What About Students’ Experiences: (Re)imagining Success Through Photovoice At a High-Achieving Urban “No-Excuses” Charter School

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What About Students’ Experiences: (Re)imagining Success Through Photovoice At a High-Achieving Urban “No-Excuses” Charter School

L. Trenton S. Marsh, University of Michigan

Abstract
The article highlights the use of photovoice, a method that gives power to creators of images to capture experiences that are central to their life. Students’ verbal considerations of success in the context of the “no-excuses” school is included, as is a sample of students’ visual data about what success is outside of the “no-excuses” context. The study reveals the “no-excuses” orientation fosters an oppressive definition of success in the context of classrooms. However, the photovoice component reveals students are able to resist the limited view as four emergent findings reveal how students make meaning of success: (1) human connection; (2) educative experiences; (3) original composition; and (4) survival methods. Lastly, implications about what educators and school communities may learn, if students were seen as active co-constructors in the design and implementation of their own education.

Keywords: Photovoice, youth of color, success, “no-excuses” charter school, ethnography

As I approached the front door of Metropolitan City Charter Academy (MCCA), I could not help but recall my own first day of middle school growing up in Shaker Heights, Ohio. I remembered being excited to see friends whom I had not seen throughout the summer and catching up on all the latest chatter and gossip. Yet as I watched students at MCCA stoically filing into their homerooms to begin the 2015–2016 Preparatory Camp (PC), I could not sense any excitement or anticipation for the start of the new academic year. MCCA required that students return for a “mock” first day of school, an event that had been described by some MCCA teachers as the “indoctrination of the students.”

Students arrived by 7:30 a.m. and were met by Mr. Bleeker, the gym teacher, who performed “uniform checks.” Students that arrived after 7:30 a.m. or without full uniform earned an automatic detention. As students filed into the school, they walked in straight lines and were silent. Throughout the PC, students remained quiet, transitioning from classroom to classroom where they received teacher-led refreshers on how to reengage at MCCA. One such “crash course” that set the tone for my year of observation was titled “Living RAISED.” This was a refresher on the school’s character values.
When I entered the classroom, students were sitting with their backs straight against the chairs, at desks that were evenly positioned in three columns. Students’ heads were perched, facing forward, while their hands were folded and rested on their table tops. As I tried to slip into the back of the classroom, a few students watched me from the corners of their eyes. Staring at the ground, I purposely tried to ignore making eye contact, not wanting my entrance to cause a distraction. Although this was my first day in the school, I could sense that an incident involving a student not paying attention to an adult speaking at the front of the room may have been grounds for a public reprimand.

Mr. Younger, one of the math teachers, was at the front of the classroom. He was flanked by Mr. Waters, the music teacher who also stood at the front and Ms. Foss, another math teacher, who stood on the side of the room. Mr. Younger was short in stature, and like the other teachers in the room, White. “Living RAISED,” he began to pontificate, was about a “set of shared values” that dictated students’ behavior at MCCA. The students were reminded that RAISED was an acronym that stood for Respect, Answerability, Involved, Sympathy, Eagerness, and Discipline. As the young scholars continued to stare expressionless, Mr. Younger elevated his pitch and cadence to perhaps lighten the mood from this rote speech. He suggested that students should “strive to live RAISED values every day,” and those who did could “earn RAISED dollars” and they would have the opportunity to redeem those dollars through an annual auction.

At the end of his presentation, Mr. Younger did not ask if students had any questions. Meanwhile, Mr. Waters and Ms. Foss remained stationed on the left and right side of the room, looking up and down the rows, presumably to make sure students were paying attention. As the time approached for students to exit the room and go to the next lesson, there was a specific set of timed instructions, what Mr. Younger referenced as “Steps 1 through Step 4” that granted students’ permission to make silent, uniform movements to exit their desk chairs and form a line by the door.

Introduction

The above vignette provides a glimpse into the everyday reality of Black and Latino/a/x students who attend MCCA, a self-described urban “no-excuses charter school.” Across the country, a polarized debate persists about how to increase the academic success of Black and Latino/a/x students coming from low-income communities. At the center of this debate is the extent of influence that market-based school choice policies should have in the context of urban education reform. In current school choice rhetoric, “no-excuses” models are viewed by some charter school advocates and policymakers as an effective solution to close what is seen as the persistent “achievement gap” of high-poverty Black and Latino/a/x students with their affluent or middle-class White and Asian peer groups (Davis & Heller, 2017; Dynarski, 2015). Many charter advocates, including teachers who have embraced the “no-excuses” model, have argued that charter schools are more successful than traditional public schools because they are innovative and more responsive to student needs. The “no-excuses” schools have emphasized frequent testing and dramatically increased instructional time, parental pledges of involvement, aggressive human capital strategies, and a relentless focus on math and reading achievement (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

The “no-excuses” charter schools often operate a broken windows (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) method of discipline—that is, applying enforcement strategies in schools to prioritize punishing low-level infractions and policing common youth behaviors like
cussing or “horseplay” to curb future incidents. In his book *Sweating the Small Stuff* (2008), charter advocate Whitman profiles “no-excuses” public charter schools that he referred to as “new paternalistic” schools which operated similarly. These schools monitored the “small stuff” of their Black and Latino/a/x students with the philosophy that if small behaviors are controlled in school, with a set of supplementary character values that modeled “middle-class” behaviors and a reward system, this should reduce more serious school-related incidents and ultimately reduce social inequalities. Here, the “middle-class” often explicitly represents White cultural standards that concern what success in school (and subsequently beyond) looks and behaves like, and is implicitly constructed as superior to that of the students and families of color (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). The subtle (and not so subtle) socialization towards a predetermined definition of success can inform the ways in which teachers teach and students learn. And while the vast majority of students want to succeed in K-12 schooling and view school as important to being successful in life, sociocultural and structural barriers even inside school often stand in the way of this manifestation (Theoharis, 2009). Thus, students from working class families may not know the unspoken dominant norms concerning schooling success and may not recognize the structural inequities that can “live” in school contexts (e.g., classrooms, relationships, learning expectations among teachers, and institutionalized practices).

