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Street Smarts vs. Book Smarts: The Figured World of Smartness in the Lives of Marginalized, Urban Youth

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How smartness is defined within schools contributes to low academic achievement by poor and racial/ethnic minority students. Using Holland et al.'s (1998) [Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (Eds.) (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.] concept of "figured worlds," this paper explores the "figuring" of smartness through the perspectives of marginalized youth. The youth made key distinctions between being book smart vs. street smart. This distinction is a direct challenge by the youth to the dominant discourse of smartness or "book smarts" as it operates in schools. To the youth, "street smarts" are more important because they are connected to being able to maneuver through structures in their lives such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive "others." This distinction is key because street smarts stress agency in countering social structures whereas, for many of the youth, book smarts *represented* those structures, such as receiving a high school diploma. Implications for schools and pedagogy are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Figured worlds; Ability; Smart; Achievement gap.

To be smart at my school, you have to go to school. Like, that was the bottom line. Stay in school. You're not going to be anything unless you stay in school. And they pushed it hard, like pretty much you're going to be a nobody without an education, and in my opinion, I disagree. – Nickili

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> [A]nybody can be book smart. You can sit down and read a book and say, "Oh, I know this and that."... You got to get that experience. You have to have had a hungry mouth to be street smart. – Jeremy

> When I was in high school, I didn't believe in being smart, because you know, the harder I tried, doing work and stuff, the more I failed... so I just stopped... like forget it... maybe I'm not smart. – Sheena

I recently met a young man named "Elo" whom at the age of twelve had been running his own business and at the age of thirteen had $16,000 saved. Through his business, Elo was able to provide financially for his mother and younger sister. Not many twelve year olds could handle such responsibility or possess the street smarts necessary to run a business such as Elo's, which was selling illegal drugs. While in high school, Elo did not consider college an option and, consequently, quit school at the age of 15 to pursue financial security through alternative means. At the age of 20, Elo was taking college courses but behind prison doors.

While in school, Elo was never identified as college material. Until taking college classes in prison, he had never believed he was capable of college level studies. What in Elo's life encouraged him to believe college was not a possibility, that he was not "smart enough" to do college level work? Through my conversations with Elo and many other student-inmates like him, I began to question the concept of smartness and the ways the meanings behind it are used in schools.

The term "smart" has been habitually used in connection to education and, consequently, has become invisible and difficult to question or challenge. Terms such as "smart" have meanings that are "socially loaded... multiple, and they are laden with power implications" (Lightfoot, 2004). In this article, I try to unpack the meanings associated with smartness through the perceptions of youth, ages 18–24, who previously withdrew or were expelled from high school. Using figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998) as a guiding theoretical framework, I explore how smartness is socio-culturally produced, rather than being biologically based, and the ways it becomes embodied through academic identity. I define academic identity as the ways we come to understand ourselves within and in relation to the institution of schooling and how this shapes our own perceptions of efficacy, ability, and success in relation to academics. Every student that is a part of the institution of schooling develops an academic identity that helps to shape who we think we are, who others think we are, and who we think we should become.

When I began the study, I wanted to learn how the youth would define smartness, particularly as it related to schooling. What I discovered was that every participant but one made a meaningful distinction between being ''book smart'' versus ''street smart.'' The youth overwhelmingly placed a higher value on being street smart and used the concept to directly counter dominant definitions of smartness connected to formal education. The ways the students juxtaposed these two definitions of smartness was intricately connected to their schooling identities and academic achievement.

In this article, I will first look at how students become marginalized through dominant perceptions of smartness in schools. I will then explain the concept of figured worlds and how the figured world of smartness is constructed in schools through artifacts, discourse, and identity. The discussion on identity includes how my identity as a professor shaped smartness during the interviews. Finally, I offer implications for smartness and schools.

MARGINALIZATION THROUGH SMARTNESS

Children typically learn about their own relative smartness in school (Weinstein and Middlestadt, 1979). Overwhelmingly, it is poor and/or students of color who are unjustly left feeling not smart in schools through such practices as tracking and teacher expectations. Anyon (1980) discovered in her work concerning knowledge construction in schools that, ''[Working-class] children already 'know' that what it takes to get ahead is being smart, and that they themselves, are *not* smart'' (p.14). Additionally, African-American and Latino students are overly-represented in special education programs and gifted programs often result in *re-segregating* schools, where the white students attend the gifted program while students of color are tracked into ''regular'' educational programming (Nieto, 1996; Sapon-Shevin, 1999).

