In Defense of the Delinquent: School Rhymes and Black Youth Activism in 1960s Harlem

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May 22, 2026

Introduction

"Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate" (Bridges 20). That was a jump-rope rhyme recited by Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old girl who became a major face of the movement for educational reform in 1960. She learned this rhyme from the white mobs that chanted this phrase in protest of her attendance as a Black girl in a formerly segregated, all-white elementary school. While not necessarily aware of the phrase's semantic meaning, she came to understand it through her school experience: seeing images of black dolls in coffins held by white adults before walking into school, inviting white peers to play who refused because of their parents' instructions, and facing violent threats that had her scared to both eat or sleep (162). Ruby's fear reflected a social awareness of racial violence that Black children across America adopted, particularly in their school environments.

While society made no failures to see children, they didn't necessarily care to hear or take children's thoughts seriously. However, literature on the impacts of political systems on the lives of children by 20th-century historians and other scholars situate children as participants in the political space. The act of recording children's ideas about politics started with Fred Greenstein's 1965 book *Children and Politics* and a question to the child participants of a New Haven study: "What do you think of when I talk about the President of the United States?" (18). This method originated during the wave of political socialization studies happening in the same decade (6).[1] By the 1960s and the following decades, Greenstein and other scholars started exploring both children's

[1] Greenstein defines political socialization as the "process of initiation into politics," a concept that was established as an academic area of interest (5).

understanding of politics and the idea of children as participants.[2] Specifically, Ruby and many other children's roles in civil rights activism forced scholars to take children seriously as political agents.

For the black youth of that period, just the experience of childhood was politicizing. In thinking about the politics of childhood, we must consider how we can not only just add these children to historical events, but reframe the way history is told altogether using their voices (Berghel et al. 2). Few direct records of Black children voicing their experiences existed during civil rights. Though their voices are often unacknowledged by the adult world, that doesn't negate the fact that they still were perceiving the world that was perceiving them.

Scholar and poet Onwuchekwa Jemie argues that "school rhymes" remain a significant tenet of youth culture that children maintain beyond adult mediation (32).[3] Although much childlore is learned by observing adults, kids mimic, practice, and interpret those observations with each other and within their own spaces. Considering children learn much from each other, the following examination of their lore reveals the ways that they navigated the world both alongside and apart from adults.

The connection between school rhymes, youth activism, and social awareness was a defining part of the sixties. While the scholarly discussion around activism and play may seem distinct on the surface, I argue that the two are interdependent. Through focusing on Black children's lived experiences as they appear in archival newspapers, interviews, yearbooks, and school rhymes from the 1960s, I argue their voices reveal a

[2] Other early examples of these studies came from Dennis and Easton 1969; Marson 1973, and Coles 1983.
[3] Jemie also cites "children's rhymes," and "game songs" as interchangeable terms for school rhymes in youth research (32).

unique counterculture that defined the fight for education reform in Harlem.[4] This thesis will explore the ways in which Harlem children understood, interpreted, and responded to the social conditions affecting their experiences in education. In bringing their own voices into the discussion, we can gain an accurate understanding of how Black children not only experienced these conditions, but envisioned the possibilities of a better future for themselves.

Growing up in Midcentury America

Historians of childhood and youth studies tracked the conditions of 20th century childhood and how they started to shift over time. In Joseph Illick's *American Childhoods,* he claimed that in the decades preceding the 1950s, the adult workplace and other social institutions promised children personal and intellectual freedom, yet kept them in a constant state of dependence under the guise of protection (130). In *Huck's Raft,* Steven Mintz found that American children universally broke down earlier ideas of the "protected childhood," growing more independent and autonomous by the 1950s (4). Wilma King's *African American Childhoods* went further in focusing on the shifts in Black childhood. While Black children had little opportunity to record their lives, let alone publish them, the few that could be recovered revealed "nuances about their legal status, class standing, and social development" that challenged earlier norms (5). Particularly, records of Black children during the Civil Rights Movement showed that responding to racial violence became a unifying experience for them across the nation.

[4] Counterculture originated from Yinger's 1960 term "contraculture," defined as subcultures with "an element of conflict with dominant norms, values, or both," and in direct opposition to widely accepted societal beliefs. Later scholars discourse the term, but for the sake of this paper, a key element of counterculture is historian Roszak's 1969 claim that young people widely rejected traditional Western thought following WWII. Countercultures | Encyclopedia.com

Much of the social conditions that defined the 1960s were influenced by early 19th and 20th century events, and more immediately court cases, legislation, and social reforms occurring in the 1950s. Whereas in the first half of the 20th century, children were to be seen but not heard, in the 1950s, Americans began to focus political and social concerns on youth, Black youth in particular. In 1954, the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools went into effect, changing all of the lives of children who were enrolling and attending American schools. This decision overturned the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision that enforced a "separate but equal" doctrine in all social spaces (Mintz 304). America's spectacle of Black children in social reforms spread into simultaneously occurring concerns about youth culture and crime.

A moral panic over juvenile delinquency and gangs spread across America, which influenced public perception of children and teenagers during that time. Adults started to believe that mass media caused a widespread alienation of teens from their parents' values (Illick 121). The term "juvenile delinquency" would be applied to a wide range of behaviors and appearances, especially as middle-class youth started to adopt their identities from the working-class youth (Mintz 293). Law enforcement started to link the "juvenile delinquent" with gang affiliation and violent crime, and the two terms became interchangeable (293). Social critics declared a teenage monopoly over society and warned adults that children were "dictating their vision to elders" (Illick 121). Because America maintained a dominant culture of racial prejudice, a major part of the efforts made to reduce delinquency was the uptick in policing of the nation's Black youth.

During this period, Americans began to reckon with the violence inflicted on Black children. At the heart of national concern for delinquency and education was racial violence. In 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy from Chicago, was lynched in Money, Mississippi (King 156). What might have only been local news shocked the conscience of the entire nation when photographs of Till's brutally beaten body in an open casket funeral made newspaper headlines (164).[5] They attributed his murder to the idea of white society's desperate need to control Black children. Till's killing was never about stopping delinquency and always about white people having authority over Black life, a reality Black children then wanted to change.

