistance.

Familiarizing students with the norms of prison environments is one aspect of the school-to-prison pipeline, made more salient by the fact that school represents "the predominant institution where stigmatizing labels are likely to be ascribed" (Duxbury and Haynie 2020: 3). Scholars have noted two main pathways through which school punishments contribute to a "cycle of disengagement" (Morris & Perry 2017: 128). First, punishment encourages selection into academically underperforming peer groups that shape future behaviors (Duxbury and Haynie 2020; Fergusson et al. 2007). Second, being labeled "deviant" leaves youth vulnerable to increased surveillance (and consequently, punishment) within and beyond the school (Ferguson 2000; Hirschfield 2008; Rios 2011; Kupchik 2010; Mittleman 2018). Integrating these literatures shows how youth who engage in deviant behaviors tend to bear stigmatized labels that invite special scrutiny from adults *and* are channeled toward "deviant" peers, strengthening their association with deviant networks and norms (Payne and Welch 2016). Together, these

processes contribute to a "downward spiral" (Mittleman 2018: 183; see also Rios 2011) or a "negative cycle" (Way 2011: 366) shaping youths' trajectories into adulthood. School sanctions are thus not merely a response to deviance; "[t]hey actually help produce it" (Mittleman 2018: 184).

Notably, such cycles or spirals are not inevitable. School authorities make decisions about which behaviors to permit and which to prohibit. They could treat snack sales as an opportunity to learn about money management, business ethics, and goal setting – three of the skills that the Girl Scouts tout in their well-known cookie sales (Girl Scouts n.d.). Instead, at Hamilton, adults choose to reprimand youth-led food sales. Snack sales thus represent one instance of how youth experience "criminalized childhoods" (Dinsmore & Pugh 2021: 13). Non-criminal student behavior can become stigmatized through a process known as "school criminalization," which occurs when adults frame problems and implement solutions oriented around the logic of crime control (Simon 2007; Hirschfield 2008: 81), thus treating students as potential future criminals (ACLU 2017). Schools can thus either "cultivate and enhance social and academic skills... leading to a greater likelihood of prosocial behavior" (Payne and Welch 2016: 749) on the one hand, or push children towards a "spiral of hypercriminalization and punishment" on the other (Rios 2011: xv).

In this paper, I investigate how Hamilton High School students carried out illicit snack sales and demonstrate how faculty and staff constructed snack sales as deviant under certain conditions. Following labeling theory, I understand deviance as "a characteristic applied to a behavior rather than one inherent to a behavior" (Roucheleau & Chavez 2015: 169). At times, adults permitted snack sales and even celebrated them as legitimate entrepreneurial activities – when they raised funds for formal extracurricular activities. Apart from these instances, adults'

criminalizing responses to snack sales made the activity more closely resemble that which they feared – drug sales – ultimately leading some students to reject the school's legitimacy.

Context, Data, & Methods

Hamilton High School is a public school in the near south suburbs of Chicago. It serves roughly 1,800 students, of whom approximately 65% are Hispanic, 30% are Black, and fewer than 10% are white. 80% of students come from low-income families. Hamilton is a Title I school. Its teaching corps is predominantly comprised of white women, who on average earn close to $100,000 annually. There are thus noticeable differences between teachers and students in terms of race, ethnicity, and social class.

Schools are racialized organizations (Ray 2019), and Hamilton specifically represents an "intensely segregated" school (Orfield & Jarvie 2020). In this organizational context, the student position – one associated with Blackness and Latinidad — is devalued relative to white-coded adult roles. While white students reap social rewards from their whiteness, at Hamilton they simultaneously occupy a stigmatized position due to their structural location within the majority-non-white student body. Thus, the "student" role is devalued in the racial hierarchy at Hamilton, even as students' experiences of this racialization differ. White students' generally poor and working-class backgrounds contributed to the devaluation of the student role. Although certain aspects of students' experiences at Hamilton clearly differed across racial/ethnic groups, I did not observe significant differences in students' participation in, or adults' responses to, snack sales by student race/ethnicity. Therefore, the findings presented below are not disaggregated by these features.