The purpose of this article is to urge the start of a new scholarly conversation focused on exploring the construct of success using students’ voices and lived experiences in order to develop policies that foster a learning environment that treats students not just as objects, but also as agents of reform and improvement. To begin this conversation, I first discuss the literature which examines the disparate academic and disciplinary outcomes for students of color in schools in the U.S. I also discuss the “no excuses” approach to teaching and learning and how this impacts students of color and how focusing on the “no-excuses” context in tandem with the photovoice method fills a gap in the scholarly discourse. Lastly, the article concludes with implications for theory and practitioners.

**Disparate Outcomes for Students of Color in Schools**

The ways in which teachers seek to understand their students, including addressing their assumptions, biases, and expectations, particularly about vulnerable students (i.e., low-income, linguistic, ethnic minority) and their families, are critical (Howard, 2013; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Yet the literature on student achievement strongly suggests that Black and Latino/a/x students are generally perceived by their teachers to be less competent than Whites and more disruptive. A series of studies reveal that this perception gap concerning students’ schooling success has been brooding in American culture for a long time. Research dating back to Rist’s (1970) ethnography of elementary classrooms has shown that teachers rate Black children as having more behavioral problems and poorer academic performance than White children (Horwitz, Bility, Plichta, Leaf, & Haynes, 1998; Lindholm, Touliatos, & Rich, 1978). In his study, Rist found kindergarten students’ expectations from their teachers did not include any academic potential measurements, but were initially based on teachers’ perceived success factors that mirrored White, middle-class society, which was the teacher’s ‘normative reference group.’ As a result, the teacher reacted positively to those students whose lifestyle and background norms were familiar, and negatively to those students whose norms were not. In such a way, the perceived bad reputations of students of color took root.

Reputation in school is most relevant for low-income Black and Latino/a/x students overall and males of color, in particular. Black and Latino male students’ identities and
reputations are constantly being defined and confirmed by teachers and schools (Ferguson, 2000). Accordingly, Black and Latino male students are typically over-represented in academic categories associated with failure and dis/ability status, and under-represented in those associated with schooling success (Ferguson, Noguera, & Martin, 2014). Pigott and Cowen (2000) also found that Black children were judged by teachers as having more serious school adjustment problems, more negatively stereotypic personality qualities, such as a preference for interaction or being nonsubmissive, and bleaker educational prognoses than White children. More recent work confirms that White teachers tend to view and evaluate the behavior and competence of students of color more negatively than White students (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). In their recent study on “teacher discretion,” and the recommendation of gifted and talented programs in the U.S., Grissom and Redding (2016) found Black students, particularly Black male students are less likely to be assigned to gifted and talented services in both math and reading, a pattern that persists when controlling for background factors, such as health and socioeconomic status, and characteristics of classrooms and schools.

The “No-Excuses” Approach and Students of Color

The pernicious trends affecting Black and Latino/a/x students’ schooling experiences persist in public charter schools, especially for Black and Latino male students. For instance, one study examining racial disproportionality of charter schools in the state of California, found that Black students were mis/labeled and overrepresented in the specific learning dis/ability category of emotional disturbance (Fierros & Blumberg, 2005). Seider, Gilbert, Novick, & Gomez (2013) found in a study of three “no-excuses” schools that the students most likely to receive the worst penalties and become victims of adverse school-imposed labeling were Black males who were low-achieving. In a nationwide study, policy research firm Mathematica (2010) evidenced that the attrition rate for Black students in some charter schools is as high as 40%, yet praise and financial will for “no-excuses” public charter schools continues, at least in certain academic and policy circles (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009; Charter Schools Program State Entities competition of 2017; Finn & Wright, 2016). In the end, charter schools that comprise a majority of students of color living in under-resourced communities may be driven by a deficit-oriented framework that creates a curriculum and pedagogical approach in part by what school operators think students (and their families) may lack (Marsh, 2017).

This approach to learning resembles Bernstein’s (1990) concepts of classification and framing, which refer to issues of power and control in areas of curriculum and pedagogy. Accordingly, schools with strong classification adhered to rigid boundaries in what counts as knowledge, often excluding local knowledge forms (White, 2018). And schools with strong framing adhered to highly structured pedagogical rules that prescribed the transmission of knowledge (e.g., scripted lessons and Teach Like a Champion). Taken together, the concepts of strong classification and strong framing are akin to what Haberman (2010) identifies as the ‘pedagogy of poverty.’ These acts are performed to the exclusion of other forms of pedagogical taxonomies due to biases and stereotypes about the race and socioeconomic class of students being taught.