In her memoir, *Coming of Age in Mississippi,* author and activist Anne Moody recounted her memories of Till's murder:

> I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all the other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice [her teacher] had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting the whites kill them than toward the whites. Anyway, it was at this stage in my life that I began to look upon Negro men as cowards (136).

Her reaction to the murder and few people's passivity around it represented a growing need for mobilization and passive resistance, something Black children regularly enacted. Here emerged their calls to take back control of Black lives.

In the same year, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin was violently arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing a bus seat reserved for white people. From her recollection: "I didn't get up, because I didn't feel like I was breaking the law" (Mintz 305). In 1957, the lone "Little Rock Nine" students of Little Rock Central High School in

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[5] Till's murder became the first major media publicizing of Black Death during the Civil Rights Movement. While both children and adults cried for more details about his case, Till's murderers were acquitted and he never received justice for his death. https://famous-trials.com/emmetttill/1755-home2

Arkansas suffered vicious harassment from their white peers and angry mobs (King 157). One of those students, Minnijean Brown, refused to tolerate the harassment. After multiple incidents of throwing food, purses, and insults to her white harassers, she was expelled (Mintz 307; King 161). In all of these recorded cases where Black children were experiencing racial violence, they were starting to independently think about resistance.

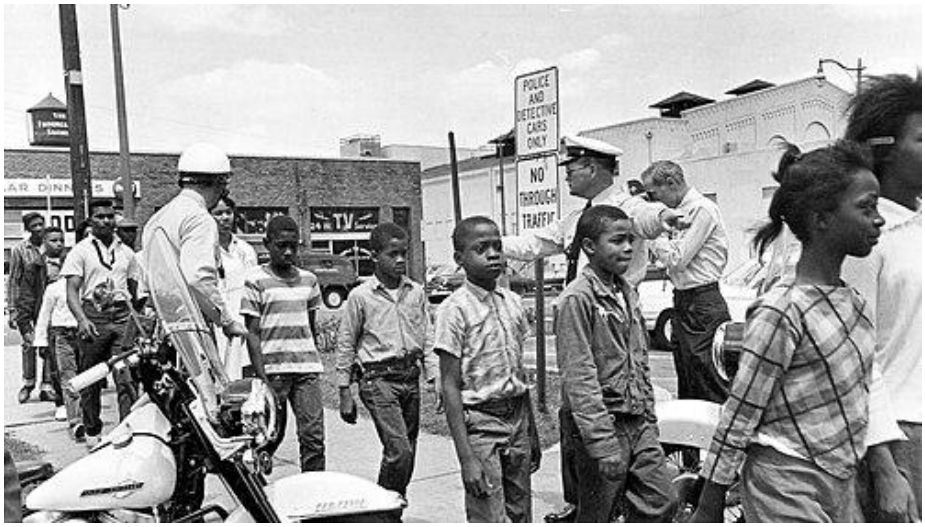


Figure 1. Birmingham children protesting during the 1963 Children's Crusade. Wikipedia

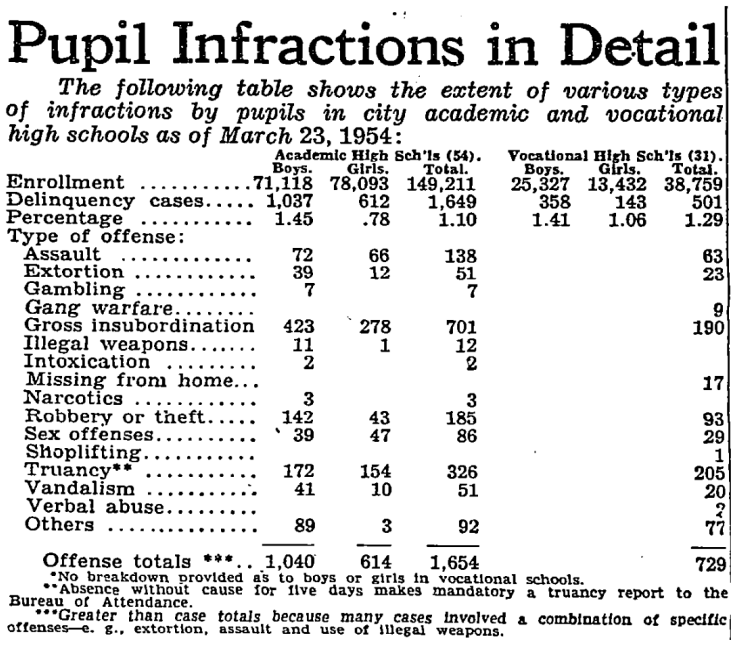
The seeds planted in the fifties would begin to grow in the sixties, as Black children responded to child murders and discrimination en masse. In 1960, four Black college freshmen began the sit-in movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, which inspired thousands of other young people to participate (Mintz 311). In 1963 Birmingham, the Children's Crusade assumed the youth's role as activists, as children marched to protest the church bombings that killed four Black children (King 165; Mintz 311).[6] [7] Between 1963 and 1964, Black children in Mississippi, Cleveland, Chicago,

[6] Children's Crusade https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_Crusade_(1963)
[7] Sixteenth Street Bombings, with excerpts from Angela Davis https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/16th-street-baptist-church-bombing/

Milwaukee, and New York City picketed and protested in honor of the Freedom Day and Freedom Summer movements (Franklin 143; King 165). Till's killing and the bombings that killed those children ignited Black youth across the nation to participate as activists, as a 13-year old Mississippi boy asserted: "We are trying to get freedom...because slavery is the next thing to hell...we want our freedom now...If I have to die[d] for freedom I don't mind" (King 165). They frequently saw not only their parents being murdered, but children too. While this likely wasn't a new phenomenon for these children, just experiencing the live murders of children their own age influenced their calls to action.

