

Dance, L. Janelle (2002). *Tough Fronts: The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

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*Tough Fronts*, a book included in the *Critical Social Thought Series* edited by Michael Apple at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, directly addresses how urban life through the eyes of Black American urban youth collides with perceptions of this group by academia, both at a university and middle/high school classroom level. Dance passionately articulates a three-fold purpose of the research at the foundation of this book, originally beginning during the process of writing her dissertation:

- (1) to better understand the experiences of street-savvy students who act 'hard' like a 'gangsta';
- (2) to explore the implications of gangsterlike posturing on schooling; and
- (3) to breathe students' lives into scholarly debates about the state of (urban) public education in the United States (p. 2).

Dance lays the foundation for her book by positing that Black males, the primary subject of her research, are at a juxtaposition between race, class, gender, and region; it is this very concurrence that places her middle and high school subjects "wedged between a mainstream rock and a street cultural hard place" (p. 5). That

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#### About the Author

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is, even though these youth embrace mainstream aspirations, they eventually lose sight of these goals due to “mainstream rejection” embodied by societal perceptions to the contrary that they are troublemakers, they most likely will fail in school, and that they actually prefer being “gangsta’s.” Dance argues that “the social construct of low income Black male as gangster tends to obscure the statistical reality that the average urban Black or Brown youth is not hard at all, and this is especially true of students in their middle to junior high school years” (p. 6). Dance cites as evidence the fact that of the 270 students from urban areas in Boston and Cambridge who were interviewed and /or observed as part of her own research, less than ten percent were involved in violent behaviors often associated with the street culture where they live.

Following the Introduction in which Dance outlines the foundational ideas underlying *Tough Fronts*, there are three subsequent sections of the book; Part I presents a two chapter review of “expert” and “scholarly” literature relevant to Black Americans, Part II offers three chapters of an ethnographic perspective through the voices of “street-savvy students”, and Part III consists of three chapters summarizing implications and recommendations from the research.

### Part I: “Expert” Points of View

The first chapter in Part I covers five scholarly depictions of Black Americans in sociological and anthropological literature. In her detailed review of the continuum of scholarly perspectives---from Blacks as inferior to Blacks as victims of social structures to Blacks as oppositional and antagonistic, Dance cites numerous authors and publications with a critique of each perspective. She offers a sixth perspective, that from her own research that depicts Blacks as “agents of history”, borrowing from research specific to Asian-Americans. Dance contends that scholarly views of Black Americans to date are insufficient in singularly capturing the diversity of the culture. With the exception of the “Blacks as inferior perspective” (that Dance maintains continues to be espoused in academic settings such as the University of California and Harvard), Dance embraces various strengths of each position yet finds that each is lacking through omission of the voices of the subjects about whom are being theorized.

In chapter two, Dance begins her presentation of the human agency perspective through the voices of urban youth, themselves. Dance stated that in chapter two, “I allow the experiences of the real experts of this study, that is, the students, to speak for themselves....In short, this chapter sheds new light on the social forces that conspire to forge hard postures.” (p.8). Through highlighting the experiences of Malik, a young man from her study, Dance presents the idea that gangsterlike posturing represents survival-oriented behavior in response to the demands of the street; so, such behaviors have a purpose as opposed to being reflective of “true” characteristics of those within the culture of focus. A main theme emphasized by Dance is the message students from her study, themselves, had given: “Teachers just don’t understand the streets” and, as a result, misperceive students from urban areas as simply being of low ability and/or low motivation. Through Malik’s story, Dance exemplified how disengaged behaviors on the part of these Black, urban boys actually represent a boycott of sorts as opposed to being representative of ability and/or motivation deficits; that is, due to perceptions that teachers are unsupportive and have predictions that urban students are destined to become thugs, these students react by remaining uninvolved in the learning process. Dance concludes chapter two with a very important discussion and distinction between teachers viewed as caring/knowledgeable about street culture, teachers who are caring but unknowledgeable, and teachers who are both uncaring and unknowledgeable. Black students from urban, low income areas are more likely to complete work for teachers viewed as both caring and knowledgeable based on findings from Dance’s work.

## Part II: The Perspectives of Street-Savvy Students

In the first chapter in Part II that highlights the perspectives of the study participants, Dance provided a detailed description of three terms identified by the adolescents, themselves: “hard”, “hardcore wannabe”, and “hard enough.” Distinctions between the various behaviors and implications of these terms further underscore the purposes of “gangsta” posturing. Unlike more superficial and stereotypical interpretations, Dance’s distinctions provided in an ethnographic context enliven the reality for middle school Black and Latino males in urban settings. Further, the distinctions

give the reader a glimpse into life as experienced by these adolescent males and the survival-based purpose of the posturing described.

