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Public School Art Teacher Autonomy in a Segregated City: Affordances and Contradictions

In the public schools of Chicago, like in many American cities, a system of hierarchical academic tracking has been underway for years—not only within individual schools, but throughout the city. Starting in the 1990s, the city attempted to halt or reverse white flight out of the city by creating and expanding a set of public selective-enrollment magnet schools. In the 2010s, under former Mayor Rahm Emanuel, this trend has now encompassed the closure and consolidation of dozens of neighborhood public schools, alongside a huge shift of resources to semi-private charter schools that are able to slough off the burdens of organized labor and student retention, along with other forms of oversight. This process has only increased the concentration of poor students of color in under-resourced schools in segregated neighborhoods (Jankov and Caref, 2017).

In this article, two former Chicago Public Schools art teachers, one who spent many years in a top-tier public magnet high school and another who spent years in an academically underperforming public neighborhood high school, will consider this wide gap in schooling opportunity in terms of the curious parallels in their teaching experiences. Through engaging in narrative autobiographical inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), and drawing on ideas of teacher autonomy informed by recent education scholarship, each former art teacher will reflect on the considerable autonomy that he was granted. Each author will describe what this freedom entailed and how he used it, as well as examining the circumstances that allowed this freedom, and speculating on what outcomes it may have had in terms of student

growth and personal professional satisfaction, all within the context of Chicago's racialized economic inequality in educational access.

There are obvious disparities in capital (of every kind) between the schools where we worked, and these disparities led to particular students being in those particular buildings during the time that we taught in those places. Despite major differences between the two schools in terms of student demographics, staffing turnover, discipline regime, and available resources, our teaching experiences were surprisingly similar in regard to administrative support and curricular flexibility. The key element of our exchange in this essay concerns the circumstances allowing us to make the art we made with and alongside our students in such different settings, set against a background of systemic inequality in public services. In fact, what each of us made with our students was not only a collection of objects, projects, and experiences, but was also an ever-evolving space of negotiated productive tension that both incorporated and resisted the political specificity of the institution.

In similar ways, both of us attempted to understand the pliability of our schools and our curricular experiments within differing limitations and indeterminacies of place, identities, and relationships, and varying elasticities of the permissions we found and forced at our respective schools. We've chosen to write about our individual public school teaching experiences in the first person, withholding the actual names of the schools at which we taught. To begin with, we will sketch

out a social and psychological context for contemporary art teacher autonomy narratives, and then move on to our individual reflections, followed by a summary and a conclusion that suggest a political framework for teaching art in public schools. Our hope is to present the generativity of what happened in the midst/ media of our shared and distinct circumstances, in order to encourage art teachers to think in detail about what frames, permits, and shapes their expressive and pedagogical choices.

Autonomy, Access, and Complicity

Many education scholars have examined the issue of teacher autonomy, relating it positively to teacher motivation, student motivation, and/or overall quality of instruction, as well as recognizing the antagonism between teacher prerogatives and control exercised by higher officials in the school or in various levels of government. Luman Strong and Roland Yoshida (2014) establish autonomy as a significant factor in teacher satisfaction and retention, and evaluate various means of defining, understanding, and measuring teacher autonomy. Gemma Parker's literature review (2015) recognizes the necessity of autonomy in sustaining teacher motivation, and the relationship of independence and interdependence in producing teacher autonomy in Britain; this overlap of autonomy and collaboration is verified statistically in a 2017 Flemish study (Vangrieken, Grosemans, Dochy, and Kyndt). The importance of teacher autonomy in promoting Taiwanese school reform goals is highlighted by Shwu Ming Wu (2015), and the tension in Norway between teachers, local school-level authorities, and centralized education policies is examined by Solvi Mausethagen and Christina Molstad (2015). Writing for the U.S. Department of Education, Dinah Sparks and Nat Malkus (2015) examine a decade of data on decreasing

perceptions of autonomy and job satisfaction among American teachers.