To define the fight against criminalization and for education in Harlem means to acknowledge how the 1960s became a decade of autonomy for America's Black youth. Children separated themselves from their adult counterparts to participate in their own activism, with Mintz referring to them as the "activist generation" (313). Nationally recorded moments of youth movements and resistance following *Brown v. Board* helps provide a backdrop for the youth culture simultaneously developing in northern cities.

Criminalization in NYC: Defining the Delinquent



Pupil Infractions in Detail

The following table shows the extent of various types of infractions by pupils in city academic and vocational high schools as of March 23, 1954:

	Academic High Sch'ls (54).			Vocational High Sch'ls (31).		
	Boys.	Girls.	Total.	Boys.	Girls.	Total.
Enrollment	71,118	78,093	149,211	25,327	13,432	38,759
Delinquency cases	1,037	612	1,649	358	143	501
Percentage	1.45	.78	1.10	1.41	1.06	1.29
Type of offense:						
Assault	72	66	138			63
Extortion	39	12	51			23
Gambling	7		7			
Gang warfare						9
Gross insubordination	423	278	701			190
Illegal weapons	11	1	12			
Intoxication	2		2			
Missing from home						17
Narcotics	3		3			
Robbery or theft	142	43	185			93
Sex offenses	39	47	86			29
Shoplifting						1
Truancy**	172	154	326			205
Vandalism	41	10	51			20
Verbal abuse						2
Others	89	3	92			77
Offense totals ***	1,040	614	1,654			729

*No breakdown provided as to boys or girls in vocational schools.
**Absence without cause for five days makes mandatory a truancy report to the Bureau of Attendance.
***Greater than case totals because many cases involved a combination of specific offenses—e. g., extortion, assault and use of illegal weapons.

Figure 2: Reports of delinquency cases from the Board of Education. (Milton Bracker. *Definitions Vary for Delinquency.* The New York Times. May 24 1955)

How was youth culture in urban Black neighborhoods like Harlem, New York, portrayed by media, social scientists, and politicians? Firstly, it's important to acknowledge that the obsession over youth delinquency in the early 1950s garnered the attention of politicians and other reformers to address the issue (Suddler 18). Black children specifically were overrepresented in the newly established juvenile court system, received harsher punishment, and were refused rehabilitative resources (14). This disparity is characterized by cycles of harmful media perception, surveillance, and overpolicing that prevailed in their lives daily.

Media portrayal of Black child activists across the nation mirrored legal and local perceptions of Harlem's youth. In 1955, efforts to define the *delinquent* laid a foundation for how Black children in New York City experienced harmful racial bias and criminalization from the law and local citizens. During this year, a New York Times (NYT)

article explained the discourse surrounding perceptions of the “delinquent” and what indicated one, which varied among parents and the Board (Bracker 24). According to educators, parents described the *delinquent* as a child who performed annoying acts. Legally, the Board of Education “usually” defined it as any child under 16 who committed an offense that would have been felonious if tried as an adult. The Board required teachers to report “major delinquency” if they deemed students “in trouble serious enough” to label them a delinquent. Figure 2 shows how the Board categorized different kinds of delinquency and the delinquency rates in NYC schools. Both major and minor infractions fell under *delinquent* offenses, revealing a grey area in which there wasn’t a clear standard for labelling delinquency. Racist practices took advantage of this grey area, as it was easy to disproportionately punish Black children without facing legal ramifications. While reports estimated about 1 to 2 percent occurrence of delinquency across genders and schools, the Board estimated a rate of about 5 percent of NYC students with “vulnerability” being “prone” to delinquency under “a variety of conditions.”

	*1950 Population (5-20 yrs)	Juvenile delinquency rate per 1,000 youths 5-20 yrs of age 1951	1952	1953	1954
N. Y. C....	1,555,401	17.5	19.3	23.6	29.3
Manhattan..	312,985	28.2	30.2	34.5	45.3
Brooklyn ...	580,761	14.9	17.2	20.9	24.5
Bronx	310,053	16.9	19.0	25.2	29.5
Queens	309,578	12.4	12.9	16.3	22.5
Richmond ..	42,014	14.8	16.6	20.1	25.0

*United States Census.

Figure 3: Reported trends of delinquency by the New York City Youth Board. (Margaret Parton. *Our Lawless Youth: Behind the Statistics.* June 1 1955)

In the same year, 1955, white journalist Margaret Parton published the *Our Lawless Youth* series in the New York Herald Tribune. Here, she used statistics as evidence to further define and contextualize the *delinquent* in NYC, and she concluded that delinquency is better understood by looking at crime data**.** She cited White Police Commissioner Francis Adams's reports of a 16 percent increase in arrests of young people between ages 16 and 21, and a 25 percent increase for children under the age of 16 in 1954. She also cited the New York Domestic Relations Court's reports of 7,734 total children under 16 years old who came into Children's Courts and having committed crimes harmful to "themselves or society." [8] Figure 3 shows that the trend of delinquency increased at least 10 percent in every borough between 1951 and 1954. These reports didn't come without disagreement from other "experts in the field," as they acknowledged that the growing surveillance of teens arose from increased media publicity, as well as the increase of harsher punishments for smaller crimes. Still, analysis of these statistics led to the declaration by the city that "something [was] wrong" with the youth (Parton 1).

"The kids around here aren't invested in the future," said a Queens community center director. "They seem to have no enthusiasm, and no interest in any kind of cooperative group activity. They don't read, and they can only talk on the surface." Other NYC residents quoted in Parton's article echoed these same sentiments about the city's youth. A social worker labeled "slum" children as "aggressive" beings who "want to hurt." Statements like these reflect the stereotyped language community members used to describe the delinquency issue. Parton used the term "panacea" to

[8]In the same year children under 21 constituted 45 percent of robbery arrests, 62 percent of burglary arrests, and 73 percent of auto thefts (Parton 1).

label the efforts to prevent or end the rise in delinquency.[9] This term established the *delinquent* as ill, disease-ridden, and one who needed to be remedied (Parton 1).

