Introduction:

At the start of our research, our team was interested in studying African American, middle school aged boys’ perceptions of opportunity. We addressed this question by conducting one, one-hour observation and two one-hour interviews with Malcolm, an African American, male, middle school student. On the recommendation of Dr. Denise Pope, we contacted the Director of Development at Westside Preparatory School about observing a middle school class and conducting the interviews with a student. Westside Preparatory School, as described below, is a unique school and provided an opportunity to observe middle school students from neighborhoods where college attendance is not the norm. The Director of Development at Westside Preparatory School then put us in contact with a 7th grade math and science teacher, Julie Stevens. Julie was very accommodating to our requests and we scheduled our observation for a Thursday afternoon math class.

Following our class observation, we realized that, due to the limited time for observations and interviewing, we needed to narrow the scope of the research question for the interviews. We chose to focus specifically on the relationship between school and perceptions of future opportunities and career goals, because it was most closely aligned with what we were able to observe in the classroom and more conducive to the research methods we were using. We selected Malcolm to interview because of our proximity to him during our observation and because of his prominence in the class dialogue that day. Malcolm also seemed to be a typical student in the class. He was engaged in the assignments and worked well in the groups; however did not show any exceptionally low or high abilities in relation to his peers. We notified Julie that we were interested in
interviewing Malcolm, and gave her a consent form for him to take home to his parents. Malcolm indicated to Julie that he would be willing to be interviewed, and returned the parental consent form the following day.

We returned to Westside for the first interview on a Thursday, two weeks after the initial observation. With our new focus on the relationship between school and perceptions of opportunity, the first interview centered on the topics of school, Malcolm’s favorite classes, the roles they use in the classroom, how he relates to his teachers, and what career he would like to have in the future. For both the first and second interviews, we met with Malcolm during the school day over lunch break, and provided pizza for the five of us to share. We audio recorded each interview, and two researchers conducted the interview for 30 minutes each, while two researchers took notes.

Following the first interview, we noticed many interesting aspects about Malcolm’s school and life, with one theme being a potential disconnect between his school subjects and his life outside of school. Malcolm seemed to have a hard time finding a relationship between the two. Based on this information, we decided, in the second interview, to focus further on his ideas about connections between school and life outside of school and his future opportunities. We spoke with Malcolm about his ideas on success, opportunities, and pressed further about how those ideas relate to his school, his family and his life outside of school. The second interview was conducted on Friday of the following week. At the end of the second interview, the final interviewer reviewed with Malcolm his responses and the general conclusions from the interview, and asked him if our understandings of his responses and conclusions were accurate.
After the second interview, we discovered that the audiotape had become tangled in the tape recorder and was no longer useable. The first 15 minutes of the first interview had been transcribed; however the remaining portion of the first interview and the entire second interview had not been transcribed and were lost when the tape was damaged. In place of an exact transcript of the interviews, we relied on the detailed notes taken during the interviews, notes taken from memory after the interviews, and the transcript from the first interview, for analysis. Quotations using double quotation marks are exact quotes taken from the transcript and quotes using single quotation marks are taken from the notes recorded during the interviews and may not be exact quotations, although they are close to the original remarks made.

As we reviewed our observation and interview notes and tried to find the story in our limited data, we looked again at our initial thoughts about a disconnect existing between Malcolm’s life outside of school and his life inside of school. We began to structure our story around this theme of a disconnect, reviewing our data for every instance where school and life did not perfectly align in Malcolm’s view. When our story was nearly complete, we realized that we had lost Malcolm’s voice in our pursuit of a unifying theme. We had become critical of his inability to connect school and life and wrote as though there was a deficiency in the 7th grader because of this disconnect. We decided to then scrap our original framework for the product and begin again, telling the story through the actors and places and not through our own judgments.

The result of this revision is, we hope, a more authentic depiction of a twelve year old boy, hoping for greatness at a remarkable school in an unlikely setting. As Alan Peshkin said, “there is no setting of any interest to social researchers unless there is
something we can call a situation.” (Peshkin, 1993) Our situation is the life of Malcolm, an African American 7th grade boy living in a low-income area, but with the opportunity to pursue college, an uncommon goal in his neighborhood, partially through the existence of a unique, college preparatory private school. To quote Peshkin again, “The assumption behind the story of any particular life is that there’s something worth learning.”(Peshkin, 1993) We introduce the story of Malcolm’s life and draw some tentative conclusions about what we stand to learn about just what it means to be successful.