In chapter four, Dance shifted her focus from how students perceive themselves to how students perceive teachers. Within the context of defining social and cultural capital, Dance elaborated on observations she completed in a teacher's classroom who had been described by one of the study participants as "magic." After describing this teacher's various interactions with students throughout the day, Dance ends the chapter by stating, "Caring teachers compel at-risk, street-savvy students who are viewed by mainstream as 'culturally deficient' to view themselves as academically competent. *Every* student is important in the eyes of a truly caring teacher; and, in the eyes of a street-savvy student, *every* relationship with a caring teacher is a scarce but treasured resource" (p.84).

The last chapter in Part II provides the compelling biography of Malcolm, a central participant in Dance's interviews. While the chapter begins with an example of life on the "street", Dance sensitively unravels the complexities of Malcolm's life, complete with his experience and reactions to abandonment by parents, betrayal by a friend, and a view into Malcolm's hopes and dreams. Additionally, Dance included biography related to two primary figures in Malcolm's life—his Grandmother and his mentor. This chapter impacts the reader through broadening an understanding of Malcolm's life experiences as well as emphasizing how the behaviors of supportive adults potentially shape the choices of young people.

### Part III: Solutions, Broader Implications, and Policy Suggestions

This section begins with a description of the Paul Robeson Institute for Positive Self-Development, an initiative developed in the late 1980's by the Concerned Black Men of Massachusetts Incorporated (CBMM). The program supplements that provided to Black males in the Boston public schools in grades three through six through instruction and mentoring by African-American men. As stated by Dance, the purpose of this chapter is based within the question, "how do teachers at the Paul Robeson Institute interact more effectively with boys from inner-city neighborhoods than the teachers in the Boston public schools?" (p.112). Based on the perspectives from the students

and their families, Dance outlined and exemplified the strategies of the program that include use of one-on-one and group mentoring, embedding rituals or “responsible manhood rituals” such as Rap and Afrocentric poetry into program activities, providing instruction with learning centered on roles of Black men that challenge stereotypical expectations, and calling the bluff on hardcore behaviors. Dance concluded the chapter with a brief summary of the overall positive results from the program reflected through the boys demonstrating changed attitudes as well as changed school behaviors and performance. In her concluding remarks about the Paul Robeson Institute, Dance stated, “. . .ethos, ritualized practices, and role models of any school are major determinants of the success or failure of students. . . .schools that merely embrace and transmit mainstream American language, mannerisms, cultural expressions, experiences, and appreciations legitimize existing social inequalities. . .” (p.125).

Dance presented a broader context view in chapter seven by focusing on depictions of Black males in the media. In addition to television media, Dance provided examples from crime investigations in which young Black males were wrongly accused and convicted of crimes. She began this chapter with a very poignant personal experience in which several of her mentees were automatically assumed to be “gang bangers” when, in fact, there was no evidence or reason to support that view. In the final chapter, Dance alluded to several policy implications emanating from her study. Her primary thrust, however, focused on words from the students, themselves, about the powerful effect teachers have. Dance argued that “down” teachers are crucial, i.e., teachers who understand the streets or who care enough to learn about what the streets are like. Founded on information from her interviewees, Dance provided five suggestions for teachers to utilize in creating a classroom community understanding of the street code; these five strategies are largely practical, doable behaviors as opposed to broad generalities hard to implement.

Finally, *Tough Fronts* concluded with an Appendix and chapter notes that provide extensive information about literature and documents described in the text.

*Tough Fronts* begins as a “tough” read, replete with references and literature from various theoretical perspectives and views. At first glance, beginning with such a strong

academic tone seems a tacit attempt to disprove any notions of “inferiority” or inability on the part of a member of an ethnic minority. However, upon continued reflection, Dance weaves together a very solid foundation upon which she draws in developing the remainder of the book. A fascinating highlight from her study of a group of young Black and Brown males from urban locations is her commitment to “being” their voice; Dance provided an ever authentic and moving view from the perspectives of students, themselves. Thus, *Tough Fronts*, represents a thought-provoking and humbling view of inequalities that continue to exist in public education. While there are certainly numerous authors who would disagree with Dance’s position that this inequality is vast and pervasive (and, Dance includes references to this literature in her book), she has crafted her position in *Tough Fronts* in great detail and with enormous passion.

*Tough Fronts* provides both scholarly and street-savvy information that is much needed for inclusion in the instruction and continued professional development of educators and educational administrators. I found one of the most compelling sections of the book to be the description of teachers described as “magic” from the perspectives of students. Dance eloquently captured the immense transformations such teachers can facilitate in their students. By accenting the powerful role of teacher-student relationships in the classroom, Dance’s qualitative lens enriches the literature regarding facilitation of resiliency of at-risk students (see Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004; Schussler and Collins, 2006). Portions of *Tough Fronts*, if not the entire book, would be a valuable resource for teacher training programs and current educators, whether just beginning or seasoned in the profession.

## References

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### About the Reviewer

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