While there are existing studies that examine Black and Latino/a/x students schooling experiences (Hill & Torres, 2010; Noguera, 2008; Rolón-Dow, 2005), most of these have focused on younger children in elementary schools (Tyson, 2003; Langhout & Mitchell, 2008); students in traditional public schools (MacLeod, 1995; Ogbu, 2003) or Black students in a racially-diverse institution (Ferguson, 2000; Milner & Tenore, 2010). Few
empirical studies have been in the context of a “no-excuses” public charter school (Golann, 2015), but not many studies have asked students themselves to weigh in on the indicators of success within their schools. Students’ perspectives are seldom among the many who are valued to have a say in the discourse of the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to educational inequities whether at the micro-level (i.e., classroom), meso-level (school), or macro-level (city and state). This is an important gap in the knowledge base as “no-excuses” charter school models in some cities now make up a majority of the local charter school sector (Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2011).

Schools with a “no-excuses” orientation of learning think they are motivated by an equity concern—to close the achievement gap—which creates a college-going ethos and opportunity in which students are actively engaged in their communities and are charged to change the world. Yet, there continues to be limited empirical research documenting the ways Black and Latino/a/x students are treated inside these schools on a daily basis. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research centering Black and Latino/a/x students’ experiences, particularly using photovoice, a method that allows participants to create knowledge—in the form of photographs—representing their realities, which can then be used to stimulate critical reflection and contribute to understanding and awareness of their experiences. Overall, the research study explored the ways in which marginalized students make meaning of success in one “no-excuses” charter school and the ways in which structural characteristics, conscious and unconscious assumptions, and cultural norms may contribute to the success or systematic failure (i.e., lack of success) of particular groups of students through instantiated hierarchies of inequality. Below, I discuss the processes of site selection, data collection and methods, analysis for the overall project, and my positionality as a Black male researcher.

Site Selection, Research Methods, and Analysis

Due to the proliferation of charter schools in the United States and “no-excuses” public charter schools specifically being singled out in opinion pieces in popular media outlets (e.g., Langhorne, 2018; Leonardt, 2017) as the answer for “failing” urban public schools, I wanted to explore a middle school that identified and espoused to being a “no-excuses” school. The disclosure of being a "no-excuses" school was advertised in the school's mission, vision, purpose, values statement, institutional materials and protocols, or verbally expressed during exploratory conversations with administration. Moreover, I wanted to explore a school that was based in a neighborhood that served children from low-income, working-class communities of color within a metropolitan city.

The goal was to be at a school that was connected to a larger, national not-for-profit charter management organization (CMO). Here, “larger” is defined as a CMO operating at least eight charter schools. I presumed a school tied to a larger CMO had a shared, unified philosophy or set of pedagogical approaches concerning school and classroom success and achievement for all its students. Lastly, I wanted to work with a school site that would be willing to share the research findings across its CMO network, not because the data and analysis would be generalizable to other sites, but because it would be instructive for the network. Metropolitan City Charter Academy met the criteria.
Metropolitan City Charter Academy

Metropolitan City Charter Academy (MCCA) was founded in 2004 and is located in one of the largest northeastern cities in the United States. Since its inception, the network has burgeoned into 30-plus schools across six states, serving nearly 4,000 students. While the network’s mission is “to create citizen scholars for change,” the motto is “hard work is all you need to achieve at MCCA, in college and beyond.” MCCA is comprised of nearly 100% Black and Latino/a/x students, with nearly 90% eligible for free/reduced lunch. Identified within its larger charter network as the “gold standard,” MCAA outpaces its regional peer schools in Math and ELA assessment scores (Northeastern City Department of Education, 2016). Thus, the school is considered high-achieving.

Student Research-Participants

An essential component of my research, and the focus of this paper, was the time spent with 10 (seven boys, three girls) Black and Latino/a/x students in the seventh and eighth grade. The group of students was identified after I asked every seventh and eighth grade classroom teacher to generate a list of at least eight students that they suggest should be identified as “at-risk” students at MCCA, as well as a list of at least eight students whom they would identify as “ideal” students. Seventeen teachers responded to my request and, after aggregating, a list of shared student names became the student sample. This sample signified those students whom the teachers perceived as being “ideal” or “at risk” students within the school. Teachers were also asked to write at least one or two sentences why a student was being identified with the respective label. The hope was that the adult-generated lists and rationale for selection would give me an access point to begin to understand teachers’ philosophies and beliefs about MCCA students and perhaps offer insight into how teachers define and recognize student success or lack thereof within MCCA.

Table 1. Student-Participants at MCCA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Race/ Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Teacher-Identified Label</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerome Kirkland</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mateo Lopez</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian Orozco</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savannah Johnson</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niyyat Owelo</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Seventh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger Kinni</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamar Reeve</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felipe Smith</td>
<td>Black &amp; Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tameshiah Domingo</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Jennings</td>
<td>Black &amp; Latino</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At-risk</td>
<td>Eighth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teacher Demographics

At the time of data collection, there were 22 seventh and eighth grade teachers—17, or nearly 80%, identified as White and of those teachers, nearly 60% were female. Sixty-three percent of the teachers identified as either a current member or alumnus of Teach for America. Further, 75% identified as coming from a middle- to upper-middle class family. The demographics of the teachers at MCCA mirror the current national K-12 teaching workforce (National Center for Education Statistics 2012, 2015).

Data Collection

To understand students’ experiences, I moved to Centralton because I wanted to live in the same community as the school and its students. In so doing, I sought to avoid conducting research from a new colonial perspective (Lipman, 2016) and entering the space without acknowledging the existing strengths and assets, collecting data without community input, and retreating back to a home locale away from the context, only to exploit and decide what is best for the community, its policies, and public institutions. Guided by Rodríguez and Conchas’s (2009) inductive open-coding approach, qualitative methods of field observations, interviewing, focus groups, visual ethnography and photovoice were employed in this study.

