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The Traces of a Radical Education Neoliberal Rationality in Sudbury Student Imaginings of Educational Opportunities

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Abstract

The case of Sudbury education, a progressive school model that originated in the United States in 1968, demonstrates how pedagogy can be reimagined toward radically empowering children. Sudbury schools project an idealistic vision of individual self-actualization, self-directed learning, and egalitarian democratic participation in an unstructured pedagogical environment. This article draws on ethnographic narratives of students who have experienced Sudbury education to trace a more complex and contradictory reality of Sudbury socialization. Focusing on the case study of Natalie, a lifelong Sudbury student who transitioned to public school at the age of 15, what emerges is a narrative of self and society imbued with neoliberal discourses of self-motivation, entrepreneurship, and individualistic notions of success, punctuated by brief structural critiques of public schooling. The overwhelmingly individualistic consequences of Natalie's socialization, however, showcase the limits of Sudbury education to promote a collective sense of social responsibility.



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Introduction

Anthropologists of education have long been concerned with the ways schooling in the United States, by socializing students into capitalist culture (Foley, 2010), reproduces societal injustices (Anyon, 1981; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Less attention has been placed on cultural *production* through examples of radical education that attempt to transform schooling and, in doing so, shift their students' consciousness toward imagining and enacting a more equitable, just world. Sudbury education, a radical educational model that originated in the United States in 1968, provides a case study for understanding pedagogical innovation that focuses on individual transformation and self-actualization. Because Sudbury schools are private and charge tuition, the students who attend them are predominantly white and middle-class. Their parents are politically aligned with the school's philosophy. In Sudbury schools, students are encouraged to fully self-determine the course of their educational experiences as they are liberated from the pressures of standardized curricula, teacher-directed pedagogy, exams, and grades. While the transformative potential of Sudbury education is significant, particularly at the level of individual self-fulfillment, in this article I focus on the critical question of whether the possibilities of Sudbury education to enact *social* and *cultural* transformation are stifled by its existence within the neoliberal private education industry available primarily to families of privilege. Therefore, drawing upon anthropologist Laura Nader's (1972) still-relevant call to "study up" the power structure by understanding the cultural practices of the dominant elites in addition to the marginalized and disenfranchised, this article critically evaluates the possibility of social and educational transformation through a private Sudbury school predicated on student empowerment and self-directed learning, while critically analyzing the underlying ideologies upon which Sudbury pedagogy draws.

Sudbury education follows the progressivist, "liberate the child" model that many "free schools" of the 1960s pioneered. In the 1960s, as an outgrowth of the "social criticism and activism" (Cagan, 1978, p. 227) of this era, a movement of "free schools" emerged in the United States as a reaction to what critics perceived as an overwhelming authoritarianism in the conventional education system (Cagan, 1978). Free schools were influenced by the idea of "freedom, not license" (Neill & Lamb, 1992) that was the basis of Summerhill School (an older free school in England founded in 1921), yet free school educators chose a more radical path by giving children full license to determine the course of their educational experience. At Summerhill, which is still in operation today, adults act as facilitators of learning rather than coercing children into acquiring specific, adult-sanctioned knowledge. Sudbury schools, closely following the philosophy of the 1960s free schools, are unique from other educational alternatives such as Waldorf or Montessori because they deliberately eschew age segregation, mandatory classes, tests, and grades. The staff members (who consciously do not call themselves "teachers") take a hands-off role with the students, and the school community governs itself through a democratic process that intends to give equal voice to each participant, regardless of age. The freedom Sudbury children enjoy is limited by this democratic process in which the school community votes on mutually agreed-upon rules that govern the minimum standards of community members' behavior. According to the website of Central Valley Sudbury School (CVSS), the site of my ethnographic study, Sudbury education creates an environment where:

Students are encouraged to use their childhood years to satisfy their natural thirst for knowledge, to explore the world, and to learn how to actively communicate

with honesty and fearlessness. Students' time and choice of activities are valued and are managed without intervention or coercion by others. Curriculum is not prescribed and all students are responsible for their own day, choosing the subject matter, the place, and the time for their pursuits. Students also determine whether to work on their own, with a small group or in a structured class setting. (CVSS, 2008)

Sudbury education, therefore, is a unique example of the ways private schools, unconstrained by state requirements, re-envision possibilities of education's role in individuals' lives by allowing children to determine their own learning and make decisions democratically. In this sense, Sudbury education can be understood as a significant site of resistance to the predominant neoliberal form of education in contemporary public schools. Sudbury education self-consciously creates an autonomous educational space that allows children the freedom to fully determine both the content and form of their learning. In doing so, Sudbury education resists the neoliberal surveillance of schools that uses high-stakes standardized testing, increasingly rigid and constrained curricula, and an increasingly authoritarian mode of governance to rob teachers (and students) of agency in the classroom. Aligned with the Sudbury philosophy, Ackoff and Greenberg (2008) argue against the standardized testing of present-day neoliberal public schools by invoking a reverence for children's individuality:

We evaluate people by what they can do and how well they can do it, not by such test scores as are currently used to set "standards." The use of such standards in schools is based on the assumption that children undergo the same developmental process, at the same basic rate, from birth until maturity. The truth is that every child has his or her own highly specific and original way of growing up. To deny this diversity is to deny the very existence of individuality. Perhaps the most devastating effect of standardized testing is degradation of many children who deviate from the testers' idea of the norm. (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008, p. 6)