I draw primarily on observational and interview data collected from 2019-2020. Prior to the school's closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I spent 112 days at Hamilton, observing

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daily activities throughout the school and at after-school events. I typically visited for full days, taking fieldnotes on my laptop which I expanded in the evenings. These data are part of a larger study of Hamilton including three years of observations, interviews, and administrative data. The larger study concerns students' experiences of schooling prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019-2020 school year represents the first year of the study, during which 123 students and 109 adults enrolled. Among these 232 individuals, I closely observed fifty as members of my focal sub-sample. I selected these 30 students and 20 adults from the broader ethnographic sample to help me learn about different groups' experiences in the school. I was interested in whether patterns of interaction differed by gender, race/ethnicity, grade level (for students), and job type (for adults). Thus, the focal sub-sample was purposively constructed to include roughly equal numbers of students across grade level, gender, and race/ethnicity, as well as adults representing different job types. The 30 students consisted of 15 boys, 14 girls, and 1 non-binary student; 10 of these students were Hispanic, 10 were Black, and 10 were white; 9 were freshmen, 6 were sophomores, 6 were juniors, and 9 were seniors. The 20 adults included 10 teachers, 4 administrators, 4 security guards, 1 social worker, and 1 teacher's aide. In addition to close observations, I also interviewed these respondents, with the exception of two students I could not reach after the school's closure. This yielded 48 interviews addressing respondents' perceptions of the school, themselves, and their relationships with others. Interviews typically lasted between 30 minutes and one hour; half of them (24) took place by phone. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. While nearly all of the data presented below came from year 1 of the study (2019-2020), some were collected during years 2 and 3 of the study.

I used flexible coding procedures to analyze the data in NVivo 12. Following

Timmermans & Tavory's (2012) conception of "abductive analysis," as well as Deterding & Waters' (2018) description of flexible coding procedures, I developed analytic codes via multiple strategies, sometimes drawing on theories from the literature (e.g. "status power" [Milner 2015]), sometimes identifying patterns I noticed in the field (e.g. "digital disengagement"), and sometimes noting themes of personal interest to me (e.g. "snacks"). I coded interviews and fieldnotes concurrently with data collection, pivoting primarily towards analysis after the school's closure in March 2020. I focused my attention on those "observational surprises or puzzles" that raised questions in light of established patterns and theories in the literature (Timmermans & Tavory 2012, 169). One such surprise arose when Chris, a 10th-grade student, told me about what he called "the brownie incident" (described below). The "brownie incident" helped me understand how adults built a stigma around snack sales, and I then returned to the ethnographic data to identify other instances and mentions of snack sales. Once compiled, I realized that students and adults judged the activity quite differently – as something quotidian versus something risky. Ultimately, this revealed snack sales as one way that youth at Hamilton – like other marginalized youth – experience criminalized childhoods (Dinsmore & Pugh 2021).

Findings

Adults' prohibitions of, and beliefs about, snack sales shaped how students evaluated the school's legitimacy. I first describe the operations of the snack market at Hamilton in both covert and overt scenarios, then detail how adults responded to snack sales, highlighting ties to criminality. Finally, I address how students evaluated adults' responses to snack sales, showing how adults' criminalization of snack sales led some students to challenge the school's legitimacy in terms of its disciplinary apparatus and its ability to prepare them for the future.

I met Carlos, a 9ᵗʰ grader, when I found him sulking in the deans' office one mid-September afternoon. Security had escorted him there for selling snacks in the cafeteria. Surprised and worried about his punishment, he had not known that there was a rule barring snack sales. It is buried in the school's handbook in an obscure section about after-school activities, reading:

> Students who attend co-curricular activities are expected to follow district rules and regulations. Students who violate these rules will forfeit the privilege to attend or participate in co-curricular activities for a period of time and/or will be subject to other disciplinary action... **Sales of any merchandise items in school must be sponsored by [school] organizations and be authorized by the designated [administrator].** Students who violate this policy may have the items confiscated and be subject to disciplinary action. *[emphasis added]*

The "disciplinary action" that students face varies widely. In Carlos' case, the outcome was relatively favorable. As a freshman, administrators understood that he may not know about the rule. They decided that Carlos' mom would remove him from school for the remainder of the day; he was warned against selling snacks in the future. Although this sanction meant that Carlos would miss important classwork and peer interactions, it was noticeably more lenient than the standard consequence: in-school suspension.

With such high penalties for snack sales, sellers typically took great pains to obscure them, huddling against lockers or passing goods beneath desks. At times, their strategies for avoiding detection demonstrated great sophistication:

> In English class, one girl whispered to another ordering "the hot chips and a candy." They specified the items, then the buyer presented a plan: "Alright, I'mma bring my bag over there." The buyer walked to a third girl's desk and took a single Cheeto. Having established her alibi – she was walking around to take a bite of her friend's snack – the buyer subtly slid two dollars onto the seller's desk, and placed her backpack beside it. She returned to her seat empty-handed, knowing what the next classroom activity would entail. Moments later, the teacher began a game that required students to physically reorganize. The buyer took this opportunity to pick up her

backpack – now containing the snacks the seller had discreetly placed inside it. While doing so, she told the teacher an off-topic story, practicing misdirection like a magician. (Fieldnotes)

As this incident highlights, the *consumption* of snacks was widely permitted (despite being prohibited outside of the cafeteria); thus, the buyer could take a Cheeto from her friend without consequence. The *sale* of snacks, however, had to be disguised. Both the buyer and the seller knew how to avoid detection.

