

Beyond Education, Brains and Hard Work: The Aspirations and Career Trajectory of Two Black Young Men

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ABSTRACT: It is commonly accepted that through education, intellectual ability, and hard work, individuals will attain the education and careers to which they aspire. With reference to this neoliberal ethos, I use case studies of two African Canadian young men from the same stigmatized neighbourhood to examine their social, educational and occupational experiences, aspirations and achievements. The findings indicate that while equally ambitious, determined and university educated, one of the young men successfully attained his career goal immediately after graduating from university while the other still waits to achieve the same more than two years after graduation.

KEYWORDS: Education, Neoliberalism, African Canadians, Neighbourhood Stigma, Agency, Structure

INTRODUCTION

A 2011 edition of *Forbes* magazine featured an article by Gene Marks (2011), “If I were a poor Black kid,” in which he referenced President Obama’s “excellent speech” a week earlier about the possibilities of social mobility for working class people in America. Marks argues that “everyone in this country has a chance to succeed,” and prospects are not “impossible for those kids from the inner city.” He continues to say that “It takes brains. It takes hard work. It takes a little luck. And a little help from others. It takes the ability and the know-how to use the resources that are available. Like technology....” (ibid). Like Marks and many

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other Americans (see the feedback that his article generated²), Canadians too have long pondered why “poor black kids” do not take advantage of the educational opportunities and the technological resources available to them.

The idea that equality of opportunity exists, and that all Black youth have to do is to use their “brains,” work hard, and access necessary resources is premised on individualism, competition, personal responsibility, free choice, accountability, exercise of agency, resiliency, and strategic aspirations – all of which constitute a neoliberal ethos (Porfilio & Malott, 2008; Braedley & Luxton, 2010). Influenced by this ethos, particularly through their schooling, Black youth and their parents come to expect that the educational, social and material successes they seek will be realized. But the path to such realization is contingent on many social, institutional and structural factors beyond an individual’s control. In fact, in the case of young Black men, the neoliberal “success formula” is remarkably precarious when we take into account how race, class and gender operate in their lives.

In this article, I reference the experiences of two 29-year old African-Canadian young men, Kobe and Trevor (pseudonyms), to show how neoliberal discursive rationalities operated in their social, educational, career and aspirational trajectories. While they have grown up in the same media-branded “troubled” Toronto community, and would appear to have made “all the right moves” in terms of their efforts to attain their career aspirations and become full participating and productive citizens, their achievements are asymmetrically different. I argue that this difference cannot be explained simply by intellectual ability, level of education attained, or professional qualification, but by (probably more importantly) the complex ways in which the opportunities are afforded by the educational and occupational structures to which they had access. In proceeding, I review the principles of neoliberalism, and using critical race theory (CRT) as a rejoinder, discuss the ways in which neoliberalism obscures the effects of race, class and gender on the lives of racialized members of society. Before discussing the findings, I present the methodology followed by a brief description of the neighbourhood in which the participants grew up.

² See responses to article by C. Emdin (2011, December 20), Five lessons from the ‘If I Were a Poor Black Kid’ debate, Huffington Post; I. Gandy (2011, December 14), ‘If I Were a Poor Black Kid’: Really, Forbes? The Root; L. Peitzmann, (2011, December 13), If I were a middle aged white man. Huffington Post; and Touré (2011, December 15)

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS: NEOLIBERALISM AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY (CRT)

There is a generally accepted notion that individuals can attain the education they desire (as education is free), make choices, freely pursue employment opportunities, become wealthy, and take responsibility for their lives in ways that they see fit. The prevailing neoliberal ethos which informs this common-sense notion also holds that competition is an important “social good” and the “least restrictive way” of addressing and re-distributing inequitable resources (Braedley and Luxton, 2010, 8). Principally, neoliberalism is “a transnational political project” (Wacquant, 2008) that is premised on the principles of a market economy in which individuals are free to pursue wealth without the constraints a welfare state often imposes (Braedley and Luxton, 2010; Wacquant, 2008). In such context, individuals and families are tasked with taking responsibility for their own care and social outcomes (Braedley and Luxton, 2010, 15). But in a context of structural inequity, the resources and opportunities to which individuals have access, and concomitantly their freedom and choices, are inevitably structured by the economic and social conditions over which they have little or no control (Braedley and Luxton, 2010; Porfilio and Malott, 2008; Tabb, 2003). The sustained attempts by neoliberal advocates “to promote competition, choice, entrepreneurship, and individualism” constitute what Connel (2010, 26-27) calls a “sociocultural logic” that offers formerly excluded individuals access to opportunities without changing the existing “systems of inequality or the ideologies that sustain them” (35).