Findings:

Westside Prep

West Tall Stick is a small city on the southern peninsula of the San Francisco Bay. Situated in the midst of the Silicon Valley, and area best known for internet start-up companies and the young millionaires who created them, West Tall Stick is an anomaly. It’s most remarkable neighbor, Tall Stick, is home to an elite private university, and the kind of population that comes with such an institution. Tall Stick public schools are populated almost entirely by the children of wealthy, white, highly educated parents, many of whom work or study at the university. A short drive across a freeway overpass reveals a very different reality. West Tall Stick, populated by low income African American and Latino families, sits in almost perfect contrast to its eastern namesake. Although just miles from one of the nations top universities, most of West Tall Stick’s children will never attend a class beyond high school, many will never reach twelfth grade.
West Tall Stick has been a community in chaos. While Tall Stick boasts Rhodes Scholars, West Tall Stick’s only national attention has come from its high murder rate and widely publicized busing program. Until 2000, West Tall Stick had been without a public high school for decades.

Westside Preparatory, a private middle and high school located in the midst of a West Tall Stick neighborhood, was created to prepare the community’s children to attend four year universities and has received regional acclaim for its success. From within a depressed community, Westside Prep stands as a monument.

Our route to Westside Prep takes us past a collection of chain stores (Home Depot, Ikea, Best Buy, and Office Depot). This new addition to West Tall Stick brings with it the hope of an increased tax base and opportunities for employment and success in the community. An abandoned gas station contrasts this climate of hope and serves as a reminder of this community’s troubled legacy. A left turn here reveals a neighborhood of new, but modest houses. When compared the boarded windows, empty lots, and litter-lined streets of the cities other areas, the well kept lawns and smoothly paved streets of this enclave point to the community’s aspiration for progress.

We park the car in front of a grey and white one-story house on a corner lot. Only the carefully landscaped yard and wheelchair ramp leading to the entrance distinguish it from the single family homes across the street. A low wooden sign posted in the grass, as if a lawn ornament, reads “Westside Preparatory School” and is the only clue that we have come to the right place.

As we walk through the house, we pass the secretaries desk in the living room-turned-main office. Two couches face a dark, wooden coffee table displaying a stack of
yearbooks, and clippings from newspaper articles profiling the school and its students. We continue through the kitchen where a group of teachers is seated around a table chatting, and out the back door to the campus. A collection of portable units with wooden siding and covered decks are separated from the street by a tall fence covered in ivy. These cabins surround a plush green lawn and look more like a summer camp than what we remember as “school.” The neighborhood of classrooms appears warm and inviting, unlike the ominous structures of many middle and high schools. In the middle of it all is the only structure reminiscent of a typical school: a large concrete gym/cafeteria building stands facing the tiny campus, its roof, the only piece of the school visible from the street.

Westside has an interesting history. It grew out of an after-school basketball and homework program facilitated by a local university student. Now a full fledged school, Westside receives all of its funding from private, often anonymous, donors, allowing all students to attend tuition-free. It has a small staff of approximately twenty teachers and averages less than twenty students per class. The school day runs until five o’clock and provides afternoon tutoring. All students participate in rigorous college-preparatory curriculum.

The school has been successful in its college preparatory mission. Its graduates have attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Ivy League schools and California public universities as well as other campus across the country. The school serves a need within the community for a place that highly motivated students can receive the personalized attention required to achieve their goal of college attendance.
Our initial impression of the school was of a safe trusting place where students could be treated as individuals. Students’ book bags were left, unattended but without fear of theft, on the porches outside classroom doors during the lunch hour. Additionally, students were comfortable in class, speaking up and admitting when they did not know an answer. During our observation, a young boy raised his hand and proclaimed to the class, ‘I don’t get some of this.’ The teacher responded by promising individual attention for the student. It seemed that this was a safe place for students to learn, where question-asking and admitting a lack of knowledge was acceptable and encouraged.

Essentially, the Westside story is one of success in a community plagued by crime, poverty and hopelessness.

Math Class

The math and science classroom is a bright, organized environment for learning. Science reports titled, “I am What I Eat,” are proudly displayed on the back wall. Bulletin boards around the class present geometry posters, classroom rules, and cooperative learning roles.

The teacher is a young woman named Julie Stevens. Julie effectively maintains classroom order through a set of routines and procedures, clearly understood by her students.
“So you can’t just cut out the box?”

Pushing the Envelope

After lunch, sixteen students file into the room, quietly find their seats, and begin working independently without prompt from the teacher. One boy acknowledges our presence with an exaggerated arching wave, as if painting a rainbow with the palm of his hand. For the opening minutes of the period, the room is without voices other than Julie’s. She calmly announces, “Vocab. quiz is not until the end of the period, so put those things away and write down the agenda,” at which point a few students close their notebooks and take out another.