The exception to these obscuring strategies occurred in the packed hallways between classes. During these "passing periods," a thriving snack market was visible to all:

Outside of choir class, a girl called out "I got chips, I got juice!" She shook her backpack to draw attention to the goods. A boy bought a drink, then another boy approached. "Hey, you got hot Doritos?" he asked. She nodded. "Lemme get one of those," the boy said, handing her a dollar. She accepted the dollar and handed him the Doritos. (Fieldnotes)

While aware of it, adults were largely helpless to control sales during the rush, resulting in something of an open-air snack market. Melissa – a senior – described the ubiquity of this market:

Melissa: It's against the rules to, but some kids sell chips or like snacks for extra cash.

Researcher: Right.

Melissa: And they know it's against the rules, too, but they just do it anyways. And everyone buys it from 'em. It's like a rite of passage in Hamilton.

Participating in this "rite of passage" had two clear appeals for buyers: first, there was more variety than the school-provided offerings; and second, they were more readily available, being offered in classrooms and hallways. For sellers, illicit snacks perhaps represented a way to build social status – while also offering a means to earn money during the usually economically-unproductive hours of the school day (Fletcher et al. 2014; Best 2017). Moreover, the flexibility of sales was an asset to participants in after-school activities. For example, D'Marcus, a senior,

sold chips and juice during football season when his practice schedule forced him to temporarily leave his part-time job. In this way, selling snacks actually offered a potential *alternative* – rather than a *gateway* – to drug sales, as snack sellers had a reliable source of income without risking participation in illegal activity.

Snack-related income was significant to sellers like Carlos. Five days after he was sent home early, a boy approached him and asked whether he was selling. He dejectedly shook his head, then turned to me and lamented, "See? I could be making money right now!" His stream of income wasn't entirely cut off, though. He had arrived at school late that morning, drawing the attention of the security guards. "They asked me if I was selling, and I said nah, 'cause I stopped. But they don't know that my two employees are still selling." He smirked. Always inventive, Carlos had found a way to continue making money undetected. His hierarchical organization of snack sellers enabled him to take a cut of the earnings without carrying the risk that came with his new reputation as a "seller." Given its ubiquity and criminalized nature, it is notable that selling snacks became known throughout the school simply as "selling." "You selling?" and "who's selling?" rang out frequently in the hallways. This shorthand avoided directly naming the prohibited activity, but also had the effect of making it sound like the very activity to which adults feared it was a gateway: drug sales.

Adult Responses to the Snack Market

Adult responses to snack sales varied widely. Karen, a security guard, had one of the most punitive orientations towards the market. One morning, she excitedly told me a story: at 8:06AM, she had seen a boy sell a bag of chips. She called after him, but he ran off before she could get there. Undeterred, she watched the security footage to see what classroom he entered; she called the teacher and asked which student had arrived late. After identifying the culprit, she

removed him from the classroom. Sighing, she explained "I told him I wish he'd just stopped, cause I wouldda told him no selling. But since he ran off, I had to go get him out of class, send him to the dean, do the whole thing." Karen's belief that she "had to...do the whole thing" is telling; she saw no alternative to engaging the school's disciplinary apparatus.

Few adults responded so harshly. However, adult consensus that snack sales could not be openly tolerated often resulted from their own location within the disciplinary hierarchy. One September morning, for example, Ms. Park told me that she'd written up a student who was selling chips in the hallway. "He was doing it right in front of me, so I told him, 'I don't have any choice. Because if someone sees me seeing you do that, and I don't do anything about it, that's gonna be a problem for me.'" Here, Ms. Park framed her decision to involve the disciplinary apparatus as necessary to protect her own status among her colleagues. Her concern mirrors Fine's finding that "[a]dults are obligated by other adults to respond to deviance; failure may be consequential for one's reputation or position" (2004: 14). Had the sale happened less openly, Ms. Park might have turned a blind eye, as she often did in her classroom.

Like Ms. Park's concern about visible tolerance, some aspects of adults' responses to snack sales were highly localized, but others were tied to broader social concerns. For example, Ms. Kelly drew on ideas about poverty and crime when evaluating Carlos' sales. She recognized that sellers in the snack market *could* be viewed as entrepreneurial, but still saw the activity as risky:

> Ms. Kelly: He wanted to sell chips, and I got [like], "No, come on Carlos." Then we totally would go [argue]... But he said, his mom, she helps him. I get the impression money is a real issue in the house. You know?
>
> Researcher: Yeah.
>
> Ms. Kelly: So, he's going to do what he wants to do, and *can* do, and he doesn't want to be broke... I mean, he's pretty much said it like that, like, "This is what I'm doing." So,

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yeah. I think the chips are the tip of the iceberg.