Despite the significant critiques of neoliberal notions of efficiency and standardization that Sudbury educators leverage, my study demonstrates that there are also important ways in which Sudbury education aligns itself with neoliberalism as an organizing philosophy of social life (Wilson, 2016). At the macro level, Sudbury education benefits from the neoliberal upsurge in private educational options facilitated by school "choice." At the micro level of subjectivity, as Sudbury students' narratives demonstrate, this radical form of education instills a progressivist version of neoliberal values that emphasizes self-motivation, entrepreneurship, and individualistic notions of success. In daily life at CVSS, for example, neoliberal entrepreneurship manifested itself through the school's system of Corporations, formal committees that explicitly socialized students into individually pursuing profit by selling items at the school. Many students invested considerable time and energy into creating profit-generating "shops," skills they would presumably transfer to their futures as workers in the neoliberal economy, which relies upon the efforts of "newly responsabilized, inspired, entrepreneurial and competitive individuals" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 252). As a result, Sudbury education presents a tension between the transformative possibilities of empowering children in a setting free from neoliberal high-stakes accountability and the reproductive function of uncritically adopting neoliberal values. At the macro level, furthermore, situating this form of radical education within the neoliberal private

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education industry ultimately constrains its transformative potential to the privileged families who can afford it.

While most of the 1960s free schools proved unsustainable due to power struggles between parents and teachers (Firestone, 1977), a tendency toward conformity and dogmatism (Shuter, 1973), and fiscal difficulties, the Sudbury education movement provides a unique example of how radically progressivist pedagogy has survived into the early 21st century. Such examples of radical pedagogy are important to document as United States public schools in the neoliberal era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)¹ are increasingly regulated through unprecedented testing and state surveillance (Gilliom, 2008; Hursh, 2005). Such neoliberal governance constrains the teaching and learning relationship to transmission-based coverage of the knowledge privileged by high-stakes standardized exams (Au, 2011). In Sudbury schools, the absence of standardized testing, grading, and teacher-directed instruction provides a unique context through which to examine the effects of socializing students within such a radically progressive (and privatized) system. In this article, I investigate how Sudbury philosophy—which I characterize as imbued with neoliberal subjectivity—carries over into the perspectives, aspirations, and future plans of a focal student, Natalie, who exclusively attended CVSS until the age of 15.

While Sudbury students and families are predominantly white and middle-class, and therefore my study falls broadly within research on elite education and “learning privilege” (Brantlinger, 2003; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Howard, 2007), the transformative philosophy of Sudbury education promotes a radical understanding of children as knowledgeable, sophisticated, and whole human beings. For example, in Sudbury schools children are to be trusted in making their own decisions because, according to a sign displayed in the main building at CVSS, “The degree to which children can make good decisions usually depends on how long they’ve been allowed to.” In showing how such a reconceptualization of children is particularly relevant in the contemporary context, Kincheloe (2002) notes that because of “the development of new information technologies and the so-called information explosion resulting from them, [...] children now in the era of the new (postmodern?) childhood possesses huge amounts of information about topics traditionally viewed as the province of adults” (pp. 76-77). This reconceptualization particularly applies to the millennial generation—or Generation Y—those born between 1982 and 2003 (Wyn & Woodman, 2006), of which Natalie is a member. With access to more knowledge than ever before, this generation has been characterized as individualistic, entrepreneurial, adaptable (and amenable) to the changing landscape of work, and “robustly believe that the future is in their own hands” (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009, p. 53).

The millennial generation has been—perhaps more descriptively—called the neoliberal generation (Nairn & Higgins, 2011; 2007). This term connects the lifeworlds and trajectories of a particular generation to the dominant ideology of the current era, namely neoliberalism, an ideology “based on assumptions of individualism, independence and meritocracy operating

¹ NCLB, a key piece of educational legislation signed by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2002, initiated a high-stakes standardized testing process for U.S. public schools, and is characterized by Gilliom (2008, p. 306) as “probably the most ambitious surveillance program in the history of the nation.” The testing regime is high-stakes because schools must demonstrate significant improvement in test scores on national exams in order to continue receiving federal funding and avoid significant federal intervention (Gilliom, 2008).

through markets, competition, constraints on public spending and the promotion of particular versions of success” (Nairn & Higgins, 2011, p. 180). Neoliberalism transforms

the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being, as well as for the economy, into a state that gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives. (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248)

In education, an important paradox exists within neoliberal ideology because while the state increasingly governs and regulates teachers and students through high-stakes standardized testing, it simultaneously deploys discourses of freedom, individual responsibility, and rational choice (Hursh & Martina, 2003). The explanatory frame used in neoliberal educational institutions emphasizes individual effort, motivation, and self-responsibilization.²

Despite the important connection between neoliberal governance and individual subjectivity³, scholars have thus far tended to “under-theorize the important relationship between the production of neoliberal economics, popular consent, cultural politics, and pedagogy” (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2009, p. 2). Scholars have also tended to overlook how individual subjectivity and moment-to-moment pedagogical interactions are also affected by neoliberal ideology (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Understanding the effects of neoliberal economics requires examining “how the educational force of the culture actually works pedagogically to reproduce neoliberal ideology, values, identifications, and consent” (Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2009, p. 2). By emphasizing the values of unfettered freedom, individualism, and self-responsibilization, neoliberal ideology encourages a subjectivity in which individuals are, paradoxically, “docile subjects who are tightly governed and who, at the same time, define themselves as free” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249). From the perspective of neoliberal subjectivity, individuals have unlimited choice and agency, and have access to knowledge from which they make rational decisions (for example, which school to attend). Individuals are understood as needing only to work hard in order to be successful, and as self-made and adaptable to change and uncertainty (Davies, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Demerath, Lynch, & Davidson, 2008; Nairn & Higgins, 2011; 2007). Sudbury education is imbued with a progressivist version of neoliberal subjectivity because it emphasizes self-directed learning, entrepreneurship, and individual responsibility (Wilson, 2016), which, as I show in this article, emerges in Natalie’s explanations of her own success.