In his 1964 New York Amsterdam News article, NAACP official Roy Wilkins signaled to what he and other Harlem residents thought of the Board's and Parton's *delinquent* definitions. Wilkins contemplated why political leaders from other communities remained silent about their local "white youth riots" to focus their attention on Harlem's youth, thus explaining the true *conditions* to the *delinquent.* White children performed "playful pranks," and only meant to "let off steam," even if that included fighting police officers and destroying property. Black children grew into "mobs that must be controlled." He summarized this distinction: "It is the skin color that's important, that can make fears grow into hysteria…" Wilkins described an underlying racialization of the *delinquent,* which in turn allowed Black children in Harlem to be negatively perceived both in the eyes of the law and their schools (Wilkins 14).

Historian Carl Suddler cites the aforementioned pattern of pathologization in *Presumed Criminal.* Racist policing and stereotyping controlled high arrest rates in Harlem, reinforcing the idea of the Black *delinquent* and justifying further policing and racial violence in Harlem. He argued that the police and the government had control over who they "presumed criminal." Although some people knew statistics represented a policing issue instead of a crime issue, it didn't stop predominantly Black Harlem from being hailed the "most active" area of arrests, with over 900 in 1954 (Suddler 132). To put this ridiculously high number into perspective, predominantly white Flushing, Queens, only had about half the number of arrests (Suddler 132; Community Council

[9] Panacea, according to Merriam-Webster, refers to "a remedy for all ills or difficulties." https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/panacea

14). Despite the efforts of both formal and grassroots organizations to mitigate supposed crime, by the 1960s policing would only get harsher for the Black children in the city (118). Police enforced “stop-and-frisk” and “no-knock” state laws**,** which only exacerbated the brutality Black children faced by police.[10] [11]

The case of the “Harlem Six” proved to be one of the most significant representations of this newly defined, racialized *delinquent,* and Suddler’s defined presumed criminal. In 1964, a group of Black teens overturned a fruit stand in Harlem, starting the “Fruit Riot” . Officers violently apprehended two black teens, 18-year old Daniel Hamm and 19-year old Wallace Baker, who were outside witnesses that tried to block the officers from beating the teens. As Hamm stated, “They beat us ‘till I could barely walk…[and] got so tired…they just came in and start spitting on us” (Griffin 1). In attempts to thwart accusations of brutality, police linked the two teens and the four others to the unrelated murder of a white shop owner. Black Civil Rights activist and journalist Junius Griffin published a NYT article detailing the events by varying accounts of all the witnesses. They mention how the police framed the alleged murder and riot as an organized “anti-white” gang attack by the notorious Harlem Blood Brothers gang. Harlem residents like Truman Nelson called this a fabricated myth by white media that wanted to convince everyone “that they were killers because they were Black” (Suddler 159).

While the idea of Black criminality had already been cemented in the early 20th century, midcentury social scientists and mass media helped establish Black youth

[10] Stop-and-frisk laws: https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/stop_and_frisk
[11] No-knock laws: https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/no-knock_warrant

criminality as a significant concern.[12] The Harlem Six represented an increasingly universal experience of carcerality for Black children in Harlem, as law enforcement waged war against the *delinquent.*[13] Harlem residents were aware of this, and Harlem children lived with the reality that to grow up Black is to be defined a *delinquent*. This reality proved to be most present in their experiences as students in their own local Harlem schools.

Harlem's Education and Visions for Community Control

Early cases in Harlem set the scene for how Black children experienced schooling as prison. In 1937, fourteen-year-old Robert Shelton took P.S. 5 principal Gustav Schoenchen to court for aggravated assault. Shelton was in a school hallway waiting for his sister when Schoenchen grabbed him, dragged him to his office, and beat him repeatedly. Though Shelton's defense team gave evidence to brutal head and bodily injuries from being grabbed and kicked, Schoenchen denied attacking him and accused Shelton of being the aggressor. This case resulted in the acquittal of the principal (Wendell).

Another case in 1958 involved the "Harlem Nine" parents including Mae Mallory, who refused to send their kids to school in a 162-day long boycott in protest of unsafe conditions, segregation, unqualified teachers, and inadequate teaching resources **(***Mae Mallory and Harlem Nine)*. This boycott forced the Board to grant the parents school transfers. Yet, the policies that negatively impacted school conditions remained. The two mentioned cases best represent the failures by school administration and the Board to

[12] For later research on how social scientists manipulate crime statistics to link Blackness with crime, read Khalil Muhammad's 2010 *The Condemnation of Blackness.*

[13] Carcerality refers to predictive policing and how racially biased statistical crime data is used to determine crime. This system puts Black children under constant surveillance before even committing a crime. https://purdue.edu/critical-data-studies/collaborative-glossary/carcerality.php

rectify the schooling conditions Black children still experienced after Brown vs. Board, as a 1957 headline states, “Don’t Forget NY Has Its Own School Problem” (Slack 1).

How did the Harlem community describe these schooling problems? Prominent Black psychologist and educator Dr. Kenneth B. Clark talked about Black students’ lived experiences in his seminal text *Dark Ghetto*.[14] Despite the Board’s official 1954 integration policy, Black children faced ongoing de facto segregation (111-12). Since Harlem was segregated, Harlem schools were segregated. If Black children were to integrate into white neighborhoods, white flight would segregate the schools in those neighborhoods. At the same time, Black schools had poorer quality of education than white schools, and white parents used this fact to affirm their fears of Black children’s integration and beliefs that it would lower educational standards. When white flight from schools occurred, so did disinvestment and a drop in quality of those once integrated schools. Dr. Clark argued that this reinforcing cycle of poor educational standards in Black Harlem bred poor academic and professional achievement in its students, represented by statistics.[15]

Clark also argued that Black children’s forced underachievement influenced the general population’s assumptions of them. Two major assumptions were: (1) that they came to school with “psychological problems” from being born out of Black households with a low socioeconomic status; (2) that parents don’t “stimulate intellectual curiosity” and Black children were both socially and intellectually deprived (Clark 126). Similar to

[14] For the context of this thesis, Dr. Clark was a pivotal figure during the Brown vs. Board decision and New York City’s research on Black youth in Harlem https://kennethclark.commons.gc.cuny.edu/
[15] HARYOU’s *Youth in the Ghetto* compiled extensive statistical data of Harlem students in and outside of schools.

the definition of the *delinquent*, wider society defined Harlem's students through pathologization.