In the specific realm of art education, however, Paul Bolin and Kaela Hoskings (2015) note that most art teachers don't face as many curricular directives as other teachers. The authors write: "What is actually taught and communicated about art to learners is frequently a matter of individual educator choice, with little specifically directed regulation from the state, school district, or supporting institution" (p. 40). Rather than relating their relative freedom to larger structures of education, as in the aforementioned articles, these authors focus instead on art teacher autonomy as a matter of inward purpose, linked to a sense of personal responsibility, implicitly disentangling teachers from the institutions in which they find themselves. A list of 50 possible reasons to engage in art is included in their narrative, but all of these reasons refer to either the individual student or to an uncomplicated idea of "the nation," without considering that reflections of local communities, interpersonal connections, and other forms of situated knowledge, affect, and access are central to expressive projects. In sum, these authors include no reflection on the teacher's position vis-a-vis students and systems of schooling. We try to tell a different kind of story, starting with an acknowledgement of complicity.

There's no question that, to an extent, our very presence in the public schools made us, along with every other teacher, involuntary accessories to the larger inequities perpetrated by city-level education administrators. Jorge, whose parents were born in Mexico, taught fairly affluent and racially diverse students in a school that, as mentioned, served as a model for the system-wide stratification that would continue into the 2010s. Albert worked as a white teacher serving an entirely Black and

Latinx student population in a low-income area, and thus, through conscious and unconscious actions as well as his mere presence, inevitably reinforced the racialized hierarchy that has defined the ongoing struggle for the equitable provision of education both locally and nationally. In this paper, we are recollecting ways in which the autonomy available to us as art teachers provided leverage that we tried to use in ways that departed from the neoliberal inertia of public education in our city. But in our stories, we also hope to undertake the kind of honest autobiographical reflection suggested by Jean Clandinin (2013), who describes her story of disenchantment with teaching as one in which the narrative she told herself changed over time, “one in which institutional narratives shaped me” (p. 85). It’s undeniable that our memories, like our teaching and our artmaking, rely on both context and imagination. Indeed, as Clandinin observes, “our memories are recollections, not exact duplications of original experiences” (p. 194). “What we are able to imagine,” she reminds us, “are limited, not boundless possibilities” (p. 196).

Expanding on the critique of personal narrative from a psychoanalytic perspective, Derek Hook (2013) considers the content and usefulness of personal narratives in the context of apartheid South Africa. The racial discrepancies that exist in relation to nearly every kind of access to supposedly public services, education included, make the label “apartheid” informally applicable both to contemporary Chicago (Nesbitt, 2009; Moser, 2014), as well as to aspects of life in South Africa decades after the overturning of official apartheid policy. Hook is skeptical of the notion that personal recollections are of much objective value in reconstructing historical events. Such stories “generate effects of wholeness, closure, (and) understanding,” while they shield their tellers from “disturbing or painful truths” (p. 105) and are therefore

“tantamount to a mode of forgetting” (p. 106, emphasis original). Rather, referring to the “‘impossibilities’ presented by the trauma of apartheid,” Hook suggests that “narrative attempts at grappling with such impossibilities are valuable not because they succeed at capturing the truth of the past,” but because “they provide the basis for a new symbolic matrix” through which “the transformation of a socio-historical ‘working-through’ might be facilitated” (p. 12). While our fantasies and misperceptions subvert our attempts to reconstruct ourselves as subversive teachers in an apartheid system, there is hope that sharing these recollections might nonetheless have political value.

With these limitations in mind, we still endeavor on one hand to emphasize how curiously similar our two teaching situations were, despite operating at such remote points within the school system. And yet, while our experiences of autonomy were similar, we also seek to describe ways in which the local sources and meanings of our shared freedom were distinct. These local differences engendered and shaped, to a significant extent, what we did with our open-ended job description. Jorge found a myriad of ways to transfer autonomy to his high-achieving students, and he has written about the field of modern and contemporary art as a space offering teachers a vast array of affordances (see Bremmer, Heijnen, & Lucero, 2018). Albert endeavored to promote multiple opportunities for decision-making into his art projects, while struggling to communicate the value of conceptually and historically grounded visual art in a low-income community. His approach sometimes involved bringing in outside resources and visitors, and often hinged on getting the students’ art, and the students themselves, into an array of “extracurricular” spaces in the city.