In Canada where there is an official multiculturalism policy (1971) and legislation (1988) which purport to promote “inclusive citizenship” and guarantee “value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their racial and ethnic origins, their language or religious affiliation,” minority group members continue to experience educational, social, civic and economic marginalization and exclusion (Basu, 2011, 1308; see also Reitz et al., 2009). Understandably so, since the multicultural claim of recognizing “cultural groups” (i.e. minorities) is up against the hegemonic neoliberal ideology of individualism and competition) which places responsibility for their circumstances on individuals. As a consequence, individuals attribute their social or economic circumstances to poor choices they have made, rather than to the limited, problematic or bad choices available to them. According to Luxton (2010, 172), liberalism’s “perverse form of individualism – an obstinate and persistent belief

that blames the victim by privatizing social problems”—immobilized individuals as they became resigned to the inevitability of their situation and a failure to see that they are both formed by and subjected to the prevailing values and practices of the economic, social and political structures.

In their examination of how youth are incorporated into “a global, neoliberal economic system,” Sukarieh and Tannock (2008, 304) argue that today’s youth are caught in a capitalist system which has led to the growth of large populations of unemployed, working class, poor and racialized youth, typically residing in urban settings, with worldviews, identities, and ways of life that are oppositional or peripheral to the existing social order. In this regard, educators and other youth service workers set about to make these youth “fit functionally” into society socializing them into a culture of responsibility and entrepreneurship premised on white middle-class “standardized and universalized notions” of youth development. They learn, then, that if they cannot make it in the existing employment market it is because they, “lack the skills of employability, and you should work on yourself more in order to better make it in the system” (Sukarieh and Tannock 2008, 309). They also come to know of the “ever-increasing educational requirements for jobs” which as Bills and Brown (2011, 2) contend, amounts to a practice of “credential inflation.”³

Within this neoliberal paradigm, racialized youth must wrestle with the dynamic and complex aspects of racism – a structural barrier to which critical race theorists (CRT) draw attention. Critical Race Theory is particularly useful here to understand how youth of colour fare in neoliberal contexts. By situating the experiences of people of colour at its centre, it highlights how seemingly race-neutral and colour-blind practices and policies disproportionately affect minorities (Aylward, 1999, 34). According to Howard (2008, 73), CRT holds that peoples’ experiences and opportunities are significantly shaped by their race, and that “any attempt to eradicate racial inequalities has to be centered on the socio-historical legacy of racism” which also means challenging the prevailing ideas of meritocracy, fairness, and objectivity that maintains the discriminatory and exclusionary practices in society (see also Charles, 2011; Gillborn, 2008; Stovall, 2008; Trevino, Harris and Wallace, 2011).

³ Bills and Brown (2011, 1) define credentialism as the “extent to which societies allocate individuals to slots in the occupational hierarchy on the basis of the educational qualifications that the candidates present at the point of hire.”

The “inextricable layers of racialized subordination” (Howard, 2008, 73) based on gender, social class and generational status play a significant role in determining the opportunities young people will have, the neighbourhoods in which they live, the schools they can attend, and the educational resources to which they will have access (James, 2012). Participating in the inequitable education system tends to be difficult for students who do not possess or have access to the normalized middle-class “cultural capital,” which in Yosso’s (2005, 76) words, is “an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society.” Nevertheless, as Yosso argues, Youth of Colour utilize (77) “community cultural wealth” – i.e. “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts... to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” – which enables them “to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances,” even without the “objective means” to attain their educational, occupational or social goals (78).

For young Black males, the resources and supports from their community are crucial to their journey through life; for as Walcott (2009, 75) asserts, “under the contemporary regime of the global terms of neoliberal economy and by extension... its culturally rhetorical disciplinary apparatus”, Black masculinity is always constructed as deficient. As a counter to this hegemonic cultural message of neoliberalism, Black males have to operate on a framework of masculinity that enables them to hold on to their “hopes and dreams for the future” sustained through aspirational capital, navigational skills, familial supports and community validation, whereby they are able to, in Yosso’s words (2005, 77), “challenge (resist) oppressive conditions.”