² The neoliberal discursive move of self-responsibilization involves a value system in which the responsibility of the state to provide for social and educational equity is transferred to the individual subject, who is charged not so much with the responsibility to be accountable to the common good, but instead is solely held responsible for their own success or failure in an inequitable system represented as egalitarian and meritocratic (Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Gannon, 2007; Ringrose, 2007).

³ Such a connection between neoliberal governance and individual subjectivity is illuminated by Foucault’s (1994) notion of governmentality, through which the state introduces new subjectivities that “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1994, p. 341). Individuals take up these new mentalities—in the case of neoliberalism, these include a heightened form of individualism, competition, a rational choice model of decision-making, and self-responsibilization—as their own personal value systems, and come to govern themselves through these taken-for-granted discourses.

When a generation is brought up under the assumptions of neoliberal ideology, its members tend to display “strong agentic beliefs, predispositions to exert control, deeply held attachments to individual success, highly developed self-advocacy skills, precociously circumscribed aspirations, keen awareness of new forms of cultural capital, self-consciously cultivated work ethics, and habituation to stress and fatigue” (Demerath, Lynch, & Davidson, 2008, p. 270). However, the label of Generation Y/millennial/neoliberal generation is not applicable to all members of that cohort, as generational theorizing has typically taken as normative the experiences of white, middle-class students; nonwhite and working-class students are often unable to relate to the sense of entitlement and specialness into which middle-class millennials are socialized (Bonner, Marbley, & Howard-Hamilton, 2011). Middle-class families are characterized by what Lareau (2002) calls *concerted cultivation*; they have the privilege and resources to cultivate their child’s special talents and interests through adult-orchestrated extracurricular activities, use extensive reasoning to draw out the child’s opinions and perspectives, group children into homogeneous age groups, and socialize them into an entitled perspective toward institutions, including schools.

Natalie, despite being white and middle-class, however, appears to have been socialized through the Sudbury model of education into a philosophy of *accomplishment of natural growth* (Lareau, 2002, p. 747), associated with working class parenting, where adults take on a relatively hands-off approach and “provid[e] the conditions under which children can grow but leav[e] leisure activities to children themselves.” In this approach, the child is frequently in heterogeneous age groupings and spends time “hanging out” rather than in structured activities (Lareau, 2002). While the unstructured nature of Natalie’s socialization aligns more with accomplishment of natural growth, there are aspects of the model that do not align with her experience, such as the frequent use of directives by adults, and the “general acceptance by child of [these] directives” (p. 753). Therefore, while Natalie had experienced an education radically different from the concerted cultivation middle-class children are typically socialized into, ultimately her socialization reflected a neoliberal, child-centered, and individualistic mindset that more closely resembled the *outcomes* of a concerted cultivation model; she frequently intervened in institutions on her own behalf and demonstrated an emerging sense of entitlement, as I show in this article. My findings, therefore, complicate Lareau’s model of parenting and social class, suggesting that class (and possibly racial/ethnic) consciousness at large, regardless of the particular model of parenting employed, significantly contributes to an individual’s approach to institutions and conceptualizing their place in the social world. This class-based socialization, I argue, reduces the potential of Sudbury education to instill a collective sense of social responsibility; it reinforces, rather than disrupts, white middle-class privilege.

Research Context and Participants

Until its closure in December 2009, CVSS was a very small private Sudbury school in an urban setting in California’s Central Valley. When it was open, CVSS was the only school of its type in the region. After the closure of CVSS in 2009, only two Sudbury schools remained in California. The area surrounding CVSS was predominantly (76.8%) White, with 6.8% of the population self-identifying as Black or African American, 12.6% Hispanic, 4.1% Asian, 1.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.6% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander (U.S. Census, 2010). While the 13 students who attended CVSS in the 2008-09 school year were overwhelmingly white (only one student self-identified as Mexican-American), all were solidly

middle-class, with parents who had attended at least some college and were able to afford a CVSS education for their children. All five staff members (four female, one male, who were predominantly white and middle-class) supplemented their income with some other form of part-time work, ranging from artist to pharmacist to yoga instructor.

Natalie, the focal participant for this article, became one of my key informants both while CVSS was open and after the school closed. Natalie is a white, middle-class female, born in 1995, who was 14 years old when I began my research at CVSS in 2009. Her educational history is unique because she had only ever attended CVSS since the age of 5. She had decided to attend CVSS when her mother found out about it at a local music and arts festival and took her to visit the school. Natalie told me, with a grin, that she immediately fell in love with the school because they had a pet hamster. However, once she enrolled, the hamster had died, but she soon began appreciating the education she received at CVSS because she was afforded the freedom to play all day long without having to attend classes.