One consequence of tracking is that students, ''[B]egin to believe that their placement in these groups is a true reflection of whether they are 'smart' or 'dumb'' (Nieto, 1996, p. 88). Additional consequences are that students in the top tracks are more likely to attend college while students in the lower track frequently drop out and/or become unskilled workers (Wilcox, 1982). Tracking continues to be a common practice in schools despite the fact that it has been shown to be based more upon student social status than academic aptitude and that it does not improve academic achievement (Oakes, 1985).

African-American children as early as preschool begin to be over-represented in what are perceived as ''low ability'' classes and/or classes for the

"educable mentally retarded "(McBay, 1992; Wright-Edelman, 1988). As mentioned above, assignment to these classes can be devastating to the students' self-concepts and they may even begin to perceive themselves as not smart. Consequently, this can lead these African-American students to have low achievement, a lack of motivation, and a desire to drop out of school. As Jones states, "[T]he failure of many of these students is often attributed to their ability rather than the school's ability to provide quality education" (Joseph, 1996, p. 344).

Valenzuela (1999) in her ethnographic study with Mexican-American youth found that many of the youth did not feel they were "smart enough" to attend college. Additionally, students spoke of being made to feel "dumb" by teachers through being told to quit raising their hand or asking stupid questions. As a consequence, the students quit participating in their classes. Valenzuela's work suggests that the construction of smartness can be connected to Mexican-American students' decisions to disengage from school.

Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Villaverde (1999) argue that we need a better:

> [U]nderstanding of power's complicity in the production of society's validated knowledge, its educational knowledge in particular, is essential information for racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized students who are trying to figure out why they are deemed slow and incompetent in the schools they attend (p. 11).

Hence, the ways smartness is constructed within schools is especially harmful for racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized youth. Smartness operates as a powerful factor in the education of marginalized students who are often wrongfully left feeling or labeled as incompetent or "slow."

McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006) in looking at the cultural production of learning disabilities discuss the ways that schools are preoccupied with labeling mental capacities, which result in, "simple contrasts such as smart/dumb or gifted/disabled" (p. 15). They state in relation to the purpose of their article that, "We are less interested in the characteristics of LD children than in the cultural arrangements that make an LD label relevant; we are less interested in minds and their moments than in moments and their minds" (p. 13). Similarly to how McDermott et al. (2006) explore the cultural grounding of learning disabilities, this article is centered upon smartness and the ways it is culturally produced and made powerful in

schools. Smartness is described as being initially located *outside* students and then culturally produced so that it moves through students as spoken discourse and embodied practice. Smartness operates as a figured world that shapes how ability is talked and thought about in schools and larger society. Through naming the ways smartness operates in schools, we can begin to deconstruct it and start problematizing how to not simply "reframe" smartness but, instead, how to *disrupt* simplistic notions of ability and to broaden available discourse.

DATA COLLECTION

During the spring of 2005 I began studying smartness within a special program for urban youth, ages 18–24, who previously withdrew or were expelled from high school. To qualify for the program each of the participants had to be low income and had to be at a particular turning point in their lives, which means that many of the students were struggling to get out of poverty, with drug addiction, and trying to get their lives on a more positive track. Students worked towards their GED and gained employability skills while giving back to the community through service hours and building affordable housing.

Using ethnographic techniques, I conducted two interviews with 18 youth focusing upon their schooling experiences along with their perceptions of smartness. Seven of the participants were women and eleven were men, with 12 being African-American, one being Mexican, and five being white. I also spent four hours every week conducting observations in the classroom while simultaneously assisting the GED teacher as well. The observations and interviews were conducted over a seven month period. I did not begin conducting interviews until I had first spent three months getting to know the students and building relationships with them.

Using an interpretive frame, the data were analyzed first by using matrices to organize the interview questions and responses. Next, the data were analyzed for themes connected to smartness. These themes were then analyzed according to how they fit into the theoretical framework of "figured worlds," which will be discussed in the next section (Glesne, 1999; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

THE FIGURED WORLD OF SMARTNESS

My analysis is framed according to Holland et al.'s (1998) work, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Figured worlds represent the "rules," "guidelines," or social forces that influence (but do not completely dictate),

the ways people speak, behave, and "practice" within social spaces. I chose to use Holland et al.'s work because it combines the ways culture and power/status influence our thoughts, behavior, and ways of interpreting the world along with how people are creative and improvise within those influences or structures. Additionally, their work emphasizes how the everyday, mundane activities in life build, inform, and (re)create identities and social spaces. In essence, their work allows me to analyze being "smart" as connected simultaneously to culture, power/status, and identity within everyday practices of school life.