Although Ms. Kelly recognized that snack sales were an important source of revenue for Carlos, – or perhaps *because* she recognized that the sale of such cheap items represented a significant source of income – she worried that he would turn to selling other illicit goods. Here, Ms. Kelly indicates that she worried that Carlos' snack sales could lead to drug sales, even though he insisted otherwise:

> Ms. Kelly: I don't hate him for it. I actually am pretty impressed. I've said it a couple times. I think he's either going to go one way that's really bad – [*interrupts self*] but he did say, he's like, "I won't sell drugs, but I'll pretty much make anything else work." And he does. And to talk to him too, he has a real interest in it. It isn't just like, "I want to sell these chips so I can go buy my shoes." It's not that. He wants to buy tons of shoes so he can sell tons and then do this and do that, and move it to the next one so [he] can buy more [inventory]. He has a vision.

While she "didn't hate him for" selling chips, she still worried that Carlos' snack sales were a gateway to drug sales. Underscoring the moral dimension of adults' perceptions of adolescent behaviors (Fine 2004), especially those related to snacks (Oncini 2021), she judged how Carlos would spend his earnings, approving of the idea that he would invest in more lucrative stock rather than simply buying shoes for his own enjoyment. While Ms. Kelly was "pretty impressed" by Carlos' entrepreneurship, she approved of it only once she found his ambitions more morally laudable than buying shoes. Thus, adult fears about students' *potential* failures (Gardner 2010; ACLU 2017), like drug sales or profligate spending, shaped how they responded to snack sales.

<u>*Students' Beliefs About Adult Responses to the Snack Market*</u>

To Carlos, prohibitions on snack sales made little sense. On the same day that he lamented that he "could've been making money," he continued: "There's kids selling drugs at this school, but they [the adults] care about chips." He reiterated the same point two months later:

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> They get mad, but there's people selling drugs up in the school. They're getting mad over chips. I get it. You can't sell. But there's people smoking always in the bathrooms. And I don't know how they could catch us [snack sellers], but they can't catch the kids who got drugs on them.

He was dumbfounded that adults would channel resources into criminalizing snack sales when common wisdom held that drugs were available in the school. Chris, a sophomore, agreed. In an interview, he described "the brownie incident":

> Chris: I was selling brownies last year and he [an administrator] thought they were [cannabis] edibles. They called the police on me and shit, but he knew I was a good kid, so he just let me go... I lost like $6 worth of brownies, but it is what it is.
>
> Researcher: Were you just selling them to just get some cash?
>
> Chris: Yeah... [I was] like, "I'm going to be taking driver's ed next year. I'm going to have my license. I want a car." So I sold brownies for two dollars, right? They were *this* thick [shows a couple inches], *this* wide. They were big brownies. I had different flavors and stuff. I would make two batches of 15, so I had 30 brownies. I'd make $60 a day. I would sell them every day, five days a week. I was making good money. I know I made $1000 in like – fuck. I made $1000 off of them and then they stopped my hustle!
>
> Researcher: How and who?
>
> Chris: Some teacher thought I was selling edibles. But it's Hamilton. Shit, I don't even blame her, because niggas be putting Xans [Xanax, a prescription pill] in pop at lunch.

Although he only lost "like six dollars' worth of brownies," the unfounded suspicions they were cannabis brownies also cost him the potential future earnings. Although Chris "didn't blame" the teacher who suspected him of selling drugs, he was frustrated at losing his "hustle."

Adults' responses influenced who participated in this underground economy and in what roles. Simon, for example, considered selling chips to "make some money." He ultimately decided that as a self-described "goody-goody" he ought to stay away from selling, but he had no qualms about engaging in the less risky practice of *buying* snacks. Contrast Simon's self-evaluation with Carlos, who prided himself on being a reliable seller. He returned to selling after

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a pause in the aftermath of his punishment (during which he still oversaw his "employees").

Musing in the hallway one day, he expressed frustration over the rules' inconsistent application.

Gesturing to two kids leaning against lockers with their hoods up, a dollar and a bag of chips

changing hands between their huddled bodies, he exclaimed, "See?! Everybody sells. But they

caught *me*."

What frustrated Carlos was a sense that the disciplinary system at Hamilton was unfair

because of the seemingly-random likelihood that any particular seller would be caught. Another

frustration was that certain sales were not only allowed, but even encouraged, exemplified by the

Spanish club's chocolate sale to fundraise for a trip to Peru, when members could carry their

wares openly and advertise on posters throughout the school. Sellers working for their own gain

did not have the luxury of such promotion. When the profits of snack sales benefitted

organizations that fell under the school's purview, they were lauded; the school retained control

over the proceeds, ensuring that the money went to something "worthy." When students

individually profited from snack sales the use of money was subject to moral scrutiny, as in Ms.

