

Abstract for Teachers College conference, October 2013

Anita Chikkatur

Carleton College

Department of Educational Studies

apchikka@carleton.edu

Nine months into my ethnographic study at a middle school in a Midwestern urban area, I sat in on the first session of a Youth Participatory Action Research group, led by a local graduate student. The six students in the group had been chosen to participate because they are students that the staff felt were not as “engaged” in school as much as the students or the teachers would like. During the introductions at this first meeting, I found myself being surprised when K*, a student I had observed in one classroom for the past nine months, talked about how she wanted to be a doctor or a basketball player and how she wanted to go to college. I was also a bit surprised when her classmate, N*, gave her a high five at the mention of college. My reaction of surprise led me to become aware of and reconsider the perception that I had apparently formed of the two students as being “disengaged” and not interested in being successful in school.

This paper examines my shifting perspectives on these two students, which I would argue was made possible because of ethnographic research’s focus on long-term engagement at a site and reflective and iterative data collection process. I posit that ethnographic research methods allow researchers, and more importantly, educators who work with young people to gain multiple perspectives on those young people that defy easy categorization or labeling of their students. This type of perspective on students, particularly those who are often viewed as “not capable” or “at-risk” because of their social positions, remains important at a time when notions of what it means to be an “educated person” seems to be narrowing because of the importance placed on standardized tests as the key measure of learning.