

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Where you From!”

Grounded Constructions of Gangs in an Inner-City Alternative School

by

Robert Garot

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Professor Robert M. Emerson, Chair

This study is a grounded approach to some of our most compelling social issues: gangs, violence, and inner-city education. The lack of a coherent, stable operational definition of a “gang” has long been conceived as problematic in gang research, yet if we aim to practice a *verstehen* sociology, the issue is not what gangs mean for social scientists, but what gangs mean for members. Rather than being caught in a gang’s “grip,” young people idiosyncratically and strategically use gangs as a resource for situating themselves within a local ecology, to create action, and to avoid it. In terms of violence, inner-city youth often speak of notions akin to Elijah Anderson’s “code of the street” as a justification for fighting; yet such youth also provide ways and reasons for

avoiding fights, showing that a “street” veneer is not necessary for preserving one’s safety.

The study then moves to the meaning of gangs for personnel at Choices Alternative Academy (CAA), an inner-city alternative high school established after the local gang was well entrenched. Administrators at CAA developed a “running pact” with gang members, recognizing that since nearby schools are controlled by rival gangs, local gang members have “no place else to go.” Hence, rather than transferring gang members who harass students, administrators have sound organizational reasons for transferring the harassed student, inadvertently contributing to the impression that the gang “owns” the school. Staff also use knowledge akin to “the code of the street” to maintain authority over students and to explain student behavior, yet when staff are seen by students to exercise authority in an arbitrary, capricious manner, staff risk further alienating students and compromising their own legitimacy. Many teachers tell how working to gain rapport with students “really works better,” and I explore how all staff at CAA accomplish this. Finally, I describe the general failure of teaching and learning at this setting, which is unfortunately not uncommon in inner-city areas. The study concludes by recommending that inner-city youth are best served not by “gang” prevention programs, but by enriching opportunities such as those enjoyed by young people in non-gang areas.