Kelly's judgement that buying shoes would be a poor use of Carlos's funds.

The lesson that Hamilton's disciplinary system was unequally applied was one students

learned often; it stood in contrast to many teachers' messaging that the world is fair. Lucas, a

senior, pointed out this discrepancy:

> Lucas: [They're] basically training us for a false world. I'd rather be prepared for the real world, not this fake world that [they're] trying to prepare me for.
>
> Researcher: What do you think the fake world that they're trying to prepare you for is?
>
> Lucas: That everything's fair and that everything – if we work hard, we'll get good [results]. No... Let's be honest... I know most of the shit in real life is going to get swept under the rug, not going to be right. There's not really any justice right now.

Adults thus undermined their own disciplinary apparatus by demonstrating its unfairness. Lucas

was scornful towards the school, as he knew that its formal teachings did not align with the workings of the real world. Recognizing contradictions in disciplinary systems may make students more likely to engage in deviant behaviors (Way 2011). Arum & Way note that "in order for discipline to be effective students must also perceive it as fair" (2003: 159). This led many students at Hamilton to believe that rules were not worth following. A "so what?" attitude was common. For example, one day I asked Marquise, a senior, where he'd gotten a bag of Skittles. He gestured towards another boy. "Dude – he sell 'em. We're not supposed to, but..." he said before shrugging. With consequences so irregularly applied, and the activities they aimed to prohibit so mundane, only "goody-goody" students like Simon cared much about sanctions. For others, it made more sense to disregard the prohibition and enjoy the rewards of buying and selling treats, turning innocuous activities like snack sales into important sites of resistance.

Discussion & Conclusions

School rules regulating what students wear, how they speak, and what, where, and when they eat are some ways that adults exercise power over youth, but students create avenues to "resist and evade schools' control over their lives" (Best 2013: 10). Students' opposition to such regulation constitutes a challenge to this broad institutional control (Rios 2011). To adults, this rule-breaking can appear worrisome or proto-criminal; for youth, it represents a way to challenge unpleasant features of schools' control. This paper shows how adults' efforts to criminalize "deviant" student behaviors like snack sales push the market underground, giving rise to verbal shorthands and careful choreography that closely resemble the criminal behaviors they fear, thus contributing to a "downward spiral" in youths' development (Mittleman 2018; Rios 2011).

Limitations

This research has several important limitations. First, the data presented here come from

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one school; other contexts may have concerns not relevant at Hamilton, such as the presence of severe food allergies. Second, because of the site-specific nature of the data, I cannot ascertain engagement in snack sales in other contexts. Survey research may help scholars determine the broader landscape of school snack sales, though given the possibility of punishment for participation it is likely to be under-reported. This work represents a first step towards a more widespread understanding of snack selling practices in schools. Lastly, this study does not include a key set of stakeholders in schools: parents. While some parents actively supported their children's snack sales, such as purchasing bulk snacks or driving kids to stores, others may object to these sales. Future research should consider parents' perspectives on snack sales to help guide school-specific policies.

Implications for Practice

Schools assign labels to youth which hold meaning both within and beyond the physical boundaries of the institution (Duxbury and Haynie 2020). These labels can influence youths' developmental trajectories, whether positively or negatively (Payne and Welch 2016; Mittleman 2018). Through their labeling practices, schools shape the narratives that youth hold about themselves and their futures (Kavish et al. 2016). When addressing activities like snack sales, schools determine whether to frame youths' behaviors as deviant or entrepreneurial. My findings demonstrate that these decisions influence students' perceptions of the school's legitimacy. If schools seek to operate in ways that promote youths' perceptions of their legitimacy, ensuring that their policies are viewed as fair is essential (Arum & Way 2003). One strategy for promoting such perceptions of fairness could be to ensure consistency in the application of rules governing sales by both organizations and individuals. If members of clubs and activities are allowed to fundraise through snack sales, offering individual students the same opportunity may

improve their perceptions of fairness in the school. Schools could also recognize that snack sales represent a way for students to learn about inventory, profit, marketing, problem-solving, and savings. In schools where snack sales are permitted, adults may choose to support and encourage student vendors to develop these skills. For example, math classes could teach students how to calculate profits, observe sales patterns, predict inventory needs, and re-invest their earnings; art classes could offer youth the opportunity to develop advertising campaigns and branding strategies. Beyond the case of snack sales, this research demonstrates that schools have important opportunities to recognize and respond to youths' creative uses of school time beyond the formal curriculum. Whether students engage in such activities to meet their own needs, benefit from and/or develop their own skill sets, schools' responses to such student behaviors matter because of their impacts on youths' perceptions of the institution in the present and their developmental trajectories into the future.