I argue that smartness is a figured world where, "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., p. 52). Once we become invested within the figured world of smartness it begins to "move through us as spoken discourse and embodied practice" (Holland et al., p. 251). Most importantly, it is the key process by which the institution of schooling so powerfully dictates and distributes status and opportunity in our society.

Holland et al. (1998) frame figured worlds as consisting of three key elements: artifacts, discourse, and identity. My discussion of artifacts will focus upon what artifacts the students associated with being smart. In regards to discourse, I will look at how the term "smart" was defined and used by the students. Finally, I will explore identity through the students' self-perceptions of themselves regarding smartness. By using these pieces of figured worlds, I am best able to show how smartness is "figured" and how students internalized definitions of smartness, which then shaped their academic identities.

Artifacts

Artifacts are defined by Holland et al. (1998) as the, "means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (p. 61). Artifacts operate as semiotic mediators, which act to influence psychological processes and behaviors over time. Discourse is a key way that that the meanings of artifacts become collectively understood. In this section I will first discuss the artifacts the youth associated with smartness and then the meanings they connected to them.

When asking the youth how they thought being smart in school was defined, they largely connected smartness in school to artifacts. The following represent some of their responses. When asked, "How was smartness defined in school?" the youth responded:

> Grades. A's and B's. – Bertram

> Book smarts. Grades. Someone with papers... it gives proof that they know how to do the stuff. That they know what they're doing. – Marcus

> The person who graduates with honors, the person who goes to honors classes. — Sheena

> People who read a lot of books. A good vocabulary. People in upper classes. Algebra, calculus. I always thought they were the smart kids. – Anthony

> Test scores like on the standardized tests that they give... If you score high enough you get in honors class, and gifted classes. – Calveda

As described by the youth, the artifacts of smartness within schools include grades, "papers" (diplomas), labels (i.e. gifted or honors), standardized test scores, books, large vocabulary, and participation in college prep math courses. The artifacts, acting as semiotic mediators, are what make smartness appear "real" and as something tangible or biologically based rather than as something socio-culturally produced. This makes smartness especially powerful because it becomes extremely difficult for students to challenge the ways smartness gets defined and how they are constructed as smart or not smart in school. Simultaneously, the artifacts begin to influence students' perceptions of themselves and their own abilities over time.

Each of these artifacts represents manifestations of gatekeeping in our educational system. Gatekeeping mechanisms are used to explain, "the social locomotion of individuals in many organizations" (Lewin, 1951, p. 187). Although these mechanisms are often viewed as impartial rules, in reality they are shaped by cultural forces and organizational norms that influence which individuals advance beyond particular gates (Shoemaker, 1991). The gates operate in a cumulative fashion and ensure that only a small number will succeed.

Our current educational system is set up to sort students so that not everyone will succeed in school (Nieto, 1996; Bennett and LeCompte, 1990; Oakes and Lipton, 1999). These gatekeeping points represent structures that are used to screen out students (Delpit, 1995). Artifacts such as grades, test

scores, and college preparatory curriculum associated with smartness represent some of the gatekeeping mechanisms. The students who succeed in getting past the gatekeeping points are told that they have succeeded due to working hard and being smart. The students who fail to pass the gatekeeping points are told that they are lazy and/or not smart enough. In reality, who succeeds past these gatekeeping points is largely connected to race and class with wealthy, white students receiving the easiest passes through gatekeeping points. As a consequence, the status quo gets reproduced through these gatekeeping mechanisms.

Holland et al. (1998) argue that the meaning given to artifacts, ''depends upon a collectively remembered history of use and interpretation that is a common part of the social commentary that accompanies most interaction'' (p. 36). This suggests that the meaning (i.e. smartness) the youth attribute to the artifacts are not arbitrary, individually ascribed meanings. Rather, they learned to associate these artifacts with smartness while in school. Perceiving these artifacts as being connected to smartness arises from a discourse inscribed upon them as students. The artifacts then, ''remain distributed over others for a long period of time'' (Holland et al., 1998). The youth carried the meanings with them beyond school walls and even after they quit attending school. The following section on discourse depicts the complicated ways the youth interacted with the dominant construction of smartness within school and how it subsequently influenced their decisions to disengage from school.

Discourse

Holland et al. (1998) state: ''The discourses and categories dominant in a society... are 'inscribed' upon people, both interpersonally and institutionally, and within them. Selves are socially constructed through the mediation of powerful discourses and their artifacts.'' (p. 26). Discourses are what shape taken-for-granted understandings and meanings in schools. Schools as dominant institutions in our society create a powerful discourse regarding smartness and inscribe it upon the actors (i.e. teachers, students). Luttrell (2003) states regarding discourses in schools:

> Educational discourses direct us to value intellectual development and provide us the means to gauge our 'progress' in accordance with grade levels and standardized tests scores, thus shaping our self-assessments as learners and our views of others as 'slow' or 'fast' learners. This is not the only, or even the best, way to think about the acquisition of intellectual skills, but it is the way that coordinates, manages, and regulates children's trajectories through schools. There are varied ways to construe any one person's learning curve. But in

> schools, only certain assessments predominate and those are the ones that correspond with institutional aims (p. 26).

