

ABSTRACT

Title of Document:

“DOING SCHOOL”: A NEW UNIT OF
ANALYSIS FOR SCHOOLS SERVING
MARGINALIZED STUDENTS.

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This study asserts a new unit of analysis for school reform that goes beyond the mental representations of individuals, beyond the isolated lesson, and beyond the confines of a school building. I argue that the special case of expanding time and space as a method of engagement for marginalized students requires that the unit of analysis change to encompass the entire activity of collectively *doing school*. This critical ethnographic study of my own classroom follows twelve students over a period of four years in a small urban high school, with no schedule, no principal, and no imperative to remain in the building. The ultimate purposes of my praxis were: (a) to situate the activity of *doing school* within the continuum of identity struggles facing marginalized high school students in a particular urban setting, (b) to establish the school-wide structural elements necessary to support this situated and localized expression of time-

space expansion, and (c) to exploit the opportunities opened up by these spatial and temporal alterations to school structure, and by the students' raw but generative critiques, to build a meaningful co-constructed curriculum.

Despite the logical and strategic neatness of treating all students as belonging somewhere along what (Willis, 1981) calls the "shallowing continuum of shrinking capacity" (p. 1), I found instead that there is the possibility for a self-selected group of students within a temporary, collectively-held, conception of community to deepen their sense of self and to lay the foundation for a critical reading of their lives. Students were given a meticulous invitation to join or rejoin the world of academics. The terms of this invitation were jointly and individually negotiated over time as part of the co-constructed curriculum. The students and I formed a community of practice based, initially, on our ability to move as a unit through shared hardships, across our own cultural divides, through challenging experiences outside the school, and in response to outside forces of surveillance. Ultimately, one outcome for this racially diverse community of students was a conceptual reconnection of black and white histories in the city they share.