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# Engaging Out of School Males in Adult Education

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**Abstract:** This ethnographic study examines a community of practice re-engaging one marginalized group of out of school minority males (16-25 years old) in learning.

## Social Context

The high school dropout rate in America appears on the rise especially in our urban areas and among minority males. It is being called epidemic ( Bridgeland J.M., 2006). “Nationally, only about two-thirds of all students – and only half of all Black, Latinos and Native Americans – who enter ninth grade graduate with regular diplomas four years later.” (Orfield, 2004, p. 1) In some urban high schools dropout rates are as high as 60 and 70 percent (Orfield, 2004). In one large urban area, Chicago, for every 100 Black male high school freshman only 2.5% obtain a bachelor’s degree by the time they are twenty-five years old (Jackson, 2006). For far too many young adults, particularly urban minority youth, there is a disengagement from formal schooling.

This large dropout rate is occurring at the same time as a second phenomena – the postponement of adulthood for 18 – 25 year olds. This phenomenon is identified as emergent adulthood (Benson, 2003). Whereas previous generations reached full adulthood with its inherent responsibilities around 20 or 21 years of age, today’s youth do not enter full adulthood until their late twenties and sometimes thirties. This is primarily due to economics. High school dropouts are particularly vulnerable to the economics causing the delays of adulthood; this creates a marginalized population who are undereducated, often unemployed. This is a group of young people often trapped in poverty (Benson 2003).

Within this marginalized group is a subgroup that is young, black and male These young black males are at risk and most affected by dropping out and the socioeconomic issues of emergent adults. For example, Black males are unemployed and incarcerated at a higher rate than any other group of individuals in this country (Miney, 2006). At comparable educational levels, Black men earn 67% of what white men make. During the economic boom of the 1990’s, while all other groups made advances economically, young black males and other less educated young males did not (Miney 2006).

The reasons for leaving school for most young drop outs is not low ability or inability to perform but rather “a lack of connection to the school environment, boredom, being unmotivated and unchallenged, and the weight of real world events.” (Bridgeland, 2006). Most all high school dropouts want to succeed and want to be reconnected with learning environments (Martin, 2006). Michelle Fine (1991), in her now classic, *Framing Drop-Outs* reports that it is often the brightest that drop out.

Given the high school dropout rate statistics and socioeconomic obstacles to achieving adult status for young people; we have a systemic problem that goes beyond an individual student’s failure to achieve. We have a systemic problem involving issues of race, discrimination, economics, irresponsible educational policies, a history of oppression, lack of real vision for education in this country and misuse of power (Kozol, 2005; Fine, 1991). The scope of the problem is large, many faceted and complex.

## Learning in Community

Given this social context, where are young men going after they drop out? We have always seen, but now see ever increasing numbers going to adult education programs to secure a GED diploma (Imel 2003; Chulp, 2006). Increasingly adult educators have to respond to this influx of young men. The combined challenge of integrating them into programs aimed at serving adults, at a time of limited funding and ever dwindling staffing, is an ever growing problem. This study in progress examines how one adult education community responds to this marginalized population and re-engages them in learning.

This research is located in neither the individual young male drop-out nor in the system of American education. Rather it is focused in one learning community. This research attempts to identify and describe the culture of learning in The Downtown Learning Center, Brooklyn New York, one urban setting which effectively engages out of school males in learning and transitioning to college and employment. Through the theoretical frameworks of situated cognition and Cultural Activity Theory (CHAT), adult learning theory and New Testament theology; this study in progress will have significance for adult education learning communities re-engaging this marginalized population.

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