Many Harlem educators affirmed these assumptions of their Black students, fearful of and hopeless for them, yet cognizant of the violence inflicted on them. One teacher explained that "the children are not taught anything; they are just slapped around and nobody bothers to do anything about it." Another shared they actually participated in physical assault of Black students: " ...I soon learned that the boys like to be beaten, like to be spoken to in the way in which they are accustomed…and [I] hit them when they needed it…and they like it" (Clark 134).

Yet another white teacher expanded on such violence in the schools, explaining that

> Here [in Harlem], both the Negro and white teachers feel completely free to beat up the children…they know…nothing will be done about it…in the worst classes they don't have to work because whatever happens, they can just say, 'It is the children.' The white teachers are largely inexperienced…There is a lot of brutality, brutal beatings, and nobody cares… (134-35).

It's important to speculate the validity of the claim that Black teachers also enforced violence at the same scale as white teachers. Nonetheless, corporal punishment in schools wasn't uncommon at this time, and Harlem teachers represent significant messaging through their extreme descriptions of their classrooms. They didn't make aberrations, but rather characterized broader white sentiments toward Black children. These insights show that many teachers saw violence as the optimal method to control and discipline Black students in the classroom.

Some teachers weren't complacent with schooling conditions, and sought out solutions. In Taylor's chapter on teacher unions, he notes the presence of the well-established and rivaling NYC Teachers Union (TU) and Teachers Guild (the Guild) since the early 1900s and through the sixties (195, 197). Following Brown v. Board, the

Guild blamed the community and families for why Black children supposedly needed “psychological help” (203). The TU, on the other hand, saw schooling issues as a failure of Harlem’s socioeconomic conditions, pointing out overcrowding, high unemployment, low wages, and malnourished students (201). The Guild proposed solutions like more accessible social services, newer buildings with reduced class size, and industrial training for children. The TU focused on integration, hiring more Black educators and including African American history into curriculums (203, 305-06). This discourse eventually translated to boycotting and protesting as a means to solve the schooling issue.

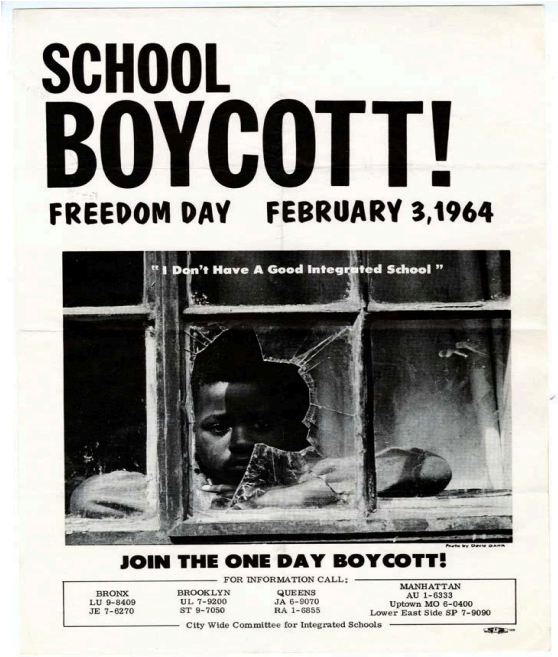


Figure 4. Flyer advertising the Freedom Day Boycott in NYC. Queens College Special Collections and Archive. 1964.

In 1964, Freedom Day, the largest boycott in civil rights history took place. More than 460,000 students across NYC stayed home from school (Gutman 249). While

educators, parents, and other community members led demonstrations, the flyer in figure 3 above represents the city's Black students as the centerpiece of the movement. Freedom Day placed further pressures on the Board to meet schooling demands.

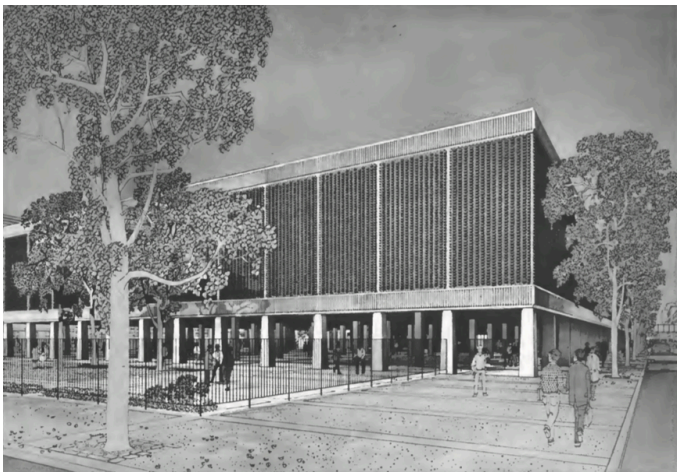


Figure 5. Curtis and Davis' graphic design of I.S 201. Office of Civil Defense. 1965

For most NYC schools, a major goal of the movement was for the Board to shift power over handling the school system to the community, informally termed as "community control" (Stark). Intermediate School (I.S) 201, established in 1958 East Harlem, became central to this goal by the mid-1960s, as many people boycotted the school's design to fail students. Architects Curtis and Davis designed this predominantly Black and Puerto Rican school to be fenced and windowless, as shown by the illustration above (Office of Civil Defense 20). I believe these two features were purposefully meant to hide the subjugation experienced by the school's Black students. The school's design spoke to how the world widely labelled Black children *delinquents* and intended for their schools to function as prisons. The Board reinforced existing segregation in the I.S. 201 building, to which the Harlem community realized their "political disempowerment" in having a say in educational standards (Gutman 252).