Natalie has a younger brother, Madrone, who was age 5 in 2009 and had begun attending CVSS the summer before the school closed in late 2009.⁴ At that point, Natalie decided to transfer to a large comprehensive public high school near her mother's house; Madrone was homeschooled. Natalie's parents were separated; her mother, Victoria, was a staff member at CVSS. Natalie split time evenly between her two parents and spent a significant amount of time with her maternal grandmother. She was an avid artist who spent hours on end, and any moment she could find in between activities, drawing elaborate pictures of characters. Academically, her work at CVSS was focused on literary criticism, history, and math.

Methods

My ethnographic study of Central Valley Sudbury School (CVSS), a private, radically progressive school in California's Central Valley, was designed to understand how Sudbury school participants understood and enacted relations of power, individualism, community, and constructions of childhood within a context of educational privatization. Through 1.5 years of ethnographic research that included participant observation and ethnographic interviews with staff members and students at CVSS, I investigated the perspectives and aspirations of Sudbury students and the staff members who socialized them into such a unique educational model. As Davies and Bansel (2007) argue, qualitative research—and I would add, ethnographic research in particular—“enable[s] us to theorize the constitutive effect of neoliberalism through close attention to its discourses and practices as they are manifested in individual subjects' talk about themselves and their experiences at school and at work” (p. 247). Here, I contribute to this theorizing through an in-depth discourse analysis of Natalie's narratives and future aspirations.

⁴ While the story of CVSS' closure is beyond the scope of this article, the pivotal event was a conflict between a group of parents and the school in 2007-08. These parents, frustrated that they did not have any say in the CVSS curriculum or pedagogy, attempted to turn the school into a parent co-op, which would have afforded them much more voice in the school's day-to-day functioning. The CVSS School Meeting, however, wanting to protect the environment of student freedom (to which they saw parental involvement as a threat), voted against the change. In response, the parents dis-enrolled their children from CVSS. The school's enrollment dropped by half, and the following year it became clear that continuing with a much smaller group of students would be fiscally unfeasible, and the school closed.

I negotiated entry into CVSS in October 2008 by presenting my research proposal to the School Meeting, which was approved. I visited CVSS twice a week for four hours per visit for the remainder of the 2008–2009 school year. After I had been in the setting for several months, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with four of the five staff members and five of the 13 students in the spring of 2009. Through ethnographic field notes of Natalie’s experience at CVSS combined with two ethnographic interviews—one while Natalie was still a student at CVSS and one after Natalie had transferred to public school—this article seeks to provide case-specific insight into the following questions: How does a student who has known only Sudbury education perceive her opportunities and options for the future? How does she make the decision to leave Sudbury schooling and pursue conventional schooling?⁵ How has Sudbury education shaped her perspective on the world, aspirations, positionality, relationships, knowledge, and perceptions of herself and others? To what does she ascribe her success in conventional schooling?

The 2009 interview focused on what had led Natalie and her family to choose CVSS in the first place, why she had stayed, and what she thought of the school, her peers, and the democratic meeting process. This interview provided a window into the perspective of a child who had only experienced Sudbury education; as a result, Natalie had profound insights into the Sudbury schooling model but was also sometimes at a loss for words to describe her experience, having nothing with which to contrast it. In the 2010 interview, I asked Natalie to reflect back on her experiences at CVSS (now that she had some distance from it), and to describe, in detail, her first experiences of going to public school. In contrasting these experiences, she was able to provide further insight into how she had been socialized by the Sudbury model, and how that socialization influenced her approach to public school and future plans. My analysis of Natalie’s two interviews is informed by ethnographic interviews I conducted with five other children at CVSS, as well as ethnographic observations and documents from the field and from websites of all Sudbury schools in the U.S. (as of 2012).⁶ Coding of the interviews followed an inductive, constant comparative process similar to the processes proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Carspecken (1996). What follows is an ethnographically-informed glimpse into the lifeworld of Natalie, where it is possible to trace the effects of lifelong socialization into a radical education that relies on the neoliberal rationalities of heightened individualism and self-responsibilization.

Natalie’s Neoliberal Imaginings of Present and Future Opportunities

I don’t think I would have made that decision independently to go to a different school if I hadn’t gone to CVSS. Like if I had gone to some other school, um, I don’t think I would have ever decided to move from that school, you know? I

⁵ It is important to note that Natalie’s plans to leave CVSS and pursue a conventional education began to take root *before* there was any talk of the school’s closure; thus her reasons for leaving cannot be ascribed only to the practical matter of no longer having a Sudbury school to attend.

⁶ Although this larger context is not included here, I have covered it elsewhere (Wilson, 2012; 2015; 2016) and drew upon the data from the entire ethnographic study to inform my analysis of Natalie’s interviews, confirming that Natalie’s perspective was typical of students and staff at CVSS and other Sudbury schools, rather than an anomaly. Ultimately, however, Natalie’s story is a unique case study of Sudbury socialization worthy of examination in its own right, regardless of its representativeness.

think my mom probably would have done a good job of raising me, but I can't imagine that I would be the same, you know? Like I'm not doubting that I think it was just the school, I think my mom did a lot, my dad did a lot, but ... I wouldn't be so comfortable with making my own decisions for myself. Like, I met with my counselor and ... I made a list of things I wanted to talk to him about, and I scheduled it myself, and I was like, 'I want this, I want this, I want this, could you help me get it?' And he was like, 'wow, I don't think I've ever seen a freshman do that with me before. Most of my *seniors* don't even do that to me.' And I was like, 'Yeah, I'm very motivated. I know what I want, and I want to be organized.' (2010 Interview)