Each of us attempted to use the leverage we were granted, given our ambiguous remit as school employees and the ambivalent position we occupied as teachers of content generally perceived as extraneous, to push back-- not against the schools we were in, but against the stratified and instrumentalized regime of schooling that made our two positions so distant, despite their similarities. Albert worked in a vibrant community that was also isolated and neglected, and tried to blunt some of the deprivation by calling on the assets of both the school and the neighborhood, but also the larger city. Jorge worked in a school with relatively more well-off students who came from a range of neighborhoods, and attempted to impart a sense of commonality in his classes through creating opportunities for collective speculation and spontaneity, interrupting students' individuated pre-professional vectors. The subversion each teacher practiced was not foreign to the school-- both were places where individuals and groups regularly found ways to marginally perturb the citywide hierarchy, expressed in resources and population. But the art class became a place where, broadly construed, curricular subterfuge could intermittently blossom through physical and social manifestations of ideas that drew from, communicated with, and contributed to contexts outside of school.

Jorge at Magnet College Prep

I didn't want to teach at Magnet College Prep. I wanted to teach in an affluent suburban high school like the one I went to in my teens. The high school I attended had a cohort of art teachers who each had a semblance of a professional artistic practice. One art teacher made large surreal landscapes out of reclaimed clay and psychedelic glazes they mixed from scratch; one of them had their own freelance photo gig, shooting weddings and graduation

portraits; and the other made watercolor paintings inspired by Andrew Wyeth in their large sun-drenched home studio, all the while traveling during the summers to see Europe's cultural masterpieces. The high school I went to had labs for darkroom photography, computer art, and ceramics amongst other studio spaces used for every type of AP Portfolio and Scholastic Art Award project imaginable. We had field trips to art museums, raku firing in the school courtyard, and community mural painting projects sponsored by the local Jaycees. There were a lot of "art kids" at my high school.

As a freshly licensed teacher, I wanted to make the money that suburban-Chicago teachers do (frequently in the six figures) and I wanted my students to have every material, tool, space, and resource I thought was needed to make the same kind of art my high school classmates and I won Scholastic Golden Keys with, and earned "5s" on our Studio Art AP portfolios with. I wanted this because at the time I thought that only two types of schools existed: thriving suburban schools and struggling city schools. In addition to my ignorance about the situationality of schools—and because I actually didn't know what I was doing as a teacher despite my undergraduate licensure training—I wanted the circumstances to be as close as possible to the only template I had experience with (my high school experience). I interviewed and was in the finalist round of three of the most well-resourced, highly funded, and prestigious suburban high school art programs at the time, losing every one of those jobs to someone who had more experience. I only applied to Magnet College Prep because a professor of mine at the time warned that I would regret it later if I didn't. I didn't believe her, but I still applied for the position, mostly out of the respect I had for her and because she had been so kind and patient with me in my

ignorance. Almost twenty years after the fact, I've come to understand that I was right about what the suburban schools had and what the city schools didn't have, but I was wrong about how art could be taught and made, and I learned this valuable lesson at Magnet College Prep.

When I was hired as the painting and drawing teacher at Magnet College Prep. the school was one year old. It was one of the first selective enrollment schools in the Chicago Public Schools. The students were admitted into the school after taking an aptitude test¹. The students--from every demographic that can be imagined--were the absolute brightest kids in the city who could manage to get themselves from their respective neighborhoods to the far north side of the city². The most unusual thing about the students as a whole--and this remained consistent throughout my tenure

1 It should be noted that the district later changed the admissions test from an aptitude test to an achievement test, which--curiously--saw the school's behavioral issues go down, while simultaneously altering the intellectual diversity of student we saw in the art classroom. Before the change, many students were generally more self-motivated, insistent on being taken seriously as contemporary creative practitioners, and willing to take risks with (and for) their work (frequently at the expense of their grade). After the change in the admissions test, the students in general were significantly more well behaved, but frequently needed more parameters and guidance with their work, generally took less risks (mostly to preserve their grades), and needed more convincing to understand themselves as artists in today's world. This is--obviously--an unscientific observation, but one that was made anecdotally to me from a variety of teachers and alumni from Magnet, even after I left the school.