RESEARCH METHOD

Kobe and Trevor were first interviewed for two different qualitative research studies I conducted with Toronto youth over a ten-year period. I took a constructionist approach to the studies in that I used the interviews (each of about 1-1/2 to 2 hours) as opportunities to have participants engage in a process of meaning-making or “sense-making work” (Roulston, 2007, 16). As such, I was not a neutral observer simply trying to access and then represent certain truths about the participants (Stephenson, 2005). To this end, the audio-typed interviews were unstructured, hence enabling me to engage with the experiences and realities of Kobe and Trevor. In fact, as critical race theorists encourage, research with racialized participants should take an approach that captures their

stories and counter-stories in ways that incorporate their perspectives on their lives noting how they cope with and respond to their social, educational and material conditions (Fernandez, 2002; Moore, Henfield and Owens, 2008). In this regard, the case study approach with its detailed examination of a particular issue, incident or individual, not only serves to recognize and address the issues of participants' lives, it also enables a range of broad understandings that might otherwise be missed (Creswell, 1994). Notwithstanding its lack of generalizability, scholars assert that case studies can be used "to illuminate the nuanced complexity of social life in a variety of contexts" (Singer and Buford May, 2010, 305; see also Lichtman, 2013; Stake, 2000).

The study in which Kobe participated was conducted with twenty-two young men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who grew up in a marginalized Toronto neighbourhood. This study explored the raced experiences of African Canadian university students of Caribbean origin, their educational and career aspirations, and their perceptions of their occupational opportunities and outcomes. Participants were first interviewed in 2001 or 2002; follow-up interviews were conducted in 2006 with ten of the original respondents, and Kobe was again interviewed in 2011 for this article. First interviewed in 2002 during his third year of university, Kobe, then twenty-two years-old, was one of about three participants who were born in the Caribbean – in his case, Jamaica. He stood out initially from the other research participants, not only in his display of self-confidence, tenacity, high achievement, and the ways in which he engaged with his schooling (his teachers specifically) but also his ambivalent relationship with the community. He recognized that being from that community could be a liability, hence he would distance himself; but at the same time, he used that liability as a motivation to for his aspirations.

The study in which Trevor participated was first conducted in 2006, and was designed specifically to study the athletic motivations, experiences and aspirations of Black/African Canadian male basketball players between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight who were living in metropolitan Toronto. This study sought to answer the question: Was playing on their high school basketball team a liability or an asset for Black student-athletes? Trevor was one of twelve participants in this study and the only one that grew up in the same neighbourhood as Kobe. Trevor was initially interviewed in 2006 at the age of twenty-five during the fourth year of his university program; and again in 2011 for this article. In the initial interview with Trevor, I observed a strong tie to the

community that was unlike that of Kobe; hence my curiosity to explore their similarities and differences in terms of their educational and career paths and ambitions, and the role of the community in their lives.

While similar in many ways, such as having grown up in the same stigmatized Toronto neighbourhood, there are important differences that make this exploration of their lives of compelling interest – specifically, the ways in which they were supported by the educational system and its educators, and the privileging of particular educational and occupational interests over others. In the follow-up interviews with Kobe and Trevor, I asked about their educational achievements and occupational situation to date noting their optimism and satisfaction with how they approached the goals they had set for themselves.

Kobe and Trevor, like the other participants in the studies I conducted, represent a growing group of second-generation and generation-and-a-half Black/African-Caribbean-Canadian youth for whom the immigrant-drive and expectations of their parents have served to motivate them to do well educationally in order to be socially and economically successful. In fact, Canadian studies of Black university students (Gosine, 2008; James and Taylor, 2008) show that their educational aspirations were motivated by their sense of obligation to their immigrant parents and their desire to “give back” to their (Black) community. And although aware of the structural realities of racism and other related barriers, they maintained that with their individual efforts and willpower, and on the basis of merit “education had worked, was working, and would continue to work for them” (James and Taylor, 2008, 585). Gosine (2010, 9) contends that such logic is informed by the larger society’s neoliberal ethos of meritocracy and individualism, and “the belief that racism can be overcome by way of academic and occupational attainment, hard work, determination, and black solidarity.” In the following section, I discuss the neighbourhood in which Kobe and Trevor grew up and then go on to examine their career trajectory noting the similarities and differences in their strategies, their familial support, and their achievements to date.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Kobe and Trevor lived and attended school in one of Toronto’s “priority areas” characterized by high rates of poverty, low-income earners, public housing tenants, and high proportion of immigrants and racialized population (Hulchanski, 2007; James, 2012; Stapleton, Murphy and Xing, 2012). Established during the 1960s, the community is commonly referred to as an “urban” or “inner city” neighbourhood. But

Keil and Young's (2011, 1) term "in-between" seems more fitting, in that it is an urban space "coached between the glamour zones of the downtown neighbourhoods and the exploding single-family home suburbs and exurbs...; an area that oscillates "between unwelcome notoriety (for poverty and crime) and outright invisibility."

