Ain’t No Makin’ It

Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood

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About the Book

- Written by Jay MacLeod
  - Served as a youth counselor in the neighborhood of Clarendon Heights.
  - While there, decided to do a sociological study
- Since he had already befriended the boys in the study, it was easy to get them to open up about their future
The Hallway Hangers

- A mostly white group of teenagers
  - Two black members
- Constantly get drunk and do drugs
- Personify the “You Gotta Be Bad” Attitude
- Main goal as teenagers is to make a quick buck
  - Many members do this by selling drugs
The Hallway Hangers

- Strong group solidarity
  - They are the only ones who look out for each other.
- Racism exists, even towards their black members
- Have no hope for education helping them
The Brothers

- Mostly Black group of teenagers
  - One white member
- They believe in the American Dream
- Instead of drugs, they prefer the company of girls and participating in athletics
- Very little racism in group
  - When confronted with racism, they prefer to just walk away
Family and the Hangers

• The Hallway Hangers have very few male authority figures
  – Most of their dads are gone, and brothers are dead or in jail
• Most parents are high school drop-outs
Family and the Brothers

• Have more male authority figures than Hangers
• Give more respect to family members than Hangers
• More optimistic about getting their family out of the projects by graduating and getting white-collar work
Hangers and Work

• The Hangers don’t hold down steady jobs
  – They switch from job to job frequently
• Have no aspirations of anything above blue-collar work
• When asked where they will be in twenty years, the typical response is dead or in jail
The Brothers and Work

• The Brothers have high aspirations
  – See themselves in white-collar jobs
    • Jobs in management and computer fields
• When asked where they will be in twenty years, they say they will have a good job, family, and a nice house
School Structure

- Lincoln High School has many programs
  - 4 regular houses
  - 4 alternative programs
  - Separate Occupation Education Program
  - Building Trades and Services Program
  - Adjustment Class

- In 8th Grade, students are forced to decide what program they want to be in
  - Counselors actually contribute to low aspirations by recommending students go into Oc. Ed and other alternative programs.
Hangers and School

• “I fuckin’ hate school”
• Hangers hardly ever attend school
  – When they do attend, they are the teacher’s nightmare
• They think the teachers don’t know anything
• Think the school caters towards the black students
The Brothers and School

- They believe that they only need to try hard to succeed
- The devaluation of white-collar work by the Brothers contributes to their high aspirations
Conclusions

• How do you create higher aspirations for the students?
• How do you make them succeed?
• What is the school’s role in answering these two questions?
Role of School

- MacLeod’s first recommendation is to get rid of the Achievement Ideology that denies the acknowledgement of their social conditions
- Teachers believe and preach this ideology because they think it will motivate students
- If students like the Hangers are to be motivated to achieve, it should be in support of their self-esteem and not at the expense of it
Curriculum Change

• If the curriculum is made responsive to the student needs, the gap between academic skill and maturity can be bridged
  – Novels dealing with the concerns of the working-class and minority youth could be incorporated into the curriculum
Materials

• Students also need current materials
  – Inner-city schools lack necessary books, classrooms, desks, science labs, and properly trained teachers
  – Inner-city schools have been allowed to deteriorate to the point that they are dangerous
Social Change

• Changing the system overnight is impossible, but making people aware of social problems will lead to progressive change

• Through education, you can gain critical understanding of social problems
Class Dismissed

- Structural inequality causes poverty
- This study points an accusing finger at one dominant dogma, itself a major obstacle to political change:
  - The persistent belief that poverty is caused by the personal vices and cultural pathologies of the poor
  - To make any change, we need to discard this long held dogma
Afterward

• Despite high aspirations, the Brothers are in the same place economically as the Hangers
  – Only Brother that did remotely well was Chris, the white member

• Hangers still unable to hold down jobs
  – Of the members, the two black members became the most disheveled