As such, multiple perspectives and sources of data were used. The data collection for the larger study combined nearly 900 hours of classroom and school-wide participant observations, 46 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with students or adults (caregivers of students or teachers), seven student focus groups and dozens of informal interviews with school and family stakeholders from August 2015 to December 2015; February 2016 to June 2016 as well as September 2016.

Leveraging Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) responsive interviewing, as well as Creswell’s (2013) interviewing techniques, a semi-structured interview protocol to conduct and guide one-on-one conversations with teachers/administrators, caregivers of students, and students was created. The questions served as a guide. The semi-structured approach allowed the interviews to serve as a medium for the participants to use their logic and generate their own narrative. If a participant was not comfortable answering a question, he/she was informed in advance that any question could be skipped. Different interview protocols were used for each stakeholder group and every interview was audio-recorded, with permission.

Interviews with students took place during lunch and were approximately 45–60 minutes. In addition, informal interviews were conducted throughout and, though not adhering to the stringent protocol, the interviews took place within designated areas of the school site. In total, the ten sample students were interviewed twice, for a total of 20 student interviews. Focus groups were comprised of students only. The groups enabled me to understand the philosophies of success and analyze any common themes or differences between and within students. The focus groups were unrestricted, meaning

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2 Teach for America (TFA) is a national nonprofit whose stated mission is to recruit, develop, and mobilize as many of our nation’s most promising future leaders as possible to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence. TFA teachers—corps members as they internally refer to themselves—are “mobilized” and placed as teachers in under-resourced communities (i.e., low-income urban and rural) for two-year teaching commitments.
students did not have to be among the selected ten participants, but needed to be current students at MCCA. Focus groups lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and ranged from two to six students. In total, seven focus groups with 12 boys and nine girls were conducted; this included the 10 students from the sample, who each met in a group with at least one other student. Since MCCA-affiliated staff walked into classrooms with laptops, for the first two months, a notepad and pen were used to capture field notes. I wanted to distinguish myself from the other adults. However, I realized typing is much faster than my writing, so I began using an iPad with an external keyboard during the third month.

When I initially decided to conduct interviews with students, I did not consider how MCCA’s systems would inhibit my ability to build rapport. I underestimated the lack of communication and daily interaction I would have with students, even while sitting in classrooms. For example, I have worked in and volunteered with other “no-excuses” charter schools, and I was always able to engage with students during lunchtime or during designated after-school programs. From these experiences, I assumed MCCA would have allotted time and space when I could organically connect with the students. I emphasize organically because within the first few weeks I was told by both administrators and at least one teacher that if I ever wanted to speak with a student, I could just “pull them out of line” at will. This type of unrestricted power, in which adults seemingly were free to do and say anything to the students’ bodies, made me uncomfortable and separated the staff from the students. This made me feel as if student bodies and voices were to be used at my convenience—for my exploitation—and I did not want to be associated with that type of symbolic power. So, for several months my energy focused on observations.

After student consent and caregiver permissions were received, I met individually with those students identified by the teachers as both “ideal” and “at-risk” during their respective lunch periods. With the exception of one student who did not eat, the students were always excited to answer questions over pizza and sodas, or whatever snacks were present. Interviews and focus groups were recorded using a digital recorder. In addition, handwritten notes were taken.

During interviews, questions were clustered into categories: “past schooling experiences,” “description of self,” “description of success at MCCA,” and “student’s future success.” For instance, some sample questions included, How would your teachers describe you? How would you describe yourself and behavior in class? How can a student do well in this school? What does success mean for you at this school? Describe how teachers at the school convey/express what success means? At the close of the first student interview, students were given a digital camera and a set of instructions (details are discussed below in the subsection photovoice overview, procedures, processes, and analysis of photovoice). The information in the student focus groups allowed me to juxtapose the experiences of the students from the one-on-one interviews. Their collective voice revealed new understanding of how students experienced MCCA. The focus groups drew clearer understandings from the students’ perspective of what they understood, desired, and expected from the charter school. This allowed for group consensus, as well as exploring key nuances.

Data Analysis

Field notes were kept daily, each note including the day (e.g., Day 1, Day 2…Day 98) and the guidelines for capturing observations were relatively open. That is, field notes ranged from narrative to descriptive data. I also created frequent analytic memos based on varying events for later analysis. If there was enough time, between interviews or focus
groups I would listen to audio immediately afterwards and start to identify keywords that stood out. The terms were aligned with the respective file using a Google document and set aside until further analysis. The raw audio files were loaded to a secure computer with limited access and transcribed. After key sections of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, a question-by-question analysis was conducted, examining responses for frequency. A code book was also created. The code book consisted of parent codes (and child codes, if and when applicable), definitions of codes, citations in current literature that reference the code, direct examples from the data (e.g., interviews, observations) that reference the code, and a section for reflection.

Open coding led the analysis. That is, first-level headings were found, generating dozens of loose categorizations of codes across the data (Rodríguez and Conchas, 2009). As I developed my analytic focus, I grouped these codes into broader categories, such as “ideology/philosophy,” “disciplinary structures,” and “schooling success dimensions.” After several iterative readings, codes were merged and new codes were created. Different stakeholder groups allowed for a critical triangulation of the data. The observations, interviews, and focus groups were used to identify and begin to understand emerging themes concerning schooling success at the “no-excuses” charter school. The article now shifts to a quick overview of photovoice, followed by my detailed procedures, processes and analysis of using photovoice as a method.