2 For a student coming from a majority-Black neighborhood on the far south side, like where Albert was teaching, this 22 mile trip could take upwards of 2 hours via public transportation, weather and traffic adversity permitting. With school starting at 7:45am and ending at 3:15pm, students from the far south side who managed to pass the admissions hurdle still had to negotiate the geographic and infrastructure ones to get to school in the morning. These students also had to take travel time into account when considering extracurricular activities.

there--was the level of parental involvement. Parent-teacher conferences were always packed with appointments and I frequently found myself sought out by parents outside of that once-a-semester event. The conversations were rarely about grades, even if the students were struggling. I still know and keep in touch with some of those parents and their now-adult children.

This kind of relationship is just one of the many luxurious intangibles that we were afforded as part of the learning community at Magnet. To enumerate the many other advantages the school enjoyed would actually turn the experience into a caricature that obscures the unique results of the accidental experiment that played out at Magnet while I was there, which is the subject of my specific narrative in this paper. No doubt the school was and is overflowing with privileges, both intangible and measurable, that should be the right of every Chicago public school student. With the wider lens afforded to me through a twenty-plus-year engagement with the whole district I now understand that the kinds of energy that exist(ed) at Magnet can be found in other parts of the city, if in perhaps a more diluted, free-range, or isolated state. But the parental involvement, students who are good at "doing school," undistracted teaching, administrative elasticity and vision, and humble leadership that existed at Magnet occurred in conjunction and in an extraordinary concentration. All of this essentially enabled the administration, teachers, staff, students, and parents to conduct schooling and-- in many glorious instances-- a true education in whatever manner we thought best. In addition, there were the superlative student test scores, which took the school off the administrative radar of the central office, and allowed the school to become a laboratory where participants (students and teachers alike) paid special attention to the situation of being

and educating ourselves alongside each other. As our principal used to say of the four years it took a student to complete their degree, "school is life, not a preparation for it" and of our relationship to the students: "they [the students] come to us bright and we [the school] try not to mess them up."

That was the position of the administration, not just to students but frequently towards teachers. That's how they treated me, except that it took some time for me to see myself as a "bright" teacher. In fact, at that nascent stage of my teaching career my idea of best practices had less to do with understanding myself as a teacher within the specific context of who and what I was teaching, and more within a homogenized sense of teaching that I was told were the best practices in my field. I actually felt incapable of reaching the heights of these so-called "best practices." My impostor syndrome in play, I turned to Thomas Hirschhorn's dictum, "Quality, no! Energy, yes!" (2016) and this is how I taught myself to be a teacher at that particular school. Luckily for me, my administration saw beyond the haze of my own naive misconceptions about what constituted "good teaching," and helped me to begin to identify my own "Quality, no! Energy, yes!" teaching as an artistic practice. This permission on behalf of my administrators encouraged me to pass along this same permission to my students. In retrospect I now understand that this network of permissions, affordances which encouraged participants to be unique contemporary practitioners of the educational moment as a creative practice, was the means by which the students and I were able to operate as artists in the school.

We were contemporary artists, not just art students with their teachers. And when I say "we" here, I'm pointing beyond the students and myself. I was one art teacher in a cohort