Natalie's narrative suggests that, through her socialization in Sudbury education and as a member of the neoliberal generation, she fashioned herself as a good neoliberal subject who repeatedly invoked ideologies of self-responsibilization and individual motivation as explanatory frames for her own and her peers' present and future opportunities. What emerged from Natalie's narrative was a uniquely Sudbury version of the routes to "success" articulated by upper middle class youth in Gee's (2000) study of youth identity formation under neoliberalism, or what he calls the "new capitalism." These privileged youth fashion themselves as "shape-shifting portfolio people" who are "heavily focused on what [their] present desires, feelings, and activities would portend for the future in terms of achievement and success" (Gee, 2000, p. 20). Such strategic positioning goes beyond mere self-directed initiative in producing good neoliberal workers who view themselves as fully responsible for and individually entitled to success, as Natalie's narrative of self and society demonstrates. However, Natalie's self-positioning in the narrative of visiting the school counselor did not entail much of the "shape-shifting" adaptation to changing economic conditions that the neoliberal generation is known for, because to do so would be to adapt to circumstances from which Sudbury students are relatively sheltered. Nevertheless, she positioned herself as a precociously organized and self-motivated student with keen awareness of the actions required for success. Her aggressive pursuit of success, in her view, is all that is needed in a neoliberal world where structural constraints are believed to be mere figments of the imagination.

While Sudbury education, as I have shown, resists some aspects of neoliberal educational policy by freeing itself from standardized testing, grades, and notions of efficiency, at the level of subjectivity Sudbury students are socialized into a neoliberal mindset that emphasizes choice, responsibility for oneself, meritocracy, and individual motivation as the only keys to educational success (Wilson, 2016). For example, CVSS staff members emphasized that students were free to participate (or not) in the school's democratic decision-making body (the School Meeting), and framed participation as merely a matter of individual willingness and developmental readiness (Wilson, 2015). Staff member Grace emphasized this neoliberal notion of individual choice succinctly, stating simply, "kids who don't want it, don't belong here. It's really all it is. If they don't want it, they shouldn't be here." Grace's emphasis on *wanting* reflects an individualistic, entitled mindset reminiscent of the outcomes of a concerted cultivation model of childrearing (Lareau, 2002), though the Sudbury approach to socialization resists the overly-involved adult-directed model typically expected from the middle class. In the quote at the beginning of this section, Natalie drew upon her middle-class consciousness to approach the counselor at the public school with an attitude of entitlement, to which the counselor reacted with surprise. The intersection between neoliberal self-responsibilization and white middle-class

entitlement reflects the larger tendency, within neoliberalism, to assume a meritocratic worldview where only those who work hard will be rewarded with success, and those (primarily white, middle-class subjects) who have the privilege to obtain success are viewed as deserving of it (Giroux, 2003; Ringrose, 2007).

In 2009, when Natalie reflected upon her experiences at CVSS and shared her plans for the future, she had appropriated this neoliberal subjectivity of individual willingness and self-responsibilization. When she discussed what she liked about CVSS, she noted, “You get to decide how you spend your time, and do what’s important to you, and that if you’re motivated, then you can succeed, I think.” When I probed further to find out what she thought it meant to “succeed” at CVSS, she responded with an individualized, self-motivated frame: “Do what you want to be doing, but if you’re going to, like, sit around and complain that there’s nothing to do, then of course there’s not going to be anything to do, because you’re not making it.” Here, Natalie’s socialization into the Sudbury values of self-directed learning and individuality led to a mindset valuing initiative, intrinsic motivation, and the type of self-made person deemed most successful under neoliberalism. Natalie drew upon “neoliberal discourses [which] convey a sense that anyone can gain positional advantage in the educational marketplace if they ‘try hard enough’” (Nairn & Higgins, 2007, p. 263). While Natalie, as a middle-class subject relatively confident of her future success, is exempt from the kind of systematic, fraught “shape-shifting” (Gee, 2000) entrepreneurship of members of the neoliberal generation who undertake more conventional educational routes, her comment regarding the importance of student initiative in Sudbury education invokes a neoliberal notion of entrepreneurship that positions learning and knowledge as entirely self-created. If students are bored or unsuccessful as a result of not taking initiative to produce their own educational experiences, she argues, the consequences are entirely their fault.

Furthermore, Natalie’s analysis of the CVSS School Meeting also reflected the privileging of individual motivation and self-responsibilization. One of the key issues I asked participants about in interviews was the fact very few students typically showed up to the School Meeting. At a typical School Meeting, the democratically elected school officers (the School Meeting Chairperson and the Secretary) were present because the school’s Lawbook⁷ required it; otherwise, just a handful of students were present, often the same few who participated to varying degrees. Many others were habitually entirely absent from the process. When I asked Natalie about this in 2009, she echoed what others had told me: it was just a matter of effort and willingness to participate. “Democracy does not require participation,” was the phrase often repeated by CVSS adults and youth alike when discussing the non-mandatory School Meeting process. Although my critical discourse analysis of the School Meeting proceedings revealed a hierarchy that did not afford equal access to females, newcomers, and younger children, participants maintained that the process was egalitarian and transparent (Wilson, 2015). Natalie explained that other students sometimes complained about not knowing about the School Meeting process, but she maintained a self-responsibilized frame:

⁷ The Lawbook, the most important written document at a Sudbury school, enumerates the rules and expectations for behavior to which the community agrees democratically (and changes periodically). For an example of a similar document from the original Sudbury Valley School, see <http://bookstore.sudburyvalley.org/product/sudbury-valley-school-handbook-0>.