About eighty thousand people live in this high-density neighbourhood with a large cluster of high-rise apartment buildings and townhouses. Characteristic of what Myles and Hou (2004, 31) term a "low-income immigrant enclave", it is home to a broad representation of Canada's diverse ethno-racial population. Black/African Canadians – most of them born in Canada to Caribbean parents – make up the largest (about twenty percent) racial minority group (the next largest is South Asians – a two percent difference), but the largest racial group is Whites with nearly thirty percent of the population. It also has "one of the highest proportions of youth, sole-supported families, refugees and immigrants...of any community in Toronto" (James, 2012a, 54). Schooling issues (such as low educational achievements, high drop-out rates, and absenteeism) and social issues (such as drugs, gangs, and violence) draw wide-spread attention from educators, governments, police, and the media (Ezeonu, 2008; Lawson 2013).

Many of residents have a strong sense of loyalty, responsibility and commitment to the place they consider home. But some residents, weary of the marginalization, stigmatization and racialization, choose to leave the neighbourhood – oftentimes move to the suburbs – seeking safety, comfort and better schooling conditions for themselves and/or children. These residents, many of them first generation Canadians construct going to live in the suburbs as a marker of upward social mobility (James, 2012a; Myles and Hou, 2004).

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL

At the age of twelve, Kobe immigrated to Canada from rural Jamaica with his older sister to join his single mother who had already been living in Toronto for six years. He recalled that while he was "excited" about leaving Jamaica because of the changes that would come to his life, he was nevertheless "indifferent" about what to expect. About two years after settling in Toronto, his family moved to a rented apartment in the neighbourhood that Kobe would call home for the next ten years. Trevor, on the other hand, was born in that neighbourhood to a single mother who had also grown up in that neighbourhood. He lived with his mother, grandmother and uncle (a police officer). Trevor's mother

had immigrated as a teenager to Canada from London, England with her mother and brother.

Both young men grew up with their working mothers – Kobe’s mother worked as a legal secretary, and Trevor’s mother as a nurse – who had concerns about raising their sons in the neighbourhood. So the message the sons received from their parents about the neighbourhood was one of risk and danger – a place from which they should move as soon as possible. This rendering of the neighbourhood was somewhat consistent with that of the media and other Canadians. It is therefore understandable that Kobe would, at that time, avoid interactions with peers in the neighbourhood outside of school since he did not want “to get in trouble because of its reputation.” He also stated: “I went to school, went to track, and went home and did my homework....I had no friends in the area....I didn’t really, I guess, associate with a lot of people from the area outside of school.” But for Trevor growing up in the neighbourhood “was a blessing.” As he explained: “Growing up in [the neighbourhood] helped me by allowing me to see and feel what it was like to live in a community which did not have the best reputation. I think it helped make me a critical thinker based on the fact that I was able to experience the positive things that the community had to offer rather than just hear about the negative.”

In keeping with their determination to leave the “bad neighbourhood” for the sake of their children, especially sons, the families did move from the neighbourhood. Kobe moved about two miles away during his second year in university; and Trevor moved to the outer suburbs at the end of grade 7. As Trevor reported, his mother did not want him to “fall into the stereotype” or “become a statistic” – a reference to gang violence, shootings, and police targeting of Black youth in the neighbourhood (Ezeonu, 2008; Lawson 2013). However, Trevor was allowed to complete middle school in the neighbourhood – a request he had made to his mother because, as he said, “I didn’t think I would be comfortable going to a new school for just one year.” This enabled Trevor to spend “a lot of time” in his old neighbourhood; hence was able to maintain his friendships. But Trevor’s transfer to high school in the new suburban neighbourhood to which he had moved with his mother, was not a welcoming experience for him. He referred to his early experience in his high school as “a culture shock” which was, in part, due to the fact that it was not a “multi-cultural” neighbourhood like the one he left – residents in his new

neighbourhood were “either white or Asians.” In reflecting on his experience in his new school, Trevor said:

“I had a hard time adjusting to the new environment and fitting in with the rest of the students. I felt that I was completely different from everyone else. It seemed that the students and teachers knew about me and where I came from before I was formally introduced to any of them. I felt as if they already had their prejudgments about me before they even got to know me.”