of excellent colleagues (in and out of the art department), and parents who were also creative practitioners (or fully supportive of the arts), working among and alongside countless after-school programs and creative bodies of which our students were a part. As such, from this time at Magnet, students produced their own chapbooks of poetry and participated in public readings of those works, put on elaborate ensemble plays in their backyards, assembled rock bands that eventually toured around the country, wrote for literary magazines, participated in poetry slams, had exhibitions of their own art at significant galleries around the city, participated in local and international performance art festivals, and generally participated in Chicago's contemporary arts scene as fully contributing and critical citizens. Art teachers Joanne Minyo, Christopher Santiago and myself instituted something called the *20 Hour Show*, which was an exhibition every semester of 20- hours-worth of extracurricular art created by every single art student in the program, with the exception of the Art 1 students. The show was open to the wider Chicago art community and was always well-attended by creative practitioners from all over the city. The show is an explosion of teen art that smashes the notion of the "school art style" (Efland, 1976) by celebrating--in a sophisticated manner--the artworks high schoolers make through an integral sense of their creative practice, both in and outside of the school's curriculum. Even though I left for higher education 12 years ago, I still get the postcards in my University mailbox announcing the *20 Hour Show* at Magnet. Clearly for good reasons, though originally designated a math and science magnet school, Magnet was frequently mistaken for an arts magnet.

Albert at Neighborhood High School

I really never enjoyed art classes. But throughout my elementary school years I drew pictures in non-art classes, and this was generally tolerated because of my ability to participate in discussion, answer questions, and succeed on tests. In addition, I am severely nearsighted, and thus cannot benefit from chalkboard demonstrations. Predictably perhaps, I didn't enjoy the product-oriented art lessons and classes that were included in the elementary curriculum, or the ones I was enrolled in on weekends or after school. I took classes in drawing and painting in high school, and did poorly in terms of grades and social acceptance, owing to the expectations of the "school art style" (Efland, 1976). Even when I finally went to art school, after graduating with a liberal arts degree, I opted to pursue community-based projects outside of my course content. While this work often interfered with my classwork, it shaped the kind of open-ended freelance teaching I pursued after receiving my BFA and before going to graduate school.

My art education master's thesis was informed by a memorable interview with Jorge, an encounter wherein I watched him creating aleatory teaching exemplars with rubber bands on a photocopier, and where he introduced me to the possibility of considering young people as avant-garde experimental collaborators. After graduate school I had the unforgettable opportunity to work as a maternity-leave substitute art teacher at Magnet for one semester alongside Jorge, before spending about eight weeks in the substitute teacher ranks and finally winding up at Neighborhood High School, an academically struggling neighborhood high school in a low-income majority-Black, minority-Latinx community on the far south side, where I remained for the rest of that year and for nine years afterward.

Students and their caretakers competed fiercely to attend Magnet; students and their caretakers tried to enroll almost anywhere but Neighborhood. I worked with many fantastic adults in that building, but Neighborhood was a chaotic, under-resourced school with a great deal of staff turnover, and a visible plenitude of metal detectors, police officers, and security guards. Just from anecdotal experience, I can attest that most students barely ever left the neighborhood, except occasionally to visit relatives in the South; many had never been to downtown Chicago, and almost none had ever flown on a plane. The default associations with white people were as representatives of the state: cops, social workers, parole officers, and teachers.

As a white multi-degree graduate, the connections I made with some students were only occasionally meaningful, and rarely personal. When I reached out to often stressed-out family members, which was a consistent part of my day, it was almost always about addressing behavior problems or attendance concerns; on top of this, phone numbers were often not in service, and reprint card pickup days were sparsely attended. To perhaps state the obvious, none of this should be taken as a sign that families didn't care about their kids; people in the area were simply living in a milieu of trauma, anxiety, and the many physical and interpersonal effects of historical deprivation and precarity.

Still, I improved my communication skills and honed my teaching tricks every year. I tried to tailor our projects to the history, politics, and cultures of communities with whom I worked. Institutional critiques of phenomena like the school-to-prison pipeline and the AP art exams found their way into my lessons, as well as into the off-campus exhibitions of student work

that I regularly orchestrated. To an extent, I compensated for my lack of strong relationships at the school with the relationships I built in the Chicago art community, which I attempted to bring into my teaching in various ways. I tried out new ideas all the time, wrote ambitious grants, invited in artists and community members, arranged inter-school collaborations, and took lots of field trips.