It's because they're not making the effort to know when it's going to happen. It's always posted on the agenda, and if you were, you could always go to School Meeting to see when it's going to happen. If you want to know about, like, a committee or something, you can always just ask somebody about it. (Interview, 2009)

By maintaining a discourse of open access and communication, Natalie valorized the self-made neoliberal subject who simply had to inform themselves and make rational decisions based on this knowledge—echoing the rational choice model of neoliberal school choice policies (Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007), where the individual is “an autonomous rational economic agent who makes choices between competing goods and services based on price and value, cost and benefit” (Bansel, 2007, p. 284). Nowhere was there a discussion of the ways access to this information might have been regulated.

Natalie drew upon this rational, self-responsibilized frame in constructing her plans for the future, readily taking up the neoliberal model of the adaptable, self-made entrepreneurial worker. In 2009, Natalie's plans for the future entailed tapping into her many creative talents, and translating them into viable employment. When I asked Natalie about her future plans, she responded,

I want to go to an art college, and either, like, major in illustration or filmmaking or both, or some combination of the two, because I really want to work in the entertainment industry. Like, I want to either make movies or draw stuff or do TV and draw stuff. (Interview, 2009)

At first, Natalie's plans appeared vague (“draw stuff”), but they were actually quite specific—they all revolved around creatively and strategically combining her current talents of drawing and filmmaking. She took what she most enjoyed doing in her leisure time and attempted to transform it into a job; she was precociously aware of spaces within the employment landscape where she could market her existing skills and talents as an entrepreneurial creative laborer. At the same time, Natalie operated from a position of privilege in which concerns about financial stability and job security did not enter her consciousness; the Sudbury version of neoliberal entrepreneurship maintains that what is most important about students' future endeavors is their personal happiness (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005). Still, as neoliberalism instantiates itself in the worlds of education and work, it creates what Nairn and Higgins (2007) term a *cultural economy discourse*, where the neoliberal generation's future aspirations revolve around plans in which “talent and personality ... can be converted into labour market power” (p. 264). Neoliberal workers are expected to be flexible, independent, and self-made entrepreneurial subjects who adapt to the constantly changing market-based landscape of employment. However, they are expected to overcome the security in the job market solely through force of will, personality, and talent, and the belief that “hard work will pay and qualifications can be translated directly into labour market power” (Nairn & Higgins, 2007, p. 264). Such a belief fails to note, however, that hard work is often not enough as the job market becomes more insecure and structural oppressions such as racism and sexism remain embedded in education and employment—an important counter-narrative obscured by neoliberal discourses of post-feminism (Gonick, 2006; Ringrose, 2007) and colorblind racism (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

When I interviewed Natalie in 2010, however, such individualistic accounts of her “success” and “motivation” while attending CVSS became increasingly accompanied by insights into the structural problems she perceived when contrasting her experiences at CVSS with the repressive space of public school. Specifically, she perceived public school classrooms as characterized by authoritarian pedagogy, low expectations of children, the absence of a fair judicial process to handle student conflict (which she missed from CVSS), problematic disciplinary practices, a lack of trust in children, and an atmosphere of intense competitiveness and conformity. In describing a particularly authoritarian teacher, Natalie said:

In one class, some of my other classes, like, basically they’re like, ‘you’re going to do this. If you don’t do this, then you’re going to be in trouble,’ and then someone would ... do the thing they were supposed to not do, or whatever, and then they would just get really mad, and just be like, ‘You have to go the [vice principal’s] office right now! Grrr!’ (shakes fist, grimaces), totally freak out and make a big deal out of it and disrupt the whole thing, and they were just like really uptight, and like, ‘I’m the boss, what I say is law, don’t question me.’ (Interview, 2010)

Here, Natalie took up the critique of Sudbury educators who perceive public schools to be rigidly authoritarian—and, within the current context of increasingly punitive (and racialized) discipline within schools (Raible & Irizarry, 2010), her characterization may not be inaccurate. While she perceived a very different power dynamic in public schools than she experienced at CVSS, her analysis remained focused on the level of the individual teacher, rather than the culture of the school that might have facilitated such a punitive context.

Although Natalie often framed her critiques of public school in individual terms, she occasionally acknowledged the structural barriers she faced as a result of her unconventional education. For example, she described the system of tracking at her high school that prevented her from entering the school’s college-preparatory gifted and talented program that focused on humanities and international studies. Because entry to the program required transcripts from seventh grade onward, Natalie was ineligible to apply because CVSS had not offered grades or transcripts. She joked, “Like how am I going to explain that? ‘Oh, my school didn’t have grades, but I can give you the phone number of one of my old teachers, and they weren’t called teachers, they’re staff members’ [laughs].” Because she was unable to present the proper credentials, Natalie was tracked into the general (non-college prep) track, had to redo her 9th grade year even though she was old enough to be a 10th grader, and was placed in a remedial Spanish class because the regular Spanish class was at maximum enrollment. She expressed frustration at the slow speed of learning in most of her classes: “And that’s really frustrating sometimes, it’s like I want to, I want to learn and have fun, not like memorize the vowels over the period of, like, five days.” She felt that, because so much of the school’s resources were devoted to the gifted and talented program, “a lot of people who are just in the regular track, at least for freshmen definitely, you’re just kinda like, ‘oh okay cool, we’re like the leftovers,’ you know?” Her perception of being positioned among the school’s “leftovers” presents an incisive critique of the school’s prioritizing—not just discursively, but also in terms of material resources—of high-track students presumed to be destined for college. Still, despite the structural constraints of being considered “leftovers” and de-prioritized by the school, Natalie remained a top student in her classes and persisted in pursuing a college preparatory track in an unconventional way not

