



Alternative Schooling for African American Youth: Does Anyone Know We're Here? Christopher Dunbar Jr. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001. 152 pp.

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So-called alternative schools exist in the shadows of every large urban community. They are rarely mentioned in the almost constant discussions and debates about public education, and they often seem to be below the radar screen of the general public. Indeed, unless one works in an alternative school or has a child attending one, most people probably do not even know that such institutions exist. Touted by some as places designed to meet the needs of children who have difficulty adjusting to regular schools, Dunbar vividly shows us that they are often dumping grounds for those difficult kids, usually African American males or other males of color, with whom no one wants to work.

Through a series of observations, vignettes, and interviews, Dunbar takes readers inside an urban alternative middle school. As is typical of alternative schools, this one is small, with six classrooms and only 28 students. Shortly after it opened, Dunbar spent 18 months in the school as an observer. In this little book, he acquaints readers with the school, its students, and its staff. Dunbar focuses particularly on African American young males, described as the group "most at risk of both social and academic failure" (p. 22), arguing that this population of students is increasingly being consigned to alternative schools because they have "found it increasingly difficult to successfully matriculate through traditional public school" (p.22). Although Dunbar describes only one alternative school, he occasionally generalizes and discusses the problems and issues faced by young African American males in American society.

Alternative Schooling is an important book in several ways. First, it focuses on an aspect of schooling that is often not included in either public discussion or academic research. Second, it takes the reader inside the school and presents representative voices of almost all of the players, including the students, administrators, teachers, and support staff. Third, Dunbar brings to this study his own voice: as an African American male, as a former teacher in an alternative school, and as someone who has shared some of the experiences of the students he observed. Dunbar's perspective prevents the author and readers from marginalizing and objectifying the students, the frequent result when researchers attempt to describe unfamiliar cultures and situations. All players described in this book are viewed with a relatively strong degree of empathy.



Although the book has a number of strengths, as a qualitative research study it is somewhat disjointed. The segues from the voices of students to those of administrators and staff are not always smooth or clear. Nor is the methodology always clearly elucidated. For example, a pilot study is mentioned but not described (p. 41). The author does not consistently provide context. For example, the stories and vignettes focusing on the students are surrounded by contextual information but interviews with administrators are not. Finally, it appears that the author used interviews to collect some data from administrators and staff. In some cases, however, Dunbar does not share his questions; instead the reader is confronted with long and sometimes ambiguous quotes of how the questions were answered. Overall, the author's tendency to jump back and forth between observations (often presented as if one were reading a play), structured interviews, and the quotes described above makes the book read like a cross between a personal memoir and a qualitative research study, each somewhat incomplete.

The book ends with an epilogue: The author reiterates the failure of alternative schools and suggests changes to teachers and administrators who work in them. However, more attention could be given to larger issues of social justice that underlie the proliferation of these schools, which hold African American and other males of color until too many of them are sent to the nation's prison industrial system. Despite methodological shortcomings, this short book provides a valuable contribution to researchers and teachers by shining a light on the inner workings of one alternative middle school. Hopefully it will provoke more research in this important area.

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