At Neighborhood High School, I did my best to offer creative autonomy to students, but the fact is that most of my students were required to take my class-- which is ultimately why I had a job. Every day was a whirlwind. Getting students in the door when the bell rang, getting everyone their sketchbooks, communicating instructions and distributing materials, assisting with student work while containing distractions and coaxing participation, and then cleaning up, storing work, and relaying any closing information, were tasks requiring considerable patience, effort, and alertness. While most students did their best to take part in the lesson, and I endeavored to give positive feedback to students who were following instructions and/or interpreting assignments in exciting and unique ways, I generally had to spend a lot of time on the few students who weren't interested in making any aesthetic gestures at completing my assignments, and were in many cases making it hard for nearby students to focus. My next priority (physical safety notwithstanding) was to help students who asked for help, which accounted for most of my time not spent on motivating and de-escalating. Nonetheless, energy in the art room was usually positive.

There were opportunities for students to complete my assignments in a range of ways, and while many students certainly didn't seem overly concerned about completing tasks, I tried to respect students' emotional lives, and would often leave them largely alone if asked.

Similarly, for my own part, much of the freedom I had as a teacher was owing in part to constant administrative preoccupation and flux. If I had stayed at Neighborhood one more semester, instead of entering a PhD program in fall 2013 when the school was threatened yet again with closure (which eventually became forced co-location with a charter school), I would have worked under seven principals. When I entered the school in 2004 the building had been broken up, following guidelines issued by the Gates Foundation, into multiple "small schools." This initiative was abandoned in the summer of 2011. That summer, the entire staff was laid off and then rehired nearly two months later—which also happened before the small schools were introduced in 2003. Owing to this kind of upheaval, along with constant punitive scrutiny by the district for our lackluster test scores, and the neverending crises inside the building, I was consistently given what I asked for as a teacher, if I didn't ask for too much, and largely left alone.

There were occasional exceptions to my pedagogical latitude-- I was asked by the district central office to explain a project addressing the War on Terror in which students made ceramic replicas of IEDs, and by my principal to explain a handout explaining an embroidery project created by South African women who graphically depicted scenes of intense trauma. But these projects were not ended, censored, or substantially amended, which goes for projects we worked on regarding homelessness, police violence, environmental racism, queerness, public housing, Black hair braiding, informal local oral history, and the school as a carceral space. The school lacked financial resources, particularly in regard to technology, but I was able to write grants for many unorthodox art projects, and was reimbursed for most materials I bought on my own. The freedom in my teaching style did result in a considerable

amount of chaos in my classroom, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. But most students were able to make fun, expressive work, learning skills and information while being experimental and working outside of strict curricular expectations. And I was able to try out essentially any project concept I believed in enough to implement.

There is a limit to the appropriateness of trumpeting the silver lining of Neighborhood's dark cloud. Students didn't have a wealth of options after leaving high school, with or without a diploma. Like any neighborhood public school, it reflected the neighborhood--particularly those adult members of the neighborhood who, by choice or not, weren't sending their youngsters to another school. The traumatic residue of centuries of expropriation, violence, and segregation (which affect Latinx students as well as Black students) shaped the physical and mental health and stability of everyone in the building; for a white educated teacher like me that trauma was secondary, though still present. Last but not least, I often saw my role at Neighborhood as roughly analogous to that of the art teachers in Native boarding schools whom Marinella Lentis (2017) describes as engaging in a "colonization of consciousness" (p. xviii), a project of cultural pacification that, despite my best efforts, I was not able to interrupt³.

All that said, however, there was room for

creative experimentation, both by the students and by me, and I feel certain this alleviated some of the ambient stress that everyone felt. I certainly don't intend to overstate the solidarity that my students felt with each other, let alone with me, but the very fact of my autonomy in the classroom, my ability to draw from my own knowledge and interests, likely had a positive impact on my credibility, confidence, and creativity. Though I inadvertently but undoubtedly deprived some students of my full attention and support, and withdrew from but was not outside of the harsh punishment regimes enacted over the years, most students hopefully benefited from my efforts. In any event, the abundant emotional, social, and cultural strength of the people in this community shone through in the school environment, and (taking a page from Jorge's principal) I tried my best to not block their light.