Conclusion

Through their disciplinary apparatuses, schools not only punish deviance or delinquency – they produce it (Payne & Welch 2016; Mittleman 2018). Punitive responses to non-criminal behaviors are one way that Black, Hispanic, and poor white youth experience "criminalized childhoods" (Dinsmore & Pugh 2021: 13), and Hamilton's students unsurprisingly saw responses to snack sales as excessive and unfair. Students who perceive their school's discipline as unfair are more likely to engage in deviant behaviors in school (Arum & Way 2003), and being punished for these behaviors predicts deviant behaviors in adulthood (Mowen et al. 2019; Sampson and Laub 1990). By criminalizing student behaviors, schools may actually increase the likelihood that their students engage in deviant behaviors throughout the lifecourse, whether due to labelling, peer networks, or both (Duxbury & Haynie 2020; Payne & Welch 2016; Rios 2011).

Moreover, children experiencing the types of punitive treatments detailed here are also more likely to experience surveillance and criminalization outside of school, perpetuating the classed and racialized stratification of childhood wellbeing (Dinsmore & Pugh 2021).

Adult responses to youth behaviors can stigmatize activities that are otherwise permitted, or even lauded. Punishing independent snack sales while rewarding those associated with fundraising further alienates students with tenuous relationships to the school. Adults may be aware of the unfairness of their policies (Nolan 2011; Lewis & Diamond 2015), yet feel obligated by their peers to punish "deviant" behaviors in order to avoid sanctions (Fine 2004). Such choices about what to penalize and what to reward contribute to persistent inequities in school discipline, both at the individual (Varela et al. 2020; Morris & Perry 2017) and institutional (Payne & Welch 2010; Ramey 2015) levels. As scholars call for research into how youth practice resistance in school contexts (Diamond et al. 2020), this research demonstrates one avenue of resistance via students' engagement in an underground snack market.

Chapter Five

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Recently, Shuster & Westbrook coined the notion of a "*joy deficit* in sociology" (2022: 1). They note that although joy is a key feature of human life which can motivate action and gives meaning to life, sociologists instead privilege "narratives about pain and suffering" (2022: 5). This is true in the sociology of education, in which the reproduction of inequality remains the near-exclusive analytical focus (Baker 2018: 61). In this dissertation, I consider avenues through which youth experience joy in schools. Alongside joy, students also experience moments of pain, confusion, enlightenment, and boredom; the whole range of the human experience takes place within the school's sturdy walls. My intention is not to discount the richness of kids' lives outside of school, nor to obscure the importance of schools' role in producing stratified outcomes, but rather to bring attention to the fuller scope of students' experiences of schooling.

I find that kids' experiences of joy in school often come despite, not due to, the formal structures of schooling and the official curriculum. They find joy after school, in clubs and on teams. They find joy during school in the moments and spaces away from adults' control, whether delighting in tasty snacks or laughing in the library. Along the way, they also find plenty of frustration, annoyance, and tedium.

In a troubling pattern, I further find that some of the spaces in which youth at Hamilton experience the most joy is in interactions with the disciplinary apparatus. For example, security guards appeared again and again as key figures in improving students' experiences of schooling. Student after student bragged about their relationships with guards:

> Latasia: "I'm honestly cool with all the security guards in this school."
> Marquise: "I'm cool with every security guard here."
> Kayla: "I'm cool with all the security guards."

It wasn't only that close relationships with security guards held social currency because guards could get students out of tricky situations (like being late to class); they also brought joy into students' days. As Audrey explained:

> I love the security guards. They're my favorite. They just make this hellhole so much better. They add a little sunshine. They're like your friend, like you can joke around with them. Like, I could be like, '*that girl's bookbag is so ugly*' and they'll laugh and they'll be like '*oh I can't talk about that*' but then they'll make a face at you like, '*yeah, I know what you mean.*' Like it's just, I love them!

This love was meaningful, and ubiquitous. Every student I interviewed reported positive perceptions of the security guards. These joyful relationships left me with mixed takeaways: on the one hand, I was glad that students had positive feelings towards adults in the school; on the other hand, I was troubled that these relationships existed only with individuals officially tasked with enforcing rules and enmeshing students in the disciplinary apparatus.

This pattern extended beyond relationships with security guards. At Hamilton, one of the spaces in which students had the greatest opportunity to exercise agency and shape the learning environment was in "the Block." The Block gets its name from its description in the district's continuum-of-service materials: it is a "cross-categorical block," a type of "self-contained programming" that represents the "most restrictive" in-school learning environment. It is no accident that the Block evokes the carceral imagery of cell blocks. Yet despite being explicitly labeled as the "most restrictive" learning environment within the school, students in the Block consistently and successfully shape their learning environment – more so than students in the officially "least restrictive" environments.