Students who struggle to acquire the artifacts of smartness discussed in the previous section are left to either perceive themselves as not smart or to reinterpret smartness. Holland et al. (1998) state, "[W]omen and other oppressed people are especially subject to... situations replete with contradictions" (p. 17). These contradictions then leave oppressed people with the need to improvise. Holland et al. (1998) perceive these improvisations as, "potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity, an altered identity" (p. 18). In the rest of this section, I will address how the youth improvised in response to the dominant discourse of smartness in schools.

Bakhtin (1981) poses "authorship" or finding one's own voice as a space for agency. This space occurs when a person begins to speak back to a voice of authority rather than automatically assuming it as their own. The person, "[B]egins to rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices and, by this process, develops her own 'authorial stance"' (Holland et al., p. 183). When looking at the discourse of the youth regarding smartness, I perceive them as working through and developing their own "authorial stances" in direct challenge to the dominant discourse of smartness connected to schooling.

When asked what they thought it meant to be smart, the youth responded with definitions that included learning what teachers teach you to knowing how not to get caught by the police when selling drugs. However, two key themes overwhelmingly were present in their responses. First, they clearly made a distinction between being book smart and street smart. Second, they refused to define smartness in a narrow way.

At first, this appeared contradictory because the youth seemed to be simultaneously defining street smart as the ultimate form of smartness while also defining smartness in a way that allowed everyone to be defined as smart. Eventually, I realized that these were not necessarily contradictory definitions. Instead, they were both attempts at agency in speaking back to the narrow definition of smartness that had been imposed upon them in school and an attempt at reinterpreting their own identities.

When I originally asked the youth to define smartness they were quick to define it as book smarts vs. street smarts. Book smarts were directly connected to the artifacts mentioned previously. Street smarts, however, were often defined as a direct counter to book smarts or the dominant discourse of smartness. The following include some of the ways the youth defined street smarts:

> Able to not go into bankruptcy I guess... and stay out of trouble. Just able to survive on the street without getting into trouble, and keeping a home for yourself and everything going. – Calveda

> If you can make ends meet, whether you're educated or not... like in school I was a book smart type person, but when I dropped out I had to learn the street smarts part of it. And yeah, I was 19 years old, 20 years old, and I had $30,000 and I could do anything I wanted with it, but yet it was illegal. – Nickili

> I believe I have some street smarts. Like I've never been arrested for drugs... I know not to walk around here with all these drugs on me broadcasting it. I mean, that would be stupid... I know when trouble should occur that I need to leave, and get out of that situation, or I have to handle my business, or not handle my business. – Quinn

> A street smart person would know not to let a cop search their car without probable cause. Someone without that knowledge, maybe someone with school smarts because they don't know about the law...the police can get over on, and it's just not going to happen to someone that has street smarts. – Sheena

> Gang bangers. You have to know what area to go in and not go in. How to wear your clothes and that type of knowledge. – Ardelia

Street smarts were connected with being able to maneuver through the structures in their lives such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive "others." This distinction is key because street smarts stress agency in countering social structures or obstacles whereas, for many of the students, book smarts *represented* those structures or obstacles, particularly in their efforts of passing the GED or acquiring "papers."

Students also addressed street smarts through the people in their lives they thought of as smart. The following is a part of an interview with Shawanna:

> Interviewer: So when you think of someone as being smart, who do you think of?
> Shawanna: My grandmother.

Interviewer: o.k. And what about her?
Shawanna: She's not smart in education, but a smart person inside. She can barely read, but she knows math. She graduated high school at the age of 27.
Interviewer: What else about her would make you say that she was smart? Can you give me an example?
Shawanna: When I was little I didn't want to get up for school, and uh, (laughs) and one day I had this reading assignment, and she couldn't read it. She said, ''You see why I've been waking you, beating you up every morning to get up? Because I can't even read, but I know how to do math,'' And that shocked me... So she really encouraged me to do something more with my life... And then she had this thing called her ''phonics'' and started using it. And she got really good at reading. Then she went back and got her diploma.