officially sanctioned by the institution. She reported that she spent most of her free time during classes researching colleges on the Internet, and planned to go to a college-preparatory summer arts program. Even though she was not enrolled in the school's college-prep track, she pursued an unconventional route to college preparation through her own resourcefulness (and privilege). It is plausible that the self-directed learning of Sudbury education afforded her this resourcefulness, along with a sense of entitlement based on her middle-class upbringing that resembled the outcomes of concerted cultivation even while Sudbury education attempted to raise children according to the accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau, 2002). Through her unconventional education and privileged class socialization, Natalie became the kind of self-made, resourceful, and entrepreneurial subject valorized by neoliberal ideology (Bansel, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007). And while her unstructured Sudbury experience had produced some immediate disadvantages in terms of being tracked out of the college-prep curriculum at her high school, Natalie's access to an alternate college-prep route assured her success in the long run.

Ultimately, however, Natalie's structural analyses of the public school to which she transferred remained largely abstract and disconnected from her narrative of her own *individual* success (and challenges) and her critiques of individual teachers. Throughout her second interview, Natalie maintained the same individualistic and self-responsibilized frame when discussing her own ease of transitioning to public school and her failure to understand why her peers were not as successful. She ascribed her success at public school to individual motivation, framing academic achievement as a straightforward process. While Natalie acknowledged that she was nervous about attending public school because she thought it would be academically difficult, she was surprised to find that it was easy, and couldn't understand her peers who struggled:

I'll be like, 'it's not that hard, you guys, if you pay attention, you know, I'm sure you'd get it too. You just, I just know that ... when people talk, you usually listen to them and then you can pick up what they say and write it down on the test.' And a lot of people don't seem to get that, or they feel like I've insulted them by being good and not having the same background as them. (Interview, 2010)

Here Natalie again drew upon neoliberal rationality, where her present and future opportunities were explained as a result of individual efforts—simply a matter of “paying attention” and “listening”—rather than a whole host of institutional privileges afforded by white middle-class standing and unthreatened by a radically unconventional education. Natalie took for granted that her parents had the freedom and privilege to know that she would succeed in school and life even with such a radical experimentation with her schooling. In fact, when I interviewed Victoria, Natalie's mother who was also a staff member at CVSS, she discussed how the philosophy of CVSS aligned with her perspective on parenting: “the main thing that I wanted [when Natalie became school age] was just that she was able to continue doing what she loved to do.” CVSS afforded that opportunity. Nowhere in Victoria's discussion was there any anxiety about how choosing such an unconventional education for her child might constrain future opportunities.

Despite her shift in analyzing the schooling landscape from two different contexts, Natalie's future goals, as articulated in 2010, had not fundamentally changed from when I had spoken to her a year earlier. Again, her plans reflected a desire to follow an individualistic creative path focused primarily on self-fulfillment; in Natalie's narrative, there exists a

conspicuous silence around articulating a sense of responsibility to contribute to societal betterment. Natalie's plans coincided with the Sudbury philosophy's emphasis on the pursuit of personal happiness as the most important goal of education (Greenberg, Sadofsky, & Lempka, 2005). In 2010, Natalie's talk was very goal-oriented; at age 15, she presented herself as precocious in articulating a list of goals toward which she saw herself as building systematically:

That kind of is building towards my goal because I really want to go to an art school and either study animation or like concept art or something. I want to do something with illustration or movies, something, you know, animation's kind of like a compromise between those two, right? Because I really like movies and I really like drawing, but also if you're like a—my mind just blanked right now—storyboard artist or something like that. I really want to do that, but eventually my plan is to move to a large city like San Francisco, and also I want to take a road trip across the United States by public transportation. [...] My plans for later in high school is I want to take all of the extra science classes there, because I really like science, I've never done science before, but it's really cool. And I really like my math class too. [...] I want to take algebra two and physics hopefully by my junior year, but I can squeeze it into senior year. And I might take a class at City College too, either next year or the year after that, because you can take some of your classes that are like required for high school or whatever, you can take them over there and get them done with, so you have more free time. I'm trying to squeeze that in but I really want to do the plays again next year too, so I don't know if I'm going to have time. (Interview, 2010)

Here, Natalie's plans came into more focus than in 2009, but the end goal was still the same: to become a storyboard artist. She had very specific knowledge of her planned college major and the prerequisites to get there, demonstrating what Demerath, Lynch, and Davidson (2008) call *precociously circumscribed aspirations*, where students in the neoliberal era articulate “strikingly precise ideas about what they [want] their future lives to be like” (p. 281). Also precocious was Natalie's deliberate planning and the sense that time was very limited; she was extremely busy, much in the same way that Lareau's (2002) middle-class participants shuttled children from activity to activity with very little unstructured leisure time, though a key difference was that she orchestrated her own busy schedule rather than her parents doing so on her behalf. Natalie also had a sense of the subjects, other than art, that she was interested in pursuing while still in high school. In conjunction with her story of going to the high school counselor's office and asking for what she needed in unequivocal terms, Natalie emerges as a good middle-class neoliberal subject, one who is self-made, self-responsibilized, entitled, independent, and fully believes in the existence of meritocracy, since hard work—along with class and race-based privilege—has paid off for her so far, and is likely to do so in the future.