Seeing it From Both Sides

Clearly there were profound differences in social and geographic mobility, and thus cultural capital and life experiences, between the students who attended our two schools, as well as their families. And there were odd similarities in our individual trajectories. Jorge had wanted to teach in the suburbs, and ended up at Magnet; Albert wanted to (and briefly did) teach at Magnet, and ended up at Neighborhood. These parallel disappointments may also apply to many students at both schools, or at least to their families. While these gaps denote frustrated goals, as teachers we could be said to have found autonomy when the pressure to conform to an ideal was replaced by a new set of expectations. Jorge was able to dispense with the professionalized idea of art teaching that he developed in high school, and embrace at Magnet a more expansive and expressive approach to collaborating with young people and with adults. Albert tried out

3 Here I am calling attention to the pedagogy of culture in any form by a white teacher within a colonized population. There are obvious distinctions between the off-reservation Native boarding schools of a century ago and city public schools serving poor Black and brown students today, not to mention contemporary schools on Native reservations. The often deadly conditions of confinement at the boarding schools is just one important difference (Adams, 1995). But to me the continuities are striking, despite the apparent anachronism of the comparison, particularly the parallels in externally imposed and largely antagonistic population management regimes.

highly ambitious teaching ideas at Magnet, approaching academically advanced high school students as fine-arts undergraduates. But at Neighborhood he came to better understand and operationalize his marginal role within a segregated city wherein vastly dissimilar life outcomes, and even life expectancies, were still determined based primarily on geography, and that geography in turn was determined by race and wealth.

The contrasts between our experiences are plain enough, on top of all the stark objective disparities between the schools and their constituencies. Albert had intermittent contact with a limited number of family members at any given time (extended family relationships were often more significant than parents), saw administrators and colleagues come and go, and struggled to communicate with students, while Jorge built meaningful long-term connections with both adults and young people. Jorge spoke of “undistracted teaching,” while in Albert’s classroom distraction was constant and guaranteed, and something to try to work with or around as best as possible when planning. But the maneuverability allowed to Jorge by the humility of Magnet’s leadership was echoed in Albert’s case largely through the benign neglect of preoccupied administrators. Magnet felt like a laboratory to Jorge, whereas Neighborhood was to some extent a securitized warehouse, but neither school was ultimately averse to adventurous teaching.

If the common public space of civil society is a terrain defined by what Antonio Gramsci (2007) called a “war of position,” a form of “resistance to domination with culture, rather than physical might, as its foundation” (p. 168), then the advantages of any situation, particularly a space of cultural contestation, should be assessed, celebrated, and made use of. In light of the parallels between teaching art at Neighborhood

and teaching art at Magnet, there are reasons to be tactically optimistic and ambitious about the affordances of urban public schools for teaching art. However, public space may not be truly common, as full inclusion of all members of the society is uncertain, let alone inclusion on equal terms (Wilderson, 2003). Self-congratulatory triumphalism, then, is at best premature. In drawing lessons from the comparison of our teaching experiences, it is worth considering in a bit more detail what it is that made our divergent circumstances so analogous.

Parsing the Structure

The role of education in the lives of children in both traditional and industrialized societies is examined by David F. Lancy (2015), who differentiates sharply between the ways in which children in subsistence-economy societies generally learn autonomously, collectively, and informally, while, in wealthier and more “developed” places, tropes of formal individualized education infiltrate all of childrearing. In keeping with this model, the lower level of academic indoctrination among his students meant that Albert did not have to try quite as hard as Jorge to encourage independent group work, even if maintaining on-task focus was a far greater challenge. But this particular comparison risks reifying racialized ideas about civilization, culture, and poverty. A more useful approach should address the subtleties of structure and function in different American education institutions, accounting for different settings in which different students are expected to learn, coexist, and be creative.