And in our most recent interview, Trevor noted: “it seemed that they thought I should be a certain way because of where I grew up. They were expecting to see this thug or from what some people said, ‘someone more Black’.”

Trevor recalled that there were “approximately ten Black students in the entire school” when he was in grade 9. While he moved in a different academic circle, he ‘bonded’ with them because they were having “the same feelings” about the school. That bonding was also facilitated by their involvement in the school’s sports teams. In fact, as Trevor said, “all of the Black students in the school were on the sports team, whether it was basketball, volleyball, or track and field”⁴ and some of them were in special education classes “for behavioural or academic reasons” – classes in which Black students tend to be over-represented (see Toronto District School Board, 2010). Further, the recognition and related supports that Trevor and his Black peers received from their teachers for their athletic prowess were not the same in their academic programs. In fact, as Trevor observed, among his peers, “academics became secondary to athletics, and the Black students relied more on their athletic ability than on their academic ability.”

That many of the Black students were to be found on athletic teams is likely a reflection of sports being used as an intervention and pre-emptive strategy – serving as a form of social control and regulation which has become, as Spaaij (2009, 247) would argue, “a substantial aspect of the neoliberal repertoire.” For his part, complying with his mother’s desire for him “to have access to the best education” – hence their move to the suburb – Trevor resisted the effort of his coaches and peers to sell him

⁴ Trevor also added: “it seemed as though a Black student was always the star of the sports teams – usually basketball or track and field.”

on the benefits of athletics as a route toward his educational and career goals. He explained:

“I remember my basketball coach insisting that we make a videotape to send to schools in the States in hopes that I would receive a scholarship to play basketball at an American university. He also took it upon himself to give me a basketball rim to put up at my house so that I could practice. My mom was offended by this gesture, because she probably felt that me being a Black student, he should have been encouraging me more with academics instead of sports.”

Like with Trevor, sports played a role in helping Kobe negotiate and navigate his schooling environment, and to acculturate to life in Canada. During his first year in high school, Kobe was invited by his gym teacher to try out for the track team – something he gladly did with the knowledge that his school has a reputation for producing students who won athletic scholarships to U.S. universities. Kobe did become a member of his school’s track team, and he valued the opportunities that his athletic abilities and skills provided, but he had no interest in trying for an athletic scholarship.⁵ What he expected from his schooling – essentially from his teachers and coach – was support in his academic work. And as a child with an immigrant mother who had limited understanding of the educational system, it was to his teachers Kobe looked for and received help in navigating the school system. This is not to say that his mother did not do her part; she provided, according to Kobe, “a lot of the basic principles of the hard work ethic” required to get through school. In his initial interview, he also credited “the principles I learned in Jamaica” for how he was able to apply himself to his schooling and education.

Unlike Trevor, Kobe was able to identify “good” teachers with whom he could relate effectively, and who worked to address his needs and interests. Aside from his Caribbean-born teachers with whom he “had a good rapport” (given that they were able to understand and appreciate his situation as an immigrant youth from the region), Kobe credited one teacher, “who is actually...a white teacher,” for his generosity and support. Kobe felt that this teacher genuinely cared about him, saw him for who he was, and went out of his way to help Kobe. In expressing his appreciation for this teacher, Kobe mentioned that even though he

⁵ In reflecting on the plausibility of U.S athletic scholarships, Kobe reasoned that the larger population of Black people in the United States makes possible “more opportunities for... Black students.” And he added, “while there is discrimination, I think that there [the U.S.] is better, in terms of community trying to help people that are Black.”

was “the pickiest teacher [he] ever had,” he learned from this teacher “the skills to see my mistakes and that I had the ability to correct them.” Not underestimating “the socioeconomic conditions” of the neighbourhood, and believing that teachers were influenced by media and other negative representations of the neighbourhood – and by extension the students – Kobe did what he could to show that he was “someone who is pretty smart,” and had the “personal drive,” and “family support” to do well. Ostensibly, in such a context – an “urban” school with mainly disadvantaged racialized students, many of them Black – being seen as “a Black male who had potential” meant that teachers were willing to go out of their way to help. Indeed, as Kobe reported, he went from a student with “a very indifferent attitude” toward school to a scholarship student because his teachers saw “promise.” He recalled that teachers encouraged him to take advanced-level courses (as opposed to general-level courses) which prepared him for university.