Students were assigned to the Block following disciplinary incidents, typically after repeated "offenses." They spend the majority of their time in the Block, with the opportunity to take "regular" classes depending on their grades and behavior. At most, the Block can contain up

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to twelve students, but typically it had between three and seven pupils. The minimum amount of time that a student could be assigned to the Block is 60 days, but some students ended up spending years there. Kayla was one such student. Kayla was first assigned to the Block in her freshman year, following an incident in which she screamed at her science teacher. Initially, she was only assigned to the Block during her science class. But she quickly bonded with Ms. Walker, the main teacher there. Following a few smaller behavioral incidents, a group of stakeholders including Kayla, her mom, an administrator, and Ms. Walker, agreed that she would transition into the Block full-time.

For Kayla, being in the Block afforded her freedoms that few of her peers enjoyed. She could eat anytime, and often munched on snacks throughout the school day. If she was tired, she could put her head down and nap, undisturbed. She could choose to sit at her desk, on an office chair, or beside Ms. Walker – if she wanted to sit at all. If not, she could pace around the room, lounge on a beanbag chair, or stand to look out the window. She took phone calls from family members, her girlfriend, and her work manager during class time. When she wanted to leave school early, with Ms. Walker's approval, she would call her mom, who in turn called the office, giving her permission to leave. Kayla was in charge of how to spend her time, and she knew it. One day, she asked Ms. Shaw – an aide in the Block – whether she could go to the bathroom. "You can do whatever you want, Kayla," Ms. Shaw returned wryly. Kayla laughed. "Well I know *that* much," she quipped while heading for the door.

It took time for Kayla to appreciate the relative lack of restriction in the Block. When I first met her early in her sophomore year – her second semester in the Block – she described it as "a hellhole. Cause it's part lunch detention, part study hall, and part driver's ed." Still, she recognized that it had certain advantages. As she explained, "I don't get along with a lot of

teachers. Their rules and my rules, they don't function [together]." In the Block, though, "I don't have that many teachers throughout the day to deal with." At first, she was frustrated by the low curricular expectations in the Block. "They carry you," she lamented, "they help you pass." For example, teachers would "[give] us a magazine, [we'd] pick a chapter [and have to] write five facts. Well, what was we learning about that? Nothing at all...you don't learn nothing [doing] that." By her senior year, though, she had a substantially more positive perception of the Block. "The Block [is] good – they good people. Ms. Walker good peoples. Ms. Walker, she always helping, no matter what. And it's quiet, you can stay to yourself." She often beamed and laughed when we spoke about her years in the Block. She knew it was better than what her peers faced. Although she had been given the option to move out of the Block, she and her mom had agreed that she would remain in this context because she preferred it to "regular" classes.

In these "regular" classes, students were expected to be docile, passive recipients of the formal curriculum. Alejandra, a quiet girl in Kayla's grade, was in many of these classes. In her chemistry class, for example, Alejandra spent the first part of one period copying answers from the projector onto a worksheet that the class had begun the day before. Her teacher asked, disinterestedly, whether students had any questions; no one replied. After this exercise, the teacher gave a lecture about nuclear decay. "These notes are in Google Slides, so there's no writing," the teacher informed the class. "I just need you to pay attention." Alejandra stared blankly up at the projector. The minutes dragged on. Bored, she bounced her leg and fiddled with her mechanical pencil. She doodled. She examined her fingernails, stared into space, kept a quiet beat with her hands and feet, and tapped her pencil against her desk. Eventually, she pulled out her phone, fired off a couple of text messages, and then slid the phone back beneath her backpack to avoid detection. She fidgeted for a few moments, then saw her phone light up; she

read the incoming messages, and sent quick replies. She stretched, waiting for the bell to ring. When it did, she left the room with a sense of relief that she was one period closer to the end of the day. Her English, driver's ed, and geometry classes went much the same way. Alejandra's day was woefully boring, and was typical of how students at Hamilton experienced schooling. As we learned in the introduction, Alejandra did not graduate alongside Kayla; she would have to return for a fifth year of the drudgery the subsequent autumn.

It was common for students at Hamilton to find meaning primarily in interactions with the disciplinary apparatus, leaving unfulfilled the possibility for deep, positive engagement with the curriculum, with teachers, and/or with vocational skills. Kids wanted this kind of engagement; as the vignettes presented in the introduction illustrated, they enjoyed learning and valued spaces where they could solve problems and hone their skills. But instead, they were shown that they mattered mostly in punitive, or potentially-punitive, contexts. In other words, rather than being valued in contexts of possibility, they were instead treated as whole people primarily in contexts of restriction. This is why I deem it "troubling" that many students found joy largely in interactions with authorities like security guards – not because that joy is itself problematic, but because it underscores the lack of joy in formal learning environments and ultimately works to keep youth enmeshed in the school-prison nexus (Meiners 2007).