For Shawanna, her grandmother is smart not only because she overcame obstacles in her own life but also for the ways she encouraged Shawanna to overcome her own struggles. Others repeated this theme as well in viewing people as smart that had helped them out in some shape or form. Whereas book smarts emphasize individual achievement, street smarts or life smarts allow for a broader definition that includes helping others navigate the structures in their lives. It stresses a communal rather than individual focus.

By claiming street smarts over book smarts, the youth are speaking against the mechanisms of smartness mentioned previously. Through street smarts they find a voice, gain back a sense of control over their own lives, and find an alternative route to claiming status. The key to street smarts is that they can only be learned through experience, especially hardship. This allows the youth to frame valuable knowledge as personal experience rather than the knowledge found in school curriculum or academic books, which is far removed from their lives.

In *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ferguson (2001) looks at the power of schools in creating social identities, particularly that of African-American boys who become viewed as ''troublemakers.'' She discusses how getting into trouble through breaking school rules has different meanings for different groups of children. Part of this meaning is constructed through what she refers to as ''popular'' knowledge, which is very similar to the ways the youth described ''street smarts.'' She describes how this form of knowledge serves,

> [A]s a source for a critical stance toward institutional knowledge and power... It relies heavily but not solely on observation and experience; the data gathered

> by the senses and the emotions is taken seriously and valued over book learning. Folk and popular cultures are important vehicles for this knowledge. It is the form of knowledge that the individualizing, dispersing, hierarchizing strategies of school seeks to eradicate (Ferguson, 2001, pp. 104–105).

Ferguson further describes how the "troublemakers" in her study used their popular knowledge or street smarts to guide their survival and maintaining a positive sense of self, which at times led to their supposed misbehavior. Having already been labeled as "prison material" in elementary school, these youth quickly learned that a "constitution of self as smart" was foreclosed to them because it is based upon conforming behavior and academic achievement (Ferguson, 2001, p. 99). Consequently, they began to purposefully distance themselves from schooling and attempted to recreate their academic identities through hegemonic masculinity and Blackness as ways to speak back to institutional power and to regain a sense of self-worth.

Ferguson's study reminds us that in school street smarts are devalued and dismissed as illegitimate knowledge. Consequently, the students who value street smarts are left to find their lived experience and themselves being devalued. The students are then given a *forced* choice of whether to continue investing themselves in school where they are devalued and framed as "slow" or "problem students" or to disengage and potentially reinterpret themselves by valuing street smarts over book smarts.

Another avenue the youth took in challenging definitions of smartness was to define smartness broadly or to assert that *everyone* is smart. The following quotes exemplify the kinds of responses I received:

> I would define it as just experience. To live and learn, that's smart. – Jeremy

> I think everybody is smart. It's just what type of smart. I mean, you would categorize some people as strong with verbal skills, smart doing puzzles, or smart in school...or smart streetwise. – Quinn

> Some people don't like school but they love music. They use that knowledge of what they got and turn it into something real beautiful. Just trying to create something with it. Poetry or something like that. – Bertram

> A person with the ability to do what they want to do. Follow their heart. A person that has the knowledge to get where they want to be. — Ardelia

As discussed previously, smartness is typically defined narrowly within schools to mean good grades, high standardized test scores, or being a member of gifted classes. The youth who were defining it broadly were refusing to allow smartness to be defined by others in such a way that it emphasizes comparisons and competition. Again, by defining smartness broadly the youth emphasize a sense of community rather than individual gain and achievement.

Through figuring smartness counter to the discourse within schools, the youth were attempting to alter their identities. After having been framed as "not smart" through such things as poor grades and having dropped out, the youth were reclaiming smartness as a part of their own identities. They were asserting their agency by authoring their own alternative definitions. In the following section I will discuss the ways schooling definitions of smartness shape identities and how the youth internalized definitions of smartness.

Identity

A key aspect of smartness is identity. As Holland et al. (1998) explain identity, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are." (p. 3). Castells (1997) claims that one of the origins of identity building is through the dominant institutions of society. He refers to this type of identity as a "legitimizing identity." Within school walls, students are learning about themselves and others in relation to the dominant discourses found there. I believe the key discourse and symbols are about smartness or ability.

The legitimate identities in schools are overwhelmingly those of the students who pass and achieve the gatekeeping points mentioned previously or the students who possess the artifacts of smartness. These are students who conform to behavioral expectations, achieve high grades, take honors level courses, and/or achieve high scores on standardized tests. At the same time, marginal identities are created as well. These are the students who are overwhelmingly framed as troublemakers, slow learners, and/or misfits. All of these students are figuring academic identities but in different ways that are in direct response to what the institution of schooling frames as a "legitimate" identity.