Photovoice: Procedures, Processes, and Analysis

Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000) is a qualitative research method that entrusts research-participants, who are community members, with cameras and encourages them to visually identify and document their social landscapes through photography. Rooted in the Freirean approach to critical, emancipatory education (Freire, 1970), the method positions research participants as co-creators of the object of knowledge and stresses education as a social practice that is an interactive, collective construction (Gadotti, 2017). In the end, the immediacy of the visual image creates evidence and promotes a vivid participatory means of reflection, sharing expertise and the co-creation of knowledge for both research participants and the researcher (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000).

With the exception of one student who requested to write an essay, at the conclusion of the first interview, students in the sample were given new digital cameras. I placed each camera inside a 9x12 booklet envelope along with an instruction sheet. Printed on sky-blue paper, so it would stand out from the normal white paper handouts students receive at school, the instruction sheet was labeled from the top, Picture 1 to Picture 10 and asked students to take pictures of “what you think success is and/or what it means to you.” The instructions simply directed students to write at least one sentence as to why the captured image represented success.

During interviews, two participants asked, “what the pictures should be,” and I informed there was no set picture that had to be taken and reemphasized that the picture selection was entirely up to their imagination and how they conceptualize success. However, I told all of the research-participants that taking pictures inside the school may be problematic in classrooms, if teachers deemed it to be a distraction. While the teachers

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3 While the student requested an essay instead of taking pictures, she did not complete the essay before the conclusion of my data collection at MCCA.
and the administrators were informed at the start of the academic year that I was going to conduct photovoice and other data collection methods with student participants, I was cognizant of the rigid structures of MCCA. I informed each of the participants that I did not want to “get them in trouble” with this project, so if they wanted to take a picture inside the school, to first make sure they received permission from a teacher. I also informally added that if the pictures they planned on taking were of people, it would be a good idea to get their permission before taking them.

The research-participants had seven days with the cameras before collection. Upon receipt of the cameras, I copied students’ images to de-identified folders on my secured computer. I also scanned the blue instruction sheet with students’ rationales into an Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF). Next, the PDF instructions alongside the pictures were uploaded to a secure Cloud-based server, so that I could review the pictures and the rationale with the students during the next formal interview. I met individually with the 10 students for a second interview. At the beginning of this open-ended interview, using my iPad, the students were able to see their displayed images on the screen. Image by image, students were asked to explain in detail why the captured photograph conveyed “what you think success is and/or what it means to you,” providing rich insight into the students’ lives. As students addressed their captured photographs, I also reviewed their written response, looking to see if there were any discrepancies in the spoken and written text. The photovoice interview revealed how the students constructed knowledge and for many of the images, (re)imagined the notion of success. Their pictures revealed an important phenomenon concerning success that had not been captured previously in the school.

With permission, research-participants’ images were also reviewed during a focus group session with another student who also took part in photovoice. When possible, I paired research-participants with the same gender and with their teacher-identified labels: “ideal” with “ideal” and “at-risk” with “at-risk.” This provided an opportunity to see if there was any consensus or divergence amongst students concerning their images.

During analysis, I placed individual images in groups based upon students’ spoken and written responses to describe their images during the interview and focus group. For instance, in describing several images, students highlighted the importance of human connection as success. Specifically, students spoke about the images of family members, friends, community/family traditions, and neighborhood symbols. Sebastian, a seventh grader, who was identified as “ideal” by his teachers for example, captured a picture of three individuals standing at the top of a mountain with their fists raised. When I asked about the image, he told me that it was a picture that he found on the Internet using search terms, as he indicated “teamwork and motivation.” During the interview, he described this image as a team of friends, “For the team, you need friends and stuff to be successful [and without friends] it’s a lot harder for individuals.” That is, if one individual reaches the top, and the other two do not, this was not considered success. Success according to this student was if all three “friends get to the top.” Subsequently, “human connection” became one of the emergent themes based on students’ images and narratives of success.

Exploring and Positioning My Own Role in The Research Process

My interest in researching the lived experiences of students of color was a personal as well as professional one. On one hand, I am a racial insider, as I identify as a Black male who cares deeply about the schooling (and consequently the life) experiences of Black and Latino/x males, particularly because of how our social construction of Black and Latino/x masculinity in the context of U.S. schools and the U.S. society, writ large is insidiously positioned. I purposely used the word “our” because I am not naïve. Since
becoming “woke” of my racialized Black male body as an undergraduate attending a predominately White institution, I knew my gendered melanin is the primary factor people gaze upon, not my invisible characteristics: educational pedigree, familial socioeconomic stature, the “right” zip code, my father’s retired status of a physician, or other markers that may set me apart in the context of other communities of color, particularly the under-resourced Black and Latino/a/x communities that are often the backdrop of my research studies. I also care deeply about how Black and Latina/x females are depicted. Though I do not yet have daughters, I have nieces—all young ladies of color, whose mothers (my sisters) and fathers (my brothers) view them as beautifully and wonderfully created images from the Lord. However, this may not be the immediate characterization of females of color within the context of U.S. schools. As Monique Morris (2016) evidenced in her book, *Pushout*, Black girls are suspended from school at six times the rate of White girls. In addition, Black girls are often negatively positioned as being “ghetto” and “loud” in schooling contexts if they ask questions or otherwise engage in activities that adults consider affronts to their authority. Latinas/x, too face implicit racial and gender biases that result in harsh subjective labels to their character in schools. As I have reflected in previous writings (Marsh & Noguera, 2018), though my racial insider position provided me certain advantages and access in the field, my class outsider position may have inhibited my ability to recognize certain interactions that may have been favorable for the participants because they were so unusual to my experiences in a suburban public school. To address this limitation, I wrote analytic memos to reflect on the essence of the participants’ experiences and communicated with them throughout the school year to ensure I properly represented their lived experiences, instead of superimposing my own viewpoints.