Even though, as Kobe suggested that schools such as his were more likely to get “bad teachers” – because only certain “type of teachers want to go there” – there were the few committed teachers who turned out to be “amazing” because “they care about students” and they recognized the social and cultural capital that the students brought to their education (Milner, 2010; Moore, Henfield and Owens, 2008). Interestingly, in reflecting on the idea that “bad schools get bad teachers,” Kobe made reference to his experience in university with students from the suburban area where Trevor attended school. Kobe surmised that the students who attended school in urban areas did better educationally because they had a “better” system of education. But Trevor, a student who, like Kobe, was a Black male with potential and was receiving the necessary family support, missed out on having similar caring teachers to support him in his academic endeavours.

That the most significant help Trevor received from his coach was a basketball net and the opportunity to make videos to solicit athletic scholarships, suggests that his coach, who was also his teacher, was unable to look past his 6-foot, physically-fit appearance; in other words, a basketball player who would bring him and the school accolades – to see a student with academic potential and promise. It might be said, then, that for Black students, and males in particular, attending an “urban” racially diverse school with committed and aware teachers is likely to lead to better educational experiences compared to attending middle class suburban schools with uninformed and uncommitted teachers. The situation is even more problematic for Black male students like

Trevor whose bodies are persistently read in relation to the reputation or stigma of their former “urban” neighbourhood – in essence, a racialization process in which they are defined as underachievers, troublemakers and athletes (James, 2012) and unable to change. How Kobe and Trevor construct their aspirations and worked to attain them is taken up in the following section.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Kobe recalled that upon entering high school, he expressed interest in becoming a lawyer. He attributed this career goal to his exposure to lawyers and legal education through his mother who “went back to school” to become a legal secretary. He admitted that he did not know what career his mother wished for him, but he understood that while she had the attitude: “do whatever you want to do,” she expected him “to go to school, do your homework, do well” and then go to university. Kobe understood that if he were to fulfill his mother’s expectations, he needed to stay focused on his work, have a career goal, avoid distractions (he did this by isolating himself from his neighbourhood peers), and establish himself as a model student (counter to the stereotype of Black males in the community) who would gain and retain the support of his teachers because they recognized his academic potential.

Many of the Black students, especially males like Kobe, were encouraged by their teachers to become role models for other students, and to this end, were often guided to become teachers and return to work in the community. This expectation to return to work in the community is part of neoliberal thinking of teachers’ approach to working with these Black students. It served to re-inscribe the notion that the social welfare of the community rests on them, and as individuals they were responsible and expected to do something about the conditions in the neighbourhood. One consequence of this expectation is that it could limit young people’s aspirations and their possibilities; but fortunately for Kobe, this was not the case. At no time during any of the three interviews did Kobe say that he was becoming a lawyer so that he could return to work in the community. And he never entertained the idea of becoming a teacher. In fact, in his most recent interview (2011), Kobe declared that he was “careful not to take on the responsibility of a saviour.” So even though during his undergraduate years, he accepted invitations from his former teachers to give presentations to students (in other words, be a role model), he did

so out of a sense of good civic responsibility and not because he was, as he put it, “taking on the mantel of saving lives.”

Having had what might be described as a successful high school experience, Kobe entered university on a scholarship and pursued a four-year degree in business administration. Upon graduation, he worked for one year in marketing, before returning to the same university to pursue his law degree concurrently with a master’s degree in business administration. During his seven years of university, Kobe supplemented his scholarships, with financial assistance from his mother, his student bursary, and his part-time weekend and summer jobs. And he was a recipient of a number of corporate philanthropic support, including a summer job with a marketing firm that turned into the full-time employment for one year after his business degree. The connection to the marketing firm was secured by a service organization dedicated to preparing and placing “underserved youth,” particularly youth of colour, in business or professional organizations and corporations. As resident of an “underserved” or disadvantaged neighbourhood, Kobe was an ideal recruit for the corporate world as a lawyer – the kind of Black male youth who embodied the neoliberal ethos of individualism, hard work, and entrepreneurship (Braedley and Luxton, 2010). Put another way, Kobe was someone whom one might say had a knapsack of disadvantages but through his abilities, skills and efforts (individualism) was able to surmount the disadvantages thereby showing that career ambitions can be realized.