Simultaneously, this operates to legitimate academic knowledge over experiential knowledge. Through defining legitimate knowledge and who has access to legitimate knowledge, schools as a social institution are able to create a dominant societal perception of smartness, which reaffirms the power given to schools as institutions along with the power of the various identities created within them.

Levinson, Foley, and Holland (1996) juxtapose local definitions of who is "knowledgeable" versus the definition perpetuated in schools. They state:

> Institutions of mass schooling often remove children from their families and local communities, encouraging mastery of knowledges and disciplines that have currency and ideological grounding in wider spheres... No matter how the knowledgeable person is locally defined, regardless of the skills and sensibilities that count as indicators of "wisdom" and intelligence in the home and immediate locale, schools interject an educational mission of extra-local proportions. (p. 1)

They go on to claim that the school's definition of an "educated person" becomes hegemonic and encourages stratification along the lines of gender, age, class, and race.

Their work connects to Castells through the notion of a "schooled identity." The stratification of knowledge not only produces social stratification but also teaches us something about ourselves and others that extends beyond school walls. Levinson (1996) states:

> The construction of a *schooled* identity thus involves an understanding of social self as educated person, as occupying a social position distinct from the *unschooled*... Ultimately, I would suggest, it is the sense of self as educated person which most powerfully articulates social difference into new configurations. Schooled identity not only emerges from the school-based culture... but it also finds support and expression in myriad social spaces beyond the school. (p.231)

We all carry smartness with us through internalizing labels (gifted vs. learning disabled), academic "papers" (Ph.D. vs. high school drop-out), and previous school performance (A's vs. C's). The figured world of smartness is located inside us, not as a biological function connected to our brains, but, instead, as a cultural practice we use to give meaning to others and to ourselves. In sum, it is what makes the institution of schooling so powerful in shaping our identities.

Researcher Identity

My presence at the youth program carried with it the dominant discourse of smartness, a schooled identity. The fact that I was a professor, possessed "papers" (i.e. Ph.D.), and was conducting research meant that I automatically represented the dominant discourse on smartness. In a way, I embodied the structures the students were facing. I struggled with wanting to downplay this aspect of my identity while also realizing that I could not escape it. In my fieldnotes I wrote:

> I try not to be framed as the "smart" one in the room. I tell them I'm unsure if I don't know how to help them with a math problem they are working on. I admit to making mistakes. I admit to not knowing things. I try to frame them as knowledge holders, rather than it just being myself framed in that way. I always participate in their activities, even if I do not want to, such as dancing with Nuusa (the instructor) and playing the reading game. I feel as if I have to make myself vulnerable as well. Is it working? Maybe but I can't change the fact I'm a professor. – Fieldnotes, 1–24–05

In my earlier observations, students made comments to each other about being "dumb" or "smart" while working on the course materials. These comments always seemed to be in a direct response to my presence. However, over time these comments seemed to lessen as the youth became more comfortable with my presence. Yet, the students did test me. Marcus, a participant in the program, playfully challenged me and how I represented the dominant discourse of smartness. The following is an excerpt from his interview:

> Marcus: I think teachers are a big thing in school. How the teacher acts towards everybody. Who they pick for teacher's pet. You were a teacher's pet weren't you? (He says to me with a slight smile.)
> Interviewer: (I'm quiet for a moment in wondering how to respond because I was a teacher's pet at times in school.) Why are you saying that?
> Marcus: Cause you can type... you got your own little laptop there... you're in college and you seem to understand every teacher. You have to know teachers to be a teacher's pet.
> Interviewer: I did get along well with teachers but I didn't try to be a teacher's pet. There are lots of reasons why I did what I did in school. (I share with Marcus some of my personal background)

Marcus was not going to let me conduct a study on smartness without allowing myself to be personally implicated. By telling me I was a ''teacher's pet,'' he was discrediting any status I might have through the dominant discourse of smartness. He was making sure I understood that I did not hold status with him.

Additionally, many of the youth made a point to clearly define smartness in opposition to someone with ''papers'' or a formal education. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Jeremy:

> Interviewer: Who is someone you think of as smart?
> Jeremy: I'd say my old boss, Mark Fowler.
> Interviewer: OK, so what about Mark makes you think he's smart?
> Jeremy: I don't think he's somebody that's book smart. I don't think of that as being smart – where you went to college or where you went here or there. I'm thinking about being through things you know? If you go out and experience this, and you grew up through this, and this kind of trouble, and trials and everything... Just different experiences make you smarter.
> Interviewer: Yeah. Um, so it sounds like you're talking about, what would you call that kind of smartness? You already mentioned book smart.
> Jeremy: Street smart. Just life smart. You know just being through things. Just smart, you know.
> Interviewer: Yeah. Why is it that you don't define smart as book smart?
> Jeremy: Because anybody can learn that. You can sit down and read a book and say, oh, I know this and that. You got to get that experience. You have to have had a hungry mouth to be street smart.