Thus, in 1966, boycotts for community control of the school ensued, and 1200 students stopped attending classes (252).

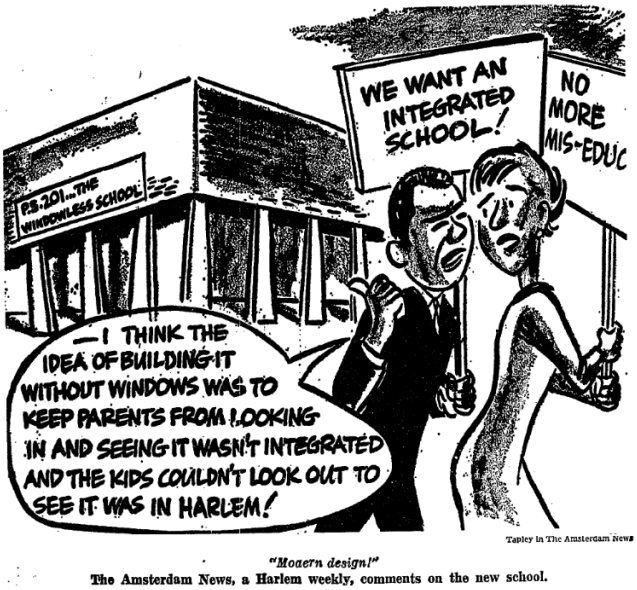


Figure 6. Reprinted New York Amsterdam cartoon of parents on the picket lines for I.S. 201. (Fred M. Herchinger. *I.S. 201 Teaches a Lesson on Race.* The New York Times. Sept 25 1966)

Boycotts led by parents, educators, and community leaders like Babette Edwards granted temporary success in 1967, when the Board decided to transfer schooling power over to a local governing board.[16] This board, including Edwards, implemented afterschool programs and unconventional teaching methods for their children. [17]In 1968, I.S. 201 became an established "demonstration district," and received funding from the Board to test the impact of community control. Though, only a year after, a

[16] New York City native Babette Edwards was a major figure in both I.S. 201's formation and the movement for community control. She joined the local governing board as a community representative. https://www.nypl.org/blog/2021/09/16/is201-babette-edwards-education-reform-harlem-collection
[17] One example of this was the Gattegno teaching method, which emphasized "learner autonomy and active student participation." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Way

Decentralization Law passed, giving power back to the Board over curriculum, school budgeting, and staff selection (Stark).

The movement for community control in Harlem died down as other NYC areas like Ocean-Hill Brownsville simultaneously mobilized for educational change. Research on the Brownsville struggle revealed a major flaw of these movements: student voices not being centered (Loomis). A 1966 NYT article framed the I.S. 201 issue in a similar fashion, as parent voices, not youth, were centered in the fight against the school system (Herchinger 199). What does the lack of student voices say about Black children's position in plans for community control? This absence showed a disregard for children's say on political matters that directly affect them. So, I believe gaining a better understanding of community control through the centering of youth themselves can offer new visions for success in making long-lasting change.

Dr. Clark's HARYOU organization (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited) predated initial visions for community control. In 1962, he was granted funding to study the conditions surrounding Harlem's youth and propose plans to improve their lives, which culminated in a 620 page report titled "Youth in the Ghetto: A Study of the Consequences of Powerlessness and a Blueprint for Change" (HARYOU xi). Unlike Parton's earlier stated research, Clark made youth voices central to this study. He recruited hundreds of youth to survey their peers on the streets and in other youth spaces about "their problems, conflicts, defenses, fantasies…perspectives of themselves…doubts…[and] aspirations" (Clark xx). He wanted to understand the social and personal consequences of Harlem's youth under these conditions. (xxii). Dr. Clark's

approach to research illuminated the potential for community control through hearing the lived experiences of the youth.

In 1963, HARYOU launched a Leadership Training Workshop (LTW), committed to helping teens articulate their understanding of Harlem's issues and the forces that operate within and outside their community (Erickson 233). Some teens from the workshop participated in a "Heritage Program" led by Black scholar John Henrik Clarke to teach African American history to their younger peers (236). A 1964 New York Times article shares some of the contributions HARYOU teens made to their younger peers' education (Levin 52). One volunteer expressed her desire to help: "You know they need you and you're helping them." Another said "when a kid says, 'How do you know that?' and you say 'I learned it in school' you're a walking example of why they shouldn't drop out." The work HARYOU's youth volunteers and researchers did represented their commitment to social and educational change in Harlem.

With a new understanding of youth's involvement in community control, it's important to point out how they tended to deviate from adults in their thoughts. For example, some of HARYOU's youth workers opposed their supervisors' idea to prioritize integration, and mostly stressed improving the educational environment first (Erickson 234). Young people carved out their own spaces for social thought and placed themselves in Harlem's discourse. In hearing their words, thoughts, and conversations from their own spaces, we will see how they might have demonstrated their own definitions and visions for community control.

We Still Have Our Own Ideas": Youth Reflections of Harlem

This section is best explained by the writings of 8th-grader Gordon Wright, titled "Discovery also includes…":

> The space program, man's discoveries and projections into the future, are only a small fraction of the universal theme of discovery. It also involves questions of "self-image." Who am I? Am I a true Soul brother? What does Black Power mean to me? Do I really know who I am; if I don't, how can I find out? Also included are our impressions about the environment we live, work, and play in: Harlem, Wadleigh, and the World in general. On the next few pages, you will "discover" our feelings and ideas of that world around us.