Since he had moved, Trevor was unable to benefit from his residential address as Kobe did, even though like Kobe, Trevor had similar disadvantages and high aspirations. In fact early in his life, Trevor aspired to become a police officer, but given his interest in sports, his friendship with athletic peers, and encouragement from his coach, when time came to apply to university, he thought of entering a program related to sport. He gained entry to Kinesiology at the same university as Kobe. But after one year in that program, he transferred to Sociology because he “was not doing very well in Kine.” At that time Trevor planned to complete his honours degree in Sociology and then apply to the police force. But in his final year of university, he was encouraged by his mother and others to pursue teaching. He applied to education faculties and was accepted a year after graduation. During the in-between year, Trevor worked as a waiter at a restaurant (where he had worked part-time while attending university) so that he “could pay off his student loan.” He graduated with his teaching degree, applied to school boards around Toronto, but

was unsuccessful in getting a job. In the summer following his graduation, Trevor worked as a youth worker in his old neighbourhood and at the restaurant on the weekends.

Unable to obtain a teaching job in Toronto, and encouraged by friends, who had taught in London, England, to do the same, Trevor decided to take a chance and migrated to London in 2009. His decision to go there was made easy as he was also a British citizen since his mother was born there. In many ways, London turned out to be a productive move for Trevor in terms of his personal and professional growth. As he stated: "Teaching in London seemed to be an easier process than teaching in Toronto. There were less hoops to jump through and I found work almost instantly." In fact, after two weeks in London, Trevor found a job at an alternative school "located in a lower socio-economic community" (similar to the one in which he grew up) where he worked for two years. He taught special needs students⁶ with whom he was able to build relationships and helped them, not only in their education, but also with their social and emotional issues. According to Trevor teaching in London "was extremely challenging and difficult, but rewarding at the same time." He explained that the rewards came from seeing students go from "selling drugs, fighting, or just negativity in general...to applying to different colleges, or finding an apprenticeship. The difficulty came from seeing some students sent to prison, a mental hospital, or just give up on their future in general."

Trevor returned to Toronto in summer 2011, hopeful that with his experience and biography he would be able to get a teaching job, especially having heard about the need for Black male teachers to work in Toronto and surrounding area schools. But six months after returning, he was still unemployed despite his many applications to teaching jobs at the four school boards in the Greater Toronto Area. Running out of money⁷, Trevor has had to consider his options which were to apply for jobs as a youth worker or return to his job at the restaurant. But as he suggested, "once you have made a certain amount of money or have been doing a certain type of work, you become accustomed to it. [Hence] I find it extremely difficult to go back to a part-time job or a service job. To me it feels like a step backwards and I am trying to move forward." On this basis, Trevor returned to his earlier career interest which was policing noting that "My uncle

⁶ These were students who were "excluded from mainstream schools due to their behaviour, lack of attendance, or special needs."

⁷ Trevor said that he did manage to save a significant amount of money from working in London, and living with his parents was helping with his financial situation.

was a major influence in me deciding to get into policing when I was younger...I have always looked up to him and thought that joining the police force would be a natural progression." In moving forward, Trevor applied to police forces in the Greater Toronto Area – as he said, "the ones that are hiring." It is interesting that Trevor remained interested in becoming a police officer, given that he grew up with neighbourhood peers who had always accused the police of racial profiling which has contributed to police-youth-community relationship filled with tension and conflict (Chapman-Nyaho, James and Kwan-Lafond, 2012; Ezeonu, 2008). Yet, evidently influenced more by his uncle than his friends, Trevor remained convinced that there are opportunities and possibilities for him as a police officer. In the meantime, while waiting to hear about his application to become a police officer (which he did not get), he worked part-time as a youth worker and afterwards as a full-time city transit driver.

In many ways, Trevor could be said to have the same determination and level of motivation to attain his career goal as Kobe. But unlike Kobe, he has not been fortunate enough (or has not been at the right place at the right time) to receive the necessary institutional help.⁸ Nevertheless, well-schooled in the neoliberal ethos of individualism, personal responsibility, and rules of competition, Trevor continued to pursue his career goal believing that it is up to him to do everything possible to succeed even though his many attempts – the numerous applications and job interviews – have been unproductive to date. In trying to understand his failures, and admitting frustration, Trevor directed his attention to "the process" in which he engaged – with which he had to cope (Luxton, 2010) – rather than the opportunity structures he has been up against. As he said: "Some of my frustrations come with the process and time it takes to find a job/career that you want....Working in England for two years, and having a teaching degree, I believe I have jumped through enough hoops that the process should be somewhat easier." Clearly, the difference between Kobe and Trevor obtaining their respective career goals cannot be attributed only to their individual efforts, abilities and commitment.