It is important to note that Jeremy chose to tell me, a person with a Ph.D., that the smartest person he knows was not defined according to book smarts and that he believed anybody could be book smart. Jeremy was speaking directly to the dominant discourse as it was embodied in me. Perhaps students such as Jeremy were not just answering my questions; they were trying to teach me a lesson and to make sure I understood that I did not automatically possess status with my ''papers.'' In essence, a part of their responses was taking an authorial stance to my identity as a professor and all of the artifacts of smartness I possessed.

Holland et al. (1998) write: ''The dialect we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear are treated as indicators of claims to and identification with social categories and positions of privilege relative to those with who we are interacting.'' (p. 127). The ways we carry smartness

with us is a part of that identification. I clearly had invested myself into the figured world of smartness as it operates in schools whereas many of the youth had not. The youth and I could not escape our educational histories and the identities that resulted from them. In a sense, we could not escape the ways we figured smartness through our identities.

When asked about their performance in school and their own perceptions of smartness, most of the youth stated that they typically received C's or lower and that they were not book smart. When asked if she thought she was perceived as smart in school, Misty stated, "Probably not. I found homework irrelevant." By choosing not to invest herself in smartness or to adopt a legitimizing identity by not doing her homework or trying to receive good grades, Misty was not perceived as a "smart" student by her teachers.

Many of the youth also did not perceive themselves as book smart. For example, Sheena stated, "I'm street smart. (laughs) I'm not very intelligent in school but I have street smarts." This suggests that the youth did internalize the meanings associated with the artifacts of smartness and the discourse around them in schools. The youth also discussed that because they did not feel book smart, that they chose to give up or disengage from school. For example, Shawanna stated, "It seemed like every time I tried my hardest, I still failed and I was just like, why should I try now if I keep failing? So I stopped trying." Anthony, who switched schools a lot when he was young, said that he gave up trying by the time he reached the 4th grade because he felt so far behind. He stated, "I used to have speech classes. I used to think I was special needs but eventually I grew out of it. I didn't feel like I was very smart. There were some things I did know but there was a lot I didn't."

For Sheena, Shawanna, and Anthony, the narrow definition of smartness that focuses upon grades and test scores made them feel as if school was not something they were good at. They did not feel smart or capable within school walls, which directly influenced their decisions to eventually drop out of school. The discourse of smartness is so powerful that it does not really create choice for students such as Sheena, Shawanna, and Anthony. To maintain their sense of self-worth and agency, they *have* to disengage.

It is important to mention that some of the youth did get framed as smart while they were in school. Calveda was placed into gifted classes when she was in high school but she was the only Black student in the class. The following excerpt describes her experience:

> Calveda: I liked school, it's just when I got to high school, it was like "Oh, what am I here for," because I was like in this gifted program in high school, and everyone else is changing classes but me. And it was just boring.

Interviewer: So whenever you got put into the gifted program, you didn't know any of the kids in there?
Calveda: No (laughs). Like I had other friends, but I didn't have any classes with them. You know, I'd see them at lunchtime, and that was it. I was the only Black girl in there.
Interviewer: That was what I was wondering. And how did they respond to you?
Calveda: It was fine. Like it wasn't any type of racial issue. I never had any problems. I think they were probably more scared that I would beat them up! Even in middle school, like there were only 2 Black girls in the gifted class. It was me and my friend, Camellia, but when it split up, she ended up going to another school. So it was like *me*! As a matter of fact, I can't remember even having a Black teacher in my lifetime.

Although Calveda possessed an artifact of smartness by being in the gifted classes, she found possessing the artifact to be alienating because she was the only Black student. She did not perceive the other students in the class as her friends. In fact, she believed they were afraid of her.

Another student had a similar experience. Justin performed well academically in elementary school so his parents applied for him to attend a local, elite public school. Once attending the school, he found the experience very alienating. Again, he was the only Black student, not just in his class, but in his grade level. One of the most damaging things that happened was that many of the teachers and students could not understand him when he talked because he spoke in Black dialect. He went from attending an elementary school with a large African American population and performing well to a school where no one looked like him and people struggled to understand his speech. Justin had attained an artifact of smartness by attending the school, which has a reputation of sending many of its graduates to Ivy League colleges, but found the experience to be alienating and painful. Calveda and Justin's experiences show how the dominant figuring of smartness in schools is heavily connected to white privilege. For people of color to attain artifacts of smartness, they must often make painful sacrifices.