This reflection was published in the 1969 edition of *The Wadleigh Way*, a yearbook for the students of Wadleigh Junior High School in Harlem. Wadleigh faced its own segregation issues during the Brown vs. Board decision, though ultimately became a site of resilience for its predominantly Black student class as shown in their yearbook archives (Johnson 131).[18]

Many of the students' ideas about the world around them circulated through their yearbooks, especially during the 1960s. In looking at these editions alongside Harlem's school rhymes, it becomes clear how Black children shared their own reflections of schools, Harlem, and the world as a whole. The writings that will come to follow invites readers to experience their world as they tell it. As 8th-grader Corinthia Washington states in her feature "We Still Have our Own Ideas",

> We teenagers need something so that we can be separated from adults…This is the Space Age and everything goes fast. The latest records. The days, months, and years; the school term; even money is gone before you get it…Here's some advice to all parents and adults…Get hip. (Wadleigh Way 1963 5)

These children lived in a world that treated their ideas as afterthoughts, hence the difficulties in locating their voices in historical scholarship. Both Wright and Washington make mentions of the Space Race, as an allegory to their own lives as students. For

[18] For more information on the history of Wadleigh JHS and HS read Johnson's chapter in *Educating Harlem*.

them, entering Wadleigh is an important milestone, as they start to discover themselves and develop identities separate to adults.

Firstly, Wadleigh students juxtapose the *delinquent* to their own interpretations of what it means to pursue education as a Black child in America. 9th-grader Regina Felton makes an interesting reflection in “A growing youth in a growing America”:

> As growing boys and girls, we are trying to make America bigger, better, and stronger to meet all the needs of a new age…The Negro especially needs every bit of education he can receive. Problems are arising for when the American youth must have top qualifications…Are you qualified? (Wadleigh Way 1963 4)

9th-grader Russell Woodard expands on this idea with his short poem,

> They say I have to go to school
> As a requirement of the nation.
> But I don’t think they know the facts
> Behind getting an education. (Wadleigh Way 1963 38)

These two students point out that being Black puts them at a disadvantage in education, as they’re seen as *delinquents* before being seen as ambitious students. They know that because of this, they have to work twice as hard to get a shot in the race for growth and financial stability. While education is often the best option for their upward mobility, many people only scratch the surface of what getting one looks like.

One popular New York City rhyme indirectly hinted at the fears Harlem students had as they entered schools:[19]

> Oh, I won't go to Macy's anymore, more, more
> There's a big fat policeman at the door, door, door
> He'll take you by the collar and make you pay a dollar
> So I won't go to Macy's any more, more, more. (Jemie 117)

What do these students mentally prepare for as they enter their school doors? While Macy’s doesn’t necessarily relate to school, the image of a policeman at the door likely resonated with most of them. At school they must prepare for the worst, as it doesn’t

[19]This rhyme predated the current and more familiar “I Don’t Want to Go to Mexico” https://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/11/nyregion/fyi-323470.html?mcubz=0

take much for them to be perceived as *delinquents* and thus punished like one. Before students enter school for the day, they think about what could happen to them.

Harlem students directly described their schooling experiences as well. From the words of a 17 year-old interviewed by Dr. Clark,

> Discrimination is even in the school I attend right now. I know my teacher is very prejudiced because I have certain questions that have to be answered for my knowledge, but he will never answer. He would always call on a little white boy to give the answer. (Clark 3)

He and many others understand the racial bias from teachers and how it negatively impacts their learning in the classroom. A group of 6th through 8th grade Wadleigh students address how that experience internalizes: “Misery is when your teacher says you aren’t going to high school…Misery is when you get a beating and you didn’t do what they said they did” (Wadleigh Way 1966 19). 8th-grader Arlene Smart reveals the implications of these miserable experiences at the end of her poem “School”:

> …school is just the beginning
> of a hard and worthy strife,
> for the outside world that’s grinning,
> at the chance to ruin your life. (Wadleigh Way 1967 28)

While students clearly state their awareness of how racial discrimination in schools shows up as violence against them, they also reveal another experience. Students internalized these violent experiences as how the school system intended for their lives to amount to failure and destruction.

Student interpretations of school activism, broken promises, and life in Harlem foreshadow their ideas about control and what that could look like. One student went further to talk about their experiences of the Freedom Day boycott. 9th-grader Alicia Montague explained:

> Thousands of students all over the city
> Didn’t go to school, it was a pity.

Teachers marched in picket lines,
Quietly showing slogans and rhymes
Of laws that the Board should have long ago passed
Integration! And equal rights they asked,
In this way we clearly stated
Some of the wrongs and injustices we hated
The boycott was successful and right,
Maybe someday soon we will win our fight! (Wadleigh Way 1964 17)

The word “we” represents students bringing themselves together as active participants of the boycott. They interpret the fight for education as a stepping stone that they must take for their advancement, and proof that there’s potential for an even larger win.

8th-grader Herbert McKee talked about the government’s broken promises for improvement in his poem “Black Militant”:

We’re tired of hearing lies spewed forth from the white man’s lip.
About helping out the black man; It’s all a big gyp.
They call a meeting of the Senate, the House, the big wigs.
While we are in our ghettos like common pigs.
They promise big improvements: a new housing development,
But all we see is our blood in the gutter or covering the cement. (Discovery Wadleigh Way 1969 20)

Students view efforts made by the government to address their issues as not meaningful, especially when they continue to face extreme violence. The “Black Militant" alludes to the Black child that would have to try and take matters into their own hands because others fail to.

8th-grader Elaine Grant’s impressions of living in Harlem addressed how important it is for students to stay militant:

…Harlem is my hometown
Our streets may be filthy and filled with despair
But if you look around, we are always there.
There are slums and ghettos as they say.
And why do kids like to run away?
We’re running towards freedom both day and night
We’ll strive to survive to get out right.
Now I’ve said what my feelings are
For all my people here and far.

> Harlem is my home and it will always be
> Believe me or not, I'll never leave.[20] (Discovery Wadleigh Way 1969 22)

Grant still saw Harlem as her home, despite being disadvantaged. While life hadn't been kind to her and other Black students, her main takeaway was for her peers to come together and voice their concerns and calls for action.