As the last few students finish recording the agenda and gather their materials for the math lesson, Julie makes an announcement about their homework logs. “Some of you have been writing the homework for this class in the section for Beth’s class. You need to be writing them in the correct section. Okay. It’s part of habits of work. It’s part of being organized. From now on, if it is in the wrong section, I won’t check it off.” An African American boy with smooth dark, skin, a fade style haircut, raises his hand, his arm in a cast from hand to elbow. This is Malcolm. He proposes a scenario: “So you can’t cut out a little box and paste it?” Julie refuses to address the silliness of the question, and responds with a simple, “No.” The comment’s humor lies in the fact that it would take much more time and energy to write the assignment in one section, cut it out and paste in another, than to simply record it in the designated section. Malcolm’s charm resides in his clear realization of this contradiction.
“I get it Gabriel; I was looking at the wrong one.”

Cooperative Learning

The class moves into small (four student) groups to carry out the lesson. Students will complete the lesson without interference from the teacher. During this time, Julie circulates through the room jotting down questions she hears repeated in multiple groups. These will be addressed when the large groups reconvenes at the end of the hour. Taking his seat at the back table, Malcolm assumes his role as facilitator. It seems that his primary responsibility in this role is to urgently utter “Off topic! Off topic!” whenever conversation strays from the task at hand.

After working through a problem independently, the students in Malcolm’s group share their answers. “No, Gabriel’s 35. See look.” Gabriel leans in as Malcolm demonstrates his measuring process. Gabriel takes the protractor and shows his own Malcolm then says “Oops, I’m looking at the wrong one” and smiles. By now, Gabriel is on the other side of the table conferring with another student. When he returns to his seat, Malcolm shares his change of heart, “I get it Gabriel, I was looking at the wrong one.”

Malcolm

Malcolm is an African-American seventh grader who came to Westside last year. At twelve years old he is 5’9,” slim; and has long slender limbs. Given his physique we are not surprise to learn that he plays basketball for the school team. During the observation two weeks earlier, his arm was in a cast, but by the interviews the cast has
been removed. In both interviews, Malcolm appears well-groomed. He sports a fresh fade-style haircut, clean high-top basketball shoes, and a grey Sean John sweat suit. He says a prayer before he eats, and he motions for time to chew between questions.

Malcolm is in many ways a typical 12-year old boy. He enjoys basketball and pepperoni pizza and has an infectious smile. He is on the school basketball team and has played football. His favorite subject is social studies and he considers himself a good student.

“I don’t do all those things, but I’m a good student”

Success and School

We begin the first interview by asking Malcolm to tell us about his school and his teachers. Malcolm sounds more like a recruiter than a young boy as he emphasizes the aspects that are posted on the website: the college preparatory curriculum, small class sizes, and individual attention from teachers.

“Uh…it’s just like a prep school, just preparing for college, for students…”

About his teachers, he says:

“…they do a little individual, kind of they’re more of like one on one because of smaller class sizes and they’re like they’re pretty nice too…and yeah…classes are real small so they can give you more attention and see who needs help the most.”

Comparing Westside Preparatory to his former school, Marcus asserts:

‘It’s better. I was getting in more trouble [at my old school]. I wasn’t academically challenged. I’m more academically challenged…Most of the kids here are
from my old school. There are some new ones. Since it is a smaller class, it is easy to
get to know them early...It’s way beyond my old school. Like we do stuff way earlier.
The stuff we do now, like geometry, you know, it wouldn’t be until high school there...
There are more challenging things. I do more. Work is harder. I learn more from it.’

This theme of challenging curriculum and hard work resurfaces as Marcus begins
to define successful students: “Someone who works hard. Gets straight A’s. Organized,’
though he later explains that straight A’s are not as important as hard work and
organization: ‘I’m a good student. I mean, I don’t get straight A’s, but I’m still a good
student...I’m more successful in Julie’s class. I get better grades in Beth’s. It’s easier.
I’m just better in Julie’s. I’m more organized. I try harder. More organized, I don’t like
lose things. I’m better. More organized in class. I take better notes that I can go back
through.’

The ‘eslers’ are Expected School wide Learning Results and at Westside. They
consist of proactive learning, communication, habits of work, obligation to community,
and technology. These are the five bulleted points hanging on the top of the wall in
Julie’s classroom, difficult to see from the opposite side of the room. According to
Malcolm, the teachers tell him to follow the ESLR’s to be a good student. When asked if
he does this, Malcolm responds matter-of-factly, ‘I don’t do all those things, but I am a
good student’.
“Money, fame and knowledge.”