On the other hand, as a researcher, I know that students of color, most often Black and Latino/a/x must often navigate through a sociopolitical landscape that reinforces multidimensional stereotypes and enervating narratives that negatively impact how their lived experiences and how they are understood (both in and out of school). Thus, I wanted to use my position as a qualitative researcher for two-fold purposes: first, to explore the meaning that students make of their lived experiences, specifically how they define and imagine success within the context of a “no-excuses” school; and secondly, and perhaps more intimidatingly, I wanted to contribute to teachers and administrators reflexive process of understanding their students through a different paradigm. In this case, it was established in part from students’ digital photography.

Findings

This section presents two key findings about the meaning of success that emerged during interviews, focus groups, and the photovoice project with the students who were labeled by their teachers as “ideal” and “at risk.” The first finding is centered on students’ interpretation of their classroom experiences, while simultaneously highlighting their (sometimes subtle) strategies of how to navigate the rules that govern the “no-excuses” context. The second finding focuses on four of the students’ broader, bolder notions of success captured through their photovoice entries and interviews.

“Playing the Game”: Student Success Despite the “No Excuses” Environment

Participants who were identified as both “ideal” and “at-risk” by their teachers shared similar dispositions about what success looks and sounds like for a student in a classroom
with a “no-excuses” orientation to learning. In particular, every participant believed there was a prescribed space of success that they could occupy with limited degrees of freedom that must never go beyond the school’s communicated mold. While participants’ behavior varied greatly, to ensure they never crossed the threshold, participants seemingly made strategic decisions that protected themselves from the school’s rigid pedagogical exchange. For instance, Niyatt, a seventh grader who was identified as “ideal” by her teachers, expressed the need to alter her persona to fit within MCCA. She stated, “In school, I try not to be that outgoing…because I don’t like getting deductions and ReStarts and [other negative consequences]. …You can’t talk or interact with friends here.” Niyat likened being friendly and socially confident, which is the definition of “outgoing,” as symptomatic to problem behavior that would be linked to the school’s detention space. Later, however, she confided, “When I am outside of school I can talk really loud, but not that loud. I am interactive…..” Here, Niyat owned her authentic self as someone who is “interactive” with others and, quite possibly, “loud.” But she is quick to highlight that her loud is an acceptable volume, which abides by the school’s “no-excuses” regulations.

Lamar, another student labeled as “ideal,” too, expressed a strategic modification of his authentic self to fit inside the “no-excuses” context. Lamar exclaimed to be a successful student at MCCA, “Don’t be different, …seem like you’re interested, always follow teacher’s directions.” And lastly, he said, always “keep opinions under wraps.” In his interview, Lamar spoke at length about the import of not sharing opinions, as in his mind, he learned the hard way. He shared that his caregivers applied to send him to a preparatory boarding school outside of the state, but one of the requirements was a recommendation from the school principal to which the MCCA principal did not show a bode of support. Lamar explained, “Mrs. Stockton wrote I was deceitful, officious, and very disruptive in the classroom.” He continued, “My grades were fine,” but Lamar believed the principal’s comments were in part because he had conflicting perspectives about the school. As a student who was homeschooled before attending MCCA, during his first two years at MCCA Lamar said, “I felt as if everyone was against me [at MCCA]—I still feel that way sometimes; the teachers are against me.” But during the year of the data collection, as an eighth grader, Lamar had learned what to say and not say publicly. With continued aspirations to attend a private boarding school, go to college and then medical school and eventually become a neurosurgeon Lamar believed public critiques of MCCA could only be an impediment for his trajectory. Thus, in his words, Lamar strategically “plays the game.”

Other participants in the study had a different approach to obtaining success at MCCA, one that seemingly rendered participants void of their humanity. For instance, Mateo, a seventh grader identified as “at risk,” and whom teachers described as “disinvested” from his education, indicated the only way for him to be successful at MCCA was to “Say what the teacher wants you to say…act in a way a teacher wants you to act.” While Mateo had one of the highest State math scores in the seventh grade, his words and actions needed to be in precise agreement to that of his MCCA teachers. Deviating from those norms would, in his view, illicit adverse consequences. Similar to Mateo, Abby, a seventh grader also labeled as “at risk,” summed up a successful student’s positioning at MCCA. She explained, “Basically become a machine—don’t move, don’t speak, don’t breathe unless they tell you to. And when they do, be very, very quiet so you don’t make a sound.” As a researcher and educator who values and incorporates the narratives of students, Abby’s interpretation of how students’ can be successful in this “no-excuses” context is meaningful. She equated a student’s behavior to that of a machine, or in the context of the criminal justice system (i.e., penitentiaries), as a prisoner whose bodily movements and sounds are constantly under surveillance and regulated.
Overall, participants’ narrow interpreted notions of success at MCCA gave insight into how teachers manage classrooms and as a result, manage students’ bodies within the “no-excuses” context. Simultaneously, students offered how they negotiate the context, with some acquiescing to the environment, some strategically navigating through the environment, and others losing their humanity.