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School is hard. By this, I mean that schools are hard places in which to spend time. They make exhausting demands of their charges: Be on time. Dress this way. Eat this food, at this time. Talk now. *Don't* talk now. Sit up straight. Take notes. Ask questions. Make friends. Quiet down. Do your work. Above all: *follow directions*. Young people in schools struggle with these demands. Sometimes they find ways to comply with them; sometimes they find ways to reject

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them; sometimes they find ways to change them altogether. Each of these strategies underscores the importance of highlighting adolescents' enactments of agency within the highly-structured context of the school. This is a project I take up in this dissertation.

Adolescents' learning in high schools is not restricted to the formal curriculum. During and after school, they learn about who they are and how they fit into the worlds around them. These lessons matter not only for their impacts upon who they become, but also for how they experience schooling in the present. In this dissertation, I have detailed youths' school-based learning experiences outside of the formal curriculum across two contexts: on extracurricular debate teams and in informal school-based snack markets.

Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2017-2018 and 2019-2022, I have shown how learning outside of the formal curriculum influences students' perceptions of themselves, of the official curriculum, and of schooling more generally. Through debate team participation, I argue that students develop a strengthened belief in the importance of their own voice. They also use the skills and information that they learn in debate to improve their learning practices and make connections between the formal curriculum and other domains of their knowledge. In this way, students' learning outside of the formal curriculum worked to strengthen their engagement with the formal curriculum. On the other hand, through informal snack markets, students learned that adults were more concerned about their imagined, future failures than their entrepreneurial skills in the present. While youth saw snack sales as harmless and appreciated their capacity to provide appealing food options (for buyers) and much-needed income (for sellers), adults linked snack markets to drug markets, producing a stigma around the activity and exposing kids to patterns of school criminalization. In scenarios such as these, students' learning outside of the formal curriculum led youth to disengage from the formal

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curriculum and resist the demands of schooling.

Overall, this work has considered the ways in which students' experiences of schooling relate to the formal and hidden curriculum of high school (Jackson 1968). In Chapter One, I introduced the literature which has motivated this research, emphasizing the importance of student experience and acquainting the reader with typical patterns of life in the high school. In Chapter Two, I showed how engagement with extracurricular debate teams helped students develop a deeper sense of the value of their own voice. I argued that debaters demonstrated dominant cultural capital through demanding critical feedback and analyzing complex ideas, and established the notion of "adaptive cultural capital," or cultural capital that dominant institutions demand of individuals from non-dominant backgrounds but that is not required of members of dominant social groups. In Chapter Three, I illustrated how debate team participation shaped kids' engagement with school. I showed that behavioral engagement in the form of debate team participation helped foster debaters' cognitive and emotional engagement in school. Through the activity, debaters developed strong relationships with peers and their adult coaches, and strengthened their appreciation for challenging aspects of the learning process. Although many debaters felt that the learning environment of the debate context was more stimulating than the learning environments of their classes, they nevertheless applied the skills and attitudes they acquired in the activity to the formal curriculum of the school. Finally, in Chapter Four, I highlighted a form of student learning which weakened kids' engagement with the formal curriculum: learning the operations of informal snack markets. I documented how adults' criminalization of snack sales led the activity to more closely resemble that which they feared – drug sales. Snack sales constitute one way in which youth exercised agency in the face of broad institutional control, leading some to challenge the legitimacy of the school overall. These

findings represent a case of how youth face "criminalized childhoods" in a school context.

Together, this work calls for a greater focus among researchers and practitioners on the daily features of kids' experiences in school. Although formal lessons are taught each minute of the school day, for many students they constitute little more than background noise. In the spaces between the official structures of schooling, youth create myriad "sprouts" (Thorne 1993) where they find joy, community, and identity. On the flip side, when forced to engage with the plodding toil of the formal curriculum, they voice frustration and a sense of disrespect. In a landscape in which kids' quiet, technology-enabled distractions can offer "the appearance of work" (Outland 2021: 120), it is easy for adults to overlook youths' disengagement from the formal curriculum. This disengagement comes not because students don't want to learn – quite the contrary, they clearly articulated a love for learning – but because the content and structure of the official curriculum had an alienating effect.

Lucas, one of the library hangers at Hamilton, predicted that readers would be displeased with this work because my notes would simply read "this place is boring." But I found the ubiquity of boredom at Hamilton fascinating. Often, teachers warned me that a given period would be "boring" while giving me permission to observe; kids complained about boring classes daily. It was striking to me because teenagers are excellent at entertaining themselves and one another. They teach each other new skills, like how to avoid getting caught skipping class; they learn useful things like how to earn money during school. They look up things that confuse them; they brainstorm possible futures; they laugh together. Boredom need not be the default feature of school. By paying attention to how kids get through the drudgery of the school day, at times even finding moments of joy, adults may be able to better understand and ultimately improve students' experiences of schooling.

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