Resisting Neoliberal Rationalities: Imagining Collective Futures

To be trusted means that you are free to go about your day in whatever way you wish, and to pursue your education and your happiness, whether in ways that look traditional or in ways that look decidedly different. (Greenberg, Sadofsky, &

Lempka, 2005, p. 6)⁸

Through the narratives of Natalie, a lifelong Sudbury student whose socialization in radical education was placed in sharp relief as she transitioned to conventional public school, I have traced the potential of Sudbury education—which is deeply imbued with neoliberal rationalities—to influence students’ understandings of the world, sense of self, and aspirations for the future in ways that are decidedly individualistic, entitled, and fall short of articulating a sense of collective or civic responsibility. Natalie sought to convert her many creative talents into gainful employment in a neoliberal society that implores workers to “do what you love; love what you do”—what Tokumitsu (2014) in a recent *Slate* article called “the unofficial work mantra of our time,” a discourse that reframes labor as leisure, thereby devaluing labor in redefining it as “fun.” The Sudbury philosophy emphasizes the pursuit of individual happiness and personally satisfying work as the most important goal of education, as the above quote from Sudbury practitioners Greenberg, Sadofsky, and Lempka (2005) suggests. CVSS students were very talented at creatively imagining their own futures and critiquing the present, but—as the silences in Natalie’s narrative demonstrate—they fell short of articulating a sense of social responsibility toward the common good. Ultimately, Sudbury students want futures that allow them social mobility and/or the maintenance of middle-class status while having the privilege to pursue their creative outlets.

Such a lack of explicit connection between individual and social responsibility may result from Sudbury schools’ insistence upon education as a fundamentally apolitical endeavor. While the Sudbury philosophy of child empowerment and participatory democracy in a school setting may be viewed as political, and radically so, adult staff members at CVSS resisted such a conceptualization. When discussing the graduates of CVSS, staff member Grace presented them as not engaged in social justice activism: “Most of them don’t shake it up. Some of them do. We’ve had some graduates that definitely go out there, and they’re shaking the world up, and they’re trying to make changes, just like all of us, and past generations have done, but they really tend to, what I see in them, is that they really know themselves.” Grace’s perspective emphasized that the Sudbury value of individual self-actualization—for students to “know themselves”—was ultimately a more important outcome than becoming politically active and “shaking the world up.” While self-fulfillment can often be compatible with working toward social betterment—and those who work towards social change often do so at least in part because of a drive for individual self-fulfillment—in the Sudbury context, the pursuit of individual happiness and fulfillment was presented as an end in itself, a goal to be achieved individually and separately from a direct engagement with working toward the common good. Staff member Matthew indicated that Sudbury education was, and always had been, about securing education as a private good primarily for the families of staff members, as he stated simply, “it wasn’t that I wanted to join a movement, and change the world, it was for my kids.”

Such an individualistic perspective is not surprising in the progressivist Sudbury model, which, along with the 1960s free school movement, was founded on the individualistic approach of liberating the child from the constraints of society. In critiquing this original movement,

⁸ Greenberg, Sadofsky, and Lempka, the authors of this quote that emphasizes neoliberal freedom and self-responsibilization, are Sudbury practitioners involved in the original Sudbury school in Framingham, Massachusetts (<http://www.sudval.com>).

Cagan (1978) argues that, “in response to the authoritarianism of American society and traditional education, radical school reformers have sought to foster personal freedom and autonomy for children, but they have done this without effectively challenging the dominant individualism of American culture” (Cagan, 1978, p. 229). Cagan’s critique is relevant to the heightened individualism, fueled by neoliberal ideology, that characterizes Sudbury schools today. Instead of limiting radical educational projects to the self-focused neoliberal “biographical project of self-realization” (Bansel, 2007, p. 285, drawing on Rose, 1999), post-neoliberal imaginings of the future through education must also be collectively oriented toward the social, public good, and toward dismantling the global crisis that neoliberalism has created (Hursh & Henderson, 2011). Individual imaginings of future happiness and job satisfaction are a start, but they are not enough. A socially just future requires graduates who are committed to “shaking the world up,” and schools—especially private schools that have the freedom to create their own curriculum—have a responsibility to contribute to this future.

In order to enact a collective reimagining of a socially just society, the unquestioned reverence for individual autonomy and freedom in the Sudbury model—to where a child can choose to opt out of the democratic process altogether or refuse to educate themselves beyond the limits of what they already know—must be tempered with socialization towards collective responsibility and engagement, perhaps from a more deliberately adult-guided approach. While individual freedom and autonomy are important in a democratic society, such notions must be complemented by “a pedagogy that adheres to collectivist goals” (Cagan, 1978, p. 228). Freeing the child from adult authoritarianism, while important, must be accompanied by work that is explicitly focused on collective liberation through dismantling race-, class-, and gender-based oppressions. Those who live and learn within the sheltered, privatized space of Sudbury schools have the responsibility to educate themselves on how to use their privilege to work toward collective liberation and social justice. Sudbury education has the potential to contribute to this reimagining and recreating of the social world inside and outside of schools because of the immense creativity of Sudbury students, but to do so would mean redefining creativity as not just art, but also as political, economic, social, and cultural creativity. Radical education should not only seek transformation of individuals, but must also “seek to contribute to a broader project of imagining a post-neoliberal future” (Nairn & Higgins, 2007, p. 280), develop critical consciousness, and a greater sense of socially interdependent, globally engaged responsibility and transformation. Only then will its truly radical potential be realized.

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