"I'm Little But I'm Loud": Imagining Control and a Future in Education

Harlem students drew from their own experiences and interpretations to imagine their futures in schooling. In looking further in their yearbooks and childlore students reveal how they theorized three main concepts: what equality should look like, how to make schools better, and fighting back against their discrimination. Their imaginations show a resilience that counters the helpless and unmotivated nature of a *delinquent.*

9th-grader Hermeania Christian detailed the concept of equality in her reflection "What Brotherhood Means to Me":

> Brotherhood in my eyes is a better understanding of men toward each other. Each man who is respecting the other fellow's rights and privileges is living up to the standards of brotherhood. In a world of turmoil and crises, men should try to understand and know each other a little better…Feelings of brotherhood are often prevented because of economic differences. The rich look down on the poor…Another factor leading to the prevention of brotherhood is the difference in skin color. If we were to remove the skins of five average men and examine their skeletons we would not be able to tell them apart…we are all equal…we must forget that a man has a different skin color, and treat him as an equal. (Wadleigh Way 1963 7)

For her, all it takes to achieve equality is for the world to understand each other. Students imagined a world that didn't look at them through the lens of class and racial bias. 8th-grader Valerie Van Dyke explained that the "spirit of brotherhood can exist successfully only when we realize and are willing to accept differences of others" (Wadleigh Way 1966 37).

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[20] This poem can be interpreted as being in direct conversation with Langston Hughes' *Harlem* poem and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* play. What does it mean to chase your dreams in Harlem? What does it take? How does a Black child living here make their dreams "explode?"

Students likely envisioned this acceptance as law enforcement cutting down on overpolicing, or policymakers improving their conditions and education as they would for anyone else. Thus, equality and the general acceptance of others stayed a main tenet of the students' theory of control.

The second tenet of students' theory of control focuses on the classrooms and the decisions made about schools. One rhyme titled "I Received an Invitation" hints at student aspirations for getting a seat at the table:

> I received an invitation. Ah chi-ka
> From the Board of Education. Ah chi-ka
> From the people population. Ah chi-ka
> From the young generation. Ah chi-ka. (Jemie 100)

Students make a distinction between themselves as young people and the larger population. They see themselves as their own governing body with the power to make important decisions for their futures. All they want to do is have the opportunity to take part in these decisions and have their voices be both heard and considered.

8th-grader Nicole Robinson's "How to Make a Class Great" offers an example of how students imagined better classrooms:

> A little more praise, a little more less blame,
> A little more virtue, a little less shame,
> A few more thoughts of other men's rights,
> A little less self in chase of delights,
> A little more love, a little less hate,
> All these things are needed to make a class great. (Wadleigh Way 1960 24)

Instead of placing blame on the children and their families for their outcomes, students encourage others to start critiquing the policymakers who disregard their needs for an adequate classroom and the school staff that enforce violence in the classroom.

The third tenet of students' theory of control involves the potential to fight back, largely explained through their school rhymes. One rhyme illustrates the confidence they had in fighting back despite their age:

> I'm little, but I'm loud
> I'm poor, but I'm proud
> I'm a little piece of leather
> But I'm well put together. (Jemie 111)

Students knew of their capabilities to mobilize and boycott for a better future. This awareness served as a precursor to how they imagined directly fighting back:

> April fool, go to school
> Tell the teacher she's a fool
> If she hits you with the mop
> Go downstairs and tell the cop
> If the cop don't do his duty
> Go downstairs and kick his booty. (Jemie 109)

Another rhyme interestingly enough includes a consequence to fighting back:

> Glory, Glory, hallelujah
> The teacher hit me with a ruler
> I popped her on the beanie
> With a rotten tangerine
> And she never bothered me no more. (Jemie 109)

Here Black students directly identified the two parties, cops and educators, who inflicted violence on them. In both rhymes, a child immediately reacts to an adult's neglect or violence. In the latter rhyme, the child succeeds in their goal as the teacher leaves them alone. They explain a never-ending cycle of racial violence against Black students and what they must do to end it. While fighting back wouldn't be as explicit as the lyrics to these rhymes, the act of retaliation would be similar.

Looking Beyond the Activist Generation

9th-grader Byron Doudy makes an allegory for why learning from Black student voices in the 1960s is important in today's political climate:

> No sooner had I started my project, when the government, fearful of dire consequences, intervened. I was told that any disturbance I would cause in the future could randomly change the course of our own lives in the present. They took away my equipment, but I refused to give up…Studying the future with a time machine is the only way to learn the fate of mankind, and I have finally discovered how to build such a time machine. (Wadleigh Way 1960 7).

In this case, we should consider what we've learned from Harlem's Black students to inform us of how we think about today's generation of Black children and their significance to politics. The activist generation participated in a counterculture that challenged dominating narratives and negative perceptions of them. They collectively thought for themselves and about many things: the world around them, the people perceiving them, and plans for their futures in education. While Black student thoughts remained disregarded by larger society, figuring out where voices thrive proved to be an incredibly meaningful methodology for those interested in researching their histories.

I intended for this project to encourage adults to look at the ways young Black children think about the world they live in. The thoughts and ideas they have in childhood provide an interesting angle to consider when discussing youth issues and challenging this idea of the *delinquent*. The experiences of Harlem's Black students of the 1960s attributes to my own experience as a Black boy growing up in the New York City school system, as I recall educators and other adults disregarding my educational needs and inflicting similar biases against me. In 2026, the cycle of adults presuming Black children criminals and *delinquents* persists, as moral panic over "teen takeovers" circulates national media and racially biased surveillance increases (Clyde et al. 2026). So, it is more important than ever to hear and understand what these children are trying to communicate to the world and challenge negative adult perceptions that dominate

youth discourse. In doing so, we can help improve the spaces in which Black children attempt to discover themselves.

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