In summary, the figuring of smartness is directly connected to schooled and unschooled identities. Smartness is what makes the institution of schooling so powerful in our society in assigning status and privilege because it is connected to identity. We use smartness to tell us about ourselves and to tell us about other people. The artifacts of smartness make it seem real and tangible rather than socio-culturally produced. Hence, it

appears to be more meritocratic than it really is. People who have benefited from the system, who have been framed as smart while in school, typically not only do not see its figuring but instead believe it is real and fair.

So then, where are the spaces for improvisation, for "altering identities"? It can be found in listening to the youth's "authorial stances," their challenging of smartness as it is dominantly perceived. Street smarts are not about received knowledge someone else determines is important. They are not about performing to someone else's standards and judgment. Instead, street smarts are about living and learning. They are about agency in the face of oppression. They are about learning how to survive and to think for yourself.

IMPLICATIONS

I began by talking about "Elo," a college student behind prison doors. Before taking college classes, he did not believe he was capable of doing university level academics. What led to Elo underestimating his capabilities? Why was he taking college classes but behind prison doors? Something in Elo's educational history led him to believe that schooling was not for him, that he was not college material. Most likely, he did not demonstrate the right artifacts of smartness such as grades, test scores, or behaviors. The discourse of smartness constructed him as a "failure" and moved him towards creating his own "marginal" identity. As one of the participants stated about his brother, "He didn't do too good in school but he did do good in the streets. He was so good at the streets; so, he took on more of that than school. You do what you do. He was good at doing street stuff but left school alone. So, that was his angle."

When youth are framed as failures in school, they are forced to adopt the "angle" of street smarts over book smarts to find a way to succeed and get the things they want out of life. It is their own way of refiguring smartness and finding some sense of agency within the institutionalized figured world of smartness where schools overwhelmingly do not allow for students to be *both* street smart and book smart. Allowing for both would involve reinventing the idea of the "good" student, of what counts as legitimate knowledge, and broadening definitions of success within schools beyond grades and test scores. Elo is an example of what happens when students are forced to choose.

Brayboy's (2005) work on Tribal Critical Race Theory offers a way to rethink smartness in schools. Brayboy states:

> While Indigenous ways of knowing and 'book smarts' are often seen as diametrically opposed, these different forms of knowledge do not necessarily need to be in conflict. Rather, they complement each other in powerful ways. This blending of knowledges – academic and cultural ones – creates knowledge that is key to survival (p. 434).

As Brayboy indicates, the blending of cultural and academic knowledge can be very powerful. By blending the two, it would allow youth to stay connected to their communities, their cultural identities, *and* achieve in school without feeling like they are denigrating the other two.

In order to reframe the figured world of smartness in schools, the three popular cornerstones of teaching (i.e. method, assessment, and content) need to be rethought. There is a fourth dimension to teaching that directly impacts the supposed cornerstones. This fourth dimension is more *people-based* than evidence-based. It is more complex and process oriented than simple and outcome fixated. It is focused upon the goal of democratic equality rather than individual social mobility (Labaree, 1997). It centers upon building relationships between teachers and students, students and students, and families and schools. It invites students' lives and experiences into the classroom. It requires a critically, reflective teacher willing to challenge her/his own assumptions and biases. It involves a curriculum that de-centers whiteness and is more co-constructed rather than pre-packaged and standardized. Without this fourth dimension of teaching, academic and cultural knowledge become polar opposites and work against each other rather than blending together to allow marginalized students to be both street smart and book smart.

The institution of schooling as a key place of socialization teaches us about what it means to be smart. From there, we look to artifacts (grades, credentials, teacher expectations, etc.) to determine whether we are smart ourselves. Then we decide if schooling or the figured world of smartness are things to invest ourselves in. For many poor and/or students of color such as Elo, they learn early on that it is not. So they begin to disengage. These students may not perceive themselves as "dumb" but they may have figured out, that regardless of talent or effort, they will never be identified as smart within the institution of schooling.

If we do not pay attention to the figured world of smartness and how it operates in schools, we miss the opportunity to reinterpret student academic performance particularly as it relates to poor students and/or students of color. We miss the opportunity to see how we perpetuate it ourselves. As a result, we accept the gatekeeping points and artifacts of smartness as necessary aspects of schooling. We must (re)envision smartness away from the sorting of people on an individual, competitive focus and from being a tool

of social reproduction through the institution of schooling. Only then, can we begin to disrupt smartness through everyday practices in schools and help students to reframe their lives.

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