(Re)Imagination of Success Beyond the Classroom through Photovoice

Even in an environment that the students described narrowly, there was a shifting in students’ conceptualization of success when they received digital cameras. Student-participants were asked to capture images that represented, “What you think success is and/or what it means to you?” The prompt yielded 74 images, and analysis of those images revealed that 80 percent of the student photographs illustrated four emergent themes of success: a) Human Connection; b) Educative Experiences; c) Original Compositions; and d) Survival Methods. Below, I highlight exemplar participant images and in students’ words, offer explanations about the images.

**Human connection.** Nineteen images revealed success is/what success means to students as family, familial and cultural traditions, friendships, and community-based symbols and artifacts.

As captured from Figure 1, Niyatt, a student who was considered “ideal,” took a picture of her mother and father, a couple who, in her eyes, represented unity, a unit of Black love that cared for one another. Outside of a few celebrated holidays (e.g., Latin Heritage and Black History Months), however, there were no deliberate conversations about family traditions or cultures at MCCA—certainly, not in a school-wide context of being an element in determining what success is and what success means for the students attending the school.

“That is family. I thought family was successful because it shows how they are able to commit and stay together and taking care of each other which could be simply successful for family.” (Niyatt, 7th “ideal” Black female)

Staff members had different dispositions concerning students’ families, cultures, and their communities. Teachers rarely, if ever, integrated local forms of knowledge, cultural expressions, dialects, or styles of dress and representation on the part of students. During my observations, it was not uncommon to hear teachers encouraging students to leave their local communities to attend college, communities that some teachers insinuated
during their interviews were the antithesis to success. Some teachers also had deficit orientations about the families, specifically the “parenting” of the students. In an interview with Ms. Spradley, a White seventh grade science teacher, vented about her experience with one such mother: “Some parents think we’re petty.” Ms. Spradley called Ashton’s mom because he was sent to the discipline room for “making noises in class.” Ms. Spradley continued, “His mom [has] not bought in. If you’re not bought into the system, and annoyed by what’s happening in the class or with the teachers, then why are you sending your kid here? The things that annoy you are also the same things that attracted you to us.” Ms. Spradley, like many of the teachers at MCCA was under the impression that the school knows exactly what it is doing as it relates to discipline and success, and it is the caregivers and families that need to get on board and buy-in.

**Educative experiences.** Fifteen images revealed success is/what success means to students as academic accomplishments and symbols representing higher education aspirations or related to their current public charter school.

“My brother’s certificate after he finished college and it inspired me. You have to be successful in the future. Be successful in college... and don’t make mistakes. My [other] brother owes $3,000 and is not allowed to go back until it is paid. I know not to make mistakes. And try to get a scholarship by doing my work and follow directions”

(Felipe, 8th, “at-risk” Latino/Black male)

At first glance, it would seem that some of the participant photographs under this theme aligned with the mission of MCCA, such as the “willingness to work really hard,” as posited by one teacher. Yet, for some images, the students’ discussion about the image revealed critical meaning into the complexities of their lived experiences. Take for instance, Felipe’s photo, Figure 2, of his oldest brother’s “college certificate.” In our conversation, while he indicated that going to college was an indicator of success, there was a caveat, in that “you can’t make mistakes.” Felipe believes that you have to finish college, but also that one cannot make mistakes in the process. This mirrors what he’s learned in the “no-excuses” context. While there is emphasis on college, it hinges upon meritocracy, or in his words, “hard work and following directions.” Felipe also spoke about the financial constraints as a result of higher education, particularly as it affected his other older brother who owed $3,000.00 and could not reenroll into classes. Felipe saw his brother’s inability to repay a student loan as a character flaw, a “mistake” to be avoided. Felipe did not have a critical understanding of financial aid and the wealth gap in
the U.S., as he associated an individual attribution of irresponsibility, as opposed to structural implication of why his brother may not be able to repay a loan. Further, within the walls of MCCA, there was a privileging of students attending private, four-year colleges. In the school’s main office, there was entire display of the top 50 private four-year colleges/universities in the U.S. Each location displayed its rankings and uniqueness. In the hallways of MCCA, college pendants perched from every corner of the ceiling and every classroom was named after the college/university attended by a current MCCA teacher. Despite the emphasis on higher education, there was little mention of other conditions that factor into college attendance, namely financial literacy and debt. As the co-principal shared during her interview, “There’s a very strong ideology of what we do, the curriculum that we have, everything is based and couched in the path to a successful life through college. You—your end goal—is you must get to college.” Thus, for MCCA the articulated path to success seemed to just be about getting students into college, and perhaps that is why there was no emphasis on financial planning, debt management and most importantly, as it related to Felipe’s other older brother, retention.

**Original compositions.** Twelve images revealed success is/what success means to students as creative interests and talents.

“It’s success in its own way. You don’t have to be like everyone else to be famous or to even be successful.”  (Mateo, 7th “at-risk” Latino male)

![Image 3. Living Weirdo](image)

Within the walls of MCCA, students are ostensibly granted two classes to exhibit creativity and agency in the context of the “no-excuses” context: music and theatre. Due to the space constraints of the school and the size of the staff, students rotated between music, theatre, or gym during trimesters. When I first entered the site during the fall term, seventh graders were taking gym, eighth graders were taking theatre, and the sixth graders were taking music. This is important because according to nearly 17 percent of the student images, success had been (re)imagined to include students’ most creative pursuits and interests. Participants’ original

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1. Months into my research and after an informal interview with one of the administrators about the gulf of institutions that seemed to be missing from the walls (e.g., vocation, two-year, community colleges), new pendants were added to the school’s collection during the spring term.

2. MCCA is co-located with another school, meaning it shared its building and the general facilities (gym, cafeteria, playground, and auditorium) with another public school.