In her book-length study of cultural factors in the classroom, Allison J. Pugh (2009) describes her fieldwork with students in a range of three Bay Area school settings: one low-income, majority-Black afterschool program, and two

wealthier and whiter schools, one public and one private, with distinctly different institutional cultures. At the low-income school, Pugh described a "laissez-faire approach to children's culture, in which teachers intervened only when intense emotions or physical fighting erupted from the daily scrum" (p. 73). The private school, however, engaged "an explicit social curriculum to help children handle social conflict" (p. 76). This school also actively incorporated student initiative into its curriculum in a way that nobody in either public school setting seemed to attempt. At the more wealthy public school, much as with the poorer school, "school officials refrained from getting involved with children's culture" (p. 75).

Pugh refrains from explicitly judging the behavior of the staff or students at any of these sites. But one conclusion that Pugh doesn't draw is that public schools of all kinds have a very hard time, for many reasons, creating any kind of overarching shared sensibility that transcends interpersonal differences, and have thus tended to (rather ineffectually) enforce homogeneity through impersonal centralized regimes, rather than via the more communal disciplinary mandates typical of charter and private schools (Buckley and Schneider, 2009; Wexler, 2013; Torres, 2016; Rhim and Lancet, 2018; Little and Tolbert, 2018). Due to the regimes of system-wide oversight that both of us describe, public schools have come to represent for many students a stress-inducing experience of near-constant drilling and testing that likely drives away well-to-do families just as effectively as any fears about violence, moral corruption, or inadequate teaching and resources (Stizlein 2015, Waitoller and Pazey 2016, Schroeder, Currin, and McCardle 2018). But a possibility worth considering is that one unacknowledged role of arts in the curriculum of a public school is to foster cohesion that doesn't rely on erasing social differences

through policing them, as can be seen in both the curriculum and the disciplinary culture of charter and private schools. Of course many art teachers attempt to police differences, as do teachers more generally, but in a public school they may be more able to attempt to resist that tendency.

In some sense, neither Magnet nor Neighborhood is an average American public school. Magnet is still a beacon of meritocratic educational aspiration, while Neighborhood remains a symbol for any number of problematic narratives about the failure of public education and the stagnation of the urban Black underclass. That such a freeform approach to arts teaching can happen at two such different public schools within the same school system is a somewhat deceptive coincidence. Teachers and students at Magnet were trusted, for the most part, while teachers and students at Neighborhood would have been more properly described as neglected. At the former there were new and well-maintained facilities, as well as committed teachers and remarkable academic opportunities, whereas the latter had old computers and textbooks, a high degree of staff turnover, insufficient support personnel, and a punitive approach to discipline. One school helped students to excel, and the other allowed them to fail. In some ways those distinctions are significant, particularly in terms of factors such as family involvement, resource access, and life opportunities, but, in terms of day-to-day teaching, both situations had incredible potential. This potential reflects the fact that neither of us faced the burden of administrative micro-management that widely plagues non-art teachers in any school (Strong and Yoshida, 2014; Parker, 2015; Sparks and Malkus, 2015; Mausthagen and Molstad, 2015)-- and they also didn't have to contend with a private or charter school's efforts to enforce a consistent culture.

And so, there may be hope for every public school teacher (especially art teachers) in Pugh's comment (2009) about the "school officials" who "refrained from getting involved with children's culture" (p. 75). Addressing potential parents/clients, most private schools, and by extension most charter schools, tend to distinguish themselves from public schools through a promise of individualized attention and a unified institutional culture (Buckley and Schneider, 2009; Wexler, 2013; Wilson and Carlsen 2016; Anderson, 2017; Rhim and Lancet, 2018). Public schools, on the other hand, are required to serve every student, and cannot customize their student body (although selective enrollment at magnet schools mitigates this limitation). What they can offer, however, is a local culture of plurality in which neighborhood and family relationships are not superseded by pedagogical discipline (leaving aside administrative punishment), and where proactive teachers can strategically defend some limited shred of cooperative space. While the momentum of public education policy may be tending more and more to follow currents of private investment, quantified transparency, and social stratification, the public school classroom, and the art room in particular, may at least sometimes be a place where talking and making can happen without undue interference. In such a situation, through interactions that recognize polyvocality, teacher autonomy may help to amplify localized expressions of political energy. "Quality, no! Energy, yes!"

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