Success & the Future

We started a discussion on success by asking Malcolm who he considers to be a successful person and why. He answers, ‘Bill Gates. He is a billionaire and he invented Microsoft.’ So what does it take to be successful? To Malcolm, success is about “money, fame and knowledge.” Based on our own understanding of these terms, Bill Gates fits well into this definition. As Malcolm said earlier, Bill Gates is a billionaire; he is well known, and he is considered by many people to be knowledgeable (particularly within his field). Malcolm’s definition of success reflects a broad societal conception of achievement. Pressed to explain the terms, Malcolm appears at first to be confused by our lack of understanding and then by his own inability to expand.

He lowers his eyebrows, pauses for a moment and then attempts to clarify. ‘Well, money, that just means having a lot of money. Like being a millionaire.’ Can you be successful if you are not a millionaire? ‘Yeah you can, but you should have some money.’ ‘Fame is when a lot of people know who you are. You know, like people know your name.’ Can you be successful if they don’t know your name? ‘Yeah, I guess. Maybe you wouldn’t be famous, people don’t know who you are, but they might know the thing you invented. They might use it or everyone knows about it. You could still be famous, if they don’t know your name. They just know what you do.’ The concept of knowledge, while central to the continuing discussion of success, is difficult for Malcolm
to articulate. ‘It means having a lot of knowledge.’ So, what is that? ‘Knowing a lot of things…you just know lots of things.’ Can you tell us how someone gets knowledge? ‘You have to go to school. Stay in school. College at least. Well I mean at least you…at least, at least need to finish twelfth grade, but you should at least go to college too. Four years, really at least four. Maybe more.’ He combines the importance of schooling and learning, which he also discussed while talking about success in school.

Our conversation about success continues throughout the interview and we discover that for Malcolm to be successful in 20 years, he feels that he should ‘Play a sport or invent something.’ Interestingly, while Malcolm lists sports and invention as ways to be successful, and things that he believes he can do, neither is what he had earlier mentioned as his goal. ‘Yeah, I want to design cars, be a car designer. I just like cars. I like looking at them and being around them.’ Whether Malcolm’s ideas of car design fit his articulated definition of success is difficult to tell. The knowledge aspect of his definition seems to be based primarily on years in school, and so is independent of any career. Since Malcolm has indicated that he plans to go to college, it seems clear that he will meet at least his current standard of knowledge. Whether or not the criterion of “money” is met by car design depends on what Malcolm believes about the potential for income in such a position. However, he is much less likely to become a millionaire during a career as a ‘car designer’ than as a professional athlete (although he is much more likely to have a career in the former). By his expanded definition of fame, it seems Malcolm could meet this criterion through car design. While it is unlikely that the general public would know his name, it is more likely that people will see the cars he has designed and be familiar with his work.
Conclusions:

Malcolm, like many of us, strives to define success and to make a place for himself in that definition. As an African American male from a low-income community, Malcolm’s journey to define success tells an interesting. Urban black males are the least likely population to finish high school and the most likely to end up in the criminal justice system. To this point, Malcolm’s story appears to be one of success. Westside Prep is a school well-acclaimed for reaching out to boys like Malcolm. In a setting where success stories are the exception rather than the rule, Westside consistently graduates and sends students on to college.

Malcolm maintains a flexible definition of success. His concept of success appears to be influenced by Westside expectations of diligence and mainstream societal values of wealth and fame. Yet, when he creates a definition that excludes him, he broadens the definition, rather than minimizing his own potential. In doing so he modifies the terms to make achievement attainable.

Realizing that he may not ever reach “fame,” defined as having your name known to the world, Malcolm changes the criterion to include having your work well known or respected. This adjustment in the definition keeps fame, and thus success, in the realm of the possible. Similarly, Malcolm’s initial emphasis on “straight A’s” as a key component of school success clearly does not allow for Malcolm, himself not a straight A student, to be identified as successful. Rather than proclaim himself, “not a good student,” he alters the definition, placing more importance on hard work and organization, characteristics he does exhibit.
Malcolm’s definition of success seems to be evolving during our discussion. After minimizing the importance of A’s, he seems close to rejecting their value all together, naming the class in which he gets poorer grades as the more successful of the two. Although he consistently receives A’s in social studies and English, he reports that he is more successful in his math and science courses. Clearly, values absent from his previous definition, although not clearly articulated, are surfacing in his notion of success. Like all of us, Malcolm’s conceptions of success and self will continue to develop over time.