3. The only subjects that had multiple teachers in the same grade level were Math and Reading.
compositions were in the form of sculptures, book covers of favorite literary works, production equipment for music and cinematography, as well as drawings, like Mateo’s picture (see Figure 3). Mateo knows there’s value in expressing oneself—being heard, and creating, not just being an idle consumer, as he identifies as a “living weirdo.” But in the “no-excuses” context, even the spaces where students were supposed to have “freedom,” to use a term given by a teacher, these spaces, too, were restrictive and offered prescribed notions of success as these classes were not highly regarded spaces for closing the purported “achievement gap.”

**Survival methods.** Twelve images revealed success is/what success means to students as coping processes to overcome or prevent adversity.

“For every shot [Jordan] makes, he takes a step forward. I tell myself just take one step at a time and keep moving forward, then I go to school. If you take a shot once in a while you’re going to make your shot. And if you keep shooting, shooting, and shooting that’s when you’re going to start getting good and you’re making progress.” (Patrick, 8th “at-risk” Latino/Black male)

Another type of success as elicited from the participants’ photos were individual survival methods (e.g. activities, routines or processes) that were used to overcome some form of adversity, and for some participants’ preventative strategies, if and when adversity came. For most, the method was in place due to adversity faced at MCCA. Some of the participant photographs literally represented activities students engage in outside of MCCA. As one participant labeled “at risk” described his picture of a basketball court, “[I go there] to get away, especially when I don’t do well in school.” Other images captured a snapshot of students’ routines that were used as daily forms of encouragement. As seen in Figure 4, Patrick shared a photograph from his routine that started as he exited his bedroom. Primarily identified by his teachers as “at risk” because he was retained twice, in our interview, he described his selection of Michael Jordan as a daily motivator to do better at MCCA, or in his words, “to keep making a shot.”

As a student at MCCA, there were some assaults on Patrick’s humanness and he, like others, was trying to find ways to keep going. However, depending upon a student’s label as affixed by teachers, coping processes had a double standard at MCCA. Whereas a student identified as “ideal” was encouraged to be reflective and develop a stress release like basketball or video games, a student identified as “at risk” was told s/he did not have time for a stress release. In the “every minute” counts, no-excuses context, “at-risk” students were not privy to reflexivity; instead, they were simply told to be resilient and exhibit grit.
Discussion and Implications

Students’ voices, perspectives, and imaginations often have little to no role in shaping school policies, processes and standards, at the local classroom, state or federal levels (Anyon, 2005; Noguera, 2003; Orfield, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). This is particularly true in traditional public schools, and most certainly true in urban “no-excuses” public charter schools. MCCA resembled Bernstein’s (1990) view of strong classification and strong framing, whereby the daily curriculum and pedagogy and the control of how knowledge was presented (e.g., pacing, sequencing, and selection of activities) to students was predetermined.

As such, value for the cultural resources and prior knowledge of students was ignored, and thus every student, whether labeled as “ideal” or “at risk” had a common experience when thinking about how to be successful in the context of the school. This was defined as a pedagogical exchange that regulated voice, movement, and students’ authentic selves. Rooted in the ‘pedagogy of poverty’ which intersects students’ racial/ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and spatial location, some students consciously created strategies just to subsist in the space. In the end, the “no excuses” context operated as part of a larger, yet tacit process that steaded the conscious and subconscious assumptions about low-income, Black and Latino/a/x students and translated into explicit teaching and learning practices that have the potential to ultimately reproduce already marginalized youth.

However, as evidenced from the images captured in the photovoice component of the study, students were resisting MCCA’s reproduction, particularly in how they made meaning of success. Outside of the classroom, students had conceptualized success (e.g., human connection, creativity, survival methods) that operate both naturally and effectively toward their healthy development and well-being. Combined, the participants’ conceptualizations of success were what Ryan and Deci (1995) would posit as “psychological nutriments” as they were necessary to actualize inherent potential. Educators, however, still play an important role as students spend more time in school than outside of it. Thus, educators should be integrating students lived experiences and local knowledge into the classrooms which could enable teachers to have a more thorough, yet nuanced understanding about their students which can shed light to the assets (or obstacles) that may exist and impact the teaching and learning. Photovoice can serve as both the data collection method and analytical tool. Creating a safe space for students to visually identify and furnish photographs that can help teachers understand their interpretations of a situation or opportunity has the potential to promote teacher-student partnerships that forge a communal learning experience (Gay, 2002), one that is genuinely student-centered and equitable.

While most P-12 teachers agree in theory with the idea of valuing cultural and linguistic diversity of their students, as evidenced this is not an everyday pedagogical practice. Educators should strive toward pedagogies that are more than relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people, but support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge of their communities while simultaneously offering exposure to dominant cultural competences (Paris, 2012). Efforts towards cultural sustainability require changing actions and deeply-seated teaching practices. These practices can only be accomplished by challenging and disrupting normalizing discourses in the policies
that inform curriculum design, instructional routines, and the pedagogies used in teacher education programs and in P-12 schools. But this requires humility and reflection. To truly (re)imagine “no-excuses” public charter schools, many of which have been purportedly designed to create opportunities for low-income students of color, teachers must allow the problematization of the conceptualization of success. Though photovoice is only one form of inquiry, allowing students to be active participants in the design and implementation process of their schooling (Freire, 1970), while honoring their voice and the ways in which they make meaning of success in their daily experiences, treats students not just as objects, but also as agents of reform and improvement.

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