⁸ While Kobe might have had the social and educational support of his friends, Trevor did not. In fact, their friendship groups were quite different. Kobe reported that all of his close friends have "at least two degrees." And Trevor, in suggesting that the move from his neighborhood might have been "a good idea," went on to say that a number of the people with whom he grew up and "called friends... have become victims of murder or have had someone in their family murdered, and others... have fallen into life of crime...."

CONCLUSION: BEYOND EDUCATION, BRAINS AND HARD WORK

Apart from their personal efforts and attributes, Kobe's and Trevor's path toward their career goals have been shaped by how effectively they were able to navigate the layered multifaceted structures of inequity which sustain the hegemonic ideology and common-sense rhetoric of neoliberalism, as well as the confounding obstacles. On the one hand, their imagination and acceptance that success in the competitive labour market is dependent on "the rational choices they make and their own skilled and diligent work" (Luxton, 2010, 180) seem to have inspired their consistent efforts and tenacity. But on the other hand, these qualities alone proved insufficient (at least for Trevor) without the support and sponsorship of individuals and institutions.

In effect, Kobe, Trevor and their parents – encouraged by teachers and coaches – dutifully worked with the idea that education is largely (if not singularly) what it takes for them to succeed in society. This would appear to be the case, if Kobe is used as an example of someone whose education and intellectual ability enabled him to become the corporate lawyer he is today working between Toronto and New York City. But his relationship with caring teachers and coaches, and the supports he received from them, as well as from charitable service organizations, cannot be underestimated. Indeed, these resources all played significant roles in helping Kobe to navigate the educational and employment structures and become a role model and example for others to follow. As such, Kobe became evidence that one can escape the conditions in which he grew up. Trevor, on the other hand, was left to find his way on his own with whatever supports his family members were able to provide. Trevor's move to the suburbs for better schooling and education did not occur as his mother expected (Deluca and Rosenblatt, 2010). Ironically, having left his neighbourhood might have contributed to Trevor's loss of educational, social and other opportunities to which Black youth living in "troubled" neighbourhoods might have access. In other words, Trevor might have lost his "at risk" status – a social capital that might have served in building relationships with educators and human service personnel who are interested in 'helping' Black young men with potential to escape their delinquency-producing neighbourhoods.

Neither Kobe⁹ nor Trevor eschewed the significance of education as a means to attain their career goals – neither did they challenge the idea that it was up to them to work hard toward this end. But they

⁹ In all of the interviews I have conducted with Kobe he admitted to being highly influenced by capitalism.

recognized that what they have achieved to date, or what anyone is able to achieve, is not totally of their own making. In fact, when asked what they thought of the notion that a person can become whatever he wants to be, Kobe submitted: "Life is much too unkind for that. You control maybe ten percent; fifty to sixty percent depends on winning the birth lottery. While there is no guarantee, you're well on your way....This is the reality of life. Watch the interview process and see who gets hired." Kobe concluded by saying that for someone like him "the climb is a lot steeper." Similarly, while saying "if someone works hard at what they want to become in life eventually it may come true," Trevor went on to suggest – probably hinting at his coping mechanism:

"What should be said is that even if you work hard and do everything the way you are supposed to do it, your end result may not be exactly what you expected and your end goal may not happen when you expect it to happen. There are other factors that come into play when trying to become someone or entering into a certain career – factors such as location (the area where you have always wanted to work is not hiring for the career you are interested in); [and] competition for the career you're looking into is high. Although you may be the most qualified for the position, I am a firm believer in the idea that it's who you know that really gets you into a career rather than what you know."

The stories of Kobe and Trevor illustrate how individual agency is mediated by social, economic and educational structures. If youth like them are to maintain confidence in the potential and possibilities of education, then educators and others of us working with youth need to help them read, understand, and in turn successfully, navigate and negotiate the societal structures. They need to know how factors outside of their control – many of which cannot be anticipated – affect their life goals. Whereas the rational success formula and seductive reasoning of neoliberalism lays out a seemingly reasonable path to success, the reality is, it is primarily individuals who have access to and are conversant with 'mainstream' social and cultural capital who will ultimately realize their high aspirations through